



REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Debates of the House of Representatives

2nd Session – 11th Parliament (Rep.) – Volume 5 – Number 38

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

THE HONOURABLE BRIDGID ANNISSETTE-GEORGE
SPEAKER

THE HONOURABLE ESMOND FORDE
DEPUTY SPEAKER

Wednesday 10th May, 2017

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*Leave of Absence**Wednesday, May 10, 2017***HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Wednesday, May 10, 2017*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

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

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, Mr. Rushton Paray, MP, Member for Mayaro and Mr. Fazal Karim, MP, Member for Chaguanas East, have asked to be excused from today's sitting. I recognize that Mr. Paray is here.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE

(APPOINTMENT OF)

Cybercrime Bill, 2017

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I now will read correspondence received from the President of the Senate dated May 10, 2017.

“Dear Honourable Speaker,

Establishment of Joint Select Committees

Your letter dated May 05, 2017 on the subject at caption refers.

I wish to advise that at a sitting held on Tuesday, May 09, 2017, the Senate concurred with the House in the establishment of the following:

A Joint Select Committee to consider and report on the Cybercrime Bill, 2017; and the following six Members were appointed to serve on the Committee:

Mr. Clarence Rambharat;
 Mr. Dennis Moses;
 Mr. W. Michael Coppin;
 Mr. Wade Mark;
 Miss Melissa Ramkissoon; and
 Mr. Paul Richards.

Accordingly, I respectfully request that the House of Representatives be informed of this decision at the earliest convenience, please.

Respectfully

Christine Kangaloo

President of the Senate”

PAPERS LAID

1. Consolidated Audited Financial Statements of First Citizens Bank Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]

To be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.

2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Civic Centre for the year ended September 30, 2004. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Civic Centre for the year ended September 30, 2005. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Tobago House of Assembly for the year ended September 30, 2015. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
5. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2012. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
6. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2013. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
7. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the South-West Regional Health Authority for the year ended September 30, 2006. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
8. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the South-West Regional Health Authority for the year ended September 30, 2007. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
9. Second Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2008. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
10. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2009. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Papers 2 to 10 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

11. Response of the Auditor General's Department to the Fourth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheet and other Financial Statements of the Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme for the financial years 2009 to 2014. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

STANDING FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT

(Presentation)

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following report:

The Second Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Second Session (2016/2017), Eleventh Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2017.

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

State Enterprises/Companies/Agencies without Boards

(Details of)

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (Caroni Central): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. My question to the Prime Minister: Could the Prime Minister please identify those state enterprises/companies/agencies that are currently without boards?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, there are approximately 60 state enterprises/companies/agencies. Those boards are required to be named. At any given point in time, there may be one or two situations in which boards are in transition. At this point in time, to the best of my knowledge, these boards are in place except the board of the Children's Authority, which is not in place. The matter is before the Cabinet and would be finalized tomorrow. So I am not aware of any significant absence of board members. A board is being placed.

**Prime Minister's Tobago Visit
(Itinerary and Transport Utilized)**

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (Caroni Central): Could the Prime Minister indicate the official itinerary for the visit to Tobago he undertook late last week and the mode of transportation he utilized to and from Tobago?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, I am not exactly clear as to what the Member understands by official itinerary, but as far as I understand it I went to Tobago last Friday. I spent Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday in Tobago. I attended, on Friday, the opening of the Prime Minister's charity Golf Tournament. I spent Saturday in Tobago and I went to my office in Tobago on Monday. I travel to Tobago using my normal mode of transportation, which is public transportation.

Dr. Tewarie: Did the hon. Prime Minister travel by air or sea?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Public air transportation.

Dr. Tewarie: Did the Prime Minister encounter, in Tobago, any articulations by people in Tobago, especially in the business community, but the larger population as well, having to do with difficulties that they are having with transportation to and from Tobago?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, there is a very genuine concern in Tobago that the transportation as available and the sea bridge involving the cargo ferry is not up to standard and is causing some significant problems for the people of Tobago. In fact, in some instances persons are facing losses to their businesses and if the system deteriorates any further there might be some shortages in materials in Tobago. We are all aware of that because the Tobagonians have been very vocal in expressing that. But during my weekend in Tobago, Madam Speaker, I was not made aware of anything other than what is being said to all of us in the nation.

Dr. Tewarie: When you said public transportation, air transportation, you meant Caribbean Airlines?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Unless you know of some other transportation, I mean, that is what I mean.

Dr. Tewarie: It was just clarification.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: What possible clarification is that? Is there somebody else flying to Tobago? Public transportation to Tobago is Caribbean Airlines. Unless you know something I do not know. Other Prime Ministers used the national security helicopter as public transportation. I do not.

**Budgetary Independent Body
(Establishment of)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Would the Prime Minister give consideration to the establishment of an independent body like the Congressional Budget Office in the United States which provides “value for money” analyses of cost items in budgets, mid-year reviews and on policy decisions of the executive?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the answer to that, in giving considerations, yes, because on coming into office we committed ourselves, somewhere along the way, to establish an agency which can be so described as the Member for Naparima described. But we spoke about it in the context of a general accounting office to do just these things.

However, being taken up with the more urgent matters, as you are well aware coming in with the difficulties we are facing, we have not yet got around to doing that. But this is something that we would want to do somewhere along the way.

**Investor Confidence-boosting Measures
(Introduction of)**

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister, does your Government have any immediate plans to introduce confidence-boosting measures to inspire investors in Trinidad and Tobago?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Yes, we have a lot of measures and not the least of which is to maintain political and social stability in the country, good economic management of our affairs, eliminate corruption from our business, maintain satisfactory levels of public security and safety and to ensure that there are materials and infrastructure which would be useful to investors who want to invest their resources within our borders. These are the conditions under which we work and we strive to have those conditions maintained or established where they are not maintained.

Dr. Tewarie: Is the Prime Minister aware that there are a significant number of complaints, most of it having to do with a sense of unease and lack of confidence in the economy, and, therefore, many local companies, at least, are making a decision, a calculated decision not to invest in the economy at this time?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am not aware of that, Madam Speaker. On the contrary, I do know that there are a lot of local companies and in fact international companies who see Trinidad and Tobago as a place to invest.

If there are local companies who are troubled by our condition, I am sure that those local companies would have had sufficient information and will continue to provide more information as to what is happening. And today in particular, the Minister of Finance will outline how well we are doing in a very difficult circumstance.

But for there to be any local company that is prepared to have one foot here and one foot outside because of our difficulty then, of course, we would be disappointed to know that, when things are good you have both feet in the country and the minute we face any difficulty, you have one outside. That is not our understanding of our local investors.

Dr. Tewarie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister, one of the issues for private sector is the seeming contradiction between a hope for investment and development and growth and the policies of the Government. So, for instance, when you tax industrial equipment, which reflects a need of the private sector, if they are to grow, the private sector is very hesitant to expand a plan in order to attract more tax.

Madam Speaker: Member, I do not want to disturb you but there is 15 seconds to ask questions, please.

Dr. Tewarie: Is the Prime Minister aware that the tax on plant and equipment is affecting private sector decision and, therefore, is a disincentive to investors?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: No, I am not aware of that, because, you see, at the end of the day one determines the overall climate in which one invests, and whether there are returns to be had. And if there is an investment that would not be made because of a requirement to pay a reasonable tax, then, obviously, you were not entirely convinced in the beginning. There might be other reasons and those taxes are deductible for your profits and your profits are determined by other aspects of taxation.

And, of course, the places where you may choose to go, if you can direct me where there is a pull factor somewhere, where our investors are pulled to that location where there is no tax, then I will be happy to know that.

**Commission of Enquiry into the Judicial System
(Consideration of)**

Mr. Ganga Singh (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Given the current controversy in the justice system, is the Government considering the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry into the judicial system?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): No, the Government is not considering any commission of enquiry into the judicial system at this time.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Is the Government considering measures by which the over 50 part-heard matters before the former Chief Magistrate would be dealt with?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I want to make it abundantly clear that the specific matters to which the Member refer is a matter which resides entirely within the borders of the Judiciary and this Government maintains the Great Wall of China between the Executive and the Judiciary. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Great Wall of China might be amorphous, having regard to the malaise plaguing the justice system right now. Is the Prime Minister turning a blind eye to the current controversy in the justice system?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas West has no idea where the Prime Minister is looking. I give him the assurance that the Government is concerned about all aspects of national life in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

**TSTT's Acquisition of Massy Technologies
(Due Diligence Details)**

Mr. Ganga Singh (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Could the Prime Minister state whether a due diligence was done on Massy Technologies prior to its acquisition by TSTT?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, a thorough due diligence was done by independent consultants. Financial due diligence and legal due diligence were performed. There has been no acquisition as yet. TSTT and Massy Communications signed a share purchase agreement that is subject to the necessary legal regulatory approach.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Could the Prime Minister indicate who were the consultants/advisors/valuators engaged by TSTT for this purpose of due diligence?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That being a matter inside the company, I do not have that information at this time.

**Mount Hope Public-Private Partnership Project
(Details of)**

Mr. Ganga Singh (Chaguanas West): Could the Prime Minister provide an update on the Public-Private Partnership Project on housing at Mount Hope entered into in September 2016?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the latest update that I have on that project is that the project is underway. Initial earthworks are underway, and preparations, and that the project is scheduled to be completed sometime in late 2019.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Could the Prime Minister indicate whether Government has guaranteed or any state institution has guaranteed the financing of this project?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I am not aware that any Government or state guarantee has been given and that is not the basis on which the public/private partnership is entered into.

**Tourism and Heritage Plan for Moruga and Ste. Madeleine
(Details of)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Is the Prime Minister aware of an 81 page, "Tourism and Heritage Plan for Moruga and Ste. Madeleine" costing less than \$70,000 done in 2015 by the world renowned tourism experts for the Princes Town Regional Corporation and could the Prime Minister then justify the expenditure of an additional \$250,000 to complete a feasibility study for the Ste. Madeleine Project? It is actually Ste. Madeleine Staff Club and Golf Course Development.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, as you know, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago engages in a number of reports of all kind. I am not aware of any report as described and I am also not aware of any feasibility as costed. But in the event that there was one done under this Government, I am confident there would have been justification for it.

Mr. Charles: Prime Minister, if and when that feasibility study is made available to you and it has merit in it, would you then not consider spending \$250,000 of taxpayers' money to repeat the same kind of analyses?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I have no idea what the Member is talking about, but what I do know is that there is a Minister of Tourism that will ensure that any moneys spent—because Government moneys spent are always taxpayers' money. And the Minister will ensure that moneys are spent in such a way that there is value for that money.

Mr. Charles: Would the Prime Minister then tell us, whether in identifying cost items, that due diligence is done to see whether the information already resides in the Government's domain?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I have every confidence that the Minister of Government in Trinidad and Tobago with the portfolio for tourism will take care that that matter is properly looked after.

TSTT's Acquisition of Massy Technologies (Cost Benefit Analysis)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Is the Prime Minister aware—well, I think you answered this already. So can I? The only aspect of this is the—all right. Is the Prime Minister aware of any cost benefit analysis done on the \$255 million purchase by TSTT of Massy Communications and—this is the part—further, is he prepared to make this analysis available to the national community?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the spokespersons for TSTT, namely the Chairman, made very extensive public disclosures on this matter, with respect to the benefits to be had and the reasons why TSTT went into this arrangement. Those benefits remain the same, this week as they were last week, mainly acquisition of—to establish plant and equipment, customer-base and other arrangements that are positive to TSTT.

And with respect to making it available, at the appropriate time, I am sure the company that is committed to transparency would allow Members of this House to have access to what they have done.

First Citizens Bank Share Offering (Details of)

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister, could you please share with this honourable House the result of the recently extended share offering for First Citizens Bank?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): I would do better than that. The Minister of Finance, in a few minutes, is scheduled to report on the mid-year review and I am sure that that would be one of the issues that he will deal with comprehensively.

Dr. Tewarie: I will then defer any follow-up questions.

**TSTT's Acquisition of Massy Communications
(Divergence of Views)**

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (Caroni Central): Could the Prime Minister please explain the divergence of views between the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister of Public Utilities on Cabinet knowledge of the TSTT acquisition of Massy Communications?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): To the best of my knowledge there is no divergence of views on this matter.

Dr. Tewarie: What about the views of the other two Ministers who spoke on the matter?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am not aware that there is any divergence of view on this matter. TSTT is a majority-owned state enterprise and the issue of what the Cabinet knows and does not know is quite clear and has been made public.

Dr. Moonilal: Is the Prime Minister aware that in answering a question in this honourable House, the Minister of Public Utilities indicated that he had no knowledge and the Cabinet had no knowledge of this Massy/TSTT arrangement?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: It might very well be that the Minister did not hear exactly what was being asked of him.

Dr. Moonilal: Is the Prime Minister suggesting that the Minister spoke out of turn or may have not reported correctly and truthfully to the House of Representatives?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am suggesting no such thing. As I said before, there is no divergence of view on this matter in the Cabinet.

Dr. Tewarie: Was the Prime Minister prompted in any way to make an intervention in the radio station to make a statement?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: No, I was not prompted except by—I was driven to respond and agree with the level of outrage that was felt by the public on receipt of the Auditor General's Report.

**Maracas Bay Water Treatment Plant Project
(Commencement of)**

Mr. Ganga Singh (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Given the urgency of the situation at Maracas Bay, could the Prime Minister advise when will the Maracas Bay Water Treatment Plant commence and what is the projected cost of this project?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, only this week the Minister of Works and Transport indicated to the public that project, Maracas Upgrade, commenced this week. The total project is to cost approximately \$60million and the water treatment plant is costing \$13.3 million and it is estimated that the project would be completed at the end of August.

URGENT QUESTIONS

**Bomb-like Device at Chaguanas Magistrates' Court
(Details of)**

Mr. Ganga Singh (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In light of the finding of a "bomb-like device" within the precincts of the Chaguanas Magistrates' Court, what measures are being put in place to improve security at this court?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in light of the discovery of the bomb-like device, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, inclusive of the Chaguanas Police, has revisited measures in place and are currently implementing enhanced proactive security measures at the court to ensure adequate protection and safeguards are adopted to preserve the operations of the Magistracy and the safety of all within its hallowed corridors.

In addition, the Judiciary which is responsible for security of the daily court activities, has already taken proactive measures internally to buttress internal security and complement the police measures. Thus, there will be a combined presence with the Judiciary security and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to deter, to detect and foil any attempts directed at the proceedings of the magistrate, Madam Speaker.

Dr. Rambachan: Hon. Minister, through you, Madam Speaker, given the very poor response of the police in Chaguanas to citizens' matters, is it the intention of the hon. Minister to bring forces from outside of Chaguanas including the defence force, to spruce up the security at the Chaguanas Magistrates' Court?

Hon. Maj. Gen. E. Dillon: Madam Speaker, we already have a presence in the Chaguanas area; members of the defence force who are there actively supporting the members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Mr. Singh: Hon. Speaker, thank you. Could the hon. Member indicate whether through investigation they have established the motive for this bomb-like device being placed at the court?

Hon. Maj. Gen. E. Dillon: Madam Speaker, the matter is still under investigation by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Inter-Island Transport (Details of)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Works and Transport, could the Minister indicate the specific time frame when nationals in Tobago can expect relief from the failure of this Government to adequately deal with the inter-island transport arrangements?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the people of Trinidad and Tobago have been placed in a situation where the cargo vessel, the *Super Fast Galicia* has been withdrawn from service at short notice. This has attracted the attention of the attorneys representing the Port Authority and the Ministry of Works and Transport as a breach of its contractual agreement. The board of the Port Authority has indicated a short-term, medium-term and long-term plan to bring relief to the people of Tobago.

In the short-term plan, a one-to-three month solution to bring a suitable vessel and to fulfil the requirements of Tobago. The board is quite confident that this requirement will be fulfilled within the specified time and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will fix this problem, especially for the people of Tobago, once and for all. Thank you.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Could the Minister indicate whether the payments being made now to the transporter and provider of those vessels, are these payments being made in US currency?

Madam Speaker: I would not allow that question as a supplemental question arising out of this.

Dr. Moonilal: I go again. Could the Minister update the House on the status of procuring another vessel to fill this void?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, procurement of a vessel at the port is something that the board of the Port Authority is very careful of. I did indicate before that the attorneys for the Port Authority and the Ministry of Works are looking at the matter concerning the breach of the contractual agreement. What I did not indicate is that at the Attorney General, we are also looking into the first contractual agreement where bid-rigging and collusion are being investigated. Based on that, the Port Authority is very careful as to how we go forward procuring another vessel. Thank you.

2.00 p.m.

Mr. Charles: Thank you, Madam Speaker. If the Minister was aware that sometime in 2017 the contract with *Galicia* would have come to an end, why were no contingency or no alternative arrangements put in place, so we would have had a seamless transition?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it has been said numerous times in the public domain that the contract for the *Super Fast Galicia* was supposed to go up to the end of October. In February of 2017 the Cabinet approved—[*Crosstalk*] No, you cannot wait until October, Madam Speaker. In February of 2017, the Cabinet approved a note that gave the Port Authority the permission to go out and tender for a new vessel. Basically, we had six months to procure a vessel, and we would have had that crossed of the vessels in Trinidad. So the Government was very proactive and very responsible in how we go about sourcing a new vessel. [*Desk thumping*]

Detainees from Turkey (Measures Taken)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): To the Minister of National Security: Could the Minister provide the House with the assurance that all measures relating to the return of detainees from Turkey have been taken consistent with global best practices, and could he state the critical measures taken?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I wish to assure this House that measures relating to the return of detainees from Turkey have been taken consistent with global best practice and adapted to Trinidad and Tobago circumstance. With respect to the critical measures being taken, I am not at liberty based on security reasons to say the critical measures taken, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, might I ask that you ask question 5? We will return to 4. The Minister is not here as yet.

**San Fernando Oncology Centre
(Availability of Therapy Sessions)**

Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, I am so guided. To the Minister of Health, question No. 5. Based on recent reports that scores of cancer patients continue to be turned away from the San Fernando Oncology Centre each day while availability of therapy sessions have been reduced from five days per week to three days per week, can the Minister state the reason for this development and when shall it be rectified?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, first of all, I do apologize to those patients who were not able to access chemotherapy in the usual manner. Having said that, this is something that occurred in 2013 and 2014, and has its genesis in the then Inter-Ministerial Committee on HR, where it did not seek to look kindly on the payment of an allowance to pharmacists to mix chemotherapy.

What I have done immediately is to intervene operationally to find a simple, common-sense solution to the immediate problem, and that is to have the chemotherapy drugs mixed at St. James and sent to San Fernando. That is already in progress, so that is a short-term solution. On the policy side, we identified new pharmacists to be trained in the mixing of chemotherapy some months ago, and that training starts next week.

On another policy intervention, it is my intention to recommend to the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Human Resources to re-look at the decisions taken in 2012 and 2013 to pay pharmacists some sort of allowance to mix chemotherapy drugs which is the basic cause of this immediate problem.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Minister, in light of what you have just indicated, can you indicate to us whether or not you have had consultations with the SWRHA based on some of these long-term and short-term solutions, especially with respect that this particular situation has been ongoing for about a week and, therefore, there would have been many persons who would have come and would not have been serviced? Could you tell us whether you have had these discussions with the SWRHA to ensure that this does not reoccur?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I can guarantee the hon. Member, not only did I have consultations with South-West, also with Eastern, North-Central and North-West to pool their resources. And, as I have said, I

intervened operationally to ensure that chemotherapy will be sent to San Fernando as of tomorrow morning. It is being mixed today and will be sent tomorrow. But I also have to intervene, as I said, on a policy position, to once and for all find a way to deal with the issue of the payment of the allowances to pharmacists to mix chemotherapy.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Could the hon. Minister indicate the approximate time frame for conclusion of the training of these pharmacists and how many?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sure.

Dr. Gopeesingh: How will he obviate the issue of pharmacists moving to centres where the allowances are higher than in the public sector?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. Thank you very much. So let me deal with the last issue first. We have to harmonize across the RHAs what is paid, and the situation where one RHA poaches by paying higher rates for different specialities has to stop. So that is something we are actively engaging the RHAs in. It is compounded by the fact that the TRHA, as a matter of practice and policy, pays higher rates generally. One of the pharmacists at San Fernando who mixes chemotherapy undertook to go to Tobago with very short notice, which is one of reasons why we have this situation. So we are working with the RHAs to standardize what rates are being paid, and as I said, that is the policy intervention that we are now going to implement. [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: How many?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sorry. Two new pharmacists will be trained starting from next Monday.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, question 6.

Truckers between Trinidad and Tobago (Financial Losses Being Incurred)

Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Works and Transport. Based on the recent reports of growing financial losses being incurred by truckers who are transporting goods between Trinidad and Tobago due to the inefficiencies of the barge and ferry which have replaced the *Galicia*, could the Minister consider compensating these truckers or providing some form of financial subsidization to meet the extra costs they have been forced to bear?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, based on the report of financial losses being incurred by truckers, the Port Authority has implemented a system where drivers were being issued courtesy tickets for travel. Additionally, the Board of the Port of Authority will meet with the Truckers' Association on Friday of this week where other concerns will be addressed. Thank you.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Minister. Hon. Minister, are you prepared at this time to meet with these truckers to have these dialogues ongoing?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, just two days ago, I read an article where the Truckers' Association was trying to get in touch with the Minister and they did not. I immediately enquired as to what number they were calling and who they were calling. Unfortunately, they were not calling my number. I immediately sent a message to them. They came into my office, I spoke with them and arranged the meeting with the Port Board on Friday for them.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, question 4.

**Central Market Vendors
(Alternative Accommodation)**

Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Question No. 4 to the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government: Based on recent media reports that some market vendors at the Central Market, Port of Spain will be displaced due to the construction work of the Sea Lots walkover, could the Minister state what alternative accommodations or arrangements, if any, will be made to allow these vendors to continue their trade in a safe and comfortable manner?

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in the absence of the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, I would like to answer the question.

Madam Speaker, we are happy to be able to bring some additional safety to the residents, travellers and users of the market, including vendors, with the construction of the Sea Lots Walkover.

In respect of the reports of the displacement of some of the vendors at the Central Market, Port of Spain, due to the construction of the long-awaited walkover, the Port of Spain City Corporation has assured that there is sufficient space within the

market to accommodate all vendors. As such, some of the wholesale vendors will be relocated to the northern side of the market parallel to where they are currently located.

The Engineering and Building Departments of the corporation are currently working with the market administrator on reconfiguring the market to ensure that any displaced vendors are satisfactorily relocated. Additional lighting will be installed and security put in place to ensure both comfort and safety for all vendors and patrons of the market. Thank you.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Minister. Hon. Minister, are you in a position to share with us whether or not a contract has been awarded for this particular project, the cost and who it has been awarded to or whether or not local content in terms of the particular area has been considered with the contractor?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, I think that question would be more—better directed to Minister of Works and Transport.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central, do you have a supplemental question?

Dr. Tewarie: No, Madam Speaker.

WRITTEN ANSWER TO QUESTION

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, may I indicate that question No. 84 has been circulated. We said that it was ready since last week, but it has been circulated since. Thank you very kindly. There are no questions.

Education Facilities Company Limited (Details of Contractors)

84. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

With respect to contractors of Education Facilities Company Limited during the period October 1, 2015 to December 30, 2016, could the Minister state:

- a. the names of the contractors;
- b. the total payment to each contractor;
- c. the payment dates;
- d. the services provided;

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- e. the outstanding sums yet to be paid; and
- f. the planned payment schedule for the outstanding sums?

Answer lodged in the Parliament Library.

**FINANCE (VARIATION OF APPROPRIATION)
(FINANCIAL YEAR 2017) BILL, 2017**

Bill to vary the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2017) Act, 2016 and varied by the Finance (Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2017) Act, 2017 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage of the Bill be taken later in the proceedings in accordance with Standing Order 64(1)(b). [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Question put and agreed to.

RELATED MOTIONS

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 50(1), I seek leave to debate together with this Motion and the Motion for the second reading of the Finance (Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2017) Bill, 2017 which are interrelated.

Madam Speaker: Members, is this the wish of the House?

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, I do not know if I am being premature in this matter here, at this point in time, but the Minister of Finance is asking us to debate—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: In terms of the Motion and the request just made, are you all in agreement or not?

Mr. Lee: No.

Madam Speaker: No. The result is that it would not be done together. It has to be with the leave of the House.

Question put and negatived.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDER 45(1)

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I seek leave pursuant to Standing Order 122 for the suspension of Standing Order 45(1) in relation to the speaking time of the mover of the Motion to follow, that is the Minister of Finance as well as the Opposition

Member who responds, to allow for contributions not exceeding 90 minutes in each case. Madam Speaker, you will recall that this was the procedure we followed last year given the significance of this debate. Madam Speaker, I seek your leave.

Madam Speaker: I am prepared to grant leave since the Motion relates to the equality of time on both sides and then I have to put the question.

Having granted leave, I now say, hon. Members, the question is that Standing Order 45(1) be suspended in relation to the speaking time of the mover of the Motion for the adoption of the Report of the Standing Finance Committee, that is the Minister of Finance as well as the Opposition Member who responds, to allow for contributions not exceeding 90 minutes in each case. Somebody is going to call for a division?

Question put.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Division.

The House divided: Ayes 21 Noes 17

AYES

Robinson-Regis, Hon. C.

Rowley, Hon. Dr. K.

Al-Rawi, Hon. F.

Imbert, Hon. C.

Young, Hon. S.

Deyalsingh, Hon. T.

Hinds, Hon. F.

Mitchell, Hon. R.

Cudjoe, Hon. S.

Garcia, Hon. A.

Crichlow-Cockburn, Hon. C.

Forde, E.

Dillon, Hon. Maj. Gen. E.

Webster-Roy, Hon. A.

Gadsby-Dolly, Hon. Dr. N.

Cuffie, Hon. M.

Smith, Hon. D.

Leonce, A.

Antoine, Brig. Gen. A.

Olivierre, Miss. N.

Mc Donald, Miss M.

NOES

Lee, D.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Mrs. K

Charles, R.

Rambachan, Dr. S.

Tewarie, Dr. B.

Moonilal, Dr. R.

Newallo-Hosein, Mrs. C.

Gopeesingh, Dr. T.

Gayadeen-Gopeesingh, Mrs. V.

Indarsingh, R.

Ramadhar, P.

Khan, Dr. F.

Singh, G.

Padarath, B.

Bodoe, Dr. L.

Paray, R.

Ramdial, Miss R.

Question agreed to.

**STANDING FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT
(ADOPTION)**

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I beg to move:

Be it resolved that this House adopt the Second Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Second Session (2016/2017), Eleventh Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2017.

Madam Speaker, since the Members opposite have not agreed to debate the Variation of Appropriation Bill together with the report which is the basis for the Bill, I will simply say that the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives met on the 5th of May 2017 and agreed to a proposal with respect to the Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2017, in the sum of \$1,398,125,544 to fund urgent and critical needs under recurrent and capital expenditure for the balance of the fiscal year.

The details of the proposed changes were circulated to all Members of the Standing Finance Committee and a discussion ensued. When we come to do the Bill, I will deal with this matter in more detail since we are not permitted to do both of them together.

In the context of the proposed Variation of Appropriation for fiscal 2017, I rise in this honourable House to present the budgetary framework for these measures by way of the usual mid-year review of budget 2017. In this presentation, I will give an update on the fiscal outturn for the first half of 2017, and an update on the status and performance of a number of important financial initiatives.

Madam Speaker, you will recall that the 2017 budget was introduced against the background of an uncertain global economic environment, with Brexit casting a damper on economic activity in the Eurozone and depressed oil and commodity prices impacting Latin America, and other developing and emerging market economies. Based primarily on supply considerations, oil prices have fluctuated significantly since October 2016, trading in a \$10 band between \$45 and \$55 per barrel. The oil price today is just over \$47, around \$47.50 for WTI, which closely approximates the average price of the basket of crudes in Trinidad and Tobago.

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Our economy has faced three consecutive years of economic decline, caused by a 23 per cent fall in petroleum output between 2013 and 2016 with oil production dropping to its lowest level in 50 years, in 2016, to 66,000 barrels per day. Fortunately, as a result of sustained focus by this administration on increasing oil production over the last year, the country is now back up to almost 76,000 barrels per day, an increase of 10,000 barrels per day.

However, the general decline in oil production and the collapse of oil prices since 2014 has resulted in a severe reduction in Government's revenue leading to cuts in expenditure which have impacted upon on the construction, manufacturing and services sectors.

It is worth repeating that as a country we have lost \$20 billion in annual revenue since 2014 and US \$2.5 billion in annual foreign exchange inflows. Claims of the unavailability of foreign exchange by persons who demand US dollars on call must be viewed in the context of this significant loss of forex. This is the reality we now face, how to run an economy accustomed to \$57 billion in expenditure on \$37 billion in tax revenue. But notwithstanding this serious challenge, we have made progress towards bringing our accounts into balance.

Our 2017 budget, Madam Speaker, represented the second in our medium-term fiscal consolidation plan, which aims at achieving fiscal balance by the year 2020. The plan involves a series of tax and institutional reforms, containment of government expenditure and redirecting expenditure away from subsidies and discretionary transfers towards economic and social infrastructure.

The 2017 budget was predicated on the start of an economic recovery led by a reversal in the structural decline in oil and gas outputs. This recovery was to emanate from the start-up of production from the Angostura and Sercan gas fields in the fourth quarter of 2016 with production momentum increasing in 2017. These projects are going to be reinforced by the start-up of the Trinidad Onshore Compression, or TROC project, in mid-2017 and the Juniper field in late 2017. Combined with the expected rise in oil and gas prices, the projection was for a moderate growth in energy tax collections, which will help support a pickup in central Government investment spending.

As the tax reforms announced in the 2016/2017 budgets were expected to take a few years to yield maximum effect, the 2017 budget was expected to depend on one-time revenues equivalent to 6 per cent of GDP or \$9 billion representing the proceeds from asset sales.

The expenditure side of the 2017 budget confirms Government's commitment to a lower budget envelope, more in keeping with our medium term revenue potential. From a level of \$63 billion in 2015, Government's expenditure was reduced to \$53 billion in 2016 and this expenditure level was maintained in the 2017 budget. This represents a decrease of \$10 billion in annual Government expenditure from the 2014/2015 levels, which is no mean feat, achieved without causing social instability or economic collapse. The budget target for 2017 was an overall deficit of \$6.03 billion or the equivalent of 4 per cent of projected GDP compared with 5 per cent of GDP in 2016.

Looking at the performance in the first half of the year, the last official GDP data issued by the Central Statistical Office was its preliminary figure for 2016, which indicated that real GDP declined by 2.3 per cent last year. According to the schedule of the Central Statistical Office, no official GDP estimates for 2017 or revised estimates for 2016 will be released until later this year, just prior to the 2018 budget. Any other estimate of GDP that has been published by other agencies is not official and should not be used to make projections or comparisons, lest the persons who do so fall into error.

Based on estimates published by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, gas production has in fact picked up in the first six months of fiscal 2017 and natural gas prices have strengthened. Compared to 2016, when gas prices dropped below US \$2 per MMBtu, over the last six months, Henry Hub Natural Gas Spot Prices have reached as high as US \$3.75 per MMBtu. This occurred in December 2016 and have averaged well over US \$3 per MMBtu on many days. Today's Henry Hub price is over US \$3.30 per MMBtu. This trend is expected to firm up further during the remainder of the year as new fields begin production and the impact of BPTT's Trinidad Onshore Compression project begins to be felt on production.

In addition, the rate of implementation of the Government's public sector programmes is expected to be increased based on the availability of funding from the proposed US \$300 million CAF or Andean Development Bank loan. The available evidence therefore suggests that real GDP could show a small increase in 2017.

However, Madam Speaker, it is noteworthy that notwithstanding the expansion of the VAT base, the gradual 7 per cent depreciation of the currency over the last year, increases in fuel prices, and other tax adjustments, inflation has

remained subdued within the 12-month increase in the retail price index, with the 12-month increase in the retail price index hovering at between 2.5 and 3.6 per cent.

Food inflation has trended downwards since 2014 from a high of 18.2 per cent in October 2014 to 7.7 per cent in January 2017. Core inflation has remained relatively stable between 1.3 per cent to 2.7 per cent over the period January 2014 to January 2017. This containment of inflation is a deliberate strategy of this Government designed to cushion the effect on the most vulnerable of reduced national incomes and it has worked so far.

Further, according to the latest data published by the CSO, notwithstanding our difficult circumstances, the unemployment rate has only risen by just over half a per cent to 4 per cent as at the end of 2016 from 3.4 per cent a year earlier. The number of unemployed persons rose to 25,500 by the end of 2016 from 21,900 the year before or by less than 4,000. This is a far cry from the wild figure of 25,000 job losses being bandied about by Members opposite.

It must be emphasized that there has been a significant loss of US \$2.5 billion per year in foreign exchange inflows from oil and gas receipts since 2014. As a result, our net international reserves or foreign reserves, have fallen by 12 per cent from US \$10.4 billion in May 2014 to US \$9.1 billion in April 2017. This is also reflected in the decline in the months of import cover from 12 months in 2014 to 10 months in 2017. Notwithstanding this decline, our foreign reserves continue to significantly exceed conventional international benchmarks of reserve adequacy, providing significant buffers to Trinidad and Tobago's external position. Nearby Barbados, for example, has only two months of import cover at this time, compared to our 10 months of cover.

2.30 p.m.

I now look at central government finances. Madam Speaker, preliminary data, taking into account approximately \$1.5 billion in revenue held in the Suspense Account at Treasury, indicates that for the first half of the fiscal year, central government operations resulted in an interim deficit of approximately \$5.40 billion, compared with a budget projection of \$3.85 billion at this time of the year. The estimated interim deficit at the end of March, 2017, is due to temporary shortfalls in capital revenues, largely proceeds of asset sales, and lower-than-projected tax collection in particular areas. The shortfall in tax collections were in respect of taxes of goods and services, mainly VAT and transfers of state enterprise profits. However, with the increase in international oil and gas prices

over the half-year, tax collections from the petroleum companies has increased. Oil prices have averaged US \$50.45 per barrel for the first six months of the fiscal year, and the petroleum companies were thus required to pay supplementary petroleum tax, or SPT, for the first time since the first quarter of fiscal 2016. Income tax collections from corporations also exceeded the budget projections.

Madam Speaker, as hon. Members may be aware, the supplemental petroleum tax is a revenue-based tax. It is not a tax on profit, and is only applicable to revenue from the sale of crude oil. In its current form, SPT rates can vary from 18 per cent to a maximum of 55 per cent, depending on the price of crude oil, as well as the size, maturity and location of the oil field. The SPT is triggered when the price of oil is above US \$50 per barrel. I will expand on this later in my presentation. It is very important for Members to note that through careful and prudent management, Government expenditure for the half year was also 14 per cent lower than projected. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Fourteen?

Hon. C. Imbert: Fourteen. In the six months of the fiscal year we had projected to spend \$27.3 billion, roughly half of the approved budget of \$53 billion. We actually spent \$23.5 billion, or \$3.8 billion less than projected. The reduction in projected expenditure was both in respect of capital expenditure, where disbursements amounted to \$1 billion, compared with the budget projection of \$2.7 billion for the half-year, and recurrent expenditure, which was \$2 billion less than projected.

Allow me now to look at the reasons for the variations in the main budget aggregates. On the revenue side, we are expected to collect \$6.3 billion in capital revenues in the first half of the year. These funds were earmarked to come, among other things, from proceeds from the sale of Clico shareholdings in Methanol Holdings (International) Limited, (MHIL), of approximately \$2.3 billion, as well as from the sale of other Clico assets expected to yield a further \$3.4 billion. These transactions have been delayed because complex legal, regulatory, corporate and administrative road blocks which we are in the process of unravelling, once and for all. There was also a shortfall on projected VAT collections in the first half of the year, amounting to some \$669 million. While some of this could be explained by the reduced spending by the oil and gas companies, given the depressed oil and gas prices environment, and a decline in discretionary spending by individuals, there are indications that the major problem continues to be the longstanding weakness in our tax administration in both the Customs and Excise Division and the Board of Inland Revenue.

This weakness has continued for years, in part because of weak management and the tendency for both institutions to work in silos, rather than in a collaborative manner. Previously, buoyant energy revenues had masked the revenue losses arriving from tax non-compliance. With the fall in energy revenues, we are now confronted with the full impact of poor revenue administration. In this context, the Government plans to bring legislation to the Parliament before the end of this fiscal year for the establishment of an integrated revenue authority. I will give an update on this matter later. Additionally, in the same way that we have addressed the recruitment of personnel to assist with the collection of property tax, we also intend to engage in a major employment programme of young, and not so young professionals and graduates in the second half of 2017, to assist us with VAT and other tax collections. Space is available to accommodate this proposed new staff in the recently opened Government Plaza. In fact, we have the capacity to accommodate up to 400 additional members of staff in the new Inland Revenue building alone.

Madam Speaker, despite the shortfall in VAT collections, on the flipside, income tax collections were \$743 million, or 11 per cent higher than projected, because of the collection of SPT, that I mentioned earlier, as well as the application of the new 30 per cent tax bracket on corporations and individuals with taxable incomes in excess of \$1million. On the expenditure side, I am happy to confirm, as had been promised in the 2017 budget statement, the bulk of the additional outstanding wage arrears to public officers for this year, 2017, and not counting last year, amounting to \$1.8 billion has now been paid. [*Desk thumping*] This backpay liability, gifted to us by the outgoing regime, has had a severe adverse effect on our cash flow, but is now largely satisfied.

The \$1.8 billion in payments of arrears of salaries made in the first half of 2017 make a total of almost \$5 billion in backpay paid out by this Government since we assumed office in 2015. It has not been easy, and we have struggled to make these backpay payments, but, thankfully, that particular financial challenge is now behind us. The Government has also reduced the outstanding arrears to contractors, as we continue to verify claims. This process of verification and payment will continue in the second half of the fiscal year. A small shortfall in projected wage and salary payments has been largely due to administrative delays in the start of payments of new salaries. The shortfall in capital expenditure that I mentioned earlier, has been largely due to delays in finalizing contracts, and the time needed to verify outstanding bills and invoices to make sure they are honest and genuine.

Now, financing the deficit in the first half of fiscal 2017, the budget deficit of \$5.4 billion, the interim deficit for the half year estimated for the first six months was financed from two main sources. Firstly, a drawdown from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund of US \$251 million or TT \$1.7 billion, made on March 16, 2017, and, secondly, borrowing by the central government. It is worth noting that this was the second drawdown from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund since it was legally established in March 2007. The first drawdown of US \$375 million took place on May 13, 2016, which left the amount in the fund at US \$5.42 billion at that time. Since then the fund has been able to recover through good management and good returns on investment. In fact, the balance on the HSF increased from US \$5.42 billion on May 2016, to US \$5.695 billion in March 2017. In other words, between May 2016 and March 2017, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund earned US \$275 million. [*Desk thumping*]

Accordingly, after the second drawdown in March of this year the balance in the fund was US \$5.44 billion, which is the same level as it was after the first drawdown. Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report that despite a second drawdown from the fund, in just the last two months, the balance in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund has increased by US \$100 million to US \$5.54 billion at the end of April 2017. [*Desk thumping*] With respect to the public debt, about which there is much misinformation and misplaced commentary, it is important to note that the net public sector debt, exclusive of Central Bank, open market operations, at the end of fiscal 2010 was \$45.4 billion, with a corresponding debt-to-GDP ratio of 32.1 per cent.

However, by the end of fiscal 2015, the net public sector debt stood at \$76.5 billion, with a resulting debt-to-GDP ratio of 50.9 per cent, an increase in the net public sector debt of \$31.1 billion, equivalent to a 70 per cent increase in our public debt over the 2010 to 2015 period when the Members opposite were in charge. Coupled with declining revenues, this massive increase in debt in that prior period has presented us with another serious financial challenge. It should be noted that at the end of fiscal 2016, net public sector debt was \$87.6 billion, largely as a result of the US \$1 billion international bond issue raised in July/August 2016, which equated to a debt-to-GDP ratio of 60.1 per cent.

However, during the period under review—that is for the first six months of fiscal 2017—despite our very serious financial challenges, the net public debt only increased to \$89.1 billion, representing an increase in our debt-to-GDP ratio of just one percentage point from 60.1 per cent to 61.1 per cent between October 2016, and March 2017, in stark contrast to the excesses of the past. I wish to report that during the first six months of the fiscal year the central government

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contracted three new loans, a \$1 billion, five-year, 3.8 per cent, fixed rate bond issued on December 15, 2016; secondly, a \$1 billion, eight-year, 4.1 per cent, fixed rate bond issued on February 14, 2017; and, thirdly, a \$1.5 billion short-term, six-month, 1.7 per cent, fixed rate bond issued on March 16, 2017, to be repaid later in the year. Proceeds of these issuances were utilized for budgetary support. In addition, there was one new Government guaranteed loan in the amount of \$90 million contracted by UDeCOTT for completion of works on the Brian Lara Cricket Stadium, which will be formally opened on Friday. I believe that this is the first time in a long time that Government borrowing is being reported to the Parliament in this transparent manner. [*Desk thumping*]

Looking forward now, Madam Speaker, there are two main revisions to be made to the fiscal projection for the year as a whole. These cover expected energy tax collections and capital revenues in the form of estimated receipts from asset sales. Over the last 18 months, the new Government has made several adjustments to our tax regime and introduced some new taxes, such as the millionaire tax. I have noted wild speculation by the usual suspects regarding our plans for taxation and fiscal consolidation at the time of this mid-year review, from rumours about a huge increase in the fuel prices, to a massive devaluation of the currency, and the introduction of punitive new taxes. Over the past week, in particular, I have been bombarded by journalists and others seeking to determine our strategy with respect to these matters.

Let me put all of that to rest right now. With respect to fuel prices we made it clear that, in like manner to our Caribbean neighbours, we intend, over a three-year period, between 2015 and 2018, to remove the subsidy on gasoline and diesel, so that the price of fuel will rise and fall in accordance with changes in world oil prices and the ex-refinery price of petroleum products. This requires the proper design and application of an appropriate pricing formula, which is being worked on at this time. There will, thus, be no increases in fuel prices in this mid-year review. With respect to the exchange rate we also made it clear that we will work in tandem with the Central Bank to ensure that there is an orderly and stable exchange rate regime, based on foreign exchange inflows and the demand for foreign exchange with a suitable focus on the facilitation of exports.

There will be no drastic or sudden depreciation of the currency. In this respect, I wish to confirm that consistent with our drive to encourage local companies to become net earners of foreign exchange, and/or to reduce our import bill, we have requested the Central Bank to give priority to manufacturing and trade whenever it intervenes in the disbursement of foreign exchange to the

commercial banks. This measure took effect just one week ago. Having laid the base for fiscal consolidation, our focus will now be on revenue collection, and instead of new tax or tariff adjustments at this time, the Government will intensify its efforts on improving tax administration and compliance for the balance of this fiscal year, and beyond. We need to see a quantum leap in the performance of our revenue collection agencies as soon as possible, since there is no doubt that tax leakage and tax avoidance is widespread in Trinidad and Tobago, resulting in a loss of revenue to the Treasury in the billions of dollars.

Hon. Members would recall that the 2017 budget was predicated on an average oil price of US \$48 per barrel, and a natural gas price of US \$2.25 per MMBtu. I can now report that in the first six months of the fiscal year the corresponding prices have averaged US \$50.45 per barrel, and US \$3.30 per MMBtu, respectively. We have, therefore, increased the expected tax collections from the energy sector for 2017 to \$3.6 billion, compared with the original budget projection of \$2.6 billion, an increase of \$1 billion. The expected receipts from assets sales, although registering a shortfall in the first half of the year, have been revised for the year as a whole to reflect Government decisions to include a different mix of assets consistent with Government's policy of redefining the scope of the public sector.

Accordingly, Government revenue for the year, as a whole, has been revised upward from \$47.4 billion, and I digress to say, this is not core revenue we are talking about, we are talking about core revenue of \$37 billion and \$10 billion in asset sales. So the total Government revenue for the year has been revised upward from \$47.4 billion to \$48 billion, largely due to an expected increase of \$575 million from income taxes from the petroleum companies. As a result, the overall central government deficit for 2017 is now projected at \$5.9 billion, or an estimated 3.8 per cent of GDP compared with the original projected deficit of \$6 billion, 3.9 per cent of GDP. In terms of the projected deficit for this year, therefore, we remain on track.

Madam Speaker, permit me now to review progress made towards the implementation of some major tax reforms that were included in the 2017 budget, firstly, the property tax. I am pleased to advise that phase one of the implementation of the property tax regime, which involves the development of the valuation roles has been proceeding smoothly. Starting with residential properties, in the first instance, the Commissioner of Valuations has requested that property owners submit valuation return forms, along with any supporting documents on or before May 22nd, 2017. This form has been mailed out, and has been made available at all offices of the Valuation Division.

Madam Speaker, we do not intend to extend this deadline since it is necessary to get on with the job of assessing the rental values and determining the applicable property taxes so that tax collection can commence. The revenue from property taxation is an important component of national income which has been postponed for the last seven years. Indeed, it has been estimated that the Government has lost over \$2.5 billion in property taxation since 2009. In April of this year, a communications campaign commenced to inform and educate the public on the operationalization of the property tax regime. To this end, sensitization advertisements have been placed in the daily newspapers. A website has been developed with information on the property tax regime, and a Government hotline has been established to answer questions on the valuation process. To complement this advertising and information campaign, an expert panel of valuers from the Ministry of Finance has been making the rounds of the various media houses, appearing on television, and on radio, in order to answer questions and clarify a number of issues related to the implementation of the Property Tax Act of 2009.

To these excellent public servants who have impressed us all with their ability, knowledge and demeanour, I wish to congratulate them for a job well done. [*Desk thumping*] Further, to facilitate the preparation of the valuation roles, the Ministry of Finance is in the final stages of recruiting 248 members of staff for the Valuation Division. This includes 180 field assessors, and 15 field assessors/supervisors. The Ministry of Finance is also partnering with the Department of Geomatics Engineering and Land Management in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of the West Indies to ensure that all field assessors are well equipped to conduct field work. It should be noted that it is expected that in many cases the information provided by property owners will be adequate to assess the rental value of their properties without a visit. However, there will be instances where site visits will be required, particularly, in the case of new properties. In these cases owners will receive a notice from the Commissioner of Valuations before a site visit is carried out.

Furthermore, arrangements have been made by the Ministry of Finance to ensure that assessors of the Valuation Division are identifiable on the field. If property owners are unsure about the authenticity of this process, they can contact the Valuation Division to confirm the identity of field assessors. Madam Speaker, for clarity, we estimate that up to 75 per cent of residential properties will not be visited by the Valuation Division, following the completion of the current valuation exercise. I also wish to stress that at present the Ministry of Finance is

simply in the process of gathering information on properties in Trinidad and Tobago. And it is only upon the completion of the valuation roles that property owners will receive a notice from the Commissioner of Valuations with details of the tax due and payable. It is only at this time that actual tax collection will commence.

With respect to the allocation of funds collected from the property tax regime, the Ministry of Finance is currently discussing the operational details of recommendations made by the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. In the first instance, as part of Government's reform process, we are looking at the remittance of property tax on residential properties to the various local government bodies to assist with their cash flow. As the property tax collection system takes shape and evolves, other categories of property tax would be considered for devolution to local government in due course, but it is likely that property tax on industrial properties will remain the preserve of the central government.

Secondly, the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. In keeping with Government's intention to have a revenue authority established by the end of this year, and to submit the enabling legislation to a joint select committee of Parliament for scrutiny, an International Monetary Fund and Caribbean Regional Technical Assistance Centre, or CARTAC mission, visited Trinidad and Tobago in October, 2016, to review the current state of revenue and customs administration to recommend strategies for institutional strengthening, including the establishment of a revenue authority. In February 2017, after considering the mission's technical report, which outlined the options for reform in revenue and customs administration, Cabinet agreed to the establishment of a revenue authority as the preferred modality for modernizing tax and customs administration. Accordingly, a project implementation committee has been established to expedite the work required to implement the revenue authority in the next fiscal year. Notably, in this effort at modernization of our archaic and outdated revenue collection system by this new Government, there would be appropriate consultation with the recognized trade unions in order to build consensus and agreement on the aims and objectives of this very important project.

Thirdly, regulating the gambling industry. Madam Speaker, the Government is continuing its drive to regulate all aspects of gambling in Trinidad and Tobago. A Joint Select Committee of the Parliament has been reviewing the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill, 2016, and supporting regulations. The JSC is

expected to submit a final report to Parliament before the end of the current parliamentary session, thus, paving the way for the reform of this sector. Madam Speaker, notwithstanding arguments by some players in the industry to the contrary, the gaming and gambling sector in Trinidad and Tobago is estimated to involve as much as \$10 billion per year in economic activity.

Hon. Member: More.

Hon. C. Imbert: Largely bereft—I hear my hon. friend saying, more—of appropriate regulation. On the approval of this legislation by Parliament we expect to have in place a rigorous licensing process, compliance and enforcement provisions and an efficient taxation system for the gambling industry. We continue to be mindful of the ills which are associated with the gambling industry, not the least of which are issues of chronic non-compliance with international anti-money laundering requirements, and tax leakages, as well as the adverse social consequences of gambling addiction. It is anticipated that after the passage of the Act, and the appointment of the board of directors to the Commission, the proposed new gambling control commission can be fully operationalized in fiscal 2018.

Fourthly, our sale of assets programme. Madam Speaker, the sale of assets programme to support the national budget for 2017 remains broadly on track as follows. The additional public offer issued by First Citizens Bank, which was an offer for sale by First Citizens Holdings Limited of 48,495,665 ordinary shares, at a price of \$32 per share, closed on April 7th, 2017. Four thousand, four hundred and forty applicants received 32,035,770 shares, or 66 per cent of the total shares on offer, with proceeds amounting to \$1.025 billion. We have taken note of the comments that this additional public offering did not realize the projected revenue, and we note the theory that the offer price was too high. However, these comments ignore the fact that if the offer price for FCB shares in this APO had been priced lower than the actual market price, the value of the shareholding of existing shareholders would have been seriously compromised and diluted, leading to loss in asset value and net worth for thousands of ordinary people, pension plans, and institutional investors.

In the circumstances, we are quite satisfied to have been able to raise \$1 billion from this APO without damaging the value of FCB shares. [*Desk thumping*] The additional public offering by the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the sale of 40,248,000, class-B shares, held by NGC, or 26 per cent of the issued share capital of Trinidad and Tobago NGL Limited, TTNGL, will be launched shortly. This is expected to generate approximately \$800 million,

given that the Government has decided to leave a residual balance of 25 per cent of shareholding held by NGC in TTNGL at this time to allow NGC to retain effective control of Phoenix Park Gas Processors Company Limited, and to allow NGC to continue to discharge a strategic role in the gas sector value chain. Again, with this APO, the focus will be on maintaining the value of TTNGL shares for existing shareholders, while offering an attractive APO price.

3.00 p.m.

Thirdly, the investment of the Trinidad Generation Unlimited by Union Estate Electricity Generation Company Limited is also advancing. After a review of our earlier decision to dispose of 20 per cent of the shareholding of TGU to certain local institutional investors, we have now determined that it is more appropriate to pursue the introduction of an independent power producer, or other suitably qualified private sector investor, into the ownership and operations of TGU.

We propose that the new shareholder would hold up to 40 per cent of the shareholding in the company, with another 10 per cent offered to the public and/or institutional investors. The proceeds of this divestment exercise of TGU, are estimated to range from \$3billion to \$5 billion, depending on the final valuation of the company and the quantum of shareholding divested, with these proceeds compensating for potential shortfalls in any other one of the Government's sale of assets programme. Further details of this divestment will be made public in due course.

Madam Speaker, we have embarked on a long overdue reform of the oil and gas fiscal regimes, with a view to ensuring consistency in their application with terms attractive for investment, while at the same time securing a substantial share of the resources for the State. Having done the preliminary work in 2016 and consulted with the industry, we are currently being assisted by the Fiscal Affairs Department of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to establish a suitable legal and fiscal framework for oil and gas operations, which would promote investment in the energy sector which we need now. We have listened, and in broad agreement with the upstream producers that a reform of the supplemental petroleum tax is required. We are satisfied that in a low price environment and in its present form, the SPT does not facilitate immediate investment.

As I mentioned earlier, the SPT rates can vary from a low of 18 per cent to a maximum of 55 per cent, depending on the price of crude oil as well as the size, maturity and location of the oil field. It is triggered when the price of oil increases above US \$50 per barrel. Although the SPT has a system of credits and discounts,

and is minimized through deductibility against the petroleum profit tax, its application is not investment friendly, in that, once a price band is triggered, the new rate applies to all production from the relevant licence. The reform would modify the SPT to bring a degree of stability and predictability, in terms of the fiscal regime faced by the Government and upstream operators.

I now turn to the Dragon Field Project. In addition to a number of initiatives to increase this country's domestic production of natural gas over the short, medium and long-term, the Government is actively working to provide Trinidad and Tobago with access to Venezuelan natural gas within the shortest possible time frame, as this could substantially reduce this country's persistent natural gas supply shortages.

Towards this end, Trinidad and Tobago has signed a Government to Government agreement with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on May, 23, 2016, for the purchase of natural gas from Venezuela's Dragon Gas Field, which is located northwest of Trinidad in close proximity to Shell Trinidad's Limited Hibiscus Gas Field and its Hibiscus platform.

To access this Venezuelan gas, it is envisaged that a new pipeline would be constructed from the Dragon Field to the Hibiscus platform, which is already connected by pipeline to Atlantic's LNG facilities in Point Fortin. A separate connector pipeline would also be constructed to Point Lisas to supply gas for downstream petrochemical industries.

To advance this project, a preliminary project agreement between PDVSA, NGC and Shell was signed in Caracas on March 15, 2017. The companies are now actively working towards finalization of a gas sales agreement by July 2017, and advancing other technical aspects of the project. It is anticipated that first gas from the Dragon Field could be obtained during the 2019 to 2020 period.

I now turn to Petrotrin. Madam Speaker, the Petroleum Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited, or Petrotrin, has two significant outstanding long-term bonds on the international capital markets, a US \$750 million, 6 per cent fixed rate bond due in 2022, and a US \$850 million, 9.75 per cent fixed rate bond due in 2019, with a bullet repayment at maturity. In the case of the 2022 bond, the company is meeting its obligations as they fall due. However, given Petrotrin's current financial position and the still depressed state of hydrocarbon commodity prices, the Government foresees that the bullet repayment of the 2019 bond will be problematic for the company. Accordingly, the Ministry of Finance has

commenced discussions with Petrotrin to identify a cost effective solution for Petrotrin, to meet its 2019 debt service obligation without an explicit Government guarantee.

One strategy currently under discussion, is a partial refinancing of the bond on the domestic market followed by an international bond issue. It is noteworthy that despite the company's realization of its previously deferred tax liability of \$4.3 billion, and its credit rating downgrade by Moody's Investment Services to Ba1 from Ba3, several international investment banks have expressed to the Ministry of Finance that Petrotrin is still in a position to access the international market without a Government guarantee. In fact, three major international banks have already made indicative proposals to the Ministry of Finance, to refinance Petrotrin's long-term debt without adversely affecting the country's debt profile or our debt-to-GDP ratio. Once the requisite approvals of Cabinet are obtained, the Ministry will make formal approaches to both domestic and international financial markets, in respect of the refinancing of the Petrotrin 2019 bond. This will resolve a critical issue for Petrotrin and would allow the company to focus on strategies to return the company to profitability and growth, so that once again Petrotrin can contribute to the national revenues, rather being a burden on the Exchequer.

In this context, to help us better understand the true nature of the issues affecting Petrotrin, the Cabinet recently appointed a seven-member professional committee comprising representatives from the public sector, the private sector and the majority trade union, to conduct an independent review of the operations of Petrotrin. This committee is expected to present its first report next month.

I now look at a public expenditure review. The Government has recently commenced discussions with the World Bank to conduct a review of public expenditure in Trinidad and Tobago. The review will provide an analysis of the efficiency, equity and impact of public spending in selected sectors, to inform the Government's fiscal consolidated programme.

This review will consist of the following: firstly, an assessment of public spending, budget processes and institutions. This will include a broad review of the evolution of public finances, revenues, size, composition and allocation of recurrent and capital spending, fiscal balances and public debt dynamics based on data availability, and an assessment of strengths, gaps and weaknesses of budgetary institutions. Additionally, policy orientations that can result in a sustainable reduction of expenditure, and a stronger budget process will be identified.

Secondly, focusing specifically now, making education spending better. The World Bank will evaluate the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of public sector spending in the education sector. Additionally, policy directions on how to prioritize education spending to identify areas for efficiency gains and increased impact in a fiscally sustainable manner, will be presented.

Thirdly, making health spending better. This section will evaluate the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of public spending on health. Additionally, public policy directions on how to prioritize health spending, to identify areas for efficiency gains and increased impact, in a fiscally sustainable manner, will be presented.

Finally, improving social protection spending. The bank will evaluate the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of public expenditure on social assistance, labour programmes and pensions. Additionally, this section will also discuss whether these expenditures are adequate to cover the needs of the poor and vulnerable, targeted to reach out to those most in need, efficient so that the cost of delivery and fund flows are justified for the intended outcomes, and coordinated so that the fund flows and agencies involved allow for timely, transparent, accountable delivery of funds with minimal risk of duplication. A mission from the World Bank is expected to visit the country next month, that is, in June 2017, to commence the public expenditure review programme.

I now turn to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Hon. Members may recall that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was established by this Parliament to save and invest surplus petroleum revenues derived from the production business, in order to cushion the impact on and sustain public expenditure capacity during periods of revenue downturn caused by a fall in prices of crude oil or gas; generate an alternative stream of income so as to support public expenditure capacity as a result of revenue downturn caused by the depletion of non-renewable petroleum resources and, thirdly, to provide a heritage for future generations of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago from the savings and investment income of the fund.

The HSF Act provides for a saving and investment rule to govern deposits to and withdrawals from the fund, as well as a robust government structure and disclosure regime. Moreover, the Act provides that the provisions of the Act shall

be subject to review by the Minister of Finance, who shall submit a report to Parliament every five years. According to this provision, a review of the fund should have been presented to Parliament by April 2012. This review was never done.

Since assuming office, the current administration has been preparing to correct this non-compliance of the past. To this end, in September 2016, the Government convened a high level stakeholders' forum to discuss the principles that should underpin the reform of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Discussions which were chaired by the Ministry of Finance included representatives from the business sector, the Bankers' Association, the Central Bank, the trade union movement, the University of the West Indies, the University of Trinidad and Tobago and officials of the World Bank, some of whom had participated in the establishment of the fund in 2007.

Coming out of the discussions at that forum, it was proposed that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund should be segregated into two distinctly different funds, one for stabilization and one for heritage. Secondly, there should be a single savings rule that would determine savings to both funds, and the savings rule should be closely aligned to the Government's medium-term or multi-year fiscal consolidation plan. It is no point having a rule or rules for the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund without a connection to the national budget.

Since then, the Ministry of Finance has been collaborating with the World Bank to prepare a more detailed concept paper that will underpin the amended legislation. Work is well underway on this project, and a final round of discussions with interested parties and stakeholders will be conducted before the amended legislation is presented to the Parliament for consideration in this year 2017.

I now turn to our credit rating. As is well known, Moody's Investor Services visited Trinidad and Tobago at the end of March 2017, to conduct their annual assessment of elements critical to the sovereign credit rating of Trinidad and Tobago. The results of their assessment were published on April 25, 2017. Moody's downgraded Trinidad and Tobago's issuer and senior unsecured debt ratings to Ba1, from Baa3, and assigned a stable outlook up from the previous negative outlook. Similarly, Standard & Poor's global ratings limited, S&P, visited Trinidad and Tobago in early April 2017, and conducted their annual review of Trinidad and Tobago's sovereign credit ratings. The results of their assessment

were published on April 21, 2017. S&P lowered its long-term sovereign credit ratings on the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to triple BBB+ from A- and revised the country's outlook to stable from negative. Trinidad and Tobago's transfer and convertibility assessment was also downgraded to A, from AA-, while the short-term sovereign rating was confirmed at A-2.

Madam Speaker, the Government would like to highlight the fact that Moody's downgrade of the country to Ba1, or non-prime or non-investment grade status, means that the Government's obligations are to be considered speculative securities, subject to credit risk. S&P however, downgraded the country to triple B+, which is within their band for investment grade securities. According to S&P, an obligation rated BBB exhibits adequate protection parameters. Given the above, the Government is faced with an inconsistent situation of being rated investment grade by one international rating agency, and simultaneously rated non-prime by another.

In the case of the Ba1 rating by Moody's, the Ministry of Finance is of the view that the downgrade from Baa3 to Ba1 is wholly unwarranted, given that Trinidad and Tobago's significant buffers, which even Moody's acknowledges, infer moderate external risk to the country. However, it is difficult to understand how a country with the following characteristics, can be deemed a moderate credit risk. Firstly, net official reserves of US \$9.1 billion or 10 months of import cover; a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund of US \$5.5 billion, the equivalent of 25 per cent of GDP, and deposits in sinking funds for the express purpose of repaying debt, totalling \$6.5 billion. It must be emphasized that given the ample buffers highlighted above, the Government has the ability to repay the Central Government external debt several times over. Moody's most recent rating is thus puzzling, to say the least.

Given this discrepancy, the Government deems it prudent to seek a third credit rating in an effort to eliminate the discrepancy that currently exists. As a result, the Ministry of Finance recently approached Fitch Ratings Incorporated, the third of the three largest international credit rating agencies in the world, for an indicative costing for the conduct of a private rating in the first instance. This arrangement with Fitch is expected to be finalized shortly, and is intended to bring a clearer and more balanced perspective to our country's credit rating.

I shall now go through some other measures with respect to insurance. The Government has been working vigorously on the full implementation of the Insurance Bill, 2016. The Bill was laid in Parliament in 2016 and referred to a joint select committee in February 2017 for further deliberations and discussions

with stakeholders in the insurance industry. The Joint Select Committee has had five sittings and published two interim reports thus far. It is expected that the JSC deliberations will be completed by next month, June 2017. I wish to point out to the honourable House that the Insurance Bill is an important instrument to Trinidad and Tobago's financial sector, and the Government is working assiduously to ensure that this Bill is appropriately implemented.

I now turn to procurement. Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President, is empowered under section 10(1) of Act No. 1 of 2015 to appoint the board of the Office of Procurement Regulation, after consultation with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. The appointment of the regulator and the board are critical elements in the implementation of the Public Procurement Act. Accordingly, in pursuit of this objective, and in virtually identical fashion to what obtained under the previous administration, the Ministry of Finance is assisting His Excellency, at his request, to build a pool of suitably qualified and experienced candidates from which he may move forward with an informed selection. The Ministry of Finance is therefore in the process of procuring a suitable consulting firm to search for suitable candidates, so that His Excellency could be equipped with a short list of approximately 20 suitable candidates, ranked in order of merit, from which he can make a choice in his sole discretion as required by the Act.

Section 11(9) of the Procurement Act requires that the salaries and allowances of the regulator and other members be determined by the Minister, subject to the approval of Parliament. This is an essential prerequisite for the operationalization of the new procurement regime. I am pleased to report that the proposed compensation package for the regulator, who will be a public officer, of \$85,000 a month, inclusive of allowances, which we considered to be more than adequate, has now been approved by both Houses of Parliament, having been passed in the Senate last night and in the House last week. [*Desk thumping*] So we are on our way.

Madam Speaker, the Government has also approved the organizational structures for procuring entities for large, medium and small Ministries and Departments. For smaller models, for agencies that do not engage in significant procurement, a basic and a minor have been put forward to widen the scope of thinking in the design of procuring entities. The Government is also actively working with the United Nations Development Programme as a consultant for this important project. From the beginning of April 2017, UNDP has been working with senior officers charged with the internal change process by their accounting

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officers, towards building capacity for the customization of the procurement and disposal handbook, as required under section 30(3) of the Act, setting internal controls for efficiency and effectiveness in the procurement and disposal process, and preparation of special guidelines, as required by section 30(2) of the Act.

UNDP consultants have met with key stakeholders in Ministries, Departments and state agencies to understand the unique challenges faced by entities which undertake significant construction activity, allocate public moneys to non-governmental organizations with which they partner in meeting certain strategic objectives, and those where significant procurement is undertaken by decentralized units.

Further, the transitional arrangements for Central Tenders Board staff, under section 66(2) of the Act, are in train and will allow for either voluntary retirement from the public service, transfer to the Office of Procurement Regulation or redeployment in the public service. A multidisciplinary transition team has thus been established in the Ministry of Finance to prioritize all the needs of the staff of the Central Tenders Board in transitioning towards whichever option they choose.

I will now report on FATCA—implementation of the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act regime, intergovernmental agreement, and the Tax Information Exchange Agreement, 2017. The intergovernmental agreement between Trinidad and Tobago and the United States of America was signed on August 19, 2016. The legislation to support the intergovernmental agreement, the Tax Information Exchange Agreements (United States America) Act, 2017, was passed with the requisite special majority in both Houses of Parliament and assented to on March 20, 2017.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Thanks to the Opposition.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, I wish to thank the Opposition for its support.

The Act will come into operation on such date as is fixed by the President by proclamation. Madam Speaker, a commencement provision was included to allow the relevant persons to whom the Tax Information Exchange Agreement Act would apply, to put the necessary systems in place for the exchange of sensitive personal information as defined under the TIEA Act. The relevant persons include the Board of Inland Revenue, the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, the Trinidad and Tobago Securities and Exchange Commission and the financial institutions, namely the banks and insurance companies.

You may wish to know that the Board of Inland Revenue is continuing preparations and is on a positive path to meeting the reporting deadlines. The deadline is September 30, 2017. Central Bank and the Securities and Exchange Commission are in the process of drafting the guidelines to give effect to the IGA as required by the Tax Information Act. The banks have indicated a readiness to meet the reporting deadline. A few have reported a readiness, particularly in the area of having obtained client information already for the purpose of the exchange of information. Insurance companies are in various stages of completion of the process. It should be noted that the systems required to be put in place for the implementation of the Act are similar and virtually identical to that of the implementation of the agreement.

I now turn to the second challenge facing Trinidad and Tobago, which will come to this Parliament shortly, and this is the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchanges of Information for tax purposes—laid already. At present, Trinidad and Tobago is deemed non-compliant with the Global Forum standard for the exchange of information on request for tax purposes. This is the other part of the world. FATCA is the US approach to sharing of tax information, and the Global Forum is the approach adopted by the rest of the world. To stay compliant and avoid financial and economic sanctions, we must satisfy all international bodies in terms of tax transparency, which is no easy task. That being said, in 2014 Trinidad and Tobago committed to a new global standard for the exchange of information for tax purposes, and to commence the exchange of information according to the new standard, by 2017.

In an effort to improve Trinidad and Tobago's current Global Forum rating—and I may repeat that when I came into the office of Minister of Finance in the first week, I found a deadline staring at us of September 30, 2015 for the Global Forum, and I had to quickly go and seek an extension of time from the Global Forum. We did so and we received the extension. [*Desk thumping*] In order to improve our rating, we have completed the following actions: We have obtained the Global Forum's approval for a deferral of our commitment to commence the exchange of information automatically, in accordance with the new global standards. We have had this deferred from 2017 to 2018. On April 07, 2017, Trinidad and Tobago applied to the Global Forum's fast-track procedure with a view to improving the rating. In this regard, Trinidad and Tobago requested to become a party to the multilateral convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, and intends to become party to the multilateral Competent Authority Agreement, once it has signed on to the Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters.

In keeping with the ascension to the MAC, Trinidad and Tobago is required to put legislation in place. And to this end, as I was reminded by the hon. Attorney General, a Bill entitled the Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters Bill was laid in Parliament on April 28, 2017. We will soon be debating this, and we expect to get the support of those opposite.

The Ministry of Finance continues to work closely with the Global Forum to improve Trinidad and Tobago's current non-compliant rating, and to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago honours its commitment to commence automatically exchanging tax information, according to the new standard, by 2018.

I turn now to an update and overview of the Clico resolution plan. As at September 2016, I wish to confirm that the Government and the people and the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago would have directly expended approximately \$20.3 billion in relation to the bailout of CL Financial, while meeting the primary objectives of the bailout, which were, one, providing full protection for traditional policyholders of Clico and British American and, two, paying investors short-term investment products, STIPS holders and depositors of Clico, British American, Clico Investment Bank and Caribbean Money Market Brokers or CMMB, in line with legal priority. In addition, by April 2017, the Government would have incurred approximately a further \$3.2 billion in funding costs, advisor fees and other costs.

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Further, the Government is owed approximately \$325 million in interest on the Clico Investment Bank and British American Insurance Company promissory notes, as well as up to another \$4.3 billion for other liabilities which could arise under the liquidity support agreement with First Citizens Investment Services and in relation to Clico Investment Bank's liabilities to holders of investment notes certificates which remain unpaid. Should these liabilities arise, the Government may be owed up to \$27.7 billion by the CL Financial Group.

I thought, Madam Speaker, the time was necessary to provide this information to the national community and let the taxpayers know that in addition to \$20.3 billion of direct funding, there is a further \$3.2 billion in other costs, a debt owed of \$325 million in interest from promissory notes, as well as a potential further \$4.3 billion liabilities arising from the various liquidity support agreements entered into with entities associated with the Clico bailout.

Madam Speaker, having met the primary objective of the bailout, that is, to settle legitimate creditors as expeditiously as possible and in line with legal priority, the Government is now focusing on the recovery of taxpayers' funds. Since the initial intervention, the Government and CLF have pursued the execution of the divestment strategy envisioned by the original shareholders agreement. However, each of the companies sold had several liabilities that had to be treated with from the proceeds, resulting in minimal net returns which are being held pending the full resolution of the repayment of debts to CLF's creditors, including the Government. The Government's repayment plan envisages that legitimate, non-conflicted third-party creditors will be paid in addition to the repayment of the Government's debt, the taxpayers' debt.

These remaining creditors include Clico and British American's legitimate policyholders, comprising \$9.8 billion in terms of Clico and \$800 million in terms of British American, and Clico Investment Bank investment note certificate holders. The Government and the Central Bank are currently making efforts to divest the traditional insurance business of Clico and British American by way of one or more portfolio transfers.

After the transfer of its traditional business, it is estimated that Clico, among other assets, will still hold approximately \$2.8 billion in Government bonds, cash and listed equities, excluding Republic Bank Limited, including shares in the West Indian Tobacco Company Limited, JMMB, One Caribbean Media, First Citizens Bank, Guardian Media, National Flour Mills Limited, Guardian Holdings Limited, Ready Mix (West Indies) Limited, LJ Williams Limited and Trinidad and Tobago NGL, among others.

Madam Speaker, there are several assets of the CL Financial Group which are available to repay the remaining creditors and settle the Government's and taxpayers' debt. These assets include 57 per cent of Methanol Holdings International Limited, or MHIL, currently held by Clico; 25 per cent of Republic Bank Limited currently held by Clico and Clico Investment Bank; 78 per cent of Angostura Holdings Limited currently held by Clico, CL Financial and Clico Investment Bank; 100 per cent of Home Construction Limited currently held by CL Financial, Clico and Clico Investment Bank; 94 per cent of COLFIRE; 100 per cent of Caribbean Petrochemicals Manufacturing Limited; 23 per cent of One Caribbean Media; and 51 per cent of LJ Williams Limited and so on. And finally, there is a real estate portfolio in Clico, the precise value of which is not certain.

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However, the repayment plan envisages that once the traditional business of Clico and British American is sold, the Government will seek to divest some or all of these assets, as is required, and repay the debt owed to taxpayers. The Government is satisfied that the repayment plan, once completed, will have achieved the following key objectives: the protection of policyholders and depositors; a reduction of the public debt and an improvement in the Government's fiscal options to obtain the best possible recovery for the Government within a reasonable time frame.

I wish to assure you, Madam Speaker, that we will continue to work assiduously on the Clico resolution plan within the legal constraints and in accordance to the guidelines and directions ordered by the High Court. I thought that it was necessary to put on record that the total exposure of taxpayers to the Clico bailout could be as much as \$27.7 billion made up as I have indicated.

Madam Speaker, since our assumption to office, we have established a robust and prudent macroeconomic and development agenda. We are transitioning to a steady and sustainable growth path. Our educational and communication programmes are bringing greater clarity and clearer definition of our priorities, policies and strategies for adjusting the economy to lower levels of revenue and expenditure and in particular we are rebalancing the reduced levels of expenditure with a greater emphasis on growth-enhancing capital expenditures.

Madam Speaker, we are providing our citizens with astute leadership and good governance. *[Laughter]* We are partnering with the business sector and with every citizen in our efforts to lift the economy to its correct posture of macroeconomic balance, sustainable growth and transformation. We are ensuring through our programmes that our citizens obtain their fair share of national resources and they will always receive from this Government good, honest, equitable and transparent Government. *[Desk thumping]* In pursuit of this agenda, our country will be restored to the growth trajectory which prevailed in the early years of this new millennium. Barring unforeseen circumstances, we are on course to achieve our fiscal consolidation targets for 2017. This is a difficult year for us as petroleum prices continue to be depressed and the economy adjusts to the drastic reduction in revenue and foreign exchange receipts.

As a responsible Government in these challenging times, we must cut our coat to suit our cloth. We cannot continue with the extravagance and the excesses of the recent past. We must face reality and move forward with the understanding that everyone is required to make their contribution in one way or another, big or small, rich or poor.

Madam Speaker, I thank you and I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Leader of the Opposition, [*Desk thumping*] and I remind you—I just wish to remind you that you are entitled to 90 minutes.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I join this debate on the adoption of the Report of the Standing Finance Committee with respect to the 2017 budget appropriation Bill. I do not think the Minister spent any time or much time on that aspect of it, but gave us far and wide an overview and basically said nothing that will give hope [*Desk thumping*] and comfort to citizens.

Indeed, I felt at times he did not even believe his own words. [*Laughter*] He was just reading the words and I wondered, you know, if he had internalized it. He was just reading these words. And, you know, in so many ways he closes his contribution—the hon. Minister—by telling us about honest, transparent—what was it?—let me just find it, Madam Speaker. Yes. “Good, honest, equitable, transparent Government,” and in this very Parliament we cannot get one Minister saying the same thing as the other. [*Desk thumping*] It is as though the hon. Minister of Finance—it is as though no one has any confidence in the hon. Minister, when as Corporation Sole he could tell this country that he knew nothing about the Massy transfer of sale. [*Desk thumping*] Nothing. And the line Minister in this House—I have the *Hansard*—tells this Parliament, not once, not twice, but more than three times, the Cabinet did not know about—[*Desk thumping*] right in this Chamber. [*Interruption*] And today, the honourable—Yes, Ma’am.

Madam Speaker: Members, I would like us to maintain a certain amount of decorum. I understand we will support each other, but please, within the confines of the rules. Please, continue. I want to hear the Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. So today, the Prime Minister says there is no divergence of view. So, do I believe the hon. Minister of Finance? Do I believe the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, the line Minister? I think, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West, the Minister in the Ministry of the Office of the Prime Minister—because all the reports coming through in the last week or two from these Ministers is, the Cabinet knew nothing. Why do I raise this? I raise this in the context of good, honest, equitable, transparent Government [*Desk thumping*] that the Member for Diego Martin North/East was so clear to wrap his entire contribution with.

So where is the transparency when three out of four persons say this matter was never brought to the attention of the Cabinet, never discussed and yet we have the hon. Prime Minister—this is not the first time, you know, where there is this divergence of views coming from different ones and different Members of the Cabinet. And therefore, it is just in my respectful view, it is only a matter of time before they collapse completely. [*Desk thumping*] It is just a matter of time. It is a matter of time, and his contribution today from the hon. Minister, 90 minutes, waiving the Standing Orders for us to hear his contribution which gives no hope or comfort to anyone.

The last time I remember that happening, last year, similarly for a mid-term review. I have been in this House over 20 years, Madam Speaker, and there was only once, apart from the twice of this hon. Member waiving Standing Orders to allow him to expatiate above the time, you know, limited by the Standing Orders, was when a former Prime Minister in a debate on an appropriation Bill waived the Standing Orders to allow him to attack the Member for Diego Martin West. [*Desk thumping*] The only time I have seen this, and now under this Government we are experiencing this waiving of Standing Orders for lengthy, lengthy, speeches. And you know, there is enough time, there are so many of them, 20-plus who could speak, but the Minister is the one who must say it.

We are looking at the Report of the Standing Finance Committee. We have the verbatim notes and we have the report and you will see the hon. Minister of Finance is the one who answers everybody's questions. And even when they answer on particular issues on this think tank, this is one of the items for variation by the committee, under the Office of the Prime Minister is what we call a think tank, and each Minister had something different to say about what this is about. I am very suspicious, Madam Speaker, as to what that little unit—it is a new item, [*Desk thumping*] newly created—has been set up for. So, good, honest, equitable, transparent. But let me come back to some of the substantive matters as we go in.

The Minister spent some time on summarizing revenue, summarizing expenditure which is what budgets normally deal with, and raised matters that I could call, like I said, they are issues, the matter relating to the APO by TTNGL which has to do with the NGC. And that matter I flagged it in the budget debate for the main appropriation Bill for 2017, and I want to raise it again today, given that the Minister of Finance says that this is one of the revenue collection methods that he has in mind, to raise money from the sale of the shares NGC/TTNGL shares in Phoenix Park Gas Processors Limited that they acquired.

I received a copy of a letter from someone in my mailbox, and this letter is addressed to all employees of the NGC; employees. And this letter tells them that there is a blackout window for insiders in relation to the proposed APO. And this letter is dated the—right, TTNGL blackout period, letter to employees dated yesterday's date, I believe. Yes. It is dated May 8th and today is May 10th; dated May 8th, all employees, from the President.

It says:

Insider trading policy blackout window for insiders in relation to the proposed additional public offering Trinidad and Tobago NGL Limited. Capitalized terms as used shall carry the meaning as defined in the insider trading policy attached. The policy outlines, inter alia, restrictions in disclosing material information regarding the company TTNGL, NGL or a connected issue.

In order to ensure, insofar as possible, that trades by insiders in relation to the proposed additional public offering of 40 million, 248 thousand class B shares of TTNGL by the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited are not perceived by the public to be illicit trades, no insider shall trade in securities of TTNGL during the following blackout window of 2017, May 8 to May 21, 2017 or for such further period as may be advised by the company.

All well and good, a blackout period for employees not to share information and also for no trading, and perhaps someone can explain to us why the no-trading aspect because that will affect prices. If you have the open stock market, trading prices may go up, they may go down, you will have variations in prices and so on, but we have a blackout now.

So, it is to avoid, it says, to ensure as far as possible that trades by insiders in relation to the APO by NGC and so on are not perceived to be illicit trades. This goes out to employees. My question today is this: Are they the only insiders? If we look at definitions in our law as to insiders, we would look at our Companies Act, we would look at the Securities Act, we look at several pieces of legislation, and my question is whether these other insiders have also been given a blackout window, a blackout period? So, we are looking, for example, at directors of companies, the directors of companies involved. The directors, they have given it to employees. I am not sure I would want to say that a director is an employee. I do not see a director as being an employee unless it is an executive director. So, let us take a look at who are these other people.

When I raised this issue last year, we saw that five out of 10 companies were the shareholders of the existing TTNGL of the Phoenix Park Processors shares, and

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the Minister had then said that he would give a preferred—he would give rights, ownership rights, meaning preference shares, first right of call to existing shareholders. And I queried that, showing then where all these shares, the majority, fell.

When we look now at our law to see who can be persons that are insiders and as to whether any steps have been taken to prevent them from—to have them in this blackout period: Companies Act, insider trading sections of the Companies Act that:

“‘insider’ means, in respect of a company—

(a) a director or officer of the company;”

This is section 303 of Companies Act. Insider also means:

“(b) a company that purchases or otherwise acquired shares issued by it or any of its affiliates;

(c) a person who beneficially owns more than ten per cent of the shares of the company, or who exercises control or direction over more than ten per cent of the votes attached to shares of the company;

(d) an associate or affiliate of a person mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (c);”

—which I just read.

“(e) a person, whether or not he is employed by the company, who—

(i) receives specific unpublished information from a person described in this section...”

A person who:

“(ii) has knowledge that the person giving the information is a person described...”

A person who:

“(iii) has or had access to specific unpublished information.”

So in other words, the existing shareholders, would they be persons who would be receiving information? And I would say, the answer would be yes. Have they been also been blocked out, this blackout window, they have called it a blackout window. Have they been accounted for or taken care of, or is it just you want to

shut down the employees, because all along I had raised the spectre of this being for the super elites, for those who already control existing shares, the majority, in TTNGL.

And today, I take no comfort from the Minister's words that he is proceeding with this, without any explanation as to how these shares are to be disbursed, as to what the categories would be of the persons who can apply for the shares in the APO, and then given this blackout to employees, I think, the Minister should also have a blackout with respect to any who would be caught within the meaning of "insider" under our Companies Act and under the Securities Act. I do not want to go into all of these. And, of course, we have under the Integrity in Public Life Act as well issues of insider trading.

So, Government must bring satisfaction if they want to keep the public confidence in the APO. It is one that the Minister is hoping to collect a lot of money from, but we have not had any real comfort, apart from his words that they are proceeding with that APO.

And, you know, when I say that the Government has collapsed and has failed, the other APO which was the FCB APO that the Minister was so happy to talk about as being oversubscribed—at one point he said it was oversubscribed—indeed, if we look at the *Guardian*—the *Trinidad Express*, sorry—of May 01, 2017—well this is just a couple days ago—the headline is "Blame Imbert for failed APO". And it is that, where it is that the Minister has estimated that he would get \$1.5 billion from this, instead, today, he reported to us \$.5 billion less revenue collected. And therefore, we look forward to what is happening with the other APO and hope it does not get entangled in all kinds of stories.

Let me move on to another matter that the Minister raised and it has to do with the procurement matter. This is a scandal that is just waiting to happen, [*Desk thumping*] it is just waiting to happen. We have scandal after scandal with more questions than answers, the Massy issue, the TTNGL matter and the procurement matter that the hon. Minister mentioned. The Minister has said that the President has requested assistance to shortlist persons to be the Procurement Regulator and office of the procurement and the members for that office. But that is totally contrary to the legislation that was passed in this Parliament. [*Desk thumping*]

Here it is that an office that is going to be the office for all procurement in the public service, billions of dollars, everything bought or sold in the public sector, that regulator's office will be the one in charge. And when we passed the law in Parliament we were very careful to ensure that that office would be totally cut off

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from; it would be insulated from any interference by any of the Executive. And that is crucial because even the Ministry of Finance and all in the Ministry of Finance would be subject to the regulator, the Procurement Regulator's office.

How then, in any right-thinking democracy, can you have the Ministry of Finance advertising for a recruiting agency and for them to go about shortlisting candidates to give to the President to select a procurement regulator? [*Desk thumping*] This is like madness. This is like madness. [*Crosstalk*] And the Minister is sotto voce across the floor, we were doing—there was a committee, yes, but the committee was not involved in seeking to recruit. That is a function [*Desk thumping*] of the President, after consultation with the Prime Minister and the Office of the Leader of the Opposition. And there was a reason, and the reason was to insulate such an office from public interference.

Madam Speaker: Member for Diego Martin North East, I would kindly like to hear the Member for Siparia. Please, continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. So, we passed law in the Parliament. It took us so many years. You know, that procurement legislation took so many years. It predated the Government I led and it predated this Government and it predated several Governments before that. And we had made a promise in 2010 that should we form the Government in 2010, we will take all the pieces of paper, the draft Bills and all the research, we would lay it in Parliament and we will take it forward. It took us five years. We did so. So said so done. We kept that promise. It took us five years to 2015 to actually pass the procurement legislation after the Joint Select Committees, which the Members who were then in Opposition refused to attend those Joint Select Committee meetings, [*Desk thumping*] would not support the legislation. And in the Upper House, the Senators supported, but the Lower House they did not vote for it.

When we came back under this dispensation under this Government two amendments were made and here we are, a legislation that has been long in the making. And the whole thrust of the debates in the House, when you look at them, was to insulate the Office of this Procurement Regulator. But lo and behold, by letter dated April 10th, just a couple weeks ago, 2017, from the letterhead of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Finance, General Administration Division. You know, this is—the very Procurement Regulator now needs to be protected from conflict of interest where the Minister of Finance is going to procure a procurement regulator. [*Desk thumping*] This is to procure a procurement regulator, in total, total, total contradiction and in total subversion of the law that was passed here.

So it says—that is why, you know, this debate was shut down on us at 2.00 a.m. Friday. [*Desk thumping*] We waited, we came back into the Parliament, we sat, when the Government, not the Speaker, when the Government truncated the debate. When the Minister of Finance [*Desk thumping*] knowing full well that there were speakers on this side, the Minister of Finance jumped up to truncate the debate at 2.00 a.m. on Friday because they knew we would expose them. But there is always another day, there is always another day.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia. Members, please, I “doh” want to be standing every minute and interrupting any contribution, and therefore, I ask for the cooperation of all Members to comply with the provisions of Standing Order 53. Please, continue, Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. So letter April 10th, 2017:

Dear Sir/Madam,

—intitule:

Re: Selection of a recruitment agency...

—hear what:

...for the invitation and review of expressions of interest for the position of Procurement Regulator/Chairman of the Board of Office of Procurement Regulations.

April 10th, 2017, April 10th.

Reference is made to the above subject. The Ministry of Finance amended the expressions of interest and has therefore, terminated the previous procurement process dated March 7th, 2017.

So, first it was put out March and now here is an amendment.

The Ministry of Finance is seeking to engage the services of a recruitment agency to invite and rank expressions of interest for the position of Procurement Regulator/Chairman of the Board of Procurement for the soon to be established Office of Procurement Regulations.

...seeking to engage the services of a recruitment agency to invite and rank expressions of interest for the position of Procurement Regulator...

Totally in breach of the law, totally in breach. [*Desk thumping*]

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Proposals must be delivered to the tender box titled Recruitment Agency, Office of Procurement Regulation located Ground Floor, Eric Williams Finance Building no later than Wednesday 19th April, 2017 at 4.00 p.m.

What is the date of the letter?—April 10th. When you have to drop in your tender?—April 19th, April 19th, to get a recruitment agency now to shortlist people to help the President, and this is what you are talking about procurement of a procurement regulator, and then the Minister talks about transparency when he says—[*Desk thumping*]

So when this agency now, being procured by the Ministry of Finance, shortlisting candidates for procurement regulator and then marry it with the terms and conditions passed by the Government, benchmarking against a puisne judge instead of benchmarking against the Chief Justice, for example, because this office will be in charge of everything. The puisne judge is the third-tiered judge in the judiciary system of the higher Judiciary: the Chief Justice, appeal judges and then the puisne judge. And here we are benchmarked against those. We are benchmarked against the Auditor General; salaries where you were going to be able to procure somebody you want to be able to manipulate and control. You probably already have someone. I mean, nine days, nine days to put this in.

4.00 p.m.

How can you do a proper tender document when in nine days you have to put that into a box? But, be that as it may, you should not even be putting that into any tender box with respect to the Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*] And if the Minister of Finance says that the President has requested this assistance, and the letter is not even signed by the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry, you know. You know who it is signed by? Let us see here; a Director of Corporate Services. I do not know if this person is a contract person or—because maybe if it was the Permanent Secretary they might have advised the hon. Minister that he had no way in law to be doing this. [*Desk thumping*] No way, no way he should be doing this. And even if it is as the Minister is telling us, that His Excellency the President requested this assistance, then you should be able to tell him that he is also wrong in law, if he did so. If he did so.

And therefore we are not to bring the name of the President into this debate, but the hon. Minister did that by saying that the assistance was requested by His Excellency the President, and I would really like to see any correspondence. [*Desk thumping*] Where it is under our Constitution—can I just see it please, the Constitution? When we see under our Constitution, there are different kinds of

formula for appointing different people, and it is done by the Office of the President. There are times when it is on the joint advice of the Opposition Leader and the Prime Minister, in which case the President has no discretion. So, we have joint advice, for example, when we are to appoint a Director of the Police Complaints Authority and a Deputy Director, and by the way, there is at the moment a vacancy for Deputy Director, so the hon. Prime Minister perhaps would contact us and we would see if we can make what you call a joint advice. [*Desk thumping*] So, that is one kind of formula in the Constitution.

The other kind of formula in the Constitution is after consultation. Now in such a case where the President has to consult, the President could consult us, the Opposition Leader and the Prime Minister, talk to us: What do you think? Whom do you have in mind? And then the President can say, none of the above. That is consultation. They talk. We consult, but he is not bound by whatever comes forward. When the Ministry of Finance, through this recruitment process sends him a shortlist—first of all, how do I know they will not pick out who they want in that shortlist? Because you are not going to procure for yourself now. You are going to procure for someone that the President has to appoint according to law. How do I know your shortlist is not one in which you already have whenever you have, somebody chosen? We do not trust you. We do not believe you! [*Desk thumping*] We do not trust you, and for something where billions of dollars every year will be spent in expenditure—the Minister tells us, was it \$56 billion in expenditure? Some is recurrent, but the rest of it is Development Programme under the PSIP, under the IDF—then we cannot trust that person. We took so long—how long we took to get here to have procurement legislation in our country, and now the Minister is not taking us up to—what is this book you have here? 2030 Vision. We are going back to 1930, backwards. Backwards! [*Desk thumping*]

In every way, in every regard, the Minister then—should this continue in this manner, Madam Speaker? When the President has to consult with the Opposition Leader, which is the post I hold at this time, am I going to be subjected to a shortlist prepared by the Ministry of Finance? That I will be consulted to ask if one of these people that has been recruited through the Ministry of Finance process, that look, you have to choose one of those people? That can never have been the intention of the Constitution framers and of the legislation—it could never have been. [*Desk thumping*] So, I have grave, grave suspicions about that entire process that the Minister mentioned. So, with respect to the NGC matter, there is serious questions to be answered—TT Energy. With respect to the Massy matter, we have not heard the end of that. How can it be that Corporation Sole—

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the Minister of Finance—had no idea? Nothing from the Cabinet, nothing outside the Cabinet. In fact, I believe at a post-Cabinet it was said by the Member for Diego Martin North/East and I believe the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, that they will have some kind of investigation.

And then the Prime Minister calls in on a radio programme on such a serious issue. This is a quarter billion dollars of taxpayers' money. [*Desk thumping*] A quarter billion! When the Government is crying and crying "We don't have money. We don't have money. We don't have money to buy medicines." You cannot get medicines in the hospital. People do not have water, you cannot supply the water needs. So many things that you cannot do because you do not have money, but quarter billion dollars to buy shares, buy over this Massy Communications, to buy over this company, and just in their last financial statements, TSTT's reporting what is it—\$303 million dollars in losses.

Hon. Member: What?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, yes, check out the reports, \$303 million in losses. But, you are taking quarter billion dollars to buy—\$255,000,000—to buy a company. [*Desk thumping*] And in all of this, on Saturday when I spoke, I said this cannot be real. Three Ministers are claiming that the Cabinet did not know, they knew nothing, and I said this cannot be real. I refused to believe that the Prime Minister and/or Minister Young were unaware of this matter. I refuse to believe that, and I call for what was their role in it. And lo and behold, the Prime Minister did not issue a statement, he called a radio station. You know the last time when a Prime Minister called a radio station, you remember what happened? It is a thin, thin line—one specific radio station, rather than a notice at large—I hope the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo did not so advise him to do. I think you have been a media man long enough to know better, but, I hope you did not so advise. [*Laughter*]—calls a radio station to say the Cabinet knew.

Well, listen, I come back again, I do not know who to believe. I do not know how to believe. You know, that is like a slap in the face of those three Ministers, a total lack of confidence when your Prime Minister says the Cabinet knew. My question today, were these three Members of Cabinet not present in the Cabinet that day? [*Desk thumping*] On which day was that decision taken by the Cabinet, and were they absent? And if they were not absent, were they asleep in the Cabinet? And then whom do we believe? It reminds me of another scenario when we said one has to be lying. One has to be not speaking the truth, Madam. There was an issue with His Excellency the President and it was the same back and forward about the hon. Member for Point Fortin. I wonder if you recall—

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—who went to a meeting with His Excellency, the President. You all remember that? He went to a meeting and then it was a whole different story in terms of what happened at the meeting; how the meeting came about to be. And I think the hon. Member went with all good intentions, because like me, I am sure he is very concerned about the run-away crime in this country. He must be. [*Desk thumping*] He must be.

Then it was, well, whom do you believe? There was the Minister saying “x” and “y” about how it came about, and then you had a different version coming, so then we are back to, whom do we believe? I would say, you know there is something that we can do if we are interested in what the hon. Minister of Finance said about good, honest, equitable, transparent governance, and so on. I would call for an enquiry into this entire matter. [*Desk thumping*] It is not a commission of enquiry, but there should be some kind of enquiry where a quarter of a billion dollars of taxpayers’ moneys, really scarce moneys, is being invested in a company and three out of four Ministers are saying they do not know about it. The others have not yet spoken, so maybe they were at the Cabinet meeting, maybe they were not. There are so many other issues in terms of value, in terms of what it is worth, the due diligence. I think my colleague the Member for Chaguanas West tried to ask some of those questions today, and that is another matter that we await word on.

So, NGC, the Massy Communications issue, the procurement expressions of interest, and I say again it is just a matter of time. It is just a matter of time before we see the backs of those on the other side. [*Desk thumping*] I move on. The budgetary framework set by the hon. Minister talked about revenue and talked about expenditure, but you know they say God does not sleep—Never does. And just as we were in the finance committee on Friday we got this document, Madam Speaker. [*Holds up document*]

Madam Speaker: Member, just remember my rule—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Oh, the display.

Madam Speaker: I know you have a certain style of speaking, so please—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, I do. I have a really good speaking style, I think sometimes. [*Laughter*] Sometimes I do. [*Desk thumping*]

What I have here is the report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago financial year 2016. Now, how many

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times have we been in this Parliament, budget debate after debate, the economy after economy, and it is blame the Partnership. We drained the Treasury. We took away everything. And this is the first report that is fully and clearly, during a fiscal year, that was totally under the present Government. [*Desk thumping*] Therefore, it is a very important report from the Auditor General. It is very important for us to see what it says, because it gives us an idea of the economic performance of the present Government. First of all, on the charge that the Partnership drained the Treasury, and with respect to the IDF in particular, because in this variation, \$1.2 billion, I think, about \$1.2 billion—

Hon. Member: \$1.25 billion.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: About \$1.25 billion. That is one of the major variations is being removed from the IDF. Being removed and put into other areas for expenditure.

Well, first of all, that in itself is scandalous. It is a nightmare. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister in his framework said, look, for three consecutive years we have had drops in the economy, and basically he has not said it. But when you have three consecutive years of contraction, then you are clearly speaking about recession. He has not used the word, but it is clear even from his own report that Trinidad and Tobago is in a recession. [*Desk thumping*] So, we are at a time of contraction and contracting in the economy, and yet the Government fails to spend money that it has. The Government goes boasting they have saved \$10 billion. [*Interruption*] I mean, it is mindboggling, Madam Speaker. I am sorry, but it is mindboggling. You have saved \$10 billion, you are crying every day you have no money to spend, and yet when you had the money you cannot spend it. You did not spend it. [*Desk thumping*]

So you take this 1-point-what billion dollars that you had and you did not spend it, and what is happening in a contracting economy, when you shut down the capital expenditure programme, you shut down the development programme, you are shutting down everything. [*Desk thumping*] So, when the Minister says that they put the economy on a path of growth and sustainability, and emphasizing the capital development programme, nothing is further from the truth. [*Desk thumping*] Nothing is further from the truth. When you read the estimates, when you read the Auditor General's statement and, of course, when you walk in the streets and you walk among people, there are thousands of jobs that have been lost because the Government has shut down and is reviewing and revisiting every capital project, or most capital projects. Job losses, further contraction, the Minister has not showed us. He has started his presentation today telling us about

three successive years of contraction, but has not given us one initiative, one measure that would be taken to lift us out of this recession. [*Desk thumping*] Not one. Not one. It is like no hope on the horizon. When we look again, as I was saying, at the Auditor General's report—and Madam with your leave I would need to hold it up because I want to read, with your leave.

[*Madam Speaker nods head*]

I thank you. Not for style but for reading. I thank you. When we look at the Auditor General's report—now, on the IDF, when we questioned you are moving money from the IDF, 1.2-whatever billion—and the Minister it was said, well, there is rolling money. There is a rollover of money. It is rolling. The money is rolling. It definitely is not flowing, but it is rolling. When I looked to the Auditor General's report with respect to the IDF, I was trying to determine, you know, how much money came—how much of the money rolled over? And where did it come from? So, first, we had stopped—we are not spending the money that was allocated even though we are saying we have the money, which is bad in itself in a contracting economy, there is no further growth, more job losses. That is bad enough. Then too now, the money is rolling. The Auditor General's report, page 161, this is the report for 2017 for the financial year 2016, dated April 27, 2017, IDF, Infrastructure Development Fund.

Madam, you may recall that the capital development projects and programmes of the Government, moneys are allocated under two heads, one is under the Infrastructure Development Fund and the other is known as the PSIP. Infrastructure Development Fund receipts, first of all, the fund received \$1.6 billion for 2016. In 2015 now, while we are looking at fiscal years, which should have been our last full year in office, 2015, we put in the Infrastructure Development Fund \$3.3 billion. Then we had to go into it, add recoveries, interest received for the financial year 2016, interest received for 2015, and you come up with a total receipts then in 2015, our last fiscal year, \$3.3 billion received into this fund.

Under the present Government, 2016, \$1.6 billion. That was their receipts. And we move on. Payments were made, total payments in 2015 fiscal \$3.5 billion paid, in 2016 fiscal \$1.4 billion paid, excess of receipts, overpayments, add balance brought forward from where? September 30, 2015. [*Desk thumping*] This is the rolling over money which came from the time when we were in office, and that brought forward from September 30, 2015, \$893,774,427. [*Interruption*] Rolled over, and the balance as at September 30, 2016 was \$1 billion, made up of that \$893,774,427, plus the excess of receipts overpayments from the present

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Government 2016, \$134.7 million. So \$893 million rolled over from where? When we had been told we drained the Treasury, [*Desk thumping*] we scrapped the Treasury, everything we scrapped it, we drained it out, there was no money. You see, everything comes to light. We did not have the books at that time to be able to show those statements were not true. [*Interruption*] Yes, it was not true. And then we go to the other funds—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member, one minute, please.

Dr. Moonilal: Sorry, Madam.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sorry.

Madam Speaker: I would like all Members to please contain themselves. Unparliamentary language is not going to be tolerated. So, Member, I accept your apology, please not again.

Dr. Moonilal: I know it is startling to hear that.

Madam Speaker: Well, I am sure there are a lot of startling things on both sides. Please! Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you again, and we look at other funds, Madam Speaker, because it shows that the Government had money that rolled over from 2015 into fiscal 2016, rolling over into 2017 for spending. Again, we look at the Unemployment Fund. Excess of payments over receipts, balance brought forward from September 30, 2015, \$8,319,549,015—this is \$8 billion?

Mr. Lee: Yes, \$8.3 billion.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Eight point three billion dollars brought forward from when? September 30, 2015, our last full year in office, last fiscal year in office. And for this present Government that they rolled over into this fund, minus \$290 million into the Unemployment Fund. Now, what does that mean? Does it mean that less receipts came into Government? Perhaps they could tell us. Is it that they collected less money because less people are working, and therefore less people are paying the Unemployment Fund or less businesses are paying it? But what is clear here again, another \$8 billion rolled over from the Partnership Government at the end of our term in 2015.

We look at other funds as well. I looked at the IDF. I looked at the Unemployment Fund. We can look at the schedule or special fund, the Green Fund, yes, and the position is the same with respect to the Green Fund. All these are surpluses rolled over, Madam Speaker, and did not come in minus amounts,

but came in with a positive balance rolled over from the Partnership Government. We come back again now to local at revenue, and we have always said that the Government has no plan. [*Desk thumping*] They had no plan, and you still have no plan, and that is exemplified again as we go forward, and as we do the variations here. Government is taking \$86 million from where? The Food Support Programme.

Hon. Member: “Oooh.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Eight-six million dollars, when there are so many persons who have lost their jobs. There are so many people who cannot put food on the table, and the Food Support Programme, \$86 million, and the Minister tells us about fiscal balance and balancing and so on.

And when you look at their Vision 2030, which they gave to us—this Vision 2030—one of the pillars of it, they are now talking about, guess what? They have learnt some words from the Partnership. They are talking about people-centred development—2030, Vision 2030. But that is not evident when you take \$86 million from the Food Support Programme, you are removing that to spend where? And I want to take another point, big headline, “Kamla lying about the golf course”. When I say that about—what was it?—quarter of a million dollars was to be utilized towards a golf course, what was the big headline? “Kamla lying.” You know why? Because it is not a “new” golf course. [*Laughter*] I mean, really? The semantics of it, it was going to be applied. It says it in the variations. It says it very clearly that this item of expenditure, money is now being put into it for St. Madeleine golf course. And then we are told now it is for feasibility study. But is it a feasibility study for a football ground? No. Is it for badminton? No. What is it for? Golf. So, that screaming headline “Kamla lying,” again is not fooling anyone whatsoever. Someone on the other side.

Hon. Member: Who said so?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Someone on the other side.

So, I am making the point here before I went off on the golf course, and I went off on the variation that is taking place, that is before us, \$86 million, and then the IDF, the shutting down of the IDF, and I am saying the Government has absolutely no plan whatsoever, none is evident from the statements that the hon. Minister has made. I made it before, and I repeat it, we do not have any indication of what the Government intends to do, even as it acknowledges that we are into a recession, no policy programme, no initiative announced today as to what trajectory you will take us out into growth, and the sustainable growth that you speak about. None whatsoever. We see where you intend to raise moneys from

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one-off sales with the IPO/APU. The Clico matter, you know, telling us \$27.7 billion, if my memory is right—now that we are exposed because of the Clico matters. I hope you remember how that started, eh, and where it came from. Some of them were in Government then when they did the Clico bailout. [*Desk thumping*] Some of them sitting right here are now crying, and say \$27.7 billion, we owe, we owe, we owe. We exposed \$27.7 million. And again, did they tell us any plan, any initiative, any policy they are going to do in order to get back the money? [*Desk thumping*] What is the recovery plan? The Minister speaks glibly about to recover taxpayers' money. Sounds real nice, eh. We have to move to recover. Well, what specifically are you going to do to recover this \$27.7 billion?

I read in the newspaper and I did not hear—the Minister may have said it, but I did not hear the hon. Minister say, two properties that they bought, two of the Clico properties that were purchased in Tobago, I think, we have no idea of how much—what was the purchase price, the consideration in that transaction for that conveyance. I know that piece of the land is the one for the “scandal”—the Sandals scandal—as we have called it, no-man's land, but we have no idea of how much money. So, again, we should be very happy if the hon. Minister or anyone of them could tell us if you are trying to recover this \$27.7 billion, and these lands have been part of that negotiation process, well how much are they worth? Have much have you, out of that \$27.7 billion, been able to save minus and to have brought it down?

So, making the point again, the Government complains bitterly about not having money to spend, but could find to spend on this feasibility study for a golf course. They could find to spend on so many other projects that are not of vital need and use at this time. You could pay a lobbyist—and up to now I know they have to file something every six months, so I have someone keeping an eye on the website from the United States, because we will never find out here what they do. But we will find out from there because they have to file every six months what have they done to collect that money and to get the payment.

So, you get that, you get the Cazabon paintings, and you get the “soca” on the “soca” boat cruise, Tarouba stadium, all these other projects, and then you say you do not have money. But when I go, again, to this Auditor General's report, you know I am seeing a strange thing here, which we knew, but it is good to see it confirmed in black and white. I am seeing that revenue exceeded expenditure in the last fiscal year. Did you know that? Revenue exceeded expenditure, page 97 of the report, this same 2016 report. Total revenue 2016, \$60.3 billion; total expenditure \$56.5 billion, a surplus of \$3.7 billion. This is here. And then the question arises when you cry that you do not have money, it is what one of my

colleagues said to us not too long ago. It is not that they do not have the money. It is not about dollars. It is about the sense. It is not about the dollars. [*Desk thumping*] It is about the sense.

So, you have the money, you cry you do not have it, but then you do not spend it. Tell us why. Tell us why you do not spend it. You do not spend it, you guess why? You have put everything on hold, under review, under audit, under revisit. The Food Programme is under revisit, the IDF programme, the \$1.2 billion you have moved out under review audit, and yet there are people out there, contractors who have not been paid, suppliers who have not been paid and you are revisiting. You know last day—you cannot even do the arithmetic right—I was saying that the Government has been in office for 18 months, and you say, no, no, no; and I said you want to kill me for a few months, if you say 17, is 17. You know, when I checked it back, in retrospect, they have been in office for 19 months, not even the 17. [*Desk thumping*] From September to now, 19 going into 20 months, and they are still reviewing, and revisiting, and in the meantime further contracting the economy as they shut down on expenditure, as they shut down on projects.

I do not remember in my 20-plus years in this Parliament—and I stand to correction—where it is that you have \$1.2 billion being moved out in a mid-year review from the Infrastructure Development Fund [*Desk thumping*] for development of capital expenditure in our country. [*Continuous desk thumping*] And so, Madam Speaker, I am not comforted by what the Minister has shared with us today. I am not comforted with respect to what is happening with the NGC shares. I am not comforted by what he has told us about the Massy Communications or not told us about the Massy Communications. He has told us about FATCA which they fought us non-stop to get FATCA, and now today I am seeing those same bankers who refused to meet with the Opposition on a matter that is affecting citizens with respect to bank fees and charges, now they do not want to meet with the business community. I will leave that alone. But I believe the hon. Minister of Finance has a duty as the Minister of Finance to look after citizens when it comes to the—[*Inaudible*] [*Continuous desk thumping*]—of fees with respect to banks, and I will come back on another day to deal with that matter.

Then, Madam Speaker, on the issue of the—I made these headings, APO/FCB—Revenue Authority. Well, the Auditor General has been very clear. In fact, has pointed a way for the Government to make money without raising taxes. Yes? And when we look at the Auditor General's report, the Auditor General tells us how much money is owing, outstanding moneys, several billions of dollars, \$45 billion, yes—Did you know that?—owing to the Government for taxes,

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income, revenue. The Auditor General provided the Government with this opportunity to run the country without taxes. Page 56 of the report provides the consolidated statement of arrears of revenue. It is revealed that the Government has some \$45 billion in outstanding arrears to collect as at September 2016. This figure is \$5.3 billion less than the 2015 figure, and so it seems maybe they collected \$5.3 billion. Clearly, an aggressive pursuit of these areas together with improving tax collection is needed, and then the Minister comes to us to tell us about the Revenue Authority.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, it is now 4.30 p.m., I suggest we take the suspension now. You have remaining 38 minutes and 31 seconds to complete. So, this House is now suspended, we return at 5.00 o'clock.

4.30 p.m.: *House suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia, you have 38 minutes left.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. Madam Speaker, another area the hon. Minister spoke about was with respect to property tax, and my colleagues will speak a little more on property taxes. But the Minister has estimated \$0.5 billion of revenue in fiscal 2017 coming out of the property tax. We are in May 10th, nearly half of the month, half of May. June, July, Parliament shuts down in mid-July, August—and fiscal year September. So we are looking at August, September, maybe three to four months left of this fiscal year, where we are nowhere near to achieving the \$500 million or the \$0.5 billion that the Minister spoke of.

The Minister said that this phase was proceeding smoothly, and I may have a totally different interpretation of what smoothly means, because that is not our experience. We have been on the ground. We have had property tax meetings in every constituency and constituents have come forward, very, very, concerned and very unhappy about that tax. But in terms of looking at the revenue stream that the Minister is depending on as part of the revenue for fiscal 2017, there is no way that the Minister is going to realize the \$0.5 billion in property tax revenue. *[Desk thumping]*

So the phase he said of where the valuers would come in, and I have a serious concern. I think there are over 350,000 to 400,000 households—homes in the country, and the Ministry of Finance Valuation Division's website indicates who are the persons qualified and able to run an evaluation. So, if I may read from

that website what I downloaded—9 May, 2017 at 23:56, this is currently then, as to 23:56 this morning, sorry, yesterday on the website of the Ministry of Finance.

As of 19 April 2017, there are 51 valuation surveyor members in the Institute of Surveyors of Trinidad and Tobago.

And that list is attached and I will read it in a moment. The Ministry of Finance Valuation Division’s website indicates, and I quote:

“Valuation Surveying is a unique profession that falls under the umbrella of the Built Environment. Locally, the Institute of Surveyors of Trinidad and Tobago represents the three major categories of Surveyors within the Built Environment—Land Surveyors, Quantity Surveyors and Valuation Surveyors.”

Still continuing the quotation from the Finance website:

“Currently, all members of the Professional Staff employed at the Valuation Division are members of the Institute of Surveyors of Trinidad and Tobago. The Valuation Division adheres to...international guidelines and procedures as set by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, as well as the local guidelines prescribed by the Institute of Surveyors of Trinidad and Tobago.”

Note, I repeat:

“...all members of the Professional Staff employed at the Valuation Division are members of the Institute of Surveyors...”

Further, the site includes:

“Academic Qualifications for Valuation Professionals
 Valuation in Estate Management
 Investment and Financial Analysis
 Urban and Rural property Appraisal
 Legal and Business Studies
 Construction Technology
 Quantity and Land Surveying
 Project planning and management
 Alternative Dispute Resolution
 Urban Economics
 Research methods and Applied research”

On the basis of this and on the basis of the website of land surveyors, there are 51 persons listed on the instituteofsurveyors.com, new index, members' directory. So there are 51 persons. The Ministry of Finance tells us all members of the staff employed at Valuation Division are members of the Institute of Surveyors, but there are only 51 of them. And therefore there is no way, I cannot see any way, unless the Minister works some magic, that the Minister will be able to get the 100 or 180 or 248 valuers he says it needs to implement the property tax.

So at April 2017, which is the time that the Government announced the reintroduction of the property tax, there were only—there are or there were only 51 persons qualified to conduct valuation surveys, 51. Looking at the qualifications for professionals, the question is then, where is the Minister going to find the 180 or 248 valuers he says—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: 245.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: 245—he needs to complete this exercise? Is it then that he is going to bring them from abroad, or is it that he will then give them qualifications or just deem them to be fit to be surveyors? It is a question that the Minister needs to answer given that he is still hell-bent on pursuing the revenue from the property tax.

I move to another point raised by the Minister, and it is on the issue of borrowing and public debt. The Minister laboured to try to show that the previous Government had really taken the public sector debt into all these areas and whatever, but again, the Auditor General's Report will not lie to us about public debt and will tell us and show us how the increases in the public debt—the Minister told us that it increased and in five years we the People's Partnership was there, that was the greatest expenditure, the greatest public debt, and in one moment, Madam, when I look at the accounts of the Treasury and the exchequer account and the status of public debt we will give the lie to statements such as those, or show that those statements are false. One moment please, Madam—public debt. Too many pieces of paper.

Okay, will someone locate it whilst I continue with the—public debt from the Auditor General's Report. What these show—the Minister told us, the Auditor General's Report, what these show, public debt for the years, the Minister told us public debt net exclusive of OMO, Open Market Operations and so on, for fiscal 2010, the Minister told us it was \$45.4 billion. By the end of 2015 he says we had brought it to \$76.5 billion and today as at the first half of fiscal 2017, it is \$89.1 billion.

So when we went into office at 2010, the public debt was 45.4 billion, from the Minister's own numbers, okay. From the Minister's own numbers, \$45.4 billion. We took it, the Minister tells us, to \$76.5 billion. So we are looking at about \$30-something billion over a spread of five years. But this Government, in 18 months to 19 months has taken it to where? \$89.1 billion, from the Minister's own numbers.

In 19 months,—they like to say 18 months—the Minister says in the first half of fiscal 2017, \$89.1 billion. Now is this sustainable? The debt to GDP when you have an \$89.1 billion, we are really on the edge of a cliff. And again the Minister is not giving us any policy, any programme, any initiative to tell us how are going to get out of this situation that we find ourselves in. [*Desk thumping*] Eighty-nine point one billion dollars in debt as at the first half of fiscal 2017, we still have half to go. We know that we will not be realizing the kinds of revenues that the Minister is estimating and therefore, does the Minister intend to do what the hon. Minister did last year? When I said on the books we are showing that the revenue was greater than the expenditure; well, in other words, you made more money and we must remind ourselves that in 2016 they borrowed, the Government borrowed about \$14 billion. Drawdowns from the HSF took it to \$14 billion, 11 plus some others and we got \$14 billion in debt. What did it mean?

The Minister then took it and dropped it into the Consolidated Fund, into the exchequer account. So that this was borrowed money showing that we got more money in revenue—think we really had, it was borrowed money. It is a kind of sleight of hand, you know, playing with the books.

Hon. Member: Cooking the books.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must remember—some would say, “cooking the books”, some would say that.

Madam Speaker: I just want to advise Members. If I am hearing you, you are not speaking in hushed tones, okay. For Members who are not speaking, if I am hearing you, you are really not speaking in hushed tones. And I will ask you, Member for Siparia, to be careful with the language, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So what we have, borrowed money being deposited into the exchequer account which then shows that you have more revenue coming in. Now, we must remember what is revenue when we look at Government revenue, eh. Revenue is not just income. Revenue includes—if we look at the Revenue Estimates, Madam, for 2017 and any book dealing with revenue, we look at Government revenues it is made up of taxes. So you have tax

revenue, which is taxes on income and profits, taxes on property, taxes on goods and services, taxes on international trade, other taxes.

Another head of revenue is the non-tax revenue, property income, other non-tax revenue, repayment of past lending. So you have tax revenue, non-tax revenue. Then you have capital receipts, which is capital revenue—total capital receipts and then this financing goes into the revenue account. And from financing you get what is known as borrowing and you get extra ordinary receipts. Extra ordinary receipts are like the APO and the IPOs that you—sale of assets and so on, comes in as part of your financing and the other part of it is where you borrow.

So on the book, on the paper, yes, it looks good. The Minister talks about fiscal balance management and balancing when in reality the money is not worth the paper or the page on which it is printed. [*Desk thumping*] My question then is for fiscal 2017, given already the revenue shortfalls the Minister mentioned today with respect to VAT shortfall, the hon. Minister mentioned, in several other areas there were two other areas with respect to CLF, two huge amounts and I think \$6.3 billion the Minister mentioned that was delayed.

Capital revenue, the proceeds of sale from Clico and Methanol Holdings and sale of other Clico assets valued at \$2.3 billion and \$5.7 billion he says this has been delayed. So already \$6.3 billion, we are almost over half of fiscal 2017 and this revenue is not being realized. Six point three billion, and then further the Minister told us about the delayed VAT, \$669 million added to this and then we have \$0.5 billion out of the APO for FCB, did not get it. The \$0.5 billion you will not get from the property tax. That is another billion. We are looking now at another \$7.3 billion, climbing into \$8 billion revenue shortfall. How is the Minister going to balance the books? And is it then that there will be further drawdowns on the heritage fund, HSF and further borrowings to place it into the exchequer account to appear to be balancing your books.

So I have serious concern from the revenue side. The Minister has not come to reduce the expenditure. We have no money, the Minister is not saying let us cut this or cut that. All the Minister is doing, it is the same money budgeted last year in this mid-term review, it is the same money now spinning around from one place to the next to be expended. And further, we have revenue shortfalls, the Minister has identified, almost \$8 billion, thus far, and we have no indication as to where or how those shortfalls are to be made up. The history of this Government has been to take up that shortfall by borrowings and by drawdowns on the HSF.

So I see the hon. Minister has returned to grace us with his presence and my question would be, how is the Minister going to make up, or the Government going to make up the revenue shortfalls? And then we come to changes in the public debt, finally, as I talk about whether we will go into more borrowings.

The balance as at October 01, 2015, \$51 billion. So that was when we were there. Now the Minister said we had brought it, when we came in 2010, it was \$49 billion, I believe.

Hon. Member: Forty-five.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Forty-five billion? When we came into office in 2010 or just before we came in, \$45 billion. Yes? And then the Partnership Government took the debt up to such large amounts, but then we read here, as at October 01, 2015, when we would have demitted office, the total public debt was \$51 billion. [*Desk thumping*]

So from 45 in five years, for five years, all the debts that they had. And then when we come down to 2016 now, last year, the Minister had taken it from that \$51 to \$60 billion. This is at the end of fiscal 2016 and today the Minister tells us it is \$89 billion. So tell me, in 19 months or 18 months from \$51 to \$89, how many billions are we talking about?

Hon. Member: Thirty-eight extra.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thirty-eight billion in just this one year, 18 months, double the debt and then stands there to tell us that in 2010, "oh" it was so bad, we raised the debt in five years, nowhere, nothing to what they have done. Again, it is these mouthings and statements that are totally false statements that are being made when we come into the Parliament.

So, look at the debt here. And what is frightening now is a large portion of this debt, the public sector debt, meaning taxpayers are owing in this country, a very large portion of it comes from external borrowings. Which means we have to find what we do not have much of, forex. We have to get forex exchange now and again the Minister has given us no indication, programme, policy, project as to how we will go about earning more foreign exchange.

At the end of the day I think my colleague, the Member for Chaguanas West says, you have diagnosed the issues, you have diagnosed the problem, but you have not said what is the medicine, you have not said what is the treatment, you have not said what it is we need to lift the country out of the recession that we are in. [*Desk thumping*]

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Then we come to the rating agencies. I mean, look, you have two rating agencies that have downgraded Trinidad and Tobago. Yes? Nothing to boast about, nothing to write about, two rating agencies downgraded us and the Minister of Finance now wants to get a third rating agency. I do not know if he is going to pay them to get a different result but you would have two out of three, two have downgraded you. Do you expect a third one to come and say, “aye, everything is great”? Well then you will need three out of five because you will have two out of three saying you are bad. And the Minister told us today that we have been downgraded by Standard & Poor’s, downgraded by Moody’s and so on. Those downgrades, his words, exact words were “unwarranted”. It was unwarranted. Let me read a little, Madam, with your leave, with respect to what that report stated:

The—“ratings agency Standard and Poor’s Global Ratings...downgraded T&T’s sovereign credit rating, citing the sharp increase in the country’s debt burden since 2014.”

And that is exactly what I was talking about just now.

The sharp increase in the debt burden. This is the reason for the downgrade. It is not that the downgrade is unwarranted. They have cited this reason and we have shown it, as I have just read out, that when they came into office the public sector debt as at 1st October, 2015 was \$51 billion and now today the Minister told us it is \$89 billion, in 18 months. And then the Minister says, the downgrade is unwarranted, should not be surprised. The Minister should not be surprised. You have taken us down into valley of the burden of debt at this point in time, [*Desk thumping*] taking us in 18 months to \$89 billion, almost doubling the debt in the short period.

What is going to happen to us? By the time, you know, by the time the time comes around there will be nothing left for anybody to do anything to help this country; \$89 billion in debt, no answer today as to how you are going to deal with this. Next year the bullet payment is going to come up for the Petrotrin debt and that Petrotrin debt reminds me, you know, the Massy Communications Limited. Petrotrin debt \$14 billion where there were no Cabinet approvals; similar for those Petrotrin debts. They kept going and they kept increasing and increasing up to \$14 billion. We see this with the Massy Communications too. Do they have Ministry of Finance approval? Obviously not, because the Minister of Finance, corporation sole, did not know. It is a kind of repeat of the same pattern of behaviour come back to the rating agencies. And why did they downgrade us:

“...citing the sharp increase in the country’s debt burden since 2014.

The ratings agency lowered its long-term sovereign credit rating...to ‘BBB+’ from ‘A-’, while at the same time stating that the outlook...was...‘stable’.

The report stated: ‘Low oil and gas prices in global markets, disruptions in domestic production...ongoing US dollar shortages from the banking system’ have been the primary causes of economic contraction in T&T and although the government has taken austerity measures to reduce fiscal imbalances, the agency expected that fiscal consolidation would be slower than anticipated and interest costs higher.

Commenting on the rationale for the downgrade, the report says:”

—and I quote:

“‘The downgrade reflects further deterioration in T&T’s...”

—what?

“...debit burden, including a higher-than-expected rise in net general government debt to GDP and the interest burden over 2017—2020.”

They—“pointed out that the net general government debt rose 35 per cent of GDP in 2016, from 17.5...in 2014, which reflects...”

—and I quote again from the report:

“...‘to a large extent, a significant downward revision of both nominal and real GDP in 2014 and 2015, increased open-market operations, and a weaker fiscal stance.’

According to S&P:”

I quote:

“The interest burden has also risen, further constraining the government’s fiscal flexibility to adjust to adverse shocks. We now project...government’s interest payments will account for more than 5 per cent of revenue in 2017—2020...”

Madam Speaker, every cent we make will be spent in paying debt. And I think the Government has really failed us today in not coming clear to tell us what they will do, how they will do it, to deal with this debt situation. [*Desk thumping*] And the other one is from Moody’s. The agency criticized Government’s management of the economy. This is the other rating agency, Madam, Moody’s. They:

“...criticized Government’s management of the economy, saying it showed

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‘weak policy execution capacity’ ...”

“...‘weak policy execution capacity’ ...”

—those words.

“...which...”

—and I quote again:

“...‘limited the effectiveness of the policy response to the energy price decline’.

Moody’s also knocked Government for its poor efforts to diversify the economy away from oil and gas dependence.”

And this is where we are today, downgraded by two rating agencies which have always rated Trinidad and Tobago and the Minister now wants to do what? He wants to hire, and I quote where the Minister said from a post-Cabinet meeting, 27 April, 2017. The Minister says:

“Following rating downgrades by international credit rating agencies Standard and Poor’s and Moody’s, Government is now considering pursuing ratings from a third rating agency to offer a ‘more balanced’ perspective on the country’s ratings.”

“You ever hear more foolishness than this?” A third rating agency—

Hon. Member: Buying support.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:

“In this regard, Imbert said consideration is being given to also pursue ratings from Fitch.”

Well we will have to do a google on Fitch. And I quote his words:

“I have been advised to take a look at whether we should now pursue a rating by all three of the large rating agencies.

That is to say we would now ask Fitch to rate Trinidad and Tobago because with respect to Moody’s downgrade, there is a view out there some of the commentary that...Moody’s downgrade was a bit unreasonable when you look at Standard & Poor’s...which has us well up into the investment grade.

So I have been advised and this is good advice that we also pursue ratings from Fitch so we have the three largest and most reputable credit rating

agencies in the world rating Trinidad and Tobago so...investors could get a more balanced perspective on our ratings.”

The third rating agency.

The good advice I think the hon. Minister should consider is to take the time and read Standard & Poor’s and read the Moody’s and see where it is you are falling short and decide and take strategies to [*Desk thumping*] deal with that. It should not be to try to find another rating agency to come and say, Standard & Poor’s wrong or Moody’s was wrong. So this rating agency will now have to rate the other two rating agencies [*Interruption*]*—yes, balance the two and come up with something that the Minister is happy with. What happens if this one also goes against him? Will we get a fourth and a fifth rating agency? And so it becomes like a fiasco, it gets “curiouser and curiouser”. The Minister owes this country a duty, together with his Government, to look at the various reports and see where we can improve, where we can take ourselves out of the position in which we have been found.*

Madam Speaker, with those words I just want to repeat, I have serious concerns with the Government’s management of the economy, very serious concerns that while the Government is able to throw out the numbers and the statistics, those numbers in themselves are misleading when you look at the underlying framework on which they are built.

Secondly, we do not trust them and we do not believe them in the things they say because right here in the Parliament we have the Ministers contradicting themselves on a very important financial issue and then we have other concerns with respect to several other matters that I have raised in this debate.

I want to thank you very much for this time, Madam Speaker, and thank you Members of the House. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to participate in this debate, but more so, Madam Speaker, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity also to respond to some of the statements and the contribution that has been made by the Member for Siparia.

Let me begin by simply saying that the Member for Siparia is a person who I hold in very high regard. I am not ashamed to say that.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: But.

Hon. A. Garcia: There is no “but”, because we go back a long way. And she knows about that, both of us know about that. [*Crosstalk*] We have had a long-standing relationship.

Hon. Member: “Wha!”

Hon. A. Garcia: And therefore, it pains me today to point out some of the flaws in her argument that were presented here today.

Madam Speaker, I can easily sum up the contribution of the Member for Siparia as just rambling without any attempt to present the facts. I am sure she is aware of the word, “circumlocution” and I will describe her contribution as one of circumlocution, just rambling. But let me deal once with some of the direct points that she made.

In her feeble attempt to rebut our Minister of Finance, she cited a number of areas where in her view the Minister of Finance was at fault and certainly I cannot, for the life of me, see the wisdom in what she is saying. For example, with respect to the procurement regulator and the fact that on this side we had proposed a certain course of action for the recruitment of the regulator, it is simply following established procedure. We advertise, we interview, we recommend and then we appoint and that is established procedure in the appointment of any person and I cannot see the reason why she tried to shut down the procedure that has been put forward by this Government.

5.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, with respect to the Auditor General’s report that states that because of prudent financial management this Government was able to save \$10 billion, I think that is something that should be applauded. [*Desk thumping*] It shows, really, prudent financial management. It shows, clearly, that this Government was not engaged in the wastage that we became accustomed to in the past. I think instead of criticizing our Minister of Finance, he should have been applauded [*Desk thumping*] by everyone here for the astute financial management where that was concerned.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia continued with the mantra that this Government has no plan. May I suggest that our plan for the governance of this country is contained in our manifesto which has now been adopted as official Government policy. But more than that, our plan for the governance of this

country has resulted in the Opposition being seated on that side and this Government being seated on this side [*Desk thumping*] and that is the result of a plan that we had—

Hon. Member: A plan that worked.

Hon. A. Garcia: And a plan that worked, thank you very much.

With respect to the property tax, again, it has been shown quite clearly that when the hon. Member for Siparia was in Government that they had every intention of putting in place a property tax, and I think it would be foolhardy of me to comment more on that. I will just like to advise the goodly Member for Siparia that instead of suggesting that our Minister of Finance needs advice, I would simply like to state that the Member for Siparia herself needs to be given some advice, and one of the bits of advice I would like to share with the Member for Siparia is, please get your facts straight. Do the required research so that when you come and you respond to our Minister of Finance, it would be on the basis of fact, not idle chatter.

Madam Speaker, I now come to some of the plans of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education is aware of the economic challenges our country faces, and because of this we have sought to curtail our activities in keeping with the budgetary allocation for fiscal 2017. However, despite this, the Ministry of Education recognized that additional funding was required in order to successfully implement our plans and our programmes for fiscal 2017.

Madam Speaker, we made various requests to the Minister of Finance to consider additions in the allocations for the Ministry of Education, under certain headings. In this regard, the Ministry of Education is pleased to advise this honourable House that the pleas of the Ministry of Education were heard. A total of \$180.5 million was redirected to the Ministry of Education to facilitate continued financing in the vital areas that I will outline in the Variation of the Appropriation for fiscal 2017.

I now turn to ICT in education. The Ministry of Education is seeking to address the shortfalls in the previous approach to Information Communication Technology at the school and wider Ministry of Education levels, and we sought and obtained the approval of the Cabinet to institute its ICT Five-Star Plan, which will include the procurement of laptops to facilitate our students in the Form One and Form Two levels, as well as the teachers who will be responsible for implementing this programme and for the children's instruction.

Towards this end, the Ministry of Finance has approved the allocation of \$60 million to finance this programme, and I can assure you and I can assure this House that we are well on our way in ensuring that these devices will be procured as soon as possible. They will serve to improve the learning environment for students in an ever changing information age. These laptops will improve the quality of instruction and support the integration of ICT in teaching and learning while fostering the development of 21st Century skills among students. It will reduce the inequality in access to computers and information among students, from high and low income families. It is designed to improve students' academic performance through specific e-learning educational content and applications. It will empower our teachers to better address students' varied learning styles and multiple intelligences. And finally, it will conduct research and access information not normally available in the confines of the classroom.

But I think I need to make the point that we have departed from what was the plan of the previous Government in that we will not be giving each student a laptop, but we will provide the school with laptops so that the children in Forms 1 and 2 would have access to these laptops. This will result in considerable savings. It will result in a lack of wastage, and, with the supervision of our teachers, it will result in the maximum use of these devices. This is a fundamental deviation of the approach that was conducted by the former regime.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago. The Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago has the overarching responsibility and jurisdiction for registration and accreditation of post-secondary and tertiary education programmes. At present, the ACTT has on its register, 61 registered institutions, 12 accredited institutions and 17 recognized foreign awarding bodies. The ACTT therefore ensures quality assurance of these institutions and programmes offered to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, for fiscal 2017, the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago was allocated \$14 million, a sum that was insufficient to meet the financial requirements. In the Variation of the Appropriation for fiscal 2017 an additional \$5 million or 35 per cent was provided. This will enable the ACTT to fill crucial vacancies, pay arrears of salaries for the bargaining periods 2011 to 2013, and 2013 to 2015, and facilitate the continued provision of access to quality education throughout the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

I now turn to the National Schools Dietary Services Limited that is commonly referred to as the School Feeding Programme. The National Schools Dietary Services Limited (NSDSL) is the State-owned enterprise responsible for the

provision of meals to deserving children in our primary, secondary and even our early childhood centres. Lunches are provided throughout Trinidad and Tobago. The allocation of \$50 million in this year's mid-year review, which amounted to 33.33 per cent will now enable the NSDSL to facilitate the continued payment to its caterers and suppliers and so ensure that healthy meals to the nation's children will be continued at least to the end of this year. This is an area, again, in which we are very proud. We have been able to assure that all our children who are eligible for meals have been served meals and have benefited so that they can continue their education uninterrupted.

Madam Speaker, I now take a look at the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme, (YTEPP). We are all aware that human capital is the most important resource impacting the future development of this country. One institution that serves the education and training needs of the most vulnerable, that is our youth and the unemployed, the underemployed, retrenched and displaced persons, as well as the incarcerated, is the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme. In light of the performance of the importance of this programme to the social fabric of the nation, an increase of \$30 million, or 54.5 per cent was provided in the mid-term review in order to ensure the continued delivery of this programme, so that our targeted audiences would be able to benefit tremendously. I am happy to state and to assure the general public that the YTEP Programme will continue unabated. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I now turn my attention to Servol. Servol is a private organization that has been able to secure a partnership with our Government. And, again, this is in keeping with our policy of private/public participation and involvement. There are Servol Life Centres, there are Servol ECCE Centres, there are Servol Hi-Tech and Advanced Skills Training Programmes and there is the Servol Human Development and Skills Training Programme.

Madam Speaker, with respect to the programmes managed by the non-governmental organization, Servol, the Ministry of Education has previously been allocated a total sum of \$36 million for recurrent expenditure for fiscal 2017 on four programmes that I have just mentioned: the life centres, the early childhood care, the Hi-Tech and Advanced Skills Training Programme and the Human Development and Skills Training Programme.

Consequent to the annual mid-year review, the Ministry received allocations totalling \$15 million for these four programmes, and this is further elucidated below. The increase of \$2 million, or 100 per cent increase to the Junior Life

Centres will facilitate the provision of critical educational training, counselling and support for students between the ages of 13 to 15 at the following life centres: The Arima Regional Life Centre; the Beetham Regional Life Centre; the Chaguanas Regional Life Centre; the Diego Martin Regional Life Centre, the El Socorro Regional Life Centre; Forres Park Regional Life Centre; La Romain Regional Life Centre; Morvant Regional Life Centre; St. Andrews—which is situated in Sangre Grande—Regional Life Centre, and the Barataria Regional Life Centre; 10 Regional Life Centres that are now served by Servol.

Madam Speaker, in continuing with Servol, Servol was one of the first organizations to provide early childhood care and education across the country. Under the mid-term review for fiscal 2017, the Early Childhood Care and Education Centres received an additional \$5 million, an increase of 33.33 per cent to facilitate payment of salaries for teachers and support staff and upkeep of the 59 Servol-managed ECCE centres. This will ensure learners throughout the twin-island state to continue to receive education at this foundational level.

When we look at Servol Hi-Tech and Advanced Skills Training Programme, we were able to secure an increase of 16.66 per cent or an additional \$1 million, and this will facilitate critical education and training, counselling and support for students between the ages 17 to 23 years. And these programmes are offered at Barataria Hi-Tech Centre, Chaguanas Hi-Tech Centre, La Romain Hi-Tech Centre, to name a few. And these programmes will continue to provide training in the following areas: Computer control electronics; general maintenance; advanced electrical installation; compressor mechanics; digital electronics; computer literacy, industrial electronics; PC repairs; networking and hospitality.

Madam Speaker, Servol has been conducting a programme that is referred to as the Human Development and Skills Training Programme, and this programme has been a tremendous success, and those who have participated in this programme can attest to the fact that they have learnt a tremendous amount of skills that have helped them to deal effectively with some of the challenges that faced them in the past. We are very happy to note that we have been able to secure a \$7 million increase in this programme so that those children who sometimes cannot deal with some of the challenges that face them, would be exposed to these, or this particular programme which has proven to be of tremendous success. Again, this programme is currently being offered at the following seven secondary schools: Mucurapo West Secondary; East Mucurapo Secondary; Diego Martin North Secondary, Belmont Secondary, Valencia

Secondary, Williamsville Secondary and Five Rivers Secondary. The Adolescent Development Programme is also offered at the 10 regional life centres listed above.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education has prioritized the following projects for the continuation of construction works in fiscal 2017. At the primary level we will complete construction works at Belle View ECCE, Egypt Oasis, Wallerfield Government ECCE, Marabella Government ECCE, Springvale SDMS and we will close off final accounts for the St. Crispin's AC ECCE, Chinapoo Government ECCE and Cunjal ECCE Centre.

I am pleased—very pleased—to announce that we will continue the construction of the school building programme. As you know, we had some difficulty in terms of finances and because of the prudent management—and I want to stress this point—because of the prudent management that has been demonstrated by our Minister of Finance we are now in a position to resume the construction of several of our schools, both primary and secondary.

Dr. Tewarie: You are doing Preysal?

Hon. A. Garcia: Let me share some information with this honourable House in terms of the resumption of the construction of schools. Some of the schools that I would like to list are: Moruga AC, Belmont Boys RC, Chatham Government, Lower Morvant Government, Siparia Union Presbyterian, San Juan Boys and Girls Government, Piccadilly Government, Malabar Government and Ramai Trace SDMS. We anticipate to close off final accounts for Enterprise Government, Tranquillity Government, Monkey Town Government, Kanhai Presbyterian, Rio Claro Presbyterian and Eccles Village Anglican. And, Madam Speaker, at the secondary level, works will continue, or commence, with respect to the Baratania North Secondary, Carapichaima West Secondary, Holy Cross College and Hillview College.

Dr. Tewarie: Will the Minister give way? There were allocations in the 2017 budget for completion or for continuation of construction for the Preysal Government School. Is that going to be completed in the fiscal year? You answered a question which I posed some time ago indicating, yes, that it would be done before the fiscal year.

Hon. A. Garcia: Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to respond to the Member for Caroni Central and simply to let him know that—it is Preysal?

Dr. Tewarie: Preysal Government.

Hon. A. Garcia:—Government has not been left behind. It has not been neglected. As a matter of priority we have listed 10 schools, but for the next fiscal year, certainly Preysal Government will be included and will be given top priority.

Dr. Tewarie: But it was listed in this fiscal, Minister.

Hon. Member: Priorities change.

Hon. A. Garcia: Madam Speaker, I have taken pains to explain that because of the financial situation in which we find ourselves we had to prioritize, and on the basis of our priority listing, we have identified 10 primary schools that needed urgent attention. I reiterate that there are a number of schools that we have not neglected, and we will not neglect. We are in the month of May. Very shortly we will be in another fiscal year and those schools that have been left behind will be included. I want to give all Members the assurance that those schools will be included.

Madam Speaker, this Government has demonstrated its willingness to provide quality education to our nation's children. In almost everything that we do, we always have uppermost in our minds two important things. One is the provision of quality education and the other thing is to ensure that there is equal access to this quality education. And if our children are to benefit from this quality education we must ensure that the physical environment in which the children operate and the teachers perform, must be of a high standard so that learning and teaching can be accomplished without any major interruptions. So far, we have been very successful—

Madam Speaker: Member for Arima, your original 30 minutes have now expired. You are entitled to 15 more minutes. If you intend to avail yourself of it, you may proceed.

Hon. A. Garcia: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We have been very successful in ensuring that our schools, though many are aged, are in a state where our students can receive education and have access to the quality education that we are determined to provide. There have been many initiatives that have been undertaken by this Government, and, in particular, by this Ministry of Education over the last few months and, in fact, over the last 20 months where we have been in office.

One of the areas that we feel a sense of pride is with respect to the Laventille/Morvant initiative. That is an initiative that was the brainchild of our Prime Minister, but it is an initiative that has been pursued assiduously by the Ministry of Education. And already we are seeing the positive signs of this initiative. We have been informed by our principals and the school supervisors in the Laventille/Morvant area that violence and indiscipline have been on the wane in these schools.

In fact, Madam Speaker, I would like this House to know that I have not received one single request for extended suspension coming from any of these schools. It tells us of the success of this programme. We have been visiting schools, and today, for example, I visited two schools in the Morvant area, and my team and I were very pleased with what we saw. There has been a change in the attitude of the students and of the parents and of the teachers in those schools. We have been able to secure the desire of the parents to send their children in schools in that area, and more so, we have been able to secure the desire of the students themselves to want to remain in those schools, contrary to what operated in the past. And that is an initiative that we are very successful and we are very pleased to announce.

Madam Speaker, you would know that very often a former Minister of Education has taken every opportunity to ask for my removal as Minister of Education. The slightest opportunity he has, he calls for my dismissal. At one of the schools I visited today, a teacher told me that if there is an accident outside of the school where a truck bounced down an ant, he will ask for my dismissal. So ridiculous it is.

6.00 p.m.

In spite of that, Madam Speaker, this Ministry of Education has been in the forefront of assuring that all our students are now the beneficiary of a quality education. This Ministry of Education has been in the forefront of ensuring equality of treatment of all our students, and this Ministry of Education will continue in its effort to provide the quality of education that our children deserve, but in order to achieve our objectives we have embarked on a number of initiatives. I am happy to announce that the Cabinet of this country has agreed a few months ago to accept the refereed textbook that deals with the history of Trinidad and Tobago, and it is hoped that by the beginning of the new academic year copies of that book will be in the schools. It is time for us to ensure that the

history of this country is written by persons who belong to this country, and that is our objective. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to inform this House that we have developed a student monitoring system in the primary school to ensure that our primary school students do not fall between the cracks. Those students who are facing certain challenges with respect to learning styles, with respect to their behaviour, we are tracking their performance and the necessary support will be given to those students so that they themselves will be able to benefit from what we have to offer, and that is another initiative for which we are very proud.

We have targeted 56 secondary schools where a large number of our students reside, students who did not perform well at the SEA exam 2016. They are now in Form 1 classes in a number of our secondary schools, and we have engaged the assistance of our school supervisors, our school guidance officers, and our curriculum officers to ensure that the necessary support is given to those students. That initiative began in September 2016, and I am pleased to report that in just a few months, our principals and our teachers have reported to us that they have seen tremendous improvement in the performance of these students. That is another initiative for which we are very proud.

Madam Speaker, we hear so much about violence and indiscipline in our nation's schools. I have been at pains to report, not only to this House, but to the national community, that violence and indiscipline in our schools have been on the decline. The evidence shows that. We do not just make vacuous statements. Our statements are made as a result of empirical research, and all the evidence that we have received would show that indiscipline and violence have decreased tremendously. We have presented the figures to show, and those figures were not a figment of our imagination. Those figures came from the schools themselves, where the principals reported to us through their line supervisors. So they were figures that can stand the test of any investigation, and I am very happy to note that there has been this decrease.

We have not yet reached the stage where we are totally satisfied, because if there is one incident of indiscipline in our schools it is our view that that one is too many, and we will continue working relentlessly at ensuring that all our schools are safe, all our schools operate in an environment where learning and teaching can take place, that all our schools are conducive to good teaching and productive learning, so that when our students graduate from the schools, they will be able to hold their heads high as we saw in those two schools that were visited today.

Madam Speaker, with these few words, I want to extend to this House the fact that our education system is on an upward mobility. [*Desk thumping*] The challenges that we faced in the past are being dealt with and are being dealt with effectively. I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, what I wanted to know from the Minister of Education is whether he is going to finish building the Government school in Preysal which he promised to do, which in fact received an allocation in the 2017 budget, which means that they have reversed a decision that was made in a budget passed by the Parliament in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] I asked a direct question and many quiet questions—not in the public glare of Parliament, of the Minister—and on every instance he made a commitment to complete, and if not complete to at least start the construction, or the continuation of construction of that school. What I wish to say here, Madam Speaker, is that the Minister of Education’s word is of no value, absolutely no value. [*Desk thumping*]

He also promised me to give a little pittance, a few things to the people in the Presbyterian school in Longdenville. They wanted a few things like fans, infrastructure to support. They were cramped up together with the Longdenville Government School in the same horrible surroundings. I asked him if he would alleviate some of the problems, he told me in this Parliament. I went to see him quietly, I asked him, “Did you do anything about it?” He said, “Yes, he has done it.” When I went to give out pencils and other things to the SEA students, the people said, “No, they have done nothing.” He did nothing, and therefore, again, he did not keep his word. His word is of no account.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The Gran Couva RC School—which I share with the Member for Tabaquite—a small school, the thing is in bushes right there. He came, he made various statements about why the school could not be completed. The end result of that is that the children are going to school in a church, the floor is in an atrocious state, you have no classrooms, they have little board things separating the children there, and now he coming to talk about history as a discipline. These are the facts on which history is built. Do not come and give me no old talk about history. You spend all the time talking about education and you do not say anything quality. You come here, you talk about construction, you talk about improvement in one part of the country, you talk about school violence. What about the quality of

education in this country, primary, secondary and tertiary? All I can say is that the Minister's contribution is nothing but a provocation. It really is a total waste of time.

I want to say to the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Finance came here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to talk about debt, and when he talked about debt he refrained in his presentation from blaming the Partnership about everything under the sun as they usually do. So we were happy for that. At least he is maturing. But on the debt question, again he presented a misrepresentation of the facts. He said that we ran up the debt by about 30 per cent between 2010 and 2015, but he did not say that part of that debt was over \$20 billion of Clico debt that we inherited, and that is the kind of misinformation that this Minister of Finance does.

He did not say that the debt was in fact close to \$89 billion—I think it is 91-something—which they have run-up and that currently the debt-to-GDP ratio is about 62 per cent, and that within the last year alone they have raised the debt in Trinidad and Tobago by \$12.3 billion. I do not think in that I have calculated the \$300 million that they promised to borrow from the Andean Development Bank. So all we have here is a set of talk, and old talk, and at the same time you have nothing of good management whether it is the education sector, the Finance Ministry, or the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is what we have to live with as citizens in this country.

You listen to the Minister of Finance making his presentation. If you listen to his presentation, the tone of his presentation was this: "There is no problem that we cannot handle; we are handling everything good so far; everything bad is in fact good. You are just not seeing it right; we will get a third opinion to make it so; don't believe everything you think; don't believe everything you see; don't believe everything you smell; don't believe everything you hear or taste; don't trust your brain; don't trust your logic; don't trust your intuition; why worry; not to worry man, everything good; everything hunky-dory." That is the gospel according of the Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*] And when he almost finished his presentation, I thought to my head that what he should have said at the beginning of his presentation is that, "Members of Parliament, Madam Speaker, I have nothing to report". That is what should have been his presentation here. [*Desk thumping*] But he went on further and started to make a political speech full of fluff, nothing in it, nothing tangible to be aligned to it, about how they are going to develop and how they are going to grow the economy and so on, after about nine quarters of recession.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I mean, listening to the Members on the other side and we have only heard two, you would have to swear that they are living in a different country from the rest of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister of Finance comes, he talks about Brexit and the fluctuating oil prices. What does Brexit have to do with us? I mean really, sure it is a reality, you have to take it into account, but you have to understand what is—[*Crosstalk*] there is no connection between Brexit and the review of the budget here today. [*Desk thumping*] It makes no difference whatsoever, and the fluctuating prices, we have been living with that for a hundred years. It is just that now we are dealing with a decline in the price of oil and we are dealing with a decline in production. He used 66,000 barrels; he used the last month to say that that is where we had reached in terms of production. It is not right. You cannot do that.

He said that there is going to be no revised estimate by CSO, the other estimates are not official. This is a Minister of Finance who sat there. He sat there during the Finance Committee meeting and he in a response to a question from a Member on this side, he cited the IMF as a source that was dependable and reliable—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Members on the Government side, please, I am overhearing you all. Proceed, Member.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker—but I will explain just now what they are doing. It is a real problem you know. It is a real, real problem what the Minister of Finance is doing. You see, we are living in a time today, 2017, May 10th I think it is, in which the Government has lost the confidence of every sector in the country. [*Desk thumping*] When you look at the documentation from the Central Bank, you see in their March 17th Report that every sector of the economy is in decline except finance. It is the only sector. That is not true, Mr. Minister of Finance?

Mr. Imbert: No.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Which document are you reading?

Mr. Imbert: CSO.

Dr. B. Tewarie: That is why we so. The poor in this country are giving up now. The working people are losing hope as their own friends and family lose their jobs. The middle class are in disbelief. Everywhere you go, they are talking with one another, talking to you and saying, “I cannot understand what this Government is doing.” [*Desk thumping*]

SFC Report (Adoption)
[DR. TEWARIE]

Wednesday, May 10, 2017

Small businessmen are losing their businesses. Medium businesses are ready to quit because they are faced—these small and medium business—with sending their employees home, and if you know some of them they really build their businesses like family. So to send home somebody and to put them out of a salary, or out of a wage, is like punishment to a member of your own family. So many of them are carrying the burden, of carrying their employees, but the medium businesses are ready to quit. They have to deal with foreign exchange problems, they have to deal with the price of interest rates in the bank for loans. They have to deal with cash flow problems in a dwindling economy of loss of consumer confidence and uncertainty. The large enterprises are putting a hold on investment, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Prime Minister does not believe me, but I can tell him that that is true. Many of the same people who they talk to also talk to us, and they do not tell us what they want to hear. What they do is, they tell us what they are feeling because they feel that something terrible is happening, or not happening, and it is a problem. The state sector in this country is at their wits end, and public servants are chugging along without any kind of leadership whatsoever. The whole country is depressed because of lack of direction, absence of priorities, and lack of inspiration, and you could have gotten it. You could have gotten all three things that I say here: lack of direction, absence of priorities, and lack of inspiration from the presentation of the Minister of Finance—and there is a lot of deception.

Every time we come to the Parliament it is sleight of hand, reasonable sounding talk calculated to deceive, just like the Minister of Education, just like the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Garcia: Just like Caroni Central.

Dr. B. Tewarie: We saw—I stand by what I say. Everything that I say is the truth. Everything that I say, every conviction I have—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. Members please, and direct the Chair please. Direct the Chair, please.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Every conviction I have is what I truly believe, and anything that I believe and I stand for, I am prepared to stand to the end for. [*Desk thumping*] We saw this with the issues related to the Procurement Regulator. I would not dwell on that because the hon. Leader of the Opposition dealt with it at length, but we saw this also in relation to the property tax. So they come here with

the Procurement Regulator issue to deal with salaries, but behind the scenes they were already organizing how to get their Procurement Regulator in to undermine the authority and the jurisdiction of His Excellency the President.

We saw this in relation to the property tax. They brought the Form 2—
[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order dealing with improper motives.

Dr. B. Tewarie: There is no improper motives.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Yes, by you saying that we have somebody to put in.
[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed, Member.

Dr. B. Tewarie: You see, this is my problem. What I am saying, contrary to what the Minister of Education was saying, is a fact. It is not an interpretation. We saw this in relation to the property tax, where they used Schedule II from the 2009 legislation—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, the Standing Order that deals with improper motives. The Member just said what he is saying is a fact.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And that would be 48? [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. B. Tewarie: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we stood on this side and we listened to the Minister of Finance—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6):

“No Member shall impute improper motives...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And it relates directly to?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: What the Member said about the Government having somebody in place to put in as the Procurement Regulator.

Dr. B. Tewarie: I did not say—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: You said it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right. Member, and it is in relation to what you are quoting with regard to what? What is the source of your information?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: It is not a quote. It is an allegation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The source?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: And he said it was a fact. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, could you move on to your other point, Member?

Dr. B. Tewarie: We saw this in relation to the property tax. I would like to say before, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and ask for your protection. We stood here and we listened to the Minister of Finance carry on for 90 minutes. [*Interruption*] We did not interrupt him. He said a lot of foolish things, but we did not interrupt him.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member! Member! Member, please use a different word. Use a different word.

Dr. B. Tewarie: The Minister of Education spoke. I asked him to give way, he gave way, I asked a question. I would like to be able to proceed with my contribution and not be interrupted by the other side.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, it was on a particular Standing Order. I have since overruled. You can proceed.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I raise Standing Order 48(4), that it is improper for a Member or “out of order to use offensive and insulting language about Members of either House”.

Mr. Singh: There is nothing insulting.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: He said it was foolish.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, I told him to find a different word.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: And he did not, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen—one second—I asked you in order to move on and to use a different term. So you either move on to your new point, or you retract and you continue.

Dr. B. Tewarie: I will move on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In the case of the property tax, they brought Schedule II, which is a part of the property Act of 2009, but they added something at the top which was never in the Schedule, and therefore, not part of the law and they asked people to do it. When I pointed it out here in my contribution, the Minister of Finance indicated to me that I was misrepresenting the facts.

We saw this in relation to two budgets, and their revenue and expenditure projections. They came here with revenue projections, expenditure projections for 2015/2016, 2016/2017, we told them both times they were not attainable and they persisted. They went ahead with their business. I am going to show you some numbers here today again. We saw this in the announcement of the Minister of Finance—what I am talking about is this tendency to provide misinformation and to be deceptive. We saw this in the announcement of the Minister of Finance a few days ago.

Dr. Moonilal: What Standing Order? What Standing Order?

Mr. Imbert: 48(6), imputing improper motives.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, in terms of your words, deception and so on, please be careful how you are utilizing the words please. So decide what is the next step. Let us move on.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Members of—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, listen, the crosstalk. Member for Naparima and Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, please. The crosstalk between you and the Member for Naparima, kindly. Proceed, Member for Caroni Central.

Dr. B. Tewarie: The Minister of Finance came a few days ago saying that they had a savings of \$10 billion. What it was really, it was made up of cuts and there was a human cost to that, and what he did was he presented it in the form of a spin and that is what they do perpetually all the time. We see this in the mid-year budget review, but I will come to that. We see this in the presentation of the GDP figures for 2016 and here I want to go to a document.

The Minister came here today and he said that the only figures that are official for the GDP and the decline in GDP in Trinidad and Tobago are the CSO figures, and the CSO figures are not about to be revised for 2016 until later, and therefore, the official figures remain the same. But what they did is they projected in the Review of the Economy in the middle of 2016—that is around July—which was then the report that came to us in the September budget, they projected a growth rate of minus 2.3 per cent. I have it here, from the Review of the Economy. It is here in black and white. And then what they did was they used that same number for the March 2017 Central Bank Report.

I am hesitant to say this because I would not like to think that the Central Bank is involved in any kind of collaboration bordering on collusion with the Minister of Finance, but I know he meets with them every week. I know he meets with them every week. So I have to wonder whether there was any collusion because when they came in March they projected that the growth rate for 2016 would be minus 2.3 per cent. So what they did, they took the July numbers from 2016 and gave us in March 2017 the same numbers for the projected growth rate for 2016.

6.30 p.m.

And when we got the IMF report and the page of it that I have here, the IMF World Economic Outlook in April. Now April is one month away from March and the IMF—the Minister of Finance sat down here in the Finance Committee and said that it was a reliable source of information and a place of technical competence. [*Desk thumping*] And when they in April gave their assessment, they said that the projected decline for Trinidad and Tobago was minus 5.1 per cent and I have the entire World Outlook Report here. But this is just one page out of it. “Is ah big fat thing that looks at every country in the world.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You do not need to display, Member.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Okay. The point that I am making is that this is no joke document. It is a document that makes an assessment of the world’s system and the state of the economies all over the world and they projected minus 5.1. And I have, in past, projected that the actual decline for 2016 is going to be more than that. Given the numbers that have been given by the Central Bank itself in the March report, quarter by quarter, the decline in 2016 is likely to be somewhere between 6 and 9 per cent—minus 6.9 per cent, if they are honest about the documentation. I have used these three documents simply to indicate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Minister of Finance does not give us correct information although he says that he is doing it. [*Desk thumping*]

The third thing besides the lack of confidence in the country and the tendency to deceive is the issue of arrogance and contempt; the failure to listen, the failure to heed good advice from any reasonable source; an attitude of knowing everything, an attitude for no capacity for self-examination whatsoever; an attitude of blaming others for every problem that they encounter or conceive of, and provoking the country, to use the words of the Minister of Finance, “to riot”.

There is a lack of basic understanding, I want to say, by the Government and the Members who are dealing with the economy on that side of how an economy

works. And do not get me wrong, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am not making any rash statement about people not qualified in economics and all these kinds of things. I am not dealing with that.

Mr. Imbert: I will deal with that.

Dr. B. Tewarie: I am dealing with the ability to simply understand how an economy works. How, for instance, if you mess up the transportation between Tobago and Trinidad, you get a backup of trucks in a line for miles, you inconvenience the driver to leave here and go to Piarco to catch a plane to catch his truck when it goes to Scarborough, and how the economy of Tobago is disrupted, is short changed; how the groceries become half empty simply because you have now replaced more capacity with less capacity [*Desk thumping*] and an inefficient system. And that is what I mean by an understanding about how an economy works.

I will give another example. If you invest in a small community, and you have a project that is going on there that is Government-funded, what happens is that the Government funding means that a contractor has to get involved or some contractors have to get involve, they may have subcontractors. All the contractors and subcontractors will hire people from the community. The community will then have people with money in their pockets and they will spend and when they spend and when they need materials, hardwares will become involved and so on, and that is how a little small economy is rejuvenated or energized by a simple investment. So, I do not want to give the impression to the citizenry and to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that what I am talking about is qualifications and how much economics they know and so on. I am just talking about a simple common sense understanding about how an economy works and how money stimulates human behaviour.

The second thing I want to say is that if they understood how an economy works, they would not impose more and more taxes in a recessionary situation. [*Desk thumping*] There is little hope of this economy recovering with the manner in which they are proceeding with the economy. For instance, if you look at the situation with VAT, they have not met their VAT target. Okay? They did not meet it last year, they did not meet it the year before, and they are not going to meet it. So the question you have to ask is why and we told them why when they came. That by expanding the VAT on everything, you were not going to increase the amount of revenue because what you were doing was taking two and a half per cent off of luxury items and therefore, they did not meet their target. And if they had met their target by doing a proper approach to the VAT issue, then they would

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not have to impose property tax to make up for it because it is a problem. So the thinking is wrong. And therefore, all the things that they say about the economy are undermined by the policies that they exercise.

What is this Government's investment plan? We have a Minister of Finance come here and talk for 90 minutes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, your 30 minutes have expired. You have an additional 15, do you care to use it?

Dr. B. Tewarie: I would like to, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Dr. B. Tewarie: A Minister of Finance comes and talks for 90 minutes, you heard nothing about investment in a declining economy, a recessionary economy. You heard a Minister come, he gave us the political speech for about two minutes at the end because he knew that there was something missing in the reportage that he brought, and he, therefore, talked about growth and so on, but he had nothing that said how growth would happen.

Now all of this could have been avoided, I want to say, and the reason I am saying this is because everything that we are in, in Trinidad and Tobago, is of the Government's own making.

Dr. Rowley: You could not be serious.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Yes, I will concede the decline in the price of energy. I will concede the decline in production. I will concede the shortfall in revenue from the energy sector. But all of this could have been avoided if you had taken the time and made the effort to prepare a real plan before you came into office. [*Desk thumping*]

The second thing is that now you have a situation where the confidence is gone. Deception is a way of life, now moving into self-deception. Arrogance and contempt is what the country now knows. Lack of understanding and absence of know-how about how the economy works is the reality we are living in and the end result is that you have bad policies which are contrary to anything they say, and you have dissonance between the objectives on the one hand and the results that they are seeking to have and the results that are the effect of the policies that they are effecting.

Now, all of this could have been avoided if they had simply come to office in September 2015 and begin the process of confidence building in this country.

They had a lot of goodwill. They were a new Government, they could have done that. They could have done this by partnership and collaboration instead of quarrelling. They should have done this by continuation of some of the projects that we had on the drawing board or they could have taken it from our manifesto. They could have stolen it and simply go because they did not have none. [*Desk thumping*] They could have decided to live within their means, about \$45 in oil and explained properly to the country what that meant. They could have prioritized some projects and tell the country where they are headed. They could have gotten a private sector pool together and get them to make some commitments to investment. A public/private partnership they could have engaged. They could have gone to the manufacturers and give them incentives for jobs and exports. They could have done the same thing in the services sector, winning foreign exchange and creating jobs in the process. And that would allow them to have, not just have an immediate plan but a medium-term plan and a longer term sustainability plan.

But they did none of this. They were not interested in that. They were not interested in anything that had to do with good governance and bringing the country together although they came on the platform, “Let’s Do This Together”. But we are in a serious situation now and I know they are laughing on the other side. Right? “They think I talking nonsense but people doh think so.” [*Interruption*] But the—[*Crosstalk*] The Minister, on that side, once publicly called me a fool here you know.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, quote your source, proceed. There is no need to go that way. [*Crosstalk*] Members, please. Silence. Quote your source you are quoting from and proceed, please.

Dr. B. Tewarie: I quoted the Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And the unparliamentary language, let us avoid it.

Dr. B. Tewarie: I quoted the Minister of Finance and it is in the *Hansard* of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Imbert: Where is that? Where? Which *Hansard*? [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Dr. B. Tewarie: Exactly what I said. Mr. Deputy Speaker, they are trying to distract me.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And at the end of the day, you will say I am not protecting you. I am telling you to proceed. Proceed.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Yes, I am proceeding. I wanted to take this budget—you see, this is the budget statement for 2017 and I simply wanted to mention—I wanted to show what they say and what happens by their policy actions are two different things. This is how they talk about—how the Minister of Finance talks about it on page 5:

“Fortuitously, with the prudent financial management of the PNM, confidence is returning to the economy...”

I just outlined what is happening to confidence in the economy. This is 2017.

“...evidence by the increase in foreign direct investment in 2016...”

I do not know what he was talking about.

“...the largest foreign bond issue in our country’s history.”

And that takes us to something else. What is the situation of that bond in this situation where basically, we have been relegated to junk status by one of the rating agencies, and what is going to be the implication of that in the financial market, both for the price of borrowing and for the management of the debt situation?

But let me continue with this because it is important. So the reason I am doing this is because I do not want the population, the citizens of this country, to be carried away by the rhetoric of what the Minister of Finance says because what you have to examine is not the word but the deed and the impact of the deed. [*Desk thumping*] So, for instance, in this public sector document, 2017 document:

“The Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) is the instrument used by Government to effect its vision on policies. It’s a budgeting and strategic planning tool made up of projects and programmes which are designed to realise the goals set out by Government’s overarching policy...”

Then they go on:

“Government has set out its broad, long-term development agenda in the draft National Development Strategy 2016-2030 (Vision 2030).”

Now, I have the Vision 2030 and it is a general document of aspirations but I mean, this has to be turned into a plan. Now:

“Vision 2030 seeks to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a developed country, with sustainable growth and development...”

—and so on and then they have the PSIP incorporates this. All the things that they want to do in the country as objectives and then he comes here, I asked him about what he is withdrawing down—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, Member. You have been doing it a couple of times. The “he”, please.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Oh, the Minister, the Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right, yeah.

Dr. B. Tewarie: I am not disrespectful in that way.

Mr. Imbert: Yes, you are. You make it so.

Dr. B. Tewarie: You are, but I am not. [*Laughter*] The Minister came here and he talked about the Infrastructure Development Fund. First of all, they took money from the HSF so I asked the Minister a simple question. I say, “What yuh going to use it for?” He said, “For the PSIP”. I said, “Well, what are the projects that you are going to do?” He said, “For the PSIP”. I pressed him further, I say, “Well, tell me one big project that you are going do.” He said, “I said it was for the PSIP.” Right. Then he comes here during the Committee meeting and they take all the money out of the IDF and they put it somewhere else. I cannot understand. There is no relationship between the budget documents, whether it is the Public Sector Investment Programme or the Budget Statement itself and anything that is happening in this country or anything that they are doing, and I want the country to understand that. It is like “ah” joke. The dissonance is so loud. You know, it really, really is a painful, painful punishment on this population.

I have a document called “Are Oil and Gas Smothering the Private Sector in Trinidad and Tobago”? and I do not want to get into that. All I want to say is that what this document says is that given the nature of economic management in all Caribbean countries and given the role of the state sector, one of the terrible problems that you have is that the private sector is reluctant to invest because they lack full confidence of the ability of the Government—I am not just talking about Trinidad and Tobago alone—of Caribbean governments to steer the course in terms of policy that supports private sector investment and development. So I would not read it here, it will eat too much of my time. And therefore, the point that I am taking from this big IDB document is that if confidence is the fuel that makes private sector investment flourish and you have a lack of confidence in the Government and the economy, you are not going get any investment in this country, and it is really a sorry day for Trinidad and Tobago that we would get to this point.

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I want to deal—I have already dealt with Preysal Government and the other three schools in my constituency. I just want to close on my constituency because my constituency, by and large, are ordinary people. They work hard. The people of Caroni Central are the salt of the earth. They work, they toil, they build families, they build neighbourhoods, they build communities. They are peaceful people. They are very, very, good people and then—[*Crosstalk*] Look at that! Pure folly on that side.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, Member. Proceed with your debate, please.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have some projects here. An agricultural project in Todd’s Road, another one in Rodney Road. I would like to see these projects in the PSIP executed and supported so that the people in agriculture can benefit. I would like to see the Freeport area where you have a number of documents—sorry, a number of residents in south and north in Arena, a place that they call Tewarie Circular but that is—[*Interruption*] It is officially Tewarie Circular. All right? If the Member for Arouca/Maloney wants to know, it derives out of my service to that part of my constituency [*Desk thumping*] in the 1986 to ’91 period when I represented them.

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

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: I will soon change Arouca/Maloney to Robinson-Regis.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Arena, Free—I did not do it, “the people do it”. “Da’is the difference.” I did not do it, “the people do it”, I never asked for it.

So, I want to say that I would like to have my constituency serviced properly. I would like—the Prime Minister is not here but I want to appeal to him and the Minister of Finance to restore the continuity of construction of the school in Preysal that you promised to construct and that Parliament passed here for the 2017 Budget. And these documents for the PSIP projects, I hope that they will continue. I know the Minister of Housing gave an assurance that the two projects that he mentioned in my constituency in Freeport are going to be completed.

Mr. Imbert: “Whe he gehing the money from?”

Dr. B. Tewarie: Yeah, the two projects in Arena that are going to be done. So I will wait and see whether those things are done.

But we will see what is going to happen because what is happening in this country now is that you have a deteriorating economic situation because of mismanagement, a deteriorating financial situation because of mismanagement, an escalating debt situation in Washington. They are calculating that if we continue with the declines that we have now, the recession that we have and the strategy that we have now, we are going to end up with a debt-to-GDP ratio of over 100 per cent in five years. That is what they are going to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Your time has expired, Member.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Cherrie-Ann Crichlow-Cockburn): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I listened to the contributions of the Members on the other side and to borrow a phrase from the Member for Caroni Central, a lot of rhetoric and it would seem that the Members on the other side believe that they can speak things into being. So every week, they come here and they speak in terms of the public has lost confidence in the Government; this side, we are arrogant, we do not have a plan. But I want to let the Members on the other side know that simply speaking it into being is not going to cause it to happen. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to say here this afternoon and place on the record that the fact and the reason this Government has to cut and contrive, as my grandmother used to say, is because in the time of plenty, the Members on the other side did not see it fit to put aside for a rainy day. [*Desk thumping*] In addition to which it would seem that they have a penchant for excess. So we had situations whereby over \$500 million was spent on parks and playgrounds. If that money had been better invested or spent on projects that would have been more beneficial to this country, we would not be in the situation that we find ourselves in at this time, at this juncture, in Trinidad and Tobago.

I would now like to treat with the issues raised as it relates to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Now, during the review period, that is September 2016 to March 2017, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services was heavily impacted—as all Ministries in Trinidad and Tobago—by Trinidad and Tobago's straitened economic circumstances. We immediately recognized that in such circumstances, even greater importance needed to be placed on ensuring that the safety net is intact so that our poor and vulnerable could be protected and the value, maintenance and frequency of the payments, that we make to them, would be in no way adversely affected.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was, therefore, of paramount importance for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to focus on the removal of all wastage and mismanagement within the system in the Ministry, and to find more efficient and cost-effective ways of providing our grants and services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we sought to achieve this through improved targeting and continuous improvement in our programmes and services and this has been largely achieved through reviews of our operations, education and sensitization of the citizenry and restructuring of programmes where deemed necessary.

In terms of educating the population, during this period, we have embarked on a number of public information and education sensitization sessions and we are going to be going throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago in an effort to ensure that NGOs, CBOs, staff of some of MPs' offices, and the poor and indigent in Trinidad and Tobago are made aware of all of the benefits and services provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the qualifying criteria, very importantly. Because there are a number of persons out there who do not know or do not understand what are the qualifying criteria and oftentimes again, that is probably one of the reasons in these very Chambers, we keep hearing about the food card and it being taken away.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to ensure the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and the Members of this House that by the end of calendar 2017, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services would have gone through the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago and we would have educated a large segment of the population in terms of the benefits and grants that we provide and the qualifying criteria for those grants and services.

Now, the core responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is providing income support and a safety net for the poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago and to achieve this, there are three major social protection programmes that we manage. The senior citizens pension, that is at the end—let us say as at September 2016, we were providing to 90,800 persons at a monthly cost of \$293 million. The disability assistance grant that is provided to 24,058 persons at a monthly cost of \$44 million and the public assistance grant that is being provided to 25,906 families and included in those families are 1,177 children with disabilities. This Government has been expending approximately \$371 million monthly to ensure that our poor and vulnerable who access these grants receive payment.

I want to place on record here this evening that despite our current economic situation, this Government has maintained all grants, all benefits at the same levels. [*Desk thumping*] There have been no reductions in the quantum of payment and we have made all our payments on time every month. [*Desk thumping*] This, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is testimony to this PNM Government's commitment to care for and protect the elderly and vulnerable in our society.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have also maintained all of our benefits and these benefits include:

- Housing assistance grants to a maximum of \$20,000 for persons who may have experienced a natural disaster and this includes house repairs, electrical wiring and plumbing;
- Household items grant to a maximum of \$10,000 and this is to assist with the provision of beds and appliances;
- Medical equipment grant where persons who have need of prosthesis are given a grant of up to \$75,000. We also assist with eyeglasses, hearing aids and wheelchairs.

7.00 p.m.

Clothing grant; educational grant; where we provide assistance to children at the secondary school level with transportation; and the funeral grant, Mr Deputy Speaker. And I note and state here again, that not one of these grants have received a cut in the quantum or the value and we continue to process applications. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a lot of time was spent speaking about the food support programme and the fact that there is—the Minister of Finance would have made provision for a reallocation of \$86 million, and Members on the other side sought to convince the population of Trinidad and Tobago, that by doing this, the Ministry was going to be reducing payments under the food support or we were going to be cutting people from the food support programme.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I said at the outset, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, given our straitened economic situation, and even more so, given the fact that we are responsible for public funds, believes it is our responsibility to continually review our processes and to make sure that whatever we are doing, is being done in the most cost-efficient and effective

manner. And so the Ministry is very focused on looking at its processes, its systems and what it is doing to ensure that our operations are efficient, effective and there is no mismanagement and there is no wastage.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2016, we would have embarked on an extensive review of the food support programme, also called, the TCCTP, and as a result of that review, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we were able to get cost savings of \$110 million annually. And this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make it abundantly clear, because ever so often there is this righteous indignation on the part of the other side, that we have taken food cards away from persons. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the food card is intended to provide food support to families to ensure that they can have a nutritious meal every day. So this is for our poor and indigent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, part of that exercise entails asking persons in receipt of the food card payment to come in so that we could do the necessary assessments and also enrol them on the biometric system. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am sure that all right-thinking and objective-thinking persons would come to the conclusion that if your situation was such that you were in support of a food card, to ensure that your family got a meal every day, if you were required to come in to regularize your situation, you would have come in, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Over 13,000 persons did not come in. And this was only about coming in, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Attempts were made to contact them via phone. Attempts were made to contact them by visiting where they lived. Attempts were made to contact them via ads on the radio, ads on the television and ads in the newspaper. And despite all of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, over 13,000 persons did not come in. That forces me or causes me to conclude that those persons must have recognized that they were not in fact eligible for the food support, so they did not come in. There is also the very distinct possibility, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that some of those persons did not exist. And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, based on our review of the system, we were able to save this country \$110 million. [*Desk thumping*]

We then looked at the biometric system, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Now, this is a system that was introduced with noble objectives, because it was supposed to eliminate wastage and it was supposed to eliminate double dipping because of the unique identity of the fingerprint. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, when this was implemented, unfortunately, actions were not taken to ensure that approximately 170,000 persons who are beneficiaries of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services were registered and were placed on the biometric system.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we were doing our review, we recognized that of the 170,000 persons only approximately 62,000 persons were in fact registered. Now, what this meant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is after that Government would have spent \$67.4 million to bring the system in place, spent an additional \$29.8 million as the annual maintenance fees, they did not take the necessary actions to ensure that this country got value for money. So at the end of it, after having spent all of this money, we had a situation where only 62,000 people were registered. But worse than that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, only 3,158 persons or 2 per cent of the Ministry's beneficiaries had been transitioned on to the biometric system. So here is what was happening. After having spent \$67.4 million one way, \$29.8 million another way, we were only paying 3,158 persons or 2 per cent of our beneficiaries. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is totally unacceptable.

Mr. Al-Rawi: And they talk value for money.

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Value for money. When we looked further, we recognized that with only servicing 3,158 persons, the Government was in fact spending \$2.7 million every month to pay \$1.7 million to 3,158 persons. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if that was all right for the Members on the other side, that is not all right for this Government and we will not continue something like that. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as part of our review process, we continue to look for better means and more cost-effective means because we are operating in a situation where our circumstances, we are constrained economically. We also looked at the fact that, one, the bank that was providing the support, in terms of the debit card for the system, had indicated that the system had become obsolete and the bank had made that known to the Government since in 2014. But nothing was done to correct it. So here we are in October 2015, into 2016, and recognizing that the bank is not prepared to issue additional debit cards. And if that is not done, then persons who are to receive permanent food cards are at risk of not receiving the support that is needed.

When we looked at that, together with the fact that we were expending such large sums to only service 2 per cent of our beneficiaries, it was decided that: listen, in terms of ensuring that persons got the necessary support, we could look at an alternative way of providing it. And we looked, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the cheque system. Now, some persons may feel that is a retrograde step. But it was not considered a retrograde step for the 5,548 persons who had been approved for food support between 2014 and 2016, and had not received that food support

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because the Members on the other side who were there and the sitting Government decided that they will place it on hold until they could come up with a new debit card. Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us for a minute think of 5,548 families hungry and in need of food support and being denied it simply because the Members on the other side then did not take a decision to use an alternative form of providing that support.

But Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government, the paramount concern for us, is taking care of our poor and vulnerable. So we took the decision to pay by cheque and thus far, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have been able to bring on 3,700-plus of those 5,000 people on to the system and I am very happy to say that as at September 2016, they have been and continue to receive that much needed food support.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want also to look at the whole issue of the Poverty Reduction Unit. Now the Members on the other side sought to make a link between the discontinuation of the two poverty units in the Ministry and what was taking place with the decision to remove \$86 million from the food support programme.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was no direct link between the food support programme and the Poverty Reduction Unit. The Poverty Reduction Units were established by Cabinet in 2013 for a period of three years. And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in December 2016, those programmes, the approval for those programmes came to an end. Now, with any responsible management, the executive of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services conducted a review of the operations of those two poverty units with a view to making a decision as to whether we would go back to Cabinet and seek an extension of the units, or if we were going to make another recommendation.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must say that review revealed a very scandalous situation. The main objective of those units, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was to develop and manage a national poverty reduction strategy for Trinidad and Tobago. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, after being there for three years, we do not even have a draft policy on poverty reduction.

They were also supposed to ensure that there is current information and data available on poverty at the national, the municipal and the community levels. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is an absence of such data. They were also responsible for implementing poverty surveys. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am at pains to indicate that these units, I believe, did not properly involve themselves in the preparation for

and the conduct of the SLC 2014. And that is one of the major reasons why it is still before F&GP, because there are flaws within the methodology used in the conduct of those surveys. So Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we looked at all of that in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, we could not, in good conscience, have gone forward to the Cabinet and recommend the continuation of those programmes.

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, what happened is that the programmes came to a natural end and they were not renewed. What we have done in the Ministry, however, is that we have put systems in place and we have put persons in place to ensure that the main duties that the persons in that unit were carrying out while they were there continue. And one of those happen to be the SEED programme.

Now this is a programme that provides grants to persons who, our poor and vulnerable, have an ambition. They may have the skill. They may have the knowledge that they can have a business of their own. So it is to encourage that entrepreneurial spirit and, at the end of it, the intention and the hope is that they can be brought out of their situation and become self-sufficient, be empowered to be able to be responsible to financially provide for themselves.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to inform this House and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continue to receive and process all applications for the SEED grant and we will continue to do so and we will make the necessary awards, given the financial resources.

But I want to point out here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because, you see, it is easy for the Members on the other side to come into the Parliament and give the impression that they are so concerned about the SEED grant. Because with the units not being there, persons cannot access these grants. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to let you, this House and the population of Trinidad and Tobago know that when you look at our records, there are persons who have been approved since 2013, 2014, 2015 and the most astonishing figures are for 2015, the year of the general election.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have estimated that if we are to make all those payments, it is going to cost us approximately \$12 million, and I want to let this House know, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and that is taking it on to 2017, where we are now—just 2015, the total sum that will have to be expended is nine point something million dollars, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I believe those figures speak for themselves, because when you look at the trend, we never had a situation where

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we had that many applications. In addition to which our data does not suggest that we have so many poor and indigent persons who are desirous of getting into business. So we have to ask ourselves the question: What was the intention behind all of those approvals in 2015? Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say to you, I asked for the data and I looked at it and there was huge upsurge between June, July, August.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a responsible Government and a responsible Minister and Ministry, we have decided that we are not just going to make those payments. So what we are doing, as part of our review process, we are making contact with all persons for whom there is approval 2013, 2014, 2015 and we are calling them in and doing a reassessment. Because we need to determine first: Are these people still alive? Do they exist? Do they have a business that they really want to carry forward? So that, at the end of the day when we grant an approval it would really be in keeping with the policies of the Ministry and in keeping with the policy of the Government, which is to take people out of poverty, empower them and help them to become sustainable, not as an election ploy, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Members on the other side like to speak in terms of we do not have a plan. But we at the Ministry of Social Development, we have a plan. We have a number of plans for different things. And in terms of the whole issue of the poverty units, we are approaching it in a holistic manner. So we have gotten the opportunity, because of this review, to say: listen, the TCCTP is also a mechanism to help eliminate poverty. So going forward, we are not going to have a separate TCCTP unit and then you have a separate poverty unit. What we are going to do is put poverty reduction and eradication under one umbrella and all of the different programmes that seek to address poverty, we are going to have that under one division, under one unit, so that there will be a more holistic approach to poverty reduction in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we expect that at the end of that exercise, we will in fact see some reduction in poverty in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to touch a little bit back on the food support programme. Now, the food support programme really has two components: the food card, which is providing the food support and there is a developmental aspect to the programme, and that has to do with, we call it the "RISE UP" and this means Rights of Individuals to Social and Economic Security and Universal Prosperity. And the objective, under the conditional aspect of this programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that a social worker was supposed to have worked directly

with the families who were provided with food support. So that that social worker could have assisted them to be empowered and move out of the situation. But, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, after, what, over six years or so, this aspect of the programme has never been fully implemented. And so the achievements that should have been realized, after expending these large sums of money, have not been realized.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have started to introduce this RISE UP on a phased basis, because what we are going to do is have it like a pilot and based on the results of that we will then be in a better position to make a decision as to whether we will have it across the board or a different approach that we are going to use to ensure that, at the end of the day, persons in receipt of the food card are in fact empowered and can come out of that situation that they find themselves in, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe it is very, very, very important for us to understand that we cannot approach poverty by just throwing money or throwing financial support at persons. We have to help equip them and empower them so that they can come out of that situation and then become sustainable.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like also now to speak in terms of the fact that, while the Ministry is primarily responsible for the protection and the enhancement of the social welfare parameters in Trinidad and Tobago, we cannot achieve that most noble objective by ourselves. In addition to which, in keeping with Government's policy on the incorporation of civil society into the provision of social services to the indigent and poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry continues to partner with a number of NGOs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, during the period that we are looking at, we have been partnering with 32 NGOs, five of them are NGOs that treat with the youth in Trinidad and Tobago, three are statutory boards, the Blind Welfare Association for the visually impaired and the Lady Hochoy Home. And thus far we have expended \$20.4 million in assisting these NGOs, so they can also assist the Ministry and the Government in providing valuable services to our poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago. And a total of \$47.6 million has been approved for that, and we expect that that is going to be fully utilized.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago and for all of us, the issue of the homeless and the socially displaced continues to be a burning issue. After Government after Government would have expended large sums of money, we have not been able to successfully address the situation of the homeless and the socially displaced in our society.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, excuse. Your time has expired. You have an additional 15. You care to avail yourself?

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Thank you, yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Mr. Deputy Speaker, working together with the St. Vincent de Paul, we are presently able to accommodate over 100 persons at the Riverside Plaza and these are persons who would otherwise be living on the streets, on the pavement or in open spaces and now they are at least provided with a clean environment. Now, a survey we would have conducted earlier this year, the results of that survey was that there are approximately 300 persons living on the streets in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And so the issue of the socially displaced continues to be a challenge.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to let the House and the population of Trinidad and Tobago know that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, recognizing that a number of key stakeholders must be involved if we are to be successful in treating with the issue, convened a meeting. That meeting was attended by the Minister of National Security, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Rural and Local Government, the Mayor of Port of Spain, the Mayor of San Fernando, the Mayor of Point Fortin, the Mayor of Arima—unfortunately, the Mayor of Chaguanas did not accept our invitation—and all of the respective Permanent Secretaries. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we also met with the President of the Downtown Owners Association, the President of the San Juan Business Association and representatives of the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association. And at the end of all of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we agreed that for the interventions to work it must work in tandem, in order for us to achieve an effective and sustained system of engagement, treatment, care, rehabilitation and reintegration of the homeless.

So we formed a multi-disciplinary working committee. This was established in February of 2017, and their mandate is to examine the current situation, as it relates to the homeless, and identify ways and means of achieving the required collaboration and coordination among key stakeholders and the eventual removal of homeless persons from the streets.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a draft report has been completed, and one of the recommendations in that report is a continuum of care for street dwellers that

entails a proper functioning network of programmes and services. This continuum of care will include, Mr. Deputy Speaker, street outreach, in-depth assessment, shelter with service, transitional housing, and support that emphasizes intense case management.

We are also going to improve our data collection. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we expect that we will make a lot of headway with this by 2018. So I am saying to the Members of this House and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, that we can expect an improvement in the situation with our homeless and socially displaced by the end of 2018, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has also commenced the process of ensuring that persons with disabilities can access the Ministry's offices. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to recognize that each and every one of us sitting in this Chamber this evening, we are all one incident away from being a person with a disability, and so we need to be concerned about our 52,444 persons who live with a disability. And so the Ministry continues its effort to create a more inclusive society and ensure that there are equal opportunities through an empowered life for persons with disabilities. And to this end, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have finalized the Draft National Policy on Persons with Disability and that is going to be out for public consultation by next month.

We have also identified the key requirements and worked out the plans and timelines for meeting the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities. This is very important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because Trinidad and Tobago is required to report in July of this year. Now, what we have done, recognizing our economic situation, we know that we will not be able to implement a number of the requirements. So what we have done is that we have done up a work plan, inclusive of timelines and this will ensure that Trinidad and Tobago is able to show that while we may be unable to meet all the requirements, due primarily to our economic constraints, we have taken and will continue to take action towards a projected end date, and that is what we have been advised by the United Nations Development Programme is a key requirement, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the one unfortunate thing in this whole scenario is that I stood in this very Parliament and I had promised that we were going to try to implement the National Enrichment Centre by the middle of this year. Unfortunately, because there are inherent structural defects in the building, we have not been able to get the necessary statutory approvals, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So what we are in the process of doing, we have brought UWI on board. They are

going to conduct a structural assessment, and based on the recommendations they put forward, we are going to have those implemented as soon as possible, so that we can have that centre operationalized.

But we have not sat quietly and not done anything, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have corrected the problems with the sewer system and we now have a proper functioning sewer system. We have done some work on the pool. We are looking at the air conditioning system and we are also in the process of tendering to have somebody on board to manage the centre. So that as soon as we get the necessary go ahead and we are told that: "Listen, these are the structural problems, you can have them corrected", and that centre can be operationalized and the persons with disability in this society who need to have assessments done and to have therapy and rehabilitative action, will be able to access it.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I close, I want to indicate here this evening that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will continue to ensure that we provide that safety net that is critical to the poor and indigent and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago. We will continue to ensure that every month, on time, we are going to effect payments of the senior citizens pension, the disability grant and the public assistance grant.

We are also going to continue to work with the NGOs to ensure that our poor and vulnerable are provided with the necessary services that they require. And at the end of the day, I also wish to assure this House that, based on our projections, the maximum number of persons we expect to come on to the food card system by the end of this year is 1,200 and the funds that the Minister of Finance has provided, despite the reallocation of the \$89 million, is more than adequate to service the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.
[Desk thumping]

7.30 p.m.

Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was a "lil" bit taken aback and you have to forgive me for being a little bit perturbed that the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West indicated that she does not understand what it is we have been saying on this side that the public has lost confidence. The thing about it is that maybe the Member, as well as the Members of the Government, they have lost contact with the population, and hence the reason why the Prime Minister had to discontinue his consultations, because he has certainly lost contact with the population.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think it is necessary for me to correct some of the things that are being put out there on behalf of the Government. And, you know, while the most vulnerable populace struggle to cope just to survive, the core social sector of the Ministry continues to deny applicants of assistance. I know that the Member had indicated that the Ministry was there to ensure that the poor and the indigent have nutritious meals, yet the Ministry has reverted to a system call Direct Deposit which means, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that when moneys go directly into one's account, that person can now take that money and, in fact, purchase different aspects of anything outside other than food. A person can certainly purchase cigarettes, they can purchase alcohol and they can purchase anything as opposed to the system that we had proposed to implement which was the biometric card.

Before I go further, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to indicate and have it on *Hansard* that the whole issue of the biometric card was in fact brought by the former PNM Prime Minister, that is Mr. Patrick Manning. Mr. Patrick Manning, under his tenure, his administration, was the one who had seen the foresight in bringing this biometric card which was in fact a brainchild of our political leader and former Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar. And so what this biometric card was supposed to do was to provide a system that would have put in place a holistic management system. In other words, someone would come off of the street, they would be assessed and they would be determined to be one who requires assistance. But the whole purpose—and I know that the population had been crying out about the system being abused and the corruption in the system and, therefore, the biometric system would have eliminated a significant portion of the abuse and the corruption.

What this biometric card would have allowed is that it is a fingerprint, and with a fingerprint you would have been able to determine that you are in fact the recipient of a grant, but not that you will remain on the system. You would be taken through a whole process—a management system—where you would have been brought on board, you would have been educated, we would have used the same SEED to be able to provide, to empower the persons to become entrepreneurs. It would have also allowed you to be weaned off of the system wherever you can be weaned off, because, obviously, there are persons that you will encounter who will not be able to come off of the system.

But, more importantly, what this would have done—and many persons out there would be able to attest to this—social workers, when you go in and you meet with a social worker, you work with that social worker throughout your

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period of time. If the social worker is not there, if the social worker is ill, if the social worker goes on vacation, your file remains unattended until the social worker comes back. That, in many ways, hindered a number of vulnerable and indigent persons from receiving help.

More so, if something had happened to someone who was living in one area—and I am going to call my area, for example. Assuming that they were living in Sangre Grande and so they receive their assistance and the social worker, they visited in Sangre Grande, but because of an illness they have to relocate probably where their daughter lives, and say they have to go to Chaguanas, it meant therefore that your file would have to be transferred physically to Chaguanas, and until that file was in fact transferred, you did not get any assistance. It would automatically stop until all the necessary checks and balances are done, a site visit is done. And, therefore, oftentimes, persons would find out that their file has not gone, their file was lost and they have to reapply. And so, the biometric system would have eliminated that inefficiency in the system. And so, I just wanted to clarify the importance of this system.

It was a management system which this Government, unfortunately, did not see the value in it. They did not see the value that when you are dispensing public State funds that you must have a form of tracking and evaluating, and you must be able to measure whether you are getting value for money, whether there is a reduction in poverty and this was a form of data collection as well.

So now they have removed every form of data collection, you have removed the poverty reduction programme with a unit that collected data, and so you have removed that. So the Government cannot come and give us an accurate data information stating well, this is how many persons came into the system; these are how many persons who in fact have their issues alleviated; and these are how many people who have moved on and have become entrepreneurs. We cannot say that. And, therefore, it is important for the Government to understand that a number of times they cannot give us responses as to how much—the data in any of the Ministries. So far what we have been hearing is that they have gotten rid of all the research departments or they have reduced it. So, therefore, pretty soon, this country will not be able to report accurate information, whether it is to the UNDP or any of the agencies that we have to work closely with.

Further to that, the hon. Minister had indicated that a number of grants were approved in alignment with their policies. But I am asking: What is the policy? Because I listened to the Member, and from beginning to end she spoke about different things that are being done, but everything was under review. So, so far,

they have not devised a policy for any of the programmes and a way forward for the Ministry and, therefore, it is a matter of still in discussions. They are still discussing with NGOs.

A Member came in today and said, you know, we have one umbrella, but the staff—one umbrella for all the agencies to work under, all the staff, so that you would not have a separation. But how are they working when they have reduced staff significantly? How can the exercises be conducted when there is no one to go outside? There are no field officers. So it seems to me on this side that the whole policy system that is being implemented on that side is very much like the poverty tax—I mean, sorry, the property tax. There is no thought into what is to be done, how it is to be done, when it is to be done and who has to conduct it.

And so, the talk shops that I am hearing about with the meeting with NGOs and so forth, I mean that is great, but the NGOs already have the answers. So there is no need to have all these talk shops and to go through all the country, going on this education drive when, in fact, you need to have your policies in place and your programmes up and functioning and the people in place to ensure that when the recipients come they have their immediate attention. So, at the end of day, I do not think that the Government really understands what they have to do.

Then, of course, the Minister spoke about the socially displaced and being challenged now. If you are challenged now—after 18 months still being challenged—what happens with the job losses that have taken place over the last 18 months? We are going to have more socially displaced persons and yet we do not—the Government—we had the answers, because we visited and did an assessment of the Chapman Facility that is successful in Miami. They have been able to successfully remove the street dwellers and to effectively transition them from the streets into facilities where they are retrained, re-groomed and everything, and they are back out in society. If you go into Miami at all, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will see that there are no street dwellers there, because they have put things in place, both Government and NGO partnering together. And so these policies and these documents are right in the Ministry. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. It is right there. And so, it is perhaps important for the Minister to ask where these proposals are. And, of course, the Minister spoke about forming a multi-disciplinary committee, but what has happened? Nothing, again, except suggestions for more programmes.

The Minister spoke of a more inclusive society, but yet—and this inclusive society speaks of the persons who are disabled but, interestingly enough, guess what they stopped? The first thing that they stopped, assistance to mothers with

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children who have cerebral palsy. It stopped. And we talk about inclusivity and, therefore, there is something wrong. There is a definite disconnect between what is being said and what is being done, and this is my concern here, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I just want to explain to the hon. Minister when she indicated that she came and made a promise about the National Enrichment Centre, and that promise had not been able to be materialized. I just want to say we understand on this side why, because “P-N-M” means “promises never materialized”. So that is okay. [*Desk thumping*] We understand that. When we come back into Government we shall surely put it in place, and we will put things in place to ensure that there is, in fact, true inclusivity for all persons.

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was listening to the Member for Arima and the Member for Arima had spoken about this new history book coming out. I was a “lil” bit taken aback again, because I do not understand when the hon. Minister said that we want to rewrite the history, how can you rewrite history? You have to live in a place to rewrite history. But I think that the PNM Government has conveniently overlooked the facts, such as—and he speaks about—the Member spoke about not saving money and not putting money away and we spent it lavishly. I just want to put on record that historically it was under Basdeo Panday that this nation today has the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund [*Desk thumping*] and that was to save for a rainy day.

All the time we had money flowing like rain since oil and gas was discovered, and not one day the Government of the day—after, how much? —thirty-something years, never thought about putting aside moneys. [*Crosstalk*] It was under Basdeo Panday that we were able to save money and that is why the Government never touched it until this Government came in and decided that hear what, it was a rainy day.

Dr. Gopeesingh: They raid the Treasury.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, please.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And so, it is important for us to understand that all over the blogs—coming back to the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air—all over the newspapers, you have headlines that read that this Government is punishing pensioners. Not only is this statement accurate, it is extremely frightening. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in my constituency, a world report came out and that world report stated that in my area I have the poorest, the poorest constituency of the whole country, my own. Mr. Deputy

Speaker, just yesterday, I was passing in my constituency. My glass is always down when I am in my constituency, and so anybody who wants to see me when they are on the side of the street, they will yell out and I will stop and talk with them. One lady came and she was shaking. She was literally shaking. She said: “MP, they take away my food card.” They took away her food card this year. [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, silence, please.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Her husband is incapacitated and she had his food card, and so she assisted herself and her husband. She lost her food card and this is just one of many stories, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister indicates that they have put 5,000 persons onto the system. You know my question is okay and how many did you remove? How many did you remove between the 8th of September, 2015, to now? It certainly will be far more than the 5,000.

You see the 13,000 that the hon. Minister was speaking about, I just want to remind the hon. Minister that when we brought on the biometric card, that we were able to remove at the time of the implementation of that programme, we in fact removed 5,000 persons and those were persons who we found to have abused the system or had obtained the card in an illegal manner. I am not against the system being put in place to remove the abuse. What I am against is that the persons who had their food card stopped did not receive a call. They never received a call; they never received a letter; and they never received a visit.

I remember standing in this honourable House, and asking the methodology in which the applicants or the card holders receive that information. And, therefore, it is important to revisit, particularly when you have employees being removed out of the system, their contracts being terminated, and you have very little persons to in fact conduct the whole exercise. It brings really a grave question as to what and who are conducting these exercises?

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are so many attempts to shut us down in the debate in this august House. It almost appears that this Government is afraid of accountability and that accountability is certainly not on their agenda. We sit down here on this side and we listen to all that the Government has to say, but you know when it comes to a rebuttal, there is always the Standing Order 48(6), 48(1) and sometimes they do not even know the Standing Order. But the thing about it—[Crosstalk]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We do not need the procedural statement today. Go ahead, Member.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And so it is important for us to understand that our function here on this side as the Opposition Members is to ensure that good legislation is brought to the House and passed. We are here to ensure that there is accountability and, therefore, the other side should not be afraid when we bring forth questions and when we ask questions because, at the end of the day, the population, they are the ones that are holding us accountable and they are the ones that are asking us the questions. When we come in here it is on their behalf we represent.

I could not help but go back into the budget—I went through the books—and I saw there was a reduction in the truck borne water to the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation. It was reduced by \$200,000. I remember asking the Minister of Finance: Why are you reducing the allocation for truck borne water? The answer given was that if moneys are required, moneys would have been forthcoming.

But, you know, for the entire year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the entire country, not just my constituency, but the entire country, has been clamouring for water. There is a crisis for water. I am going to say this. When I call WASA, they are very apologetic, they are very kind. I have no problems with any of the persons that I speak with in the public utilities sector. But when I have been calling for the past two weeks for areas of my constituency like Tamana, and St. Marie Emmanuel and Little Cora, Cumuto and Manzanilla—I mean, literally all over—and I called and I asked for truck borne water, I have been told that we have two trucks and they are out on the road. We are dealing with the Sangre Grande Corporation, so you are dealing not with just Cumuto/Manzanilla, you are dealing with Cumuto/Manzanilla and Toco/Sangre Grande. It is a huge area. It is wide. I cannot imagine sending out two trucks to provide constituents who have been without water, some of them for weeks.

I was delivering some packages for SEA students, and while I was out, a guy flagged me down and he says: “Madam MP, if I do not get water today, it would be the fifth day my madam has not wash her clothes and I would not be able to go to work tomorrow,” and he was emphatic about it. When we came here and we asked the Minister of Public Utilities: Minister, what is happening? Are there any problems with water? The Minister said: Well, he does not know anything about that. There is a serious disconnect. The disconnect is so deep, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the hon. Minister does not even know about the Massy sales. It is so

deep and it is worse than that. All the Ministers say they do not know anything about it and there is not anything in Cabinet, and the Prime Minister comes here and says that was discussed and the Cabinet knows. So it is like who is really running this country? Is it a one-man show? So it really blows my mind that this Government continues to plead the fifth amendment. [*Crosstalk*] I do not know. [*Crosstalk*] So, it is important for us to understand that.

I looked again to see what would come for agriculture, if there will be allocations for access roads, because my constituency is predominantly agriculture and, therefore, I have farmers crying out for proper access roads, for water, for electricity and for a proper praedial larceny squad. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was reading—and then the hon. Minister said it today—that you had a reduction in food; there was a decrease by a billion dollars in food imports, as though, you know, that was voluntary, that was the plan of the Government that: “Hey, we are going to reduce the importation of food”, because, you know, hear what: “Bow, we growing our own food”, but that was not the case. The case of it was that there was a lack of foreign exchange. [*Desk thumping*] If you do not have foreign exchange, you cannot buy food.

I have gone into the groceries and the shelves are sparse. I have seen it. And, therefore, besides that two notices came out: one was from PriceSmart stating that they will not be stocking their shelves as before and then you had a statement by Massy who indicated that they will have an increase in cost for their goods, because of a lack of foreign exchange and then, of course, you have Tobago. [*Crosstalk*] The hon. Member for Arouca/Maloney indicated where, what grocery. You have Tobago complaining. [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Where?

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: We have pictures—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, silence please.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:—of a slow boat travelling to Tobago—15 hours with salt, salted vehicles, reaching Tobago 15 hours later and, therefore, it means that Tobago will now suffer. I mean, I am so sorry to say that. Tobago has always been the bastard child since the days of Dr. Eric Williams. Since the days that ANR Robinson decided that he was going to make a stance, Tobago has been a bastard child until the PP Government, when we decided Tobago was going to be treated equally. [*Desk thumping*] But we are back to square one, because of the fact of—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Gross incompetence.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Agreed. And so, Tobago suffers again. So, Tobago would not have food on their shelves; Tobago would not have the necessary supplies and services because of this—if you need to have it carried on this cargo boat. One trip a week.

I remember long ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker—you may remember this—as a child going on the plane to Tobago and it used to have chickens and all kinds of things. They used to say that is a market on the plane. I do not know if you remember those days.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Do not bring me into the debate. [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: I travelled on the plane and I was—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. [*Crosstalk*] There is a procedure if it is you object to anything, Members, and you all know the procedure. Proceed and please do not bring me into the debate.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: I would not again, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Crosstalk*] But I remember as a child this height. This is what I am saying, that for years and years and years, Tobago was treated like that. I think I am much older than the Member. I think because I am older than you, I know what I have experienced. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Tobago continues to suffer and we never denied Tobago their funding. As a matter of fact, for 50,000 persons, Tobago gets a budget that can certainly provide very well for them, but they depend on central Government for key services still, hence the reason that we have this problem.

I listened to the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Finance indicated there was a shortfall of the collection of VAT. I was wondering well, okay, well if businesses were folding up: “da”, I think you will get a shortfall of VAT as well [*Desk thumping*] but that was not the case. The Minister of Finance went all over the place and I thought that it is certainly—he, in fact, in a way refuted his own statement, because he said that employment was not really up as much as we had stated on this side, that it was only 25,000 up from 21,000 from 2015. And so, if it is so—[*Crosstalk*], certainly it is an admission of failure—would the Minister in fact do a correlation study to see if the shortfall of the collection of VAT is in direct relation to businesses folding up and, therefore, if it is that businesses are folding up and you are unable—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, your 30 minutes have expired. Do you care to avail yourself of the additional 15?

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member?

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

8.00p.m.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] So I am asking the question, if there is a correlation between the number of businesses folding up and an inability to collect VAT, then one must be able to put the same correlation to property tax. If persons are losing their jobs they would not be able to pay property tax. [*Desk thumping*] Therefore, it is incumbent on the Minister of Finance to rethink—I am saying with all honesty, persons are not against paying taxes, but this convoluted system that not even the Government understands cannot work. It cannot work and it will not work. You know, and then, of course, the hon. Minister indicated that there was a delay in paying to contractors due to a verification process, and I said, well, perhaps, you know, some contractors are not lucky enough to have an advisor walk in and get their cheques out for them. [*Desk thumping*] So I do not know, I just think that the system that the Minister speaks about is probably—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: It smells rotten.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: According to my Member, it smells rotten, and therefore it should be—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, retract that, please.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: It does not smell rotten. [*Laughter*]

It is very concerning because persons need to have their moneys paid, because if we do not we will have more persons out on the line. It is very, very concerning because the Minister for Social Development and Family Services, it will impact her Ministry even more because of the fact that there would be persons who are crying out for need and for help. As I indicated in a prior budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that a number of persons would not be able to cope with this level of disruption in their lives and may commit suicide and, you know, they might have a mental health issue. I mean, the studies are there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because Trinidad and Tobago for the first time have been going through a recession, but

recessions have happened in other parts of the world, and they were able to show, produce studies where there was a correlation between losses, whether it was employment, homes, marriages, whatever it is, and an increase in mental health—an increase in mental health, as well as suicide.

Then, of course, the Minister spoke about field assessors, and field assessor supervisors, and I want to know, what are the job descriptions for these field assessors? What are the requisite job description and the experience? Will the successful applicant be required to submit a police certificate of character?—because these people are coming into your home, if they need to, according to the Minister. So these are concerns that I have. Before my time ends, I just want to bring back a point to the Minister of Education. Minister of Education, during the budget the last time I asked about a specific school. I asked about the Manzanilla/Nariva who did not receive any furniture, and I was advised that the furniture was already delivered. A week and a half ago when I was delivering my pencils I asked to see the furniture and the principal could not show me. He said, well, we got one table, and that was just before I came, a week before I came. Therefore, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is a hallowed place, and I think when information is being put forward, it must be accurate, you know. [*Desk thumping*] I am asking for the accuracy of information that comes in here.

Further to that, Sangre Chiquito Presbyterian School has been decommissioned because the school has been deemed unsafe, and that was in January. To date, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the infant classes are at home. The SEA students had to do their classes in the church which had no washrooms, and I went and I visited myself. They had to go to the same school that was shut down to be able to use the washrooms, and the rest of the classes were placed at Grosvenor Presbyterian. I brought this to the attention, in January, of the hon. Minister and yet when I sat here and I asked the Minister about it during the Standing Finance Committee stage, the Minister stated that he knew nothing about it. And again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, these are hallowed—it is a hallowed House. It is a House that we need to not treat each other with any sort of disregard and disrespect, you know. We are here to represent our constituents, and if we do not do that, then we would have failed in our duties. Because had we been on that side and they on this side, we would have been obligated to ensure that the requests that came before us would have been dealt with, with the same passion and the same desire to ensure, because we are dealing with lives, and lives matter. It is—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, Members, the decorum is still silence when a Member is speaking. Proceed.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you. And so, you know, as I conclude, I just want to indicate that history is not based on who lives where, it is based on facts, it is based on truth and, therefore, when we are speaking about history we have to ensure that the necessary departments and the necessary processes are in place to ensure that that integrity, the information is protected, the integrity of the information, the data is protected.

So, I just want to indicate to the Minister of Education that I do not know what is in this history book but it concerns me, because if I have to judge, with all honesty, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what happens in here, I do not know what is in that book. I do not know if we can honestly hold to the truths that may be in that book, and that book would be going out to our young children who will grow up learning something that perhaps may be inaccurate. Therefore, I would have thought that the Minister would have had a better system in place, whether it is through a proper committee and a vetting committee, to ensure that the information in there is in fact correct.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

So I want to encourage the Government to understand that we know that promises never materialize, we understand that, but we are here on this side to help you. We are on this side to give you guidance and to help you understand if you do not understand how it is done, because, you see, we did it for five years. We were able to get things done. [*Desk thumping*] We were able to be effective and to produce results, and to deliver. That was our mandate, to deliver and to honour our commitment. So we want to be able to continue that commitment, Madam Speaker. We want to be able to hold fast to those principles and those truths. We want to be able to speak, and to be able to contribute meaningfully, and not have the Members continually stand and claim, you know, all sorts of Standing Orders just to shut us down. You must be able to receive meaningful advice and criticism, and advice. Failure to do so means that you will continue in life going in any way that you want to go.

With those few words, Madam Speaker, I just want to thank you, and I hope that the disconnect that continues to be prevalent within the Cabinet that it would be rectified as soon as possible so that there can be good governance in our country once again. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs.

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and the Minister in the Ministry of National Security (Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses): Many thanks, many thanks, Madam Speaker. I am truly honoured to have been granted this opportunity to give account, through you, Madam Speaker, of my stewardship as the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and Minister in the Ministry of National Security over the last six months. [*Desk thumping*] Mine has been one of satisfaction under trying circumstances, buttressed as I am by staff members at the Ministries and under the guidance of our esteemed Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs endeavours to deliver quality service to its partners and stakeholders, and to maintain its focus on achieving results in accordance with the action plan as articulated in the official policy framework and the National Development Strategy, 2016—2030, which was recently laid in this House. To this end, the Ministry engages on a consistent basis with stakeholders at home and in the region, and internationally, thereby acting as a protagonist through which the national interest and national development of Trinidad and Tobago are achieved.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs is in the process of being reformed, its human resources nurtured and guided to allow for even more or higher levels of performance. While not totally dire, we are consistently called upon to be innovative in meeting our human resource needs. In an inclusive way, Madam Speaker, staff members of the Ministry continue to be rotated amongst our overseas missions and the Ministry. Transparency, equity, and the requirements of the work portfolios continue to feature in our postings at the different missions abroad.

We have reinstated guidelines and checks and balances to safeguard the public purse and ensure propriety. At the level of missions, one of our missions, the one that was located in Uganda, it has been closed. It was determined that the resources could be better employed elsewhere as we seek to maximize the benefits that accrue to our country, especially in these stringent times. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs continues to do the required preparatory work to implement Cabinet's decision to open diplomatic missions in Barbados, as well as the United Arab Emirates. This decision is grounded in the official policy of our Government and in furtherance of safeguarding our national interest.

Relative to our region, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs has worked assiduously so at bilateral, as well as multilateral fora to re-establish that close and fraternal bond between and amongst Caricom member countries. Accordingly, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana agreed recently to resuscitate a framework agreement to deepen bilateral cooperation between both countries. Currently, under this agreement, we are treating with a MoU, or rather, a memorandum of understanding, in the energy sector with Guyana. We have the intention of reaching agreements on other memoranda of understanding in other areas, such as agriculture.

Madam Speaker, during the early part of last year there were calls from the Manufacturers' Association of Guyana, or rather Jamaica, and further afield for reprisals against Trinidad and Tobago in response to claims of targeting the nationals of Jamaica by denying them entry into Trinidad and Tobago. Calls for the boycott of Trinidad and Tobago's export to Jamaica were in the air. The approach and concerted efforts of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago that is, allowed perceived threats to subside. Further, undertakings given, such as the outfitting of facilities at Piarco International Airport, to allow for the proper treatment of passengers refused entry into our country, contributed to re-establishing our good relations.

The official visit by the hon. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago to Jamaica last year was critical in the rapprochement and resulted in a consolidation of the close ties between both countries. The change in the nature of the relationship is such that the Foreign Minister of Jamaica has recently been cited in the Jamaican media as making reference to the significant declines in refusals relative to the entry of nationals of Jamaica into Trinidad and Tobago. [Interruption]

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, just a point of order, 48(1), I just need some clarification, please.

Madam Speaker: Member, I would give you a little leeway, but remember what we are debating is the adoption of the report of the Standing Finance Committee, so I would give you a little leeway to set your context but you would have to tie that into the report, please.

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: Okay. I take it we are debating the Finance (Variation of Appropriation) Bill, 2017.

Hon. Member: We are doing the report first. [Crosstalk]

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: The report, okay.

Madam Speaker: Members, just be reminded that there is a particular way for Members who are not speaking to make an interjection. Okay? Thank you.

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Through the leadership—I continue—of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the CSME has been brought to the fore within the fold of Caricom. The attempts to revitalize the regional integration movement have given renewed hope in the region. The hon. Prime Minister has been championing, also, causes such as correspondent banking and citizenship by investment programmes in Caricom Member States. These areas have a direct bearing on domestic issues and the implementation of domestic policies here in Trinidad and Tobago. Our country is once more viewed as a leader in the region, thereby regaining its position and countering the negative effects or, rather, image our country had attracted in the recent past. The contribution of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs has been critical in achieving this changed situation.

Madam Speaker, the need for the variation is linked to the ongoing evolution and change in our local fortune and, as such, is linked to the policies that this responsible Government has been assiduously trying to put in place over the last 18 months. Therefore, I would continue to tie it into the performance of one of our Ministries and the Executive as we seek to treat with the changed situation in which we find ourselves. Madam Speaker, we have been actively engaged in advancing our interest in specific areas in accordance with the requirements of our local economy, given the change in our circumstances. And the Prime Minister of our country would have made official visits to Ghana and Venezuela in search of opportunities in the energy sector, in trade, in seeking markets and joint ventures. Upcoming visits of the Prime Minister in this regard, to treat with the current situation in our country, involves visits to Cuba and Chile, which hold enormous promise in safeguarding our markets for our exports, including LNG in joint areas, inclusive of tourism, energy and foreign investment.

The Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs continues to cultivate relationship with countries in such a way that Trinidad and Tobago is seen as a viable site, a credible country to do business with, guided by principles such as good governance, democracy, and non-interference in the internal affairs of countries. Madam Speaker, with respect to the visit to Venezuela by the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, a natural gas supply project, an agreement was signed allowing for access to much needed gas supplies. We look forward to the

implementation of this agreement, as well as looking forward to the facilitation of exploitation of three cross-border gas fields. Madam Speaker, with regard to the upcoming visit to Chile by the Prime Minister, we are undertaking this visit cognizant of the realities of our exports to that country of natural gas. We are Chile's largest supplier of natural gas, with 92 per cent of Chile's natural gas being met from Trinidad and Tobago. We are also a major supplier of ammonia and methanol to that market.

Our visit there is predicated on safeguarding our market share, in seeking new markets, in cooperating with the country in different areas, inclusive of alternative natural renewable sources of energy. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs continues to work in tandem with the Office of the Prime Minister and the Embassy of Chile in respect to the organization of this visit. Another visit in search of markets, in search of joint action, activities relative to the energy sector, tourism, culture, involves the visit to Cuba, which is scheduled to take place towards the end of June and the beginning of July. We share a long rich history of commonality in many areas and cooperation, and in keeping with established practice the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs would also prepare for this visit, which hold great promise.

We also make reference to the visit to Ghana, which took place about a year ago and ongoing joint actions which would have flowed from such a visit. The most recent being a visit which is under way being hosted by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. I would turn now to the opening of new embassies in countries, inclusive of the United Arab Emirates and Barbados as we continue our search, our quest for new markets, for new possibilities in the face of our chastened circumstances brought about by changes in the prices of the main export commodities which we have been exporting, and the performance of recent administration. Madam Speaker, since the Government, this Government came into office in September past, we have laid particular emphasis on the Caricom region. We have brought to the fore, as I said before, placed on the front burner, the CSME, Caricom Single Market and Economy.

We have revitalized our relationship, as I said, with our sister Caricom member countries, and we now have a working agreement that could lead to many other possibilities within the fold of Caricom. Madam Speaker, I continue now with other areas relative to the Caricom integration movement, the Caricom Development Fund, which Trinidad and Tobago has been an active participant, contributing the lion's share of that fund, so as to be involved in the redistribution inherit in successful integration movements. The very nature of integration

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movements, inclusive of Caricom, dare I say, especially in Caricom where the differences in the scales of economy and nature of the economies are such that some countries naturally benefit more from others, necessitate the operationalization of such a fund. With regard to other efforts in the region, Trinidad and Tobago has successfully canvassed a candidate with regard to the University of the West Indies, and we would have been successful in that endeavour with the assistance of our Caricom member countries.

Madam Speaker, allow me now to focus a little bit on our missions abroad once more as we seek to ensure that the gains that we foresee in cooperating in the international community are such that we can be assisted in treating with the dire straits in which we find ourselves locally. Recently, in the last two months two heads of missions would have been appointed. The High Commissioner designate to the United Kingdom is due to assume duties in London next week, while the new Ambassador of Trinidad and Tobago to Costa Rica would have presented letters of credence to the President of that country towards the end of last month. Dare I say, both individuals bring to their new positions a wealth of experience in the service of Trinidad and Tobago, which would advance once more as we always strive to do, to improve the interest and safeguard the interest, as well, as they are properly seized of Government's economic and social objectives, and have a comprehensive and sound understanding of the needs of the country. That is, the two persons who would have been appointed as, in one case, the High Commissioner to London, and the other as an Ambassador to Costa Rica.

Madam Speaker, I am also pleased to report that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has, in the recent past, agreed to the appointment of a consul, Public Affairs and Culture, at Trinidad and Tobago's Consul General in New York, and an attaché to perform in a similar capacity at the embassy of Trinidad and Tobago in Washington. [*Crosstalk*] Once again, these two individuals have a sound understanding of the needs of the country, and we look forward to safeguarding the interest of the country and attracting foreign investment, not to mention joint areas of cooperation in energy matters and culture matters, as well as trade.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry is involved in a number of areas, institutional strengthening of the Ministry, since the human resources component of the Ministry is at a critical juncture, and we are literally starved of persons with the profile that we require in many of our offices abroad. Other longstanding areas seemingly intractable would have been receiving our attention finally. I make mention in one particular case, the chancery in Ottawa where a sub-soil pollution by hydrocarbons have required, and have required for a long time—it had become

a dormant issue—remediation efforts to rid an adjoining property of such pollutants. We have finally decided on a pathway to allow us to treat with such a problem. Other areas, inclusive of the rationalization of properties of our missions aboard have once more finally received our attention. That is yet another dormant issue as we strive to save moneys that taxpayers would have been, unknowingly so perhaps, losing.

8.30 p.m.

We have had residences, properties vacant for long periods of time, and we are in the process of rationalizing the use of such properties, shifting persons, members of staff who would have secured housing through lease arrangements. So that is another longstanding, dormant issue where we are striving to safeguard the national interest and achieve some savings.

Madam Speaker, I wish to state that the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs continues to direct its work strategically, in executing the foreign policy of Trinidad and Tobago by championing, advancing and furthering the Government's objectives through its diplomatic engagement with other sovereign States in the global arena, within the ambit of international law.

With your permission, Madam Speaker, allow me to turn to the Ministry of National Security where I am a Minister in that Ministry. Since assuming this portfolio, meaning Minister in the Ministry of National Security with responsibility for immigration matters, I have taken steps to examine the existing systems that identify areas which could potentially be abused, exploited or improperly accessed and used in ways which were not intended by the laws which govern them.

The variation to an amount of \$149,491 in this regard brings relevance and, hopefully, some element of cogency to what I am about to say. In my capacity at the Ministry of National Security, the responsibilities would relate to the approval of work permits and work permit exemptions, approval of missionary permits, approval of Ministers' permits, approvals of applications for various categories of permanent residents, approval of visa exemptions.

In order to gain a clear appreciation of the responsibilities which fall within my remit, I engaged in the support of staff members at the Ministry. In my meetings with these officials, it emerged over time that the way that many of the processes are handled had become somewhat routine. Consequently, we have implemented more stringent and logical processes which contribute to ascribing some level of accountability to officials involved at all stages of our processes.

Beyond this, there is now an ongoing review of the policies and the manner of implementation of these policies. In addition, we are looking at the fee structure of immigration services offered to non-nationals, in the context of what obtains for similar and identical services regionally and internationally. Together with the anticipated changes, we propose to ensure that there is consistency in the application of policy and that processes are managed efficiently and professionally.

Some tangible examples of the breakdown in processes that have become evident over the years and how simple solutions are being applied, include—and I will give by way of an illustration—an example in the processing of work permits, a relatively simple change in this regard. I continue with the Work Permit Committee, which meets twice per month, once every two weeks, and comprises representatives and stakeholders from different Government Ministries, agencies. On average, approximately 200-odd applications are treated each fortnight, and members make a determination regarding whether these applications are approved, deferred or refused. At the end of these deliberations, a voluminous document is submitted to the Minister for approval, based on the recommendation of the committee.

Traditionally, the Minister would have had sight of the physical document containing, as I said, more than 200 individual requests for work permits, when the physical file arrives at the office, with limited time to really get into the details and peruse the contents of such a file. More importantly, there was no connection, linkage between the participants of the Work Permit Committee and the results of that committee, which are recommendatory in nature and submitted sometimes at the very last minute to the Minister. So what we have done is to have the results, hundreds of them, circulated electronically, have the individual members of the Work Permit Committee respond electronically affirming their participation and their agreement in the overall recommendations and each individual case that would have been treated.

That way the linkage of the signatories and the persons who would have been involved in the decisions would be manifest, and the Minister could treat with the file and the information at other locations and have it processed in a timely and quick manner. As I said, each member assumes responsibility for what has transpired in the meeting, and the Minister would have been able to peruse the file at different locations and approve it.

Mr. Lee: Could the Minister give way?

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: Please.

Mr. Lee: Thank you. Could you just inform for my own knowledge, the Work Permit Committee, how is it chosen?

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: Madam Speaker, the Work Permit Committee functions on the basis of Cabinet authorization, and its members, in a most transparent way, are in place and the criteria would have been laid out in the said decision of Cabinet.

With your permission, Madam Speaker, I continue.

Relative to missionary permits, in 1994 a policy was established regarding the issuance of overseas missionary permits. Among other things, this policy recommended that such permits not be used for periods exceeding three years at a time. I quote:

It will not be granted overseas, missionary permits, beyond the maximum period of three years. Further, no application of a missionary who has served his or her full period of three years will be considered within one year of the expiration of the three-year period.

Subsequently in the year 2012, the then Cabinet varied the decision and the policy was waived for a period of two years.

During that period of time, the two-year period that is, the expectation was that there would have been consultation among stakeholders to determine if there should be permanent review of this policy. No consultation was undertaken, and we have just reviewed the situation and decided that the requisite authorization would be sought and due consultation effected in any treatment of this issue. Obviously this is a delicate one, so that the requisite attention will need to be meted out to this case.

As regards permanent residence, most commonly, persons would apply on the basis of marriage, employment or at the discretion of the Minister. Over the years some ambiguity has crept into the processing of such requests, making the distinction between persons having an entitlement to apply and those having an entitlement to be granted the status of permanent residents. This is yet another area that is receiving our attention.

There has been some manifest manoeuvres and techniques employed to counter what was intended under the original provisions of the Act, and this relates even to the establishment of NGOs, dare I say, organizations sometimes of

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a religious nature, persons empowered to execute marriage or with marriage licence and such that have brought some questions in this area. So we are seeking to rationalize it; the inherent considerations and implications relative to what might be viewed as excessive abuse of our social services, and other such considerations relevant in this regard.

Madam Speaker, another area of relevance is the revision of fees payable in respect of immigration services. At the moment, when compared to fees payable at other jurisdictions in the Caribbean and elsewhere, we find that the charges—
[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Senator, your original 30 minutes have expired. You are entitled to 15 more minutes, if you wish to avail yourself of it. I am just going to remind you that what we are debating here is the Standing Finance Committee Report, so that if you can tie your contribution to that, please.

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: Many thanks, Madam Speaker. Timely it was, since the tying up is just about to come when I am about to end, so many thanks for the reminder.

At the moment, when compared, as I said to the charges in other jurisdictions, ours are relatively insignificant. The services to which I refer in seeking to attain greater inflows into the Treasury, relate to applications for permanent resident status, citizenship restoration, applications for citizenship, various categories of extensions, student permit applications, applications for visas, waivers and so on.

Madam Speaker, I hope that in some way I have been able to do in summary fashion, establish in some detail, the functioning and the attempts by the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and my involvement in the Ministry of National Security, to secure savings to safeguard the national interest, to bring a sense of propriety, good governance, by extension of the domestic policies of this country, to infuse it into our operations externally with the international community, and so in some ways attract foreign investment, safeguard our markets and, in other areas, bring a sense of propriety and civic-mindedness to our operations here in Trinidad and Tobago.

May I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As I listened to the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, I get a sense of why we are in this predicament in which we find ourselves. I would have anticipated that we are discussing the Review of the Economy, the challenges we face

economically, and what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would have been doing to help us diversify the economy, to help us increase foreign direct investment, and so would have got an idea of how we were being positioned to face the exigencies and vicissitudes of the 21st Century. [*Desk thumping*]

I would have expected some feedback on the hon. Member telling us why the overwhelming majority of persons employed in our foreign service are contract officers, contracts IRs and, therefore, they do not see the foreign service as a career and, therefore, we lose talent and they are not poised to take advantage of the opportunities that exist in the global arena.

I would have expected him to tell us a little bit about why international agencies use our foreign service as a recruiting ground. I know of two instances where I served in the foreign mission at the United Nations. I would expect him to tell us why a senior former Minister and a former Member of this House was given a low level contract appointment in the New York consulate. I would have expected him to tell us why almost the entire top cadre—and I am talking about officers like Officer Thompson, officers like Dennis Francis and others—have retired and there has been no succession planning.

I would have expected him to tell us what is the Ministry doing about the plethora of negative foreign advisories, where foreign governments are telling their citizens—and the latest being the Canadian Government—literally telling their citizens beware when you come to Trinidad because there is escalating crime, and you have to be very careful about your safety while in Trinidad. In fact, they are discouraging their citizens from visiting us, and negatively impacting on our tourism thrust which is another plank of our diversification strategy.

I would have expected him to tell us why we had to wait on Turkish authorities to tell us that our citizens were being detained in Turkey. Our intelligence services—and the Minister is also part of the—well, he is the Minister in the Ministry of National Security—why we had to wait on them to tell us? Why were we not proactive enough to know that there are citizens leaving our country, and we keep a file, and we keep intelligence on our citizens, understand the push factors and the pull factors, so that we could take corrective action, consistent with the UN Security Council Resolution 2178? [*Desk thumping*]

Maj. Gen. Dillon: Would you give way?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes, I will.

Maj. Gen. Dillon: I just want to make a short intervention there, in alluding to the fact that we were not able to say where our citizens are going to. You have to bear in mind that citizens leave Trinidad and Tobago for one destination and may end up in another destination, so that you cannot track them to that extent. So I just wanted to make that intervention.

Mr. R. Charles: Minister, I hear you. I hear you, but in the United States, for example, and Canada they have an intelligence capability to anticipate, infiltrate, in our case, the mosques, et cetera, that are recruiting grounds. They have a proactive engagement, so they could almost anticipate that these young people are vulnerable and are likely to travel to Turkey. But I take your point, and it is understood.

In terms of the Ministry of National Security, why are we overrun in Cedros? I have been there recently, Cedros and Icacos, yes. I have been there, and there are significant numbers of either illegal or illegal immigrants from Venezuela with negative impacts on possibly human trafficking, guns for food trade and arms and ammunition coming through that port.

I would have expected lastly, some information on what is our strategy with respect to Brexit. What is our strategy in respect of global terrorism, so that we would have been proactive and we could have had an idea of where Trinidad and Tobago is positioned in this complex and ever changing global environment which we are in?

This afternoon I listened intently to the Minister of Finance, and as I listened I always seek solace in my *Bible*. By accident my hands went to Luke chapter 19. I will just quote a couple verses, and I am talking this in the context of what we were presented with here today. I quote, and they said:

Jesus entered and passed through Jericho and behold there was a man called Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus was a tax collector. And Zacchaeus was a wealthy man also and he was hated.

And the *Bible* says he was short of stature, and he wanted to see Jesus, so he climbed the Sycamore tree. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] I was wondering whether God was speaking to me, as I listened to the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, because I was getting the sense that all you hear is “tax, spend, borrow, drawdown from savings and waste money”, in a sense.

So, I decided in preparation for—well, before I do that, let me just say that I was taken aback a little bit when I learnt that \$250,000—and I raised it in

Parliament earlier today—was being spent for a feasibility study for a golf course in Ste. Madeleine. I was advised some days ago by some residents of Naparima constituency, that there already exists a tourism and heritage plan for Moruga and Ste. Madeleine, and this was done with funding from a Canadian agency that does work for a number of developing countries, and work was actually done in St. Lucia and in Barbados and in Trinidad and Tobago. It is clear that it is a comprehensive report done by individuals who are of tremendous intellect and knowledge in the tourism field. One actually is a professor at the University of the West Indies, holding a Ph.D. in International Tourism and Heritage Tourism. So it became clear that in presenting the mid-year review and the Variations of Appropriation, that not all data that is available for decision-making is utilized by those making the presentations.

I also recall that when we discussed this last Friday, I kept asking what informed the decision-making, what is the measurable impact, the measurable output of the decisions, and I was told that information would be supplied before we met today. I am still waiting. I do not know if it has come to my office, but I am not in receipt of that information.

The reason why I asked that, is because it is important in decision-making, when we make decisions in the context of limited resources, that our decisions are tied to measurable outputs. So that we could come three months after or a year after, look at the outputs, see whether they have been achieved and either adjust our strategy or move on to something else.

I am saying this in the context of what I consider a major limitation in what I have heard this afternoon. If, for example, in the context of what we call “measurable impacts” in decision-making, we give the police service 300 cars, I would imagine the process of decision-making would be, we go to the Commissioner of Police and say, “What will it take for you to reduce the response time of police officers, in the context of calls by citizens?” And if we agree that the response time should be 10 minutes, for example, I would ask the Commissioner of Police to tell me what resources you need, and if he says he needs 300 cars, I give him the 300 cars, and I hold him to the output target. So that when decisions are made, we could all sit here and say, “We made a number of decisions and these are the things we can look forward to in terms of measurable improvements to our society”.

In preparation I talked to some of my constituents. I talked to particularly—in my time we used to call them “A level students”—CAPE students. I said, “Tell me

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what are your thoughts with respect to all the things you have heard in respect of the budget and what we could anticipate with respect to the mid-year review”. They say out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom, and one of them said, “You know, we are operating in a context of a piper budget.” That is the word they actually used. So I asked them, “Why would you say that?” And they say, “But everything we hear is taking money.” This is what a piper does, he takes money. When he spends we cannot see the measurable impact. He sells everything that we have—and I am talking this—later on I will deal with that—in the context of selling of our crown jewels—and he creates stories to extract the money. So we could see, for example—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: “He” is the piper? Who is the “he”?

Mr. R. Charles: The piper; he is the piper. So I am not talking about anybody here, and if I am talking we are not personalizing. I am talking about a process, a budget process. If we look at the characteristics of a piper, one of the things is that they have elaborate story telling. The piper would come and give you an elaborate story about dire circumstances, my children are sick and he would have the children and whatnot, and it is all in a process to extract resources. The characteristics of a piper: poor judgment, antisocial tendencies, financial trouble—they are in financial trouble because their decision-making is not correct—manipulation and grandiosity. They act loud and always want to be the centre of attention, et cetera, and these are based on studies on the characteristics of that.

So when I look at what we are faced with in this exercise, we are talking about telling stories. One of the things that is done, they paint a dismal picture. In the context of our budget—I am reading from the *Observer*, Tuesday, May 09, 2017:

Finance Minister paints a dismal picture of the Trinidad economy

He says, in fact, and I quote:

Our economy is in even more perilous state than we the new administration had first envisaged. The Minister of Finance told legislators on Monday...—so I suspect that happened in this Parliament, although this is covered in the *Jamaica Observer*—adding that the new government had benefited from the findings of the IMF team who came at our request just after the election..

So here we see an early painting of a picture of a dismal Trinidad economy.

Our hon. Prime Minister announced—and this is December 30, 2015—against the backdrop of current low energy prices and a dismal fiscal position, Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley first address to the nation held few glimmers of hope.

And this was another example of gloom and doom.

There is an example again in April 2016. In 2016, this is the *Newsday* Saturday, April 09, 2016, it says:

The Minister of Finance says the economy is worse off.

So I am just painting a picture of the citizens being told that there is nothing good happening in Trinidad and Tobago, and that we are, indeed, in perilous times. It was interesting that just probably in hearing all these negatives comments, the Managing Director of Scotia Bank indicated that Trinidad and Tobago is not in crisis. She was a lone voice crying in the wilderness saying despite that bleak economic forecast, Trinidad and Tobago is not in recession. She said, and I quote:

The great thing about Trinidad and Tobago's financial situation is that there is a lot of room to do many things. Trinidad and Tobago is not by any means in a crisis situation. So I think Government has a unique opportunity to put credible programmes on the table to get us through what, hopefully, will be an extended period of reduced oil prices, et cetera.

But part of the strategy has been to blame the People's Partnership Government for all the negatives that have happened in our country. The records will show that that is not the case.

It was the People's Partnership Government that reversed the country's economic decline. We moved from minus 4.4 per cent decline in 2009 to recovery and growth by early 2011. So when we came into power in 2010, we met an economy, two quarters of consecutive economic decline. We achieved economic growth in 2012, the facts will show, in 2013 and 2014, and we were on course to achieve further growth in 2015.

In the five years in office we tripled foreign direct investment in Trinidad and Tobago from \$500 million to US \$1.5 billion. According to an UNCTAD World Investment Report 2016, Trinidad and Tobago is the largest recipient of foreign direct investment in the region. But foreign direct investment flows to Trinidad and Tobago in 2015 declined by a percentage.

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The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was US \$3.1 billion in 2010, it was \$3.1 billion in 2010. By the time we left it stood at US \$5.6 billion. Foreign exchange reserves were US \$10.8 billion. We raised the minimum wage twice from nine to \$12.50 to \$15 to give a fillip to people so that this would have the multiplier effect. People will have more—citizens would have more disposable income and be able to spend money and we would have an economy that is in a dynamic state.

We created 56,000 jobs and brought down the unemployment rate to 3 per cent and had a plan to create new and better jobs. And there is a whole host of other data here, but I want to raise the point that it was not as bad as they made it out to be and they continue to make it out to be.

I issued a release on 17 June, 2016, and I said that what Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar met in 2010 was many times worse than what this Government inherited, and I will just read a little bit to elaborate on the point.

The Finance Minister seems to be remembered—he is busy trying to convince the population that the PNM inherited a wasteland. But what are the facts? The Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration was able to achieve economic growth, and I said it before, 2012, 2013, 2014. When we came into power in—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Could the Member give way, please?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes, I will.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Could you tell me—I did not hear where you are quoting from?

Mr. R. Charles: I am quoting from my release that I served.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Oh, your release.

Mr. R. Charles:—which came from documents. Okay. On the 5th October, I will give you, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean projected growth of 1 per cent in 2015 for Trinidad and Tobago.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: For 2015?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Okay.

Mr. R. Charles: So in addition, when we came into power we met the Clico fiasco was \$20 million. We are told today it is \$27.7 billion—sorry, \$20 billion, \$27.7 million.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, WASA, HCU, we had problems with respect to the HCU crisis. Petrotrin, gas to liquids and money owed to contractors totalled over \$50 billion. We had 83 wage negotiations and it goes on. What the Minister of Finance should admit to the population that when he assumed office the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund stood at \$5.7 billion, et cetera.

We were told that there was a drawdown on the fund to protect the Trinidad and Tobago economy, and we were told—he said, the drawdown from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was necessary to ensure that the economy does not collapse, et cetera, et cetera. We were told again that in terms of the plan—

Madam Speaker: Member, remember my rule against display. [*Interruption*]

Mr. R. Charles: Oh, yes. We were told again that Government intends to access a \$300 million loan from the Andean Corporation. So, as we look at what is presented here today, we see, and I make the point, no architecture, no long-range plan, nothing to take us out of the dire circumstances in which we are in. Other countries have faced the crisis that we have and they provide hope, they provide a vision, they provide an architecture, they provide alternatives to their citizenry. We do not get that in Trinidad and Tobago.

And I have sat here on a number of occasions and all I hear is the negative circumstances that we exist in, that the problem lies in the previous Government, and there is a situation, more tax, increased borrowings and drawdowns from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So much so that the experts are beginning to question the Government's borrowing. And I think the political leader and Member for Siparia talked about the challenge of increased debt.

And may I make the point that as we increase the debt and the debt to GDP ratio increases and we get downgrades from the international rating agencies, that bond that the Minister spoke about, I think one was US \$720 million, the Petrotrin bond, and another is US \$850 million, the interest on those loans are going to increase as our ratings drop and as our debt to GDP ratio increases.

So we have in the *Trinidad Express* on December 20, 2016:

“The Government's doubling of the \$500 million it initially planned to borrow through its December 19 bond issue shows not only that it is broke now, but also that it does not know how to raise money outside of borrowing, financial experts have said.”

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I do not wish to go through that, sorry.

But part of this idea that the sky is falling and everything is bad and that they met nothing from the previous Government, we see that built in the kinds of decisions that we are called upon to make. We came here and were told that if we did not pass the FATCA Bill the sky would fall and we would not be—
[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member.

Mr. R. Charles: Yes.

Madam Speaker: I think I have given you some leeway, and I really want us to remember what we are debating here. All right? So while I can understand why you were leading up, I think you “kinda” going astray along this route. Okay?

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you, and I will be guided. So, we get to the point of performance of this Government and in terms of its economic management of the economy.

Madam Speaker, when international organizations are now coming to the view that Trinidad and Tobago is an underperforming State economically and they have listed the fastest shrinking and growing economies in 2016, and this *The Economist* magazine, a highly reputable magazine that is read by decision-makers and foreign investors, and when they list the 10 worst performing countries in the world and they do this on the basis of the GDP growth, one year in 2016 compared with 2015, the countries that were last in the world were, we were second to last. Well sorry, Libya was last. Crisis in Libya, we could understand that. Venezuela, there was a 6 per cent change in GDP, they are bad; Equatorial Guinea, Syria, Macau, Brazil, Timor-Leste, Burundi then Trinidad and Greece afterwards. So this is *The Economist* magazine, it is not Rodney Charles talking, and this was printed on January 2, 2016. And the best performing countries were Turkmenistan, Lagos, Cambodia, Myanmar, India. India recorded a 6 per cent growth in 2016.

So, you see, you cannot, you cannot—facts are stubborn things, you cannot hide the fact that people looking at our performance, we could talk in Trinidad, we could “gallery”, we could look down, but international economists and magazines and investors, when they look at Trinidad they are not seeing what we are being told in Trinidad and Tobago.

Yes. Which are the world fastest growing economies?—the World Economic Forum. And again, they have Myanmar is the world fastest growing economy

which fits in, *The Economist* has it as fourth, the World Economic Forum has it as number one. And again, our country is not listed in the top performing countries. *Business Insider*, the 13 fastest growing economies in the world, we are not there. Economists now upbeat, they do not like to hear me talk about Singapore, but Singapore's growth was 2.8 per cent and it says—and they see the economy growing 2.6 per cent in the first three months of 2017, and 2.3 per cent for the whole year, a March 2017 survey conducted by the Monetary Authority of Singapore showed on Wednesday. So, Singapore is growing while we are not.

But the CIA, they do analyse of all countries on different criteria, they want to have a view of the globe. When they looked at the criterion of economic performance, Trinidad and Tobago ranked out of 225 countries—well at the UN there are 193, but they will have dependencies like Martinique, Guadeloupe, Anguilla listed in this. Trinidad ranked 212 out of 225 countries, and it is similar information as Equatorial Guinea beneath us. Venezuela beneath us, South Sudan, Gaza Strip, Trinidad and Tobago 2012. Nigeria which is a country with tremendous problems in terms of corruption, et cetera, Nigeria is 205. Puerto Rico—*[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: Member, may I ask the source and the date of that source?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes. The source is the Central Intelligence Agency and it is based on the—I can make it available—The World Factbook. Yeah, the CIA Factbook. The Member for Point Fortin is aware. The country that is number one is Turks and Caicos Island. So it tells me that it is not a thing that we are—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Singh: Attained.

Mr. R. Charles:—yes. That it cannot be attained, and it cannot be attained by countries and islands that are close to us.

Tanzania was number nine with a GDP growth 2016 compared to 2015, Tanzania was 7.2 per cent, Cambodia was 7 per cent, Bangladesh, I visited Bangladesh, extreme poverty and they had a growth of 6.9 per cent. And I am looking at countries, Rwanda, that went through a major crisis many years ago, decades ago, 6 per cent growth; Dominican Republic 5.9; Togo, 5.3; Sri Lanka, 5 per cent growth. You can go in North America, you can go in Europe, you can go South America, you can go African Continent, we are underperforming. Namibia, 4.2 per cent growth; Guyana, 4 per cent growth; Curaçao, 3.6; Trinidad and Tobago; Armenia; Turkey, 3.3, Solomon Islands, 3 per cent; Grenada—Grenada

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had a 3 per cent growth 2016/2015, little Grenada; Israel, 2.8; Trinidad and Tobago, well, you have to go down to see Trinidad and Tobago, we had minus 2.8 per cent growth. So, clearly, clearly—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Naparima, your original 30 minutes have expired, you are now entitled to 15 more minutes if you intend to avail yourself of it. And I will ask you to tie in all the information you are giving us—[*Interruption*]

Mr. R. Charles: Yes. I am tying it in.

Madam Speaker:—with what you want to make.

Mr. R. Charles: Yes. I am tying in terms of the performance of the mid-year review. We could talk what we want, but there are indicators and factual things.

And we have to look, we are making bad investments. Right? We have, and I think my leader has said it, we have Cazabon payments, we have money being spent, \$90 million, for the Brian Lara Stadium. We are not saying that cricket is not an important sport, but in my constituency I have, and I will keep repeating it, I have the Reform Hindu School, one of the schools that performed in the top 20 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago and they are in cramped conditions with rats running around, in a situation that is not the best for learning. And just next door they see \$90 million being built on a stadium. What do these children, what are they telling themselves? And what about our leader, our founding father who said the future of the nation lies in the book bags of our children. And these children are seeing a school 95 per cent complete, it requires \$10 million, \$2 million budgeted in the IDF, \$2 million budgeted and \$90 million-plus, we do not know, spent on a stadium.

And it gets a little worse. In my constituency, we have Sahai Trace. Landslips all over. Garth Road, there are about 20 landslips. In Naparima, the Lengua Health Facility is out of drugs for cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure. The Minister could say whatever he wants, I have been there, I could go and I could get names of people, they get prescriptions for cancer drugs, and when they go to the pharmacy they cannot get the drugs. But it speaks to a problem and it is a question of vision, it is a question of ideas, it is a question of architecture.

I looked at the National Development Strategy and I made the point before that when you look at this, and I will just take one area, this is the area of ageing that is close to me. When I read this document, it is page 37, I cannot help but feel that they see elderly people as a problem, I will tell you why. They gave the data. Trinidad and Tobago has an ageing population. The median age is 32.6 years and

13 per cent of the total population is 60 years and over—13 per cent, 60 years and over. But hear the response of the Vision 2020. It brings to the fore, the economic and social cost, they see it as a cost with an ageing population. These include: increased pressure on finances, so we are seen as burdening the system, since a smaller working age population has to support growing spending, health, social care, pensions. They see it—decline in working population means lower tax revenues, so they are getting less taxes from older people and higher public expenditure. The other point, the prevalence of long-term health conditions, chronic illnesses, physical disabilities associated with ageing places a burden on the health care system and they see a reduced workforce.

There is nothing in this document, a vision, where you will know that your society, people are living longer, the ageing population is going to increase. You can see us as an opportunity and investment as a way to make money rather than as a burden and a cost on the society. And this is where it is a crisis of vision that I make the point. I really do not want to make this political but I have to.

When you look at our pillars for progress, our proposals, and we looked at it from the silver economy—yes—the silver economy and what it is, and we are saying, and I quote according to:

“Meryl Lynch estimates the Silver Economy at \$7 trillion per year, which makes it the 3rd largest economy in the world. By 2020 the private spending power of the elderly generation will reach \$15 trillion globally.”

So, this is an opportunity for us to make money to diversify our economy. We have three to 400,000 citizens living in the diaspora which makes it roughly a quarter, at least a quarter of our population of 1.3 million. A lot of the elderly people in the United States want to come home, and I could name five relatives, they want to come home because they grew up here, they went to America to make money, of course, they got tied, they have children, grandchildren, third generation, but they want to come home. If we could see that as an opportunity for investment purposes, we can build healthcare facilities, with doctors, provide jobs for nurses to take care of the elderly.

In the '70s, generations of Trinidad women left to go and take care of the elderly, I saw them in New York. There are opportunities for the ageing population to come here and if, for example, we link with the American Medical Association and we develop, like the State of Florida we develop a capability down here and we get known for treating the elderly with first-world standards, providing those standards like health care, care facilities, sporting, recreational, things for the elderly, Americans will come to Trinidad. And if they come to

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Trinidad their children will follow them to check their grandparents and we will have a tourism thrust. But that requires seeing the elderly not as a problem and burden, but as an opportunity, [*Desk thumping*] an opportunity. And this is the difference. And when we ask the question, when we ask the question: where is the vision? Where is the plan? Yes. And I have alluded to all the negatives and all the economy bad and whatnot, but there are—well, the Chinese word, a problem is an opportunity.

And all I am saying to this Government as they look at us and they look—and I am not talking about ageing, I am talking citizens. As they look at us as citizens, give us the problems, let us know the truth, let us know the reality, but at the same time, your job is to give us hope in this country. Your job is to provide an architecture to take us out of the problems we face. Trinidad and Tobago—this is not the first time Trinidad went through an economic crisis, we went through this in the '60s, late '60s with the first wave of migration to the United States when bPTT and Shell and they closed down in the Trinidad and Tobago, we overcame that. We overcame in the 1980s. I recall when the NAR was in power at NP we took a 10 per cent cut salary. We got paid in bonds and public servants were given tranches, paid in tranches.

Hear the opportunity. If the Government does not have money, why borrow to pay backpay to workers when you can give them shares in the crown jewels of the country? So, we move from being slaves and indentured immigrants to the state by the New Perspectives on the Life and Work, which is the new society in the 1970s, published by Eric Williams, where the State owned NP and the 67 or so state enterprises, we could move to the next phase which is, we own shares. [*Desk thumping*] When NAR, when Minister Robinson offered public servants shares in the energy sector, well the system—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: I am grateful and I am sure the listening public is really grateful for the look back because sometimes we do forget, but I want you now to bring your contribution to today.

Mr. R. Charles: So as we look forward to today, I would make some recommendations because they say we talk, and I made it today, we need a congressional budget office right now, so that as decisions are made we could see the measurable impact of the decisions. So while we are discussing all the things and the ideas that the Minister has, what is the cost? If you borrow now, what is the long-term cost to the economy because of increased interest rates? So we need that.

I would also like to see, in terms of a policy prescriptions, I would like to see SMART outputs, specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. So instead of telling me, we are doing medicine for this and that, I want to know a citizen who is on CDAP within a six-month period he would be able to get all the critical medicines on demand. Those are the kinds of things, the kinds of decisions that I would wish. I would like to see appropriate checks and balances in our systems as we move forward. I would like to see us working consensually—not condescendingly—with the business community to double our exports and services and increase jobs by 50 per cent.

Those are the kind of—“ah pass de stage” where you say, we are going to talk. I want to know what is the measurable impact. So long as I stay here I will be insisting on that. It will be boring, but I feel something—a legacy that I would like to give to my country. This is what they do in Singapore. I would like to see establishment of growth poles located in different areas. For example, in the Naparima constituency they were given two acres of land, but no follow up. Yeah. They were given two acres of land, Caroni closed down. [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member.

Mr. R. Charles: But it is not being utilized to increase our agricultural production. You are going to tax—for example, you are going to increase property tax on agricultural land. Why can you not say the land is—and I am using Moruga Road. If the land is abandoned, you are going to tax it, but if the land is producing agriculture, they get reduced tax. [*Desk thumping*] You know what that will mean? It will open up all those unused lands in Naparima constituency and in Cedros—places like Cedros—to agricultural production because you incentivize production through a creatively bright, thought-out tax policy, and those things are not hard. Those things are not hard. We have to do this thing together, we have to do this together.

I have never applied for Canadian citizenship even though I had opportunities, American citizenship. I bury here [*Desk thumping*] and I want this country to succeed. And for heaven’s sake, help us succeed, do not look down condescendingly on us. Zacchaeus, Madam Speaker, when he climbed the Sycamore tree and saw Jesus, there was an epiphany, an enlightenment. I want that enlightenment here. [*Desk thumping*] He told Jesus, “I will sell half of my goods and give it to the poor and I will do good”, and I want to see that happen here. I am fed up. I am too old to be lectured and looked down pejoratively by people who I do not consider my intellectual superior. Forgive me, but that is my view. And so with those words, thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker, as I rise to make a contribution on the second report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives on the consideration of proposals for the variation of appropriation for the fiscal year 2017.

Madam Speaker, before I start let me just offer a few words of rebuttal. The hon. Member for Caroni Central in his contribution begged this side that we should have kept many of the UNC's policies, used many of their models and do not change anything. May I remind the Member for Caroni Central that in September of 2015 there was something called an election, and that election the population spoke clearly that they did not want to keep the UNC model of governance; they did not want to keep the wanton wastage of LifeSport of half a billion dollars; they did not want to keep a fire truck being wrecked for \$6.5 million which was worth brand new \$2 million; they did not want to keep the Beetham Wastewater Treatment Plant issue at over half a billion dollars over-expenditure; they did not want to keep the insider trading at FCB which the Member for Siparia spoke about. She produced a letter talking about a blackout for insider trading. What gall for those opposite to lecture us on insider trading when they are the kings and queens of insider trading. [*Desk thumping*] They voted to—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Singh: Imputing improper motives.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sure. If I did, I apologize and I withdraw. But the fact is—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Singh: I do not mind being called a king.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: But the fact is, insider trading reached phenomenal heights under your administration. The Member for Siparia or Caroni Central also spoke about the abuse of the Constitution in appointing the procurement regulator. May I remind the national community not to forget the abuse of the Constitution by those opposite in the run-off Bill. Let us remember that, where you cherry-picked a part of the Constitution to have a run-off for general elections in order to kill off third parties. If ever there was an abuse of the Constitution that was it.

Another Member, the hon. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, spoke about job descriptions for somebody or something. Again, where was the job description for Resmi Ramnarine? These were things that were rejected in September 2015, totally rejected. And I am glad to hear the Member for Naparima tell unions

tonight—I am glad for this clarification—that the UNC’s policy on paying backpay is to give people shares and not cash. I think that will go down very well. Thank you for that clarification on UNC policy.

Madam Speaker, in turning directly to the report on which a lot was said about health, I am going to focus the other part of my contribution on some of the national indicators on health as espoused in an excellent document, and I want to congratulate the Member for Arouca/Maloney, the Minister of Planning and Development for Vision 2030. If we had stuck with Vision 2020 as a country, the Member for Naparima wants to know the architecture. The architecture to take this country forward was actually Vision 2020 which was not a PNM document.

9.30 p.m.

May I remind the national community that Members who participated in the construction of Vision 2020 were a current Member of Parliament, the Hon Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie. Two, then UNC Sen. Nan Ramgolam was part of Vision 2020, former UNC Sen. the then hon. David Abullah was a part of Vision 2020. And the Vision 2020 subcommittees were populated by many people who are aligned with the UNC on tertiary education, on a lot of other subcommittees, and I have no problem with that. So, when the Member for Naparima talks about architecture for development, Vision 2020 was that. But what happened was when you came into office it was sent to the “labasse”. It was sent to the dump. Your own document in which Members of the UNC gave their blood, sweat and tears to develop, once you came into office you had no time for it. So, we have some lost years, and I want to thank, again, the Minister of Planning and Development for taking Vision 2020—and the Prime Minister—and updating it to Vision 2030.

Under Vision 2030, some of the indicators that we have to deal with will be maternal and infant mortality, and our sustainable development goals will give us that same SMART objective: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely. When I became Minister of Health I was faced, in my very first day, first week, with two maternal deaths—and this country has been plagued by the issue for maternal deaths for too long—and I made a statement for which I was chastised by the Member for Tabaquite. He said I was sending people to Mount Hope to die, and I was chastised by the Member for Fyzabad, that I should apologize for saying that I have paid attention to the statistics at the Mount House Women’s Hospital, and if we do not do something, I will predict that between September and November of 2016 two women will die. I said that, and I was chastised by the Member for Tabaquite by saying, I am sending women to die, and the Member for Fyzabad said I should apologize. I would apologize for nothing.

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Because for the first time in recent history no one died at the Mount Hope Women's Hospital. [*Desk thumping*] Because, for the first time we paid attention to the data and changed the policies, and for the first time in many a year, for the first five months of this year we have had no maternal deaths.

Dr. Gopeesingh: God is good. God is good.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And our medical fraternity who worked with the Minister of Health should be heartily congratulated; [*Desk thumping*] our obstetricians, our midwives, our nurses, everyone. So, we are on the way already through advocacy and policy changes to achieving and even surpassing our sustainable development goals on maternal mortality. So, I apologize to no one.

On the issue of infant mortality under Vision 2030, what we have been doing, because our infant mortality rates are still not acceptable to me. So, what we have done, from the 17th of May, the Director of Women's and Child Health will be installed. We have formalized a structure for the National Neonatal Committee to standardize care of neonates across our hospitals, with the most up-to-date practices. We have updated the standard operating procedure for obstetrics. We have introduced electronic maternal and neonatal records. And we have done all of this. We have focused on staff training, and our projections for 2035 is to reduce neonatal and infant mortality by 50 per cent, achieving the goal of having an infant mortality rate of less than 10 for 1,000 live births. And we are already close to that in some of the subcategories of infants. We are already very close to that. So I want to congratulate everyone who has been making an effort to seriously impact on maternal mortality and infant mortality.

I can even tell the national community that one of the Caricom countries which we benchmarked against to reduce maternal mortality is now asking Trinidad and Tobago what we have done to bring it down so much so soon so they could implement it. [*Desk thumping*] So, we are being seen as a leader in Caricom for bringing down maternal mortality.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Minister, may I?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sure.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Minister, consideration of that as well is that prenatal mortality and neonatal mortality, and for those of us perinatal means around birth seven days and neonatal is 28 days after birth.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And that by itself hon. Member, in some categories of infant mortality we are close to it, but some other categories we are not, and that is why we want to have the standard operating procedures, and I thank you for that.

Madam Speaker, another area of leadership which it speaks clearly to in the report is that of NCDs and treating NCDs. Trinidad and Tobago after the 2007 Port of Spain declaration, did not make the progress—and may I say the world did not make the progress, Caricom did not make the progress. The entire world fell asleep at the wheel on the issue of NCDs. We have come up with an innovative and very creative way to tackle this. And I will tell you, Madam Speaker, since we started advocating our NCD plan last year, do you know Trinidad and Tobago—little Trinidad and Tobago—is now seen as a global leader in the development and implementation of NCD plans? The world is now beating a path to the Ministry of Health, asking, how did we do it? What are we doing? Bloomsburg Philanthropic Association is coming down to meet on Monday. Everybody wants to meet with Trinidad and Tobago on the issue of NCDs. [*Desk thumping*] Everyone. And that speaks squarely to a manifesto promise to tackle NCDs and primary health care.

So, under the Health Services Support Programme, which is funded by the IDB to the tune of US \$48 million, it is going to be a very proactive and sustainable approach with very clear targets, and I will talk about blood. Thirty-million component NCD prevention and management with an emphasis on primary health care—that was stated clearly in the manifesto. Components two, three and four for \$20 million will help with physical infrastructure improvement, purchase of equipment, e-health information management systems, crucial. This country has to start to move towards electronic health management records, and human resources capacity and building. And this issue that occurred unfortunately at San Fernando with chemotherapy speaks to a lack of a clear policy dealing with human resources, to which I have spoken.

Madam Speaker, on the issue of NCDs: People are walking up to me every day, total strangers, and saying, “Thank you. Thank you, Minister, I am now changing my lifestyle. I am exercising more, I am taking in less sugars, less flour,” and so on. Recently a pundit at the cremation of former Senator—may her soul rest in peace—Carol Cuffy-Dowlat—I was so heartened when a pundit at a cremation spoke about the need for Trinidadians and Tobagonians to stop eating so much of flour, sugar and salt. So, the message is getting through.

Mr. Singh: Chandresh.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: That is Chandresh's brother. His brother. It was so heartening to hearing that the advocacy that we are promoting, taking route in people's psyche.

One of the other issues we have to tackle as a health issue—and I am going to say this squarely and I know I will get some push back on this, and I will tell you by who now. Listen carefully. The doctors in our midst—and we have three excellent doctors, urologists, OBS and GYN, OBS and GYN—they will tell you that the human body and our physiology has not changed so much in the past 30 years that we need 3,000 calories a day to exist. I think we could agree to that. But food marketers around the world will have you believe that you need 3,000 calories a day to exist.

Dr. Khan: How much you need?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: You need roughly between 2,000/2,200. That is what you need roughly.

Hon. Member: How much?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Between 2,000 to 2,200, depending on gender, age, and so on. But roughly. The point I want to make is that food marketers, just like cigarette manufacturers for 50 years will lull you into a sense that you need this, and part of the NCD plan, if we are to achieve our sustainable development goals, is behaviour change modification, where like pundit Sharma, he is exhorting the national community to watch what they eat, watch what they drink. Right? We have to go that route.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn to the issue of vaccinations, because this eats up a lot of the increased budgetary requests that we are making at the Ministry of Health. And I want to start with the HPV vaccine programme started by my predecessor, the Member for Barataria/San Juan, which is a good plan. I do not play politics with health. That HPV vaccine programme was needed then and it is needed now. To date we have distributed 63,348. But I have to say how disappointed I was recently when there was a report in the news media, which seemed to blame the HPV vaccine for the outcome in one person. And the article was not based on any science or evidence, and what it has done, it has thrown back to the dark ages this HPV vaccine drive.

And I was so disappointed by the hysteria globally that now seems to have reached Trinidad and Tobago, because when persons make statements about vaccines, so in some countries in the Middle East the polio vaccine is seen as

some invention by the West to keep down a certain part of society, and now you have polio raising itself. You had a presidential candidate making a flippant remark that somebody got an MMR vaccine and two weeks later developed autism. There was a fake report in England about the link between MMR vaccines and autism. And it saddened me to see that report which threw this HPV vaccine drive back into the dark ages. We have to be responsible in the way we have a discourse about medical issues.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Educate.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And we have to educate. Yes. So, let us talk about—

Dr. Khan: You all do it in the health centres?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes, yes. Let us talk about the flu vaccines. We want to talk about what we are doing with this money. Coming into office every year I am told people will die of the flu in Trinidad and Tobago. Not the common flu, whether it is Swine Flu, or whatever.

For the first time in recent history in this flu season we have had zero deaths due that that flu. None! [*Desk thumping*] None! To date, we have given out an unheard 60,396 vaccinations, and I did not discriminate. The first MP to take advantage of a letter which I sent around to all MPs was the Member for Princes Town. We went to his constituency, we went to the Chaguanas market, hon. Member for Couva North, Chaguanas West; we went to St. Augustine. We went every year and we have saved lives.

We have also managed, very prudently, a major health risk that spread globally, and that of yellow fever. The yellow fever vaccine between last year and this year ran out globally. There was a global panic. Luckily we managed the situation and we have yellow fever vaccines for everyone in Trinidad who needs it. So, we had no crisis, even though the great United States had a yellow fever vaccine crisis. And we adopted a whole of government approach on the issue of yellow fever vaccine with the Ministry of Health, Insect Vector, Airports Authority and Customs.

Madam Speaker, I just want to go back briefly to the issue of NCDs. I have been getting a lot of comments recently for introducing a new term into the national consciousness, and that of the sitting disease. We sit too much. We are starting—part of the NCD plan to get people to be more active. The male clinic speaks about it, and I must say the sitting disease is not recognized as a medical condition. But—[*Interruption*] it could [*Laughter*] yes—a lot of the research

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shows that people who sit most of the day they have the same risk of a heart attack as smokers. So, when you have the cascade of diabetes, hypertension and so on, high cholesterol, and you add our sedentary lifestyles, it is a toxic mixture.

Madam Speaker, a lot of the moneys allocated to health will be used for hospital construction, and I want to start to throw some figures into the public domain about what the public health system does. In Trinidad and Tobago currently we have 3,109 hospital beds across all our hospitals, Port of Spain and so on. That gives you a bed to population ratio of 2.39. I would explain what the figures mean in a short while. When you add three new hospitals; Point Fortin, Arima and Sangre Grande, and the differential between the new beds and the new 150 hospital in Arima, that would add to the stock 241 beds, which will take you up to 3,350, or a bed to population ratio of 2.57. But how does that—

Dr. Gopeesingh: Two point five-seven what? No.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Two point five-seven beds per thousand. Sorry. How does that rank with other countries? The United Kingdom is 2.95, New Zealand 2.81, Sweden 2.75. So, we are okay compared to those. But, what about other countries, that I hope we never have to reach? Japan is 13.4 and South Korea 9.56. Do we need that? Different populations, different needs. But, right now when we go up to 2.57 we will be pretty close to the UK, New Zealand and Sweden.

But, I want to congratulate the team that supports the Ministry of Health, the Attorney General, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development, because between these three Ministries we have been able to save this country on the Point Fortin Hospital, roughly \$300 million, and on the Arima facility \$250 million. [*Desk thumping*] So we have saved to date a half of a billion TT dollars without changing the design or the number of beds. Member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, and I want to congratulate you Minister and your team for that saving. Will you translate that saving into building the Chaguanas hospital facility?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Chaguanas hospital?

Mr. Singh: “Yeah”, the one on Connector Road.

Dr. Khan: Chaguanas health facility.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And may I just state for the record that contrary to what a former Member of the Cabinet of the UNC is saying, the Point Fortin Hospital project is up and running [*Desk thumping*] and I promised the national community that steel will start to touch the sky in May. And I could tell the national

community that to date, two days ago, 538 steel members were already on site, ready to start touching the sky in the third to fourth weeks of May as promised.

Mr. Hinds: Member, clarify S-T-E-E-L.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Hinds: Before they put an “A”.

Madam Chairman: Member for Laventille West! Please continue Member for St. Joseph.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: So, the Point Fortin Hospital project continues, continues well, and the people of that south-western peninsula can look forward to the completion of that project. Steel is on the site, and steel will start to be erected very, very soon. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, there was a question posed to me recently, and quite rightly, about customer service at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, and I gave an answer. But I want to share with the national community what the public health system means to this country, and these statistics have never been shared before. So, I really want to tell the national community that in looking at the statistics and breaking down our throughput data for 2016 at Eric Williams, Port of Spain, Sangre Grande and San Fernando between inpatient ward admissions, A&Es, out-patient clinics and surgeries, I wonder if the average person and those who criticize the public health system understand that the grand total of 1,000,738 interactions take place with patients throughout those four institutions.

Eric Williams is 260,022; Port of Spain 249,198, Sangre Grande, 107,758, and San Fernando 384,760. So, if we fall short from time to time we apologize and we would try to get to 100 per cent customer satisfaction. But I think the population needs to know what a free publicly funded accessible health system means to this country; a million treatments for people. And that is supported by prescriptions, laboratory tests, and radiological services. And do you know what the number of these free interactions to support these one million patients is? It is a grand total of 7,523,266 tests free of—seven million. At Eric Williams they performed 2,509,664.

Dr. Gopeesingh: For what period?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: 2016, one year.

Dr. Gopeesingh: But that is blood investigation?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Everything, prescriptions, 229,000; laboratory tests, 2.1 million; radiological services, X rays and so on, 143,000. At Port of Spain the aggregate, 2,067,502; Sangre Grande, 1,283,644, and San Fernando, 1.6 million.

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So, this country, our doctors and our nurses, performed 7.5 million tests per year in 2016 to support one million patient interactions, and that does not include the hundred-plus health centres. It does not include. And does not include the millions of blood pressure and temperature tests. That is what this much maligned public health system does. That is what we do. So, if from time to time we disappoint a couple people of the one million performing 7.5 million tests, bear with us as we try to get to 100 per cent customer satisfaction. [*Desk thumping*]

But, Madam Speaker, I am on record as saying that Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex has to get up to a certain minimum degree of performance in comparison to the others. It is public knowledge I read the riot act to the chairman and the CEO in October of 2016, especially regarding the performance of the Accident & Emergency Department. And because of that and simple policy changes, between September 2016 and April 2017 we have had a 72 per cent decrease in patients awaiting a bed at the A&E. A 72 per cent decrease in patients awaiting [*Desk thumping*] a bed at the Eric Williams A&E, which was not the best performing A&E in the country. And I want to congratulate, again, every healthcare worker, every doctor, every nurse, every consultant, the CEOs who are on board with the changes that we are making, and I will say this change does not come easy. When you try to change there is going to be resistance, but we are doing everything now to benefit the patient.

Our bed turnover time is now down from hours to now under 60 minutes, and I am trying to inculcate in our healthcare providers treat your bed—and I am just saying this as an example, do not rush to condemn me for it—as a cruise liner treats his ship. You know when a cruise liner comes into port, they will disembark, clean, restock, and send back people in hours, because time is money.

Madam Chairman: Hon. Member for St. Joseph, your original 30 minutes have expired. You are entitled to 15 more minutes. Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I beg to move that the House do now adjourn to Thursday the 11th day of May, at 2.30 p.m. at which time we will continue debate on the report that is before the House at this time. [*Interruption*] And then we would proceed to debate the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 9.56 p.m.