

Official Report

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FIRST SESSION (2015-2017) OF THE ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF GUYANA UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CO-OPERATIVE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA HELD IN THE PARLIAMENT CHAMBER, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, BRICKDAM, GEORGETOWN

75TH Sitting

Tuesday, 5TH December, 2017

Assembly convened at 10.16 a.m.

Prayers

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

PUBLIC BUSINESS

GOVERNMENT'S BUSINESS

MOTION

MOTION FOR THE APPROVAL OF THE ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR 2018

WHEREAS the Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana requires that Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana for any financial year should be laid before the National Assembly;

AND WHEREAS the Constitution also provides that when the Estimates of Expenditure have been approved by the Assembly an Appropriation Bill shall be introduced in the Assembly providing for the issue from the Consolidated Fund of the sums necessary to meet that expenditure;

AND WHEREAS the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana for the financial year 2018 have been prepared and laid before the Assembly on 2017-11-27.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly approves the Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2018, of a total sum of two hundred and forty three billion, three hundred and seventy five million, two hundred and eighty eight thousand dollars (\$243,375,288,000), excluding twenty three billion, seven hundred and eighteen million, four hundred and eighty three thousand dollars (\$23,718,483,000) which is chargeable by law, as detailed therein and summarised in the undermentioned schedule, and agree that it is expedient to amend the law and to further provision in respect of finance. *[Minister of Finance]*

Assembly resumed Budget debate.

Dr. Anthony: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, the Hon. Minister of Finance took us on a very expensive journey, a journey of \$267 billion, but, at the end of this green and yellow tour, what was very clear was that the jet-setting Government elite will be enjoying the good life while the rest of us, the ordinary, hardworking people of this country, will have to pay for it.

Budgets are supposed to be about people, but where are the people in the 2018 Budget? Whether you are a worker, a farmer or a doctor, there is nothing tangible for you in this year's Budget. If you are a child, a young person or the elderly there is nothing tangible for you in this Budget. If you are a woman, a teacher or an entrepreneur, there is nothing tangible for you in this Budget. This lacklustre Budget offends everyone. In just two and a half years and four Budgets later, the Minister and Government seem tired and they badly need a rest. Perhaps, the people should give them that rest.

Under 'targets' in this year's Budget, the Minister of Finance is hoping to expand agriculture, fishing and forestry. This is quite a laudable objective. After all, agriculture employs about 21% of the workforce. But while the Government is stocking up the sector, its actions tell another story. From 2016 to 2017, there was a \$1.8 billion cut in the agriculture budget; from 2017 to 2018, there would be a further cut or perhaps a chop by \$2.3 billion.

Agriculture has the distinction of being the only sector that has consistently received a cut in budget allocation since the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Government took office. This clearly shows the Government's intention of downsizing, de-emphasising and, perhaps, downgrading agriculture.

The assault of the sugar industry continues unabated. The Government has adopted a new, narrow-minded approach to sugar and that is to unilaterally shut down major parts of the industry. In the name of saving a few miserly dollars, thousands of sugar workers will be sacrificed to save the industry. Those

innocent sugar workers and their families would become collateral damage in a spate of vindictive politics. Instead of helping and lending a helping hand to the industry, the Government prefers to kick the people and the industry while the industry is down.

This year marks the 100th anniversary since the abolition of Indentureship, a system of exploitation only surpassed by slavery where colonial masters crack their whips extracting toil, sweat and profits, where people were treated like commodity to be used, abused and dumped. It seems that the vestiges of imperial behaviour are still with us. As we speak, hundreds of sugar workers have received their Christmas gift from the APNU/AFC or should I say from Santa or Santa Claus or maybe Santa coalition, kicking them out on the streets to scrounge for a living. Is this the APNU/AFC good life?

I shudder to think what next year would bring when thousands of workers would be kicked off the estates. Perhaps, we should go back to that old People's National Congress (PNC) tradition of naming the various years after some kind of slogan or theme, and maybe I have a proposal for the Government. The Government should name next year, 2018, "The Year of Retrenchment" because thousands of sugar workers would be on the breadline. Go to the communities, the sugar estates and the surrounding areas and speak with the people.

The workers feel absolutely betrayed because, on the campaign trail, in 2015, they were promising the sugar workers 20% increase in their salary. Now, as the backstabbing drama unfolds, they cannot even give the workers katahar. They had promised 20% and now nothing for the sugar workers; instead, they are kicking them out on the road. Is this the good life that the APNU/AFC promised? Some on the benches over there like to say that they are the "champions of sugar workers". What are they championing now? Some people over there, while the sugar workers are suffering and would be on the breadline, are enjoying nice perks and fat salaries. Martin Carter once said:

"A mouth is muzzled by the food it eats to live."

Perhaps, many of the so called champions of the workers are muzzled by the pay they are getting. Where are the plans for the sugar industry? Is there a plan to retrain the sugar workers? Is there a plan to help the sugar workers find new jobs? Is there a plan to give the sugar workers soft loans so that they could start a business? Is there a plan to give the sugar workers land on these estates? Where are these plans? Is there a social net to help these families transition through these difficult times? Perhaps, in the spirit of

this season, not only would goodwill and generosity prevail, but perhaps some good sense would prevail in the Government.

I would like to commend the Minister of Finance, although he is not here, because, when one reads the section dealing with health, the Minister of Finance was very candid in what he had to say. He said:

“The challenges faced by the public health sector are many and varied: shortages of drugs and problems of procurement; continued stress on the National Referral Hospital; health infrastructure deficits; and, disparities between hinterland and coastland...”

But the key is not only to highlight it, but also to fix the mismanagement and inefficiencies in the public health sector.

Last night, I listened perhaps with a little bit of pity and amusement at the Hon. Minister of Public Health’s pronouncement on procurement. I agreed with the Minister when she boldly stated or declared that the people of Guyana will not be allowed to suffer. But I disagree with her that her magical pronouncements... [Ms. Charles-Broomes: Hon. Member and not her.] I disagree with the Hon. Member because her magical pronouncement last night has not fixed the procurement crisis in the Ministry of Public Health.

The Ministry of Public Health is the leading violator of good Tender Board procedures and norms. Let us look at the Auditor General’s Report for 2016, paragraph 447, and it pointed out that the Minutes of the Ministerial Tender Board are not kept. Yet, the Ministry has awarded contracts worth millions of dollars without any evidence, whether it was awarded to the lowest or highest bidder, whether the contracts were split, whether these contracts were advertised, when it was done, who got these contracts or whether it was sole-sourced or whether these companies were compliant. None of this information is available because the Ministry did not keep any minutes? Then we heard the lecture on how they have fixed procurement in this country.

In Minister Cummings’ 2016 Budget speech, she said:

“The Ministry of Public Health has embraced a new procurement paradigm called open competitive bidding. No more sole sourcing of medicines and medical supplies will occur...”

This was the Minister’s speech in 2016. This was the same year when we discovered the infamous Sussex Street Bond.

10.31 a.m.

Despite several investigations, despite the public outcry and despite the Minister's playing musical chairs, this deal is still in place and this was done by sole sourcing. Again, the Government's inaction speaks louder than its words. As if this was not enough, in August, 2017, the Public Procurement Commission, in a report called Investigations into Procurement of Emergency Drugs at the Guyana Public Hospital Corporation (GPHC), has pointed out how the institution sole-sourced drugs and medical supplies without the permission of the Tender Board. This is a flagrant breach of section 17 (1) and section 25 (2) of the Procurement Act, and, despite the Hon. Minister, last night, throwing that tantrum about people being held accountable, to date, no one has been held accountable.

This, unfortunately, is not an isolated incident. In fact, if you check the Auditor General's Report, he has cited 71 examples of breaches in the Procurement Act and 82 examples of breaches in the Financial Management and Accountability Act. These breaches have increased by more than 100% since 2015 and then we have gotten this lecture about how good procurement is in this country.

In the midst of the drug shortages, the Government has allowed millions of dollars' worth in drugs to expire. The Report of the Auditor General for 2016, at paragraph 438, states that 134 items, totalling 660,877 units expired in August, 2016. This will cost the taxpayers millions of dollars. Almost every region had expired drugs and, for many of them, the quantity and the value could not be ascertained.

In Region 4, again, in the Auditor General's Report at paragraph 733, at the East Bank Demerara Regional Hospital and at the 10 health centres in Region 4, it was revealed that there were large quantities of expired drugs with an approximate value of \$315.618 million. This was how much money was wasted just in Region 4. Again, because of gross mismanagement and incompetence, millions of dollars has been lost.

The Government's fresh approach to procurement: In 2015, we were told about this fresh approach where the Government would be sending huge sums of money to the regions to buy drugs and medical supplies. When we had that debate, we told them that, if you do that, you are going to encumber the process; you are going to delay procurement; you are going to create shortages, but they do not like to take good advice, so what happened was, in consecutive Budgets, they have been sending moneys to the regions. When they send the moneys to the regions, it is like a three-card trick because the region gets the money and then it has to give it back. When it is given back, then the region would get some drugs.

When the regions get the drugs, they do not know the value of the drugs they got and they do not know the quantity of drugs that they got, and many times the quantity that they requested is not met for the region. This has led to consistent drug shortages in the various health centres, hospitals and health posts. But, again, the Hon. Minister said that the problem is fixed and the Hon. Minister is an honourable woman.

Infrastructure deficits: We supported allocations for improved health infrastructure. All of us in this House would like to see better health infrastructure. Let us look at Port Kaituma Hospital Complex. Since 2015, moneys were allocated to do quite a lot of projects in Region 1 and many of these projects were supposed to be completed within six months. But, two years after, these projects are still languishing. The Auditor General's Report... *[Interruption]* This was under you. This was under your term.

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

In 2015, you placed money in there to go and do these infrastructure projects in Region 1.

The Report of the Auditor General for 2016: In 2015, Port Kaituma Hospital had to get a generator building and a generator and the original contract was \$50.915 million. This was then varied to \$79.8 million. The job was slated for completion by mid-2016, but, as of 30th August, 2017, this job is still incomplete. But the contractor was paid \$36.4 million.

Again, in 2015, construction of the infectious in-patient facility at the Port Kaituma Hospital Complex, contract worth \$40.963 million, as of December, 2016, the contractor was paid \$39.9 million. Verification was done and, on 30th August, 2017, this project is still incomplete.

Again, in 2015, a contract was awarded for the construction of a mortuary at Port Kaituma and completion of it was expected by June, 2016. Again, the contract sum was \$14.047 million and the contractor received \$13.6 million. As of August, 2016, there is no freezer and there is still no mortuary; it is totally incomplete. Construction of a nurses' hostel at the Port Kaituma Hospital: the contract was worth \$52.7 million and the contractor received \$36.9 million; work done after two years was \$2.6 million worth on this site. Needless to say, this nurses' hostel is totally incomplete.

Again, at the Port Kaituma Hospital, \$45 million was spent on the doctors' quarters for 2016. However, that contract was worth \$58.3 million and the contractor was given \$45 million. Up to now, the doctors' quarters are still to be completed.

The Ministry of Public Health or maybe the Ministry of Communities must explain why these variations in contracts. Why is there front-loading of moneys to these contractors? Why are these projects still incomplete? All of this took place at Port Kaituma. It smacks of contract splitting. Yet, we are told of how accountable the Government is going to be. No one, to date, has been held accountable for what happened at Port Kaituma.

In 2015, the then Minister of Health, Dr. George Norton, told us about a booklet and he said that the name of that booklet was *Death in the North West*. Perhaps there is need now to write a sequel to that booklet and we should name it "Mismanagement in the North West" or maybe "Corruption in the North West." That sounds better.

This is only one region. If you go through the Auditor General's Report, you would see that, in almost every region, there are similar issues of mismanagement, incompetence and corruption. We hope that the Auditor General will continue to expose these deficiencies, but, then again, this year, the Auditor General's budget was drastically slashed and we want to know whether this is a strategy to prevent this office from doing its job.

This year, the Government has, once again, regaled us with how much money it will be spending to buy equipment. We should all be happy that the public health services would be better equipped but there are persistent reports, especially from the regions, that, instead of new laboratory analysers, it seems that we are buying second-hand items or, as they say, "brand new, second-hand analysers." These work for a while and then they stop. Some are so outdated that the manufacturers have stopped making the spare parts; yet, we are buying them for our hospitals.

Many of the biomedical equipment that we have are not standardised and so this leads to a lot of problems in servicing these machines, problems in procuring the reagents and problems with interpretation of results from these machines. Then there is this case of buying equipment and not installing them or suing them, or, in some cases, when we get equipment donated to us, we have not installed them. A typical case in point is that the Government received donations, in 2015, of two computerised tomography (CT) scanners. One of these machines was earmarked for the Bartica Hospital

and the other one was for the New Amsterdam Hospital. We are happy that these machines were going to these regional hospitals, but, two years after, the machines are yet to be unpacked and made operational. Could the Minister tell us when these CT scanners would be made operational? Then, in 2017, we budgeted for a CT scanning machine for the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation. Again, this is a welcomed development to have CT scanners at the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation.

10.46 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, the box with the Computed Tomography (CT) machine stands like a sentry near one of the entrances of the hospital. It is yet to be installed and I wonder how long it would take this Government to make that CT machine operational.

It is not only there that we have problems. There is the saying *seeing is believing*, well the National Ophthalmology Hospital at Port Mourant has helped thousands of persons to regain their sight or to see better. There are many more patients today who require eye surgeries and are in a long queue, waiting to get those surgeries. Since the coalition came to Office, this proud institution that we call the National Ophthalmology Hospital, at Port Mourant, has been in the decline. No serious eye surgeries have been done for the past two years at this institution. Again, Government inertia will cause many more patients, who are partially blind, to remain, perhaps, partially blind and some of them, perhaps, would progress to be fully blind. What a journey. What a good life under this Government.

In this year's budget, when we were looking at mental health, we were told that there is going to be a mental health institute at Quamina Street. How can there be a mental health institute and they do not have a curriculum; they do not have a teaching staff; or they do not have a programme that has been accredited? What are they going to teach? Should we just have a building with no one inside? Is this what you call an institute? Who has accredited this institute? It is nice to come here and pout fancy words, but the substance and the reality is different from what people are feeling.

We then heard about how many persons were being trained for mental health. I remember right here, in this Parliament Chamber, when we had a discussion on suicide and we were asking the technical officers in that Ministry about how many persons they trained and how many they expected to train, in terms of mental health, their answers were very abysmal. Even the targets that they themselves had set in the suicide prevention report could be met. On that occasion, I had pointed it out to them and until now there

has been no corrective action. You are coming here to tell us about how many people you will be training, but I am not sure that is happening on the ground.

Not all is so gloomy. I want to say that, on 1st December, 2017, we celebrated the World AIDS Day. The world has a lot to be proud of because, now, we can see the end of the epidemic. We are now thinking that by 2030, the world can end HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome).

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member you have five minutes remaining.

Dr. Anthony: To get there, we have to embark on the ‘Treat All’ programme. I was happy last night when the Minister of Public Health announced that the Government was going to embark on the “Treat All” programme. I think that is a good thing. When one looks at the United Nations (UN) Report for 2017, it states that 58% of people living with HIV/AIDS in Guyana are receiving antiretroviral (ARVs), and 47% of those are virally suppressed. This means that we have a lot of people to treat because the ‘Treat All’ programme envisages that once a person is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, they must receive treatment. I am happy that they are doing that, but what I want to know is where this money is going to come from? This is because when I look at the budget, what we have is \$6.5 billion and that has not increased over the years, it remained static over the last three years. Where are these new commitments coming from to fill this gap?

There is also, this year, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has stopped funding vaccination in Guyana. It used to fund 11% of our vaccination budget. Again, what has happened is that, I cannot see, in the budget, that Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has provided funding for this.

There is a law called the Ministry of Health Act and by that Act, the Minister of Public Health is supposed to bring a report, annually, to this National Assembly. I am not aware of one being tendered to this National Assembly, but I hope that one will come.

Last night, the Hon. Dr. Cummings told us about this culture of caring, and after listening to her, intently, I was inspired to create a measure of how A Partnership for National Unity/ Alliance for Change (APNU/AFC) cares for the people of this country. This is not an exhaustive list. In 2017, - this year - at the West Demerara Regional Hospital, the X-ray machines are not working after 9 p.m., but the Government does not care. The anaesthetic machine at the West Demerara Regional Hospital is not working, but the Government does not care. There is a leaking roof in the bond at the West Demerara

Regional Hospital which has caused the drug bond to be in disarray, but the Government does not care. The theatre at the West Demerara Regional Hospital is not functioning, but the Government does not care. The East Bank Regional Hospital's X-ray machine has stopped working two years now, but the Government does not care. The lab services are very basic and minimal, but the Government does not care. Even the sets on the bed for the hospital, they do not have and the Government does not care. There are shortages at the East Demerara Regional Hospital; they do not have Panadol, but the Government does not care. They do not have normal saline, but the Government does not care. They have no tablets for asthma, but the Government does not care. If one has a belly ache and he/she goes there, they do not have Buscopan, and the Government does not care.

When one looks at all the other budget in 2015, the Government had promised a presidential commission for chronic non-communicable diseases, which is still to be established, but Government does not care. The construction of the West Demerara Training Centre was in the budget, but there is nothing now and the Government does not care. At the Charity Hospital, they were to buy a generator from since 2015 and as of 2017, there is no generator. The Government does not care. When you look at...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, your time is up.

[Applause]

Minister of Public Telecommunications [Ms. Hughes]: Mr. Speaker, Members of this honourable House, I rise in wholehearted support of Budget 2018, which is very aptly themed: *The Journey towards the Good Life Continues*.

This Administration's approach to governance, to growing the Guyanese economy, to improving the lives and livelihoods of our citizens, no matter where they live, has been clear and concise since 2015. I will outline our transformational initiatives in the telecommunications sector that are already giving our citizens a taste of the good life. Despite all the hot air emanating from the other side of the House and their continuous attempts to deceive our people, even they cannot convincingly argue that our country's infrastructural developments are not taking place and producing a better nation. The strides made towards Information and Communication Technology (ICT) innovation are producing a new ICT industry that is setting up our young citizens to play active roles in their own lives and in the development of new, traditional and emerging industries.

It is important to note that the United Nation (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise the importance of ICT technology in development. In fact, there is a special target, Target 9 of the SDGs, and I quote that target which states:

“to significantly increase access to ICT and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in the LDCs (least-developed countries)...”

In fact, former UN Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, went to great lengths to explain that access to the internet really is a fundamental and human right. It is against this background that the mandate of the Ministry of Public Telecommunications is to transform Guyana into a knowledge-based, well-educated society with people and businesses that are productive and globally competitive.

Information and Communication Technology has become the main ingredient for development all over the world and Guyana will not be left behind in that area. The year 2017 has been a hectic year but I want to assure my Colleague on the other side, the last speaker, that there is absolutely no way that we are tired. We are moving rapidly ahead. With that said, I am proud to say that the Ministry of Public Telecommunications has achieved the majority of its benchmarks.

Based on a very detailed study that was completed in December 2016, we designed a 5-year project to take the Internet and Government’s e-services to our hinterland, poor and remote communities. This project is called the ICT Access and e-services for Hinterland, Poor and Remote Communities Project. It will be funded by the Guyana/Norway Agreement under the Guyana REDD + Investment Fund (GRIF), and will soon be managed by the United Nations Development Project (UNDP). I am happy to say that just last Friday, we signed on the dotted line and that project starts in January 2018.

That project will bring tremendous benefits. Over 89,000 residents, in approximately 170 communities, will have access to over 200 ICT hubs that will be created over a 5-year period. They will have access to online, public e-Services such as filing tax returns and applying for business compliance certificates.

Whilst ICT plays a central role, the ultimate goal... [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we should try to avoid having our cell phones being active to disrupt the proceedings in the National Assembly. I address these remarks to the Hon. Members, but they are equally applicable to all other persons who are in our Chamber. Please.

Ms Hughes: Thank You, Mr. Speaker. I was actually talking about the important role that ICT will play. The ultimate goal is to enhance the sustainable human development of residents in those hinterland, poor and remote communities.

In 2017, we have completed the restructuring of the National Data Management Authority (NDMA) and it was merged with the executing arm of our Ministry - the e-Government Unit. This was to enable us to satisfy the Government's commitment to improve the delivery of public services as well as citizen-to-government interaction. The new purpose of the NDMA is to execute all e-Governance programmes, leveraging e-Government as the platform for sustainable economic development. I am happy to say that utilising our e-Government network, which the NDMA now manages, has enable us to provide free internet access to 53 Government Ministries and agencies, to more than 95 secondary schools, to the 3 campuses of the University of Guyana, the Cyril Potter College of Education, 37 technical and vocational institutions including the Carnegie School of Home Economics, to the regional offices, to the Regional Educational Offices and to several non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

11.01 a.m.

I am happy and excited to boast that the NDMA has worked closely with communities and villages in Regions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10 and has set up 86 ICT Hubs and counting, with computers donated by the Government, providing access to nearly 200,000 citizens.

The establishment of these hubs have been a regular feature clearly and often reported in our newspapers. We have also connected our regional offices, public hospitals, airports, the Guyana Police Force, the Guyana Revenue Authority (GRA), the Guyana Power and Light Inc. (GPL), the Guyana Defence Force (GDF) and several other places.

Finally, in March 2018, the Centre for Excellence, which we had built with funds from the Government of India, would be opened. This centre would provide specialised ICT training to the members of the public sector. We are very excited to say that already the centre has conducted three training programmes, which trained over 100 persons within the ICT industry in our public sector.

The other important project that would start early next year is our National Broadband Expansion Project which is funded by the China Exim Bank. We have completed all the applications and we are awaiting approval. That project would bring tremendous benefits in the area of ICT to our health, education and a range of other services. When we battle the challenges in our health services, in terms of providing

services... and we must admit that those challenges had been there for the past 20 years - leaking buildings and lack of washroom facilities are not new things. Therefore, I am proud to say that this project will deal with all those issues because we are bringing ICT - the opportunity to bring online learning and training connectivity for health services, and for education, to these industries.

It is important to note that, contrary to the fake news disseminated by my misinformed Hon. Colleague, Member of Parliament, Ms. Campbell-Sukhai, at a recent press conference, places likes Masakenari never had internet connectivity before this year. I want to reassure her that we are not recycling old People's Progressive Party/Civic's (PPP/C's) projects. This year, funding has been provided and has given internet access, through a lease with Digicel, to Linden, Bartica, Kwakwani, Mahdia, Port Kaituma, Santa Rosa, Matthew's Ridge, Baramita and also satellite services to nine hinterland locations, including Waramadong, Masakenari, Aishalton, Annai, St. Ignatius, Iwokrama, Sand Creek, Karasabai and Paramakatoi. I am taking the time to list all of these because, for too long, we have been spouting the inaccuracy that nothing is being done in our hinterland regions. I am happy to say that we are now beginning to transform them.

I want to also mention that the Hon. Member, Ms. Burton-Persaud, came to this House and dared to criticise the pace of ICT development in the hinterland. That is what I consider to be a travesty. Today, we pay premium price to connect these regions. Why is that so? It is because the PPP/C's commitment to build a new fibre optic cable that cost \$2 billion that went right down the drain was never delivered.

I say to the Members in this honourable House, when my Colleagues on the other side are screaming and shouting about corruption, where did that \$2 billion go? I would love to know. Now they are shouting in the usual abusive way "You are in power now, fix it." Well yes, are fixing it. We are going across this country, across all sectors and picking up the pieces and fixing them. It is taking longer than we thought, but we are going to get there.

Let me inform you of another disseminator of more fake news. Again, the Hon. Member, Ms. Burton-Persaud, yesterday in this House, stated that there was little ICT development. To quote her:

"ICT development has been marking time."

I would remind my Colleagues that Ms. Burton-Persaud got her years mixed up. Information and communications technology development was marking time in 2012 when the PPP/C established the

same e-Government network that laid dormant for three years, which this APNU/AFC Government put into place in 2015. Who is really marking time?

I also want to highlight some more fake news which was thrown at unsuspecting Guyanese. Thankfully, the former Minister of Amerindian Affairs, who, at a PPP press conference, expressed the view that Budget 2018 had nothing to bridge the divide between the hinterland and the coast. Members of this honourable House, I have said to you, I have given you the numbers and I have given you the locations. I would just say to her next time “just the facts, please.” I want to reassure my Indigenous brothers and sisters that we are committed. We went to several of your villages and provided sustainable internet access which allows you to sell your hammocks, your tomato ketchup and your tourism services online. You and I know that many of you are doing just that.

This budget provides \$50 million to improve solar solutions for the same ICT Hubs that we are connecting in your areas - \$15 million to procure more fibre optic cables to connect you and other parts of our country; \$16 million for more internet access points; and \$20 million for power redundancy at our data centre.

We have provided internet access to your students. I have been to the Bina Hill Institute and to the St. Ignatius High School and I have seen and talked with you. Now I know that you are running four of your six soon to come radio stations. These hinterland communities, for the first, have the ability to inform, educate and entertain themselves with their own information, all these new initiatives are from the same APNU/AFC Government that so many on the other side, love to hate.

This year, we have expanded the e-Government network to include 42 Integrated Financial Management Information Systems (IFMIS) agencies, providing increased operational support to the Ministry of Finance. We are now hosting several Government websites and email accounts.

This single development has really started the process of transformation to a smarter digital Guyana in 2018 that would be bringing tremendous benefits in the area of online learning, in health and through the connection and creation of smart health centres with better health facilities and smart classrooms, is in fact the development of our internet hubs.

In 2017, 10 new hubs were commissioned specifically in Berbice. I mentioned, of course, that right now we have commissioned over 86 of those hubs. I am happy to say that in Linden we were also able to complete 9 hubs. Pilot public internet access points have been set up at the National Aquatic Centre, the

Lenora Track and Field Centre, and at the headquarters of the National Data Management Authority. In early 2019, we would be working with a few of the NGOs and the Ministry of Social Protection to provide free internet access. I want to say, safe internet access to children's homes so that they too could benefit.

Mr. Speaker, as you may already know, the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination now requires that School-Based Assessments (SBAs) be now submitted online. That is why, to ensure that we have internet access in schools, we have connected, as I have mentioned, 94 schools, which is so important. We are ensuring that, regardless of where you are in Guyana, whether you have internet at home or not, there is an ICT hub close to where you live and to where you would be able to go and get free internet access, training and support.

Many of the Members on the other side had lambasted and complained that little is being done for our young people. I want to say that all that I have explained to you have actually been created, with the help of the Ministry of Public Telecommunications; the environment upon which our young generation of Guyanese have been able to shine. I want to share a few of them, all below the age of 35 - IntellectStorm - are the developers of the directory www.gyproducts. Many of you might have known it from the Jubilee Celebrations. They still exist. It is the fastest way to know what is showing at a cinema. They have already developed a payment system: www.paymentsgy. This product allows users to pay for commodities online using the Guyana Telephone and Telegraph Company's (GTT) Mobile Money Business.

With the current World Bank/Government of Guyana - Bank of Guyana - Financial Payments Systems Project, which was again reported in the news, I am not sure how my learned Friend, Ms. Burton-Persaud, seemed not to know about it. That project is tackling the very important challenge of being able to pay for services online. Another group, Vision 75 – the winners of the 2016 Hackathon has already developed a product that allows citizens to electronically provide alerts to government agencies, whether they have to do with crime, damaged roads or whatever. Another innovative group Innosys – the winners of 2017 Code Sprint, have actually developed an online agriculture commodity exchange system to match buyers and sellers of all agricultural products so that they could conduct business transactions. That is the kind of transformation ICT is bringing to this country. Innosys was also the winners of the 2017 Hackathon and they have developed an online tax collection and payment system, specifically for Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs). During this period, there are a range of other digital

entrepreneurs. Many of you might be using our local version of Uber to book your taxis. Of course, we have 'We Own Space', a local entrepreneurship hive and DevEx. They are all producing products and services online.

I want to say that our internet - just about six weeks ago - had over 300 young students, enthusiastic young people and individuals, interested ICT development, right there for an entire week, having an opportunity to learn from the best in the Caribbean region and our local professionals.

I want to say that we have continued to do our work. We are working with the Ministry of Education to process examinations results for both the National Grade Six and the Grade Nine Assessments; the Ministry of Social Protection is to streamline our pensions payment plan; and, of course, with my Colleague, the Minister of Citizenship, to refine our passport application process. Of course, I mentioned the Ministry of Finance and the IFMIS programme. In order to sustain these activities in 2018, \$700 million have been allocated. As I mentioned, we have our National Broadband Project and the National ICT Strategy is being developed. This is a 10-year strategy. We are now in the process of doing consultations on that strategy.

New legislation is very important for this sector. Intellectual Property Protection – we want to make sure that Guyana is able to put itself in a position where it could provide security to any off-shore or local provider that wants to know that its intellectual knowledge is protected. Other legislation that we would be working on in 2018 includes the E-Commerce and E-Transaction legislation and, of course, the Cyber Crime legislation, which is already in the National Assembly.

We are moving ahead with the creation of our telecommunications agency, which comes under the Ministry. This, of course, as you know, is part of our liberalisation process. Already for that agency we have created infrastructure and a range of deliverables so that we are down to start before the end of the first quarter. As I have said before, we have not signed off on our liberalisation agreement with AT&T and GT&T, but we are making good progress.

11.16 a.m.

The Ministry has also commissioned studies to ensure that, when it comes to spectrum management and frequency management policy, we have come up with a system that is workable.

I want to mention the post offices. The post offices in Guyana, as many of us know, have been neglected for several decades. I am happy to say that, as happens in other post offices throughout the world, we are transforming the postal services. Many of you might have heard of Swift Shipping which has been doing great – it is a great... [*Inaudible*] It is a shipping programme by which you are able to get a mailbox in Miami. We have acquired warehouse facilities. So, I urge you to ensure that you do not hand deliver your cards this Christmas, but that you put a stamp on it and also have them shipped through the post office. We are also creating ICT hubs at our post offices and many of you may have known of the Kitty Post Office, which is a shining example. Right there, we have a small internet hub with, again, internet connectivity and laptops for anybody in the area that needs to visit.

An important function of the National Frequency Management Unit (NFMU), recently, has been preparing broadcasts for the conversion from analogue to digital broadcasting, and we have held a consultation on that. We are working hand in hand with the broadcasters.

Now, I want to respond specifically to some of the criticisms and questions that were raised. Again, the Hon. Ms. Gillian Burton-Persaud, Member of Parliament (MP), questioned about the promised lightning speed of the internet. Member, Ms. Burton-Persaud, I do not want to remind you that we could have been further along the way had we not thrown \$2 billion down the drain. You also mentioned about a \$30,000 charge per laptop, and I want to say that, unfortunately, again you are getting a little mixed up. That is actually the programme under the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE), which has been in operations for many years. In fact, under the previous Administration, and of course, you may have known that, if you had done some research, it is a revolving fund, and that it was setup under the World Bank. Under that programme one does pay \$30,000 for the laptop.

Again, I do want to say that, unfortunately, there is a lot of misinformation coming from a broadcast environment. I feel strongly that the importance of accuracy of information is critical, especially in this House. When we are Members of the media, transmitting information to the general public, we have a responsibility to accurately inform them. Yesterday, we had huge shouts and laughter, and individual scoffing at the \$500 increase in pension. I do want to mention that in 2003, the former Government increased pension by \$92; by \$90 in 2004; by \$95 in 2005 and thank goodness to the then Opposition, the pension was increased by \$1,495 – that was our work. But guess what? In 2010, the increase went back down to \$300. I want our listeners and the people of Guyana to know that, in just two and a half years, this Government has increased pensions by 49%.

The plight of our sugar workers is dear to all of us. We continue to worry and I want to reassure the sugar workers that we have been working assiduously to find proper solutions to this problem. What I want to say is that, so easily we forget that the problems of the sugar industry started 20-30 years ago. It is sad that the last Government did little or nothing to solve them. We forget too that they – the former Government – shutdown the La Bonne Intention (LBI) Estate, the Diamond Estate, and closed the Enmore Estate to setup an \$18 million sugar packaging factory, which I think still has not worked. But guess what? Given our commitment to the sugar industry, in 33 months, we have given contribution, support, bailout or whatever you want to call it, to the tune of \$32 billion. That works out to more than \$1 billion per month and this year we continued our commitment by giving a further \$6.2 billion to the industry. I will tell you what is sad; I went to the Wales Estate and had discussions with several of the sugar workers. What was shameful is that when they were talking about the challenges that they have, do you know what the number one challenge was? It was the fact that their National Insurance Scheme (NIS) payments were not paid over for the last 15 years. Any Government that did not ensure that the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) was paying over those same pensions ... [*Interruption*] ...when we talk about fake news, we know and the louder you shout, I can shout louder; it is not a problem.

Hon. Speaker and Members of this most honourable House, I am excited at the vision that is being created and implemented for a new Guyana. In our ICT sector, as you can see, we are training, we are creating jobs and we are changing lives. I had the good fortune to be at a youth training programme on Sunday, and to see the innovative individuals that are already producing their own processed fruits and all kinds of different applications and agricultural products. I met a lady who is now advertising her fruit delivery service online. I met another lady, about two months ago, who is selling tamarind balls to people in the diaspora, online. Therefore, I say, we are slowly but surely, picking up the pieces, yes, of the past, but moving forward to a very vibrant future.

Given all that I have said, all I that I have shared, I am extremely optimistic that this ICT sector will, for the first time, finally begin to transform our dear land of Guyana. I have no hesitation in supporting this budget and commending it to this most honourable House for passage.

Thank you. [*Applause*]

Mr. Bharrat: Hon. Members, ladies and gentlemen, I am indeed honoured to represent the people of Guyana, as I rise to make my contribution to Budget 2018, on this cold and slippery morning, much like

the A Partnership for National Unity and Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC), and its four budgets – slippery and cold-hearted to the ordinary Guyanese people. As a matter of fact, Hon. Minister Hughes tried to slip one through on us. Hon. Minister, maybe your technical people did not provide the correct details. It should be known that Masakenari got internet connectivity long before the APNU/AFC Government, thanks to the Conservation International Guyana and the Government of Guyana. The Minister further went on at length and spoke about the excessive development and fixing all the problems. According to the Public Sector Investment Report, at June 2017, the Ministry of Public Telecommunications spent 5% of its budgetary allocations, and by some magical wand, at the ending of the year, it will spend 75%.

I rise with a sense of relief and anguish at the same time. Relief in the sense that the Government has finally touched down from that colossal trip to power mania and squander mania, and regain touch with reality, the very reality Guyanese have been facing for the last two and a half years. As we say in Guyana, *the bubble burst*. And anguish, I say anguish because, in my mind, Budget 2018 seems tailored to further enrich selected groups of cronies and to offer political patronage; while not offering anything to the ordinary working Guyanese who are forced to live from paycheque to paycheque, and from their daily cook-up and plantain chips sales. It is a Budget that lacks vision and imagination, but continues the Government's *Robin Hood Policy* of wealth redistribution and not wealth creation.

Permit me from the onset to congratulate the hardworking staff and the technical consultants from the Ministry of Finance for the early presentation of Budget 2018. It would be remiss of me not to recognise the Hon. Minister of Finance. Mr. Winston Jordon's tendency of etching his name into the history books of Guyana by first presenting successive early Budgets, and then as the Minister of Finance to be featured so prominently with that characteristic broad smile on billboards across the country, which only serves to notify the nation of Budget Day and not what Budget 2018 offers the people of Guyana. The cost of these billboards, I am sure, amounts to millions – wasteful, considering the dismal macroeconomic outlook and the fiscal space. I am sure that the Hon. Minister will rebut to say that they were donations, just like the plethora of arches lining the roadways across the country. If so, indeed, could these so-called donations not be channelled into areas where our people could have benefitted? Could it not be used to enhance the welfare of our people?

There are shortages of drugs throughout the country, especially in the hinterland regions. There are playgrounds that need fixing – one not too far from the famous Presidential Arch on the East Coast

Demerara. There are deplorable roads in the Diamond New Housing Scheme, Canals Polder No.1 and 2, Black Bush Polder and many other areas which these goodly donations could have benefitted the people of Guyana.

A simple perusal of the budget will show that it is laced with Government spending and routine works. There are no innovative or long term measures to foster economic growth and job creation. Permit me to turn my attention to the over abused and fading dream of a good life for Guyanese. In 2015, it was *A fresh start to the good life in a green economy*; in 2016, *Stimulating Growth, Restoring Confidence: The Good Life Beckons*; in 2017, *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*; and finally, in 2018, *The Journey to the Good Life Continues*. When one listens to the themes of the past four budgets and reflects on the state of the economy and the standard of living of our people, it does seem like a *Mills and Boon* or *Harlequin* romance sequel – fictitious and full of heart breaks.

My Colleague, the Hon. Irfaan Ali, suggested a good theme for 2019, *Continuing on the Slippery Pathway into the Green Wilderness*. [Mr. Patterson: Do you play with dollies too?] I read a lot of books. I took my limited time to highlight these themes because the mistake that the APNU/AFC Government made, since taking Office, was not to accept that Guyanese were already enjoying a good life under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Administration.

11.31 a.m.

We heard the Hon. Minister Patterson speaking about the good life, the better life and the best life. Maybe the Minister is just practising her comparative and superlative. The situation has deteriorated so badly after the last two and a half years that the Hon. Minister Jordan, finally out of the bubble, said that they never promised a “good life” in the first term. What about the 100-day plan and the four budgets presented to date? The 100-day plan speaks of significant increases in wages and salaries for teachers, nurses and the disciplined services among others. What did they get after almost one thousand days with the APNU/AFC Government in power? A meagre increase while the Ministers of Government are enjoying the hefty 50% increase since June, 2015.

Yet another broken promise doubling old-age pension immediately, what is in Budget 2018 for our senior citizens? It is a measly \$500 or better said by my friend in Linden, 16 Guyana dollars per day - \$16. With the current state of our economy and the cost of living, this is an embarrassment to the people of our country. The Opposition calls on the Government to reinstate the subsidies on light and water for

pensioner. The Hon. Minister spoke about the small increases, but what he did not mention is that the Government was subsidising light and water for pensioners amounting to thousands of dollars, and further to remove value added tax (VAT) on light and water for all citizens of Guyana.

It will be fallacious of me not to commend the Government for placing much emphasis on the education sector, speaking as an educator myself, like my honourable friend Mr. Rutherford. I am sure the construction of schools at Good Hope and La Parfaite Harmonie are positive steps in the right direction along with training of our teachers. Our young people are of utmost importance, but with 12,684 students who graduated from the Secondary level and over 2,000 young professionals graduating from the University of Guyana in 2017, I would be happy, if I could be pointed to the part of the budget presentation which speaks of investments and job for these graduates.

However, a major concern remains the execution of the education budget. The very report, the Public Sector Investment Programme Report, shows spending of 13% at the ending of June 2017. It was projected that it would be just over 50%. This Government must certainly be regarded as the best half year Government of all time, looking at this report and the amazing figures that would be achieved at the ending of this year, in keeping with our proper procurement practices and up keeping the laws governing the awarding of Government contracts. Speaking about young people, there are so concerns, but I myself am not sure who is responsible for youths in this country. As a matter of fact, there is no Ministry of 'youth', anymore. It is a mere department. Now we have seen in Budget 2018, the allocation for youth and sport is now under the Ministry of Presidency. The question is: Who is responsible for the youths?

The national youth policy was passed in this House in October 2016, yet there is not a single implementation. The Budget 2017 reported that 1,976 youths were trained under the Hinterland Employment Youth Service (HEYS) project. Where are these young people today? Are there follow up mechanisms to monitor and guide these youths? Further, Minister Keith Scott mentioned in his presentation yesterday that 1,692 youths were trained. Could the Hon. Minister say where are these young people employed, or if they are employed at all?

Minister Trotman would have summed it up well in his post budget interview, Budget 2018 is not meant to excite, but to stabilise." If one should examine the Minister's statement, it simply means that the budget contains no direct benefit for the working people and is devoid of long-term policies for job creation in order to stimulate the dying economy. It is more of a routine constitutional act to approve

Government spending. Further, it is once again, an admission that the economy is falling into the proverbial dark hole, due to mismanagement, corruption and arrogance towards the needs of the people.

According to the Finance Minister's speech, the economy keeps growing at an average of 3% between the years 2015 and 2017. However, I am baffled as to how the Hon. Minister came up with his figures. Is this truly reflected in the lives and the livelihood of our people? What is evident is that in the last two and a half years, the US to Guyana dollars has been fluctuating. Thousands have lost their jobs and thousands will continue to do so. As we speak, only yesterday there were 3,500 sugar workers who are now on the breadline. There is no new investment and economy has become stagnated, significantly reducing the spending power of our people. The reality of the situation could be heard from the street corners, the bus stops, the bus parks, market places and even in the watering holes, as some of use frequent. You would hear the cries of the people, and I am sure, as we in the Opposition, the Government would have heard the popular comments, "*business dead bad, people nah get money*", or my personal favourite, "things have been far better under the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C)".

It is a common thing for Guyanese to mind their neighbours' business instead of trying to fix issues in their own house. The Hon. Minister in his presentation drew comparison between Guyana and its neighbours, Trinidad and Suriname, poor economic performance. Even though no mention of Venezuela was made, I would like to do so in support in the Minister's argument. However, with that said, I would like to also bring to the attention to this honourable House that these two countries, Trinidad and Venezuela, are the largest oil producing countries in the hemisphere. How then could oil be the solution to all of our economic problems? A lot of emphasis is being placed on this emerging oil and gas sector, to which the Government seems to be pinning all hopes for a promised "good life." The Minister of Finance, knowingly or unknowingly, alluded to this in his conclusion that the APNU/AFC never promised a "good life" in its first term. I must say that beside the cries and the pleas of the electorates, the Ministers still seems very confident of a second term in office. I say, that the constitutional right and the will of the people must always be respected.

From the very inception the PPP/C welcomes this new sector. As a matter of fact, it is the PPP/C administration that started work in this area. However, oil could be a blessing and it could be a curse as well, but it will never be the answer to all of Guyana's problems or the answer to economic prosperity, as being portrayed by our Government. In this regard, we, in the Opposition, have been calling on the Government time and again to keep our traditional sectors alive, especially sugar, rice and bauxite, the

very resources and industries that are responsible for our existence in this part of the world today. This was very well alluded to by my friend, the Hon. Member Carrington, when he spoke about the leather trade and the agricultural projects that would be rolled out on the highway when oil production starts. Oil production, the world over, if not managed properly, could result in the curse to a nation as we have seen in countries as Nigeria and Angola and our very neighbours, Venezuela and Trinidad. To this date, speaking on management, the contract on ExxonMobil is a secret. I am almost certain that some of the Members sitting on the Government side of this House, and maybe who are speaking now too, have not seen this contract to date.

The people of Guyana wishes to know how they will benefit directly from the oil sector. That is the fundamental question that must be answered by the Government. The people want to know if they will pay \$500 for a gallon of gas at the gas station, if they would pay \$1,000 for a 20-pound cylinder cooking gas, whether the light bills will be reduced by half. What are the benefits for the private sectors and the manufacturing sector? Will the public servants have a 50% increase as well? These are the questions that the people of this country need answers to and these are the questions that the Government must answer to the people. This is what we expected in Budget 2018, taking into consideration that production starts in only two years from now.

I know my time is running out, but I would just like to touch quickly on our unscheduled and daily blackouts by the Guyana Power and Light (GPL). We know that Wartsila was replaced by a friendly company which is responsible for the poor maintenance. While Guyanese are suffering, the Government played no part in ensuring that the “good life” is being realised.

In conclusion, there is an old saying, “Don't reinvent the wheel when probably all it needs is to be realigned”. The Opposition calls on the Government to govern for all Guyanese as promised in their manifesto. It is to prioritise Government spending so that tangible and direct benefits could be created for our people and attract real investments that will create jobs and wealth for our people.

I close with a quote from the former President of the United States of America (USA), Mr. Barack Obama.

“If the people cannot trust their government to do the job for which it exists - to protect them and to promote their common welfare - all else is lost.”

Thank you Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Minister of Agriculture [Mr. Holder]: In today's world we are faced with more extreme weather, more resource scarcity, more volatile markets and more demanding consumers, coupled with our need to continue producing healthy food for everyone, now and in the future. This year's budget meets these challenges directly and indirectly, and at the same time, allows us to capitalise on our comparative advantage. For this, I join with the rest of my colleagues in congratulating the Hon. Minister of Finance for a budget well received. In 2018, agriculture will continue to contribute 14% to the economy through inputs in the areas of livestock, fisheries, crops, drainage and irrigation, education, hydrometeorology, pesticide management and marketing. I must add that agriculture has received over \$19.4 billion in 2018, highlighting Government's unrelenting commitment to agriculture.

The vision of the Government for the agricultural sector is the provision of technical support for robust, evidence-driven services that will facilitate the development of a modernised, productive, efficient and competitive agricultural sector that contributes to the sustainable economic growth and the achievement of the green state economy in Guyana. To do this, it all starts with our ability to produce high-quality data for the agricultural sector. This Government has provided this. Furthermore, we will be executing our first agricultural census in 65 years, an event which is supposed to happen every ten years.

11.46 a.m.

Information from this census will give us an understanding of the progress and future prospects of all agricultural industries and their products and assist in determining strategies to ensure sustainable farming.

The country's framework for governing the sugar industry has to evolve. It must become more in tune with reducing vulnerabilities, resolving institutional and legacy issues and diversifying away from sugar to more sustainable industries. Since taking office Government has supported Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) with \$32 billion, with a \$6.3 billion allocation in 2018 and another \$2.3 billion estimated for 2019. It is obvious evidence of a caring government. However, capital investment of \$12 billion will be required over the next three years 2018-2020 to ensure that the sugar production targets are met. Despite the magnitude of subsidies there has been no positive impact on the financial state of GuySuCo. The economy simply cannot afford this.

The corporation commenced the implementation of the plans for the sugar industry as set out in the 'State Paper.' The plans call for three sugar estates, Albion, Blairmont and Uitvlugt Sugar Estates, to

continue with its canes and sugar operations. Skeldon Sugar Estate will be divested, Rose Hall, Providence and Enmore Sugar Estates are to be divested or diversified and Wales Sugar Estates is scheduled for diversification. In this regard a Special Purpose Unit has been set up to handle the divestment/diversification of these estates. At Uitvlugt, cane farmers will account for over 50% of the canes supplied to the factory and every effort will be made to increase on this proportion. With improvements in productivity, cane yields are expected to rise from the current levels of 55 tonnes cane per hectare to 78.43 tonnes cane per hectare in 2018, a 41% increase. The improvement in yields will see the three remaining estates attaining close to their productivity potential. Sugar production will rise from 115.447 tonnes sugar in 2018 to 145.247 tonnes in 2020, an increase of 26%.

To further counteract the effects of the changes in the European Union sugar regime, the corporation is looking to produce plantation white sugar for selling into the local, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and USA markets. With other CARICOM sugar producing countries also planning on producing plantation white sugar, the strategy is to displace the importation of refined sugar regionally. The application of a common external tariff (CET) on extra regional refined sugar would greatly assist in this regard. The unit cost of production is expected to decrease to 24.5USc/lb sugar, (currently over 40USc/lb). There is a number of cost saving initiatives which have been identified to assist in lowering the unit cost of production even further.

A feasibility study on cogeneration at Albion and Uitvlugt Sugar Estates funded by the European Union (EU) is indicating that cogeneration at both estates is a viable option with the excess power sold to the national grid. Another study funded by the EU for transitioning severed employees to becoming farmers is well advanced. The results of this study will be of benefit to those severed employees who have expressed willingness to transition into farming on lands leased to them by the Government.

Despite the uncertainty that surrounded the rice industry following the collapse of the Venezuelan market in 2014, the industry managed to surpass production and export targets. In 2015, 687,784 metric tonnes of rice were produced, the highest production of rice ever achieved in Guyana, of which 537,334 metric tonnes were exported. However, there was reduced production in 2016 due to the effects of the El Nino phenomenon. In 2017, rice production is projected to increase by 12.7% to 602,087 metric tonnes, this increase is due to improvements in yields and access to new markets. As of November 27, paddy production figures were 956,327 metric tonnes with farmers receiving as much as \$3,500 per bag of paddy in Regions 4 and 5.

In 2018, rice production is expected to increase by 2.5% to 617,353 tonnes. Exports declined by 1% in January to October, 2017 to 436,826 metric tonnes when compared with the same period in 2016. However, due to higher world prices in 2017, the export value was 5% higher at US\$163,605,760,000 during January to October. Exports for 2018 are projected at 520,000 metric tonne valued US\$176,890,000 to 34 countries. I am also pleased to report that we have secured five new export markets, namely Canada, USA, Cuba, Mexico and Peru. Mexico and Cuba came on board in 2017. Thus far, Cuba has imported 15,513 metric tonnes with additional contracts to be fulfilled before December 2017.

Under this Government, productivity of rice moved from 5.3 tonne per hectare in 2014 to 5.5 tonne per hectare in 2017. One hundred and eighty-eight persons were trained as Licensed Graders and accreditation was received for Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB)'s Central Laboratory to the International

Organization for Standardization /International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC) 17025.

The Burma Rice Research Station has 60 acres under cultivation of a new, high yielding variety that is expected to be released to farmers by April, 2018. The industry will be producing high quality seed of internationally acceptable quality, establish a national seed certification programme and produce three new varieties, one aromatic and two hybrids by 2019 via the Malaysia Rice Production Reverse Linkage Project. Furthermore, more than 1,200 farmers were trained through technology transfer in various disciplines within the industry, including paddy grading, management of pest and diseases and production practices through the "six-point package".

Hinterland agricultural development continues to feature prominently on our agenda. As stated in our manifesto, the development of the hinterland is a priority, with implementation of policies for the development of the Intermediate and Rupununi Savannahs as well as other hinterland communities.

In 2017, the Sustainable Agricultural Development Project, funded by Inter-America Development Bank (IDB) and the Government of Guyana, was formalised. Plans were finalised for the rehabilitation and expansion of the agriculture station at Ebini in the Berbice Savannahs and the establishment of a new station at Pirara in the Rupununi. Implementation of these plans will commence in 2018. As I stated in my previous budget speech, emphasis will be placed on cassava, peanuts and orchard crops and cattle at Ebini, whilst at Pirara, the focus would be on cattle, rice, orchard crops and cassava. Orchard production

was increased by an additional 20 acres at Ebini in 2017. At Hosororo, an additional 20-acre farm was established to supply planting material for turmeric, black pepper, ginger, avocado and citrus. In October this year, we commissioned a state-of-the-art turmeric factory at Hosororo. This has been a welcome development for the farmers of the Barima/Waini Region.

Similarly, a 20-acre farm was operationalised at Kato in Region 8 to demonstrate commercial agricultural production. A facility was also completed at Kamarang in Region 7 from which farmers would be able to access technical and advisory services. A similar facility is currently being established at Paramakatoi.

Support was provided to the sun-dried tomato project at Paramakatoi. Like the processing of turmeric, the project also demonstrates the value chain approach to commodity development which we are pursuing.

In 2018, we would also be introducing mechanised planting and harvesting on savannah lands in Region 9. This is to ensure that adequate supplies of fresh cassava tubers are available to the two processing facilities at Woweta and Moco Moco. Work was also initiated on the establishment of water harvesting systems in Region 9, a key ingredient to support agricultural development in the Rupununi Savannahs.

The other crops sector would have recorded growth of at least 2.3% for the past three years, with projections to continue on this positive path. It should be noted that the prices of fruits and vegetables have remained stable. Diversification of the sector has been an ongoing activity. New breadfruit, watermelon and sweet pepper varieties were introduced. No importation of sweet peppers currently occurs. White potato and onion varieties have been identified for local cultivation. Much attention has been placed on spice production, especially in the Barima/Waini region. The turmeric factory at Hosororo will give added impetus to this industry. We will continue to place emphasis on the other crops sector since this sector contributes significantly to food and nutrition security, exports and the source of raw materials for value addition.

The coconut industry continues to expand with the resurgence of markets for coconut products. The Government has been actively pursuing the revitalisation of the coconut industry through National Agricultural Research and Extension Institute (NAREI) and the Hope Coconut Estate. It is estimated that an additional 5,000 acres will be established within the next three years. An additional 1,000 acres are currently rehabilitated in the Pomeroon. In this regard, NAREI has been working very closely with the

owners to ensure that coconut production is maximised to improve agronomical practice as well as the supply of planting materials.

Hope Estate was in ruins on the new Government's assumption to office. Today the estate readily provides coconut producers with adequate amounts of high quality coconut seedlings at an affordable cost, with its capacity to produce 50,000 coconut seedlings per year among other things. By 2018 that capacity will increase to 100,000 seedlings per year, a 100% increase. A futuristic 36-acre demonstration plot with an estimated 2,000 coconut trees planted of the 18-month, three-year and five-year varieties will be established. Inter-cropping with cash crops and hydroponics will be components of this project. Additionally, partnership cultivation of coconuts at President's College will be an ongoing project. This project will continue for the entire duration of 2018.

Guyana's remaining mangrove forests continue to face threats by a range of natural and man-made factors. Natural threats to mangroves in Guyana include natural erosive and accretive cycles characteristic of the coastline of the Guianas, the area from the Amazon River to the Orinoco River, and large scale mud bank movements. The programme for mangrove, for the next three years, will focus on (i) mangrove conservation and sustainable management; (ii) restoration of degraded sites; (iii) research; (iv) education and awareness and (v) increased technical capacity through training.

The livestock industry is projected to grow 4.4% in 2017 and 2% in 2018 compared with a decline of 5.8% in 2016. Improved consumer demand and producer confidence in beef, milk, mutton and chevon, pork and table eggs contributed to the increase in 2017. Factors contributing to higher productivity and the expansion of this sector include improvements in nutrition, feeding systems, genetic quality and management information and skills.

The Black Giant Dual-Purpose Bird Programme is an initiative of the Guyana Livestock Development Authority (GLDA), which has as its objective the reduction of the dependency of the importation of poultry meat into the hinterland regions. Utilising locally available feed material, the birds can produce 250 to 290 eggs per year and yield 4.5 to 5 kilogram of meat when slaughtered at six to eight months of age. In addition to several hinterland communities, including Regions 8 and 9, other coastal regions also benefited from the programme. To date 3,500 chickens were distributed, while GLDA is currently producing 500 Black Giant chickens weekly for distribution to schools and youth groups in hinterland communities.

The duck hatchery continues to perform satisfactorily. In 2015 it produced 203,902 hatchlings. This increased to 409,114 hatchlings in 2016, which was an increase of 100.6%. In the first half of 2017, total duckling production contracted by 6% as compared with the same period in 2016. All indications are that the industry will rebound in the second half of 2017.

12.01 p.m.

In general poultry meat production grew by 5% in 2016 and was projected to grow by 10% in 2017, but was revised downwards, while table eggs are expected to increase by 65% over the reported figures for 2016. The continued high levels of smuggled chickens are perhaps the main causes for the reduction of the local poultry meat production. In 2018, livestock products are estimated to grow by 3 to 5%.

Pork production remained the same in 2015 and 2016, but is projected to increase by 17% in 2017 with further increases over the next three years. The Ministry of Communities provided resources for the National Swine Producers' Cooperative Society to import breeding animals of the top pig 40 breed to boost pork production and GLDA provided technical support to make the project a success. Mutton and chevon production remained the same in 2016 as is in 2015, but is projected to grow by 11% in 2017 with sustained increases over the next three years.

In the next two years we will increase sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS) and access to meat processing facilities. Two abattoirs will be constructed in Berbice, Region 5, and Lethem, Region 9, for the processing of meats into primal cuts to supply the local and export markets. Additionally, we will ensure adequate regulations are in place as well as maximising the number of trained inspectors and supporting policies. By ensuring compliance with SPS standards, the overall quality of meat processed in the abattoirs will be enhanced. The long-term position of a food safety system can then be recognised by international trading partners and open the opportunity for exports of meat products. This is in line with our policy as outlined in the Food Safety and Animal Welfare Bills presented in National Assembly earlier this year.

Regarding the fisheries sub-sector, over the years, we have established some fundamental building blocks. These have resulted in positive growths over 2016 and 2017. In 2016 we recorded a positive growth of an impressive 18.1%. For 2017 we anticipated a 1% growth due to the stronger enforcement of cross-border fishing regulations and a 2.3% growth for 2018 due to higher consumer demand. Thus far, in 2017, we harvested just about 30,000 metric tonnes of seafood and we exported 20,269 valued at

\$13.2 billion. We continue to work with our fisher folks to ensure that we practice sustainable fishing. To this end we have installed vessel monitoring systems on our trawling fleet and have the standard turtle excluder devices and by-catch reduction devices together with a harvest control rule. All these measures would ensure that we fish sustainably.

Having such an important economic activity we recognise challenges such as illegal unreported and unregulated fishing and we have taken the step to combat this with the proposed acquisition of a sea monitoring vessel valued at G\$54 million. This will increase monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS). Also, it is expected that there will be an increase in licensed vessels in the artisanal fleet due to this increased MCS.

As we seek to further support the sustainable development of aquaculture, we will facilitate increased investment in aquaculture through the development of aquaculture regulations, improvement of local aquaculture feed production. For the first time, we plan to reproduce local Tambaqui fingerlings at the Satyadeow Sawh Aquaculture Station (SSAS) so as to offer another option to fish farmers. We will continue to further the advancement of aquaculture in the hinterland regions by providing technical assistance and other forms of support. Additionally, after the introduction of deep sea fishing, particularly tuna, in 2016, we have been actively promoting and encouraging this in an area of our exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that is not exploited. Other areas of interest include mariculture of which expressions of interest are being received.

Over the past two and a half years, the Guyana Marketing Corporation (GMC) observed that there was need to raise awareness of the services offered and train farmers in areas of post-harvest management, cost of production, good agricultural practices, marketing, bookkeeping, exporting and group development. The agency was able to successfully conduct awareness and training sessions with 441 farmers across the country, specifically in Regions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10. In 2017, GMC continued to work towards fostering hinterland development. Furthermore, the corporation continued to maintain its export brokerage service, and in so doing, 346 export documents were prepared for the period.

The Guyana Shop continued to undertake its initiative of establishing Guyana Shops nationally. By the end of 2015, GMC was able to establish two Guyana Shop Corners, one each in Regions 2 and 6 and by the end of 2016, additional Guyana Shop Corners were established in Regions 3 and 4. Over the next three years, Guyana Shops should exist in every administrative region.

Export promotion continues to be a core function of the Guyana Marketing Corporation. In 2016, exports of non-traditional commodities stood at 10,121 metric tonnes valued at G\$2 billion. In our pursuance to increase exports of fresh and processed commodities to new markets, 2018 will see the commencement of a packaging facility at Cheddi Jagan International Airport (CJIA), Timehri, and more aggressive marketing targeting the diaspora in Canada.

Agriculture business development in 2018 will focus on the improvement of juices and concentrates, specifically labelling and packaging. Continue to assist with logistical requirement for a Guyana Shop to be located in each region we will pursue private-public partnerships with bakeries to produce bread with at least 20% cassava with consequential foreign exchange savings, and the completion of the chip processing facility at Parika, in Region 3.

Water management systems are critical in our land of many waters. Our approaches to agricultural expansion and sustainability are, therefore, based on risk reduction and disaster management, revolving around adaptation and mitigation initiatives to prevent and manage floods and droughts. Therefore the Government of Guyana is committed to this endeavour with an over G\$6.1 billion allocation in 2018. With increasing unpredictability of the weather and higher rainfall intensities being experienced, the flood risk has increased for vulnerable areas. Therefore increasing drainage coefficients of vulnerable flood prone areas is a central factor in increasing resilience. In 2018, construction and rehabilitation of sluices, culverts, conservancy regulators and other drainage and irrigation structures across vulnerable regions will be done. Tidal drainage will be supplemented with the commencement of construction for seven fixed pump stations accommodating nine pumps at Nooten Zuil and Hope, East Coast Demerara, Mora Point, Mahaicony River, Den Amstel, Hampton Court and Devonshire Castle on the Essequibo Coast and replacing a pump at Rose Hall Town.

The budget for the Mahaica, Mahaicony, Abary-Agricultural Development Authority (MMA-ADA) caters for the construction of a \$400 million sluice at D'Edward, West Bank Berbice River. It is expected to improve the drainage of over 5,000 acres of agricultural land. The Mahaica/Berbice region is particularly important as it produces 45% of the nation's rice. Additionally, the Mahaica, Mahaicony, Abary (MMA) area is home to most of the nation's cattle population. The authority is also heavily involved with providing drainage and irrigation services to residents in the Mahaica, Mahaicony, Abary block.

Even with the significant investment in the drainage system, there is still inadequate drainage, pumping, channel capacity and compromised efficiency in agricultural drainage. Some of these have been and will be addressed through a US\$11.89 million flood risk management project involving the construction of pump stations at Lusignan, Vigilance/Buxton, Hope/Enmore. There is US\$3.2 million Cunha Canal Rehabilitation Project involving rehabilitation of sluice at East Demerara Conservancy and Cunha Canal. US\$12.8 Rural Agricultural Infrastructure Development project (rehabilitating and maintaining drainage and irrigation systems in Buxton, Mocha, Triumph and Ithaca). These are projects which are presently being implemented.

With global climatic conditions continuing to change, the role of the country's hydrometeorological service is increasingly important. In 2015, the service signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Texas at Dallas for joint research activities in Guyana. This saw several persons benefiting from technical training in the areas of hydrology, meteorology and other related areas. The department was also able to establish a Research and Development Unit within the hydrometeorological service. In 2016, Hydromet continued to strengthen its capacity and technical capabilities when it collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to improve the communication of climate and weather information to the agricultural sector. In 2017, it also collaborated with the Caribbean Institute for Meteorology and Hydrology and the World Meteorological Organisation to host Guyana's National Consultation on Climate Services and the first National Climate Outlook Forum (NCOF).

To further strengthen the country's capacity in the management of our water resources, while also ensuring that our monitoring of climate variables are aligned with international best practices and to the mitigation of the impacts of climate variability and change, the service in 2018:

- Will expand its water monitoring capabilities to include water quality monitoring through the completion of its water quality laboratory;
- Have reactivated the Groundwater Resources Division, which was dormant for over two decades, and
- Initiate a groundwater monitoring programme and licensing system for Guyana, building on the national inventory of all groundwater extraction points/wells.

The Guyana School of Agriculture continues to meet its mandate during 2015 to 2017 and produced 407 trained professionals to support the development of the agricultural sector, 248 in Agriculture at the level of diploma & certificate, 30 in Animal Health and Veterinary Public Health, 104 in Forestry and 25 in Agro-Processing. The Guyana School of Agriculture will continue to take on a lead role in advancing human resource development in agriculture, fisheries, forestry to produce globally recognised agriculturists in 2018, collaborate with the FAO to develop a national policy on agricultural education, and the elaboration of a strategic plan for the school.

To promote and support agricultural development through education and training, the Guyana School of Agriculture will go forward in 2018 focusing on curriculum reform, acquiring accreditation as a reputable agricultural education service deliverer, and create an agro-business incubation facility centred on the existing agro-processing facility. To this end, facilities will be upgraded to meet industry standards.

Over the last two and half years, the Pesticides and Toxic Chemicals Control Board continued to advance chemicals management in Guyana, through the construction of a state-of-the-art chemicals storage facility. It allowed for the repackaging and disposal of 21 tonnes of very toxic chemicals from Guyana that posed severe risk to human health and the environment. The pesticides and toxic chemicals laboratory expansion, to allow for its accreditation and certification, will enable that all chemicals used in Guyana are of good quality. The laboratory would also support food safety efforts in Guyana through monitoring of pesticide residue levels in locally produced and imported foods. As the nation continues to battle the incidences of misuse, abuse, intentional and unintentional poisonings, public awareness has been recognised as a core activity over the last five years. In 2018, the board will strengthen its public awareness programme targeting major groups such as Government, non-government and the general public. The pesticide awareness programme in secondary schools is one such initiative.

Strengthening the legal framework and improving enforcement capacity is pivotal to the success of all planned activities of the Pesticides and Toxic Chemicals Control Board. In 2018, the board will further strengthen existing mechanisms in both these areas. The board will expand on the initiative to promote proper storage of pesticides and the board will, for the first time, utilise its education and examination process for pesticide vendors and sale representatives who are at the frontline of interaction with farmers, providing information and advice on pesticides. Legislative mechanisms will focus on the development of national capacity to safely manage and dispose of obsolete pesticide stockpiles.

In closing, with the implementation of all of the initiatives that we will be pursuing in 2018, and over the next three years, the Ministry of Agriculture will ensure that the “*Journey to the Good Life Continues*”. I, therefore, commend this budget to this House for its approval. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we will now take our suspension. We will return at fifteen minutes after one o’ clock.

Sitting suspended at 12.16 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 1.30 p.m.

Mr. Seeraj: Thank you very much, Comrade Speaker. First of all, I would like, on this side of the House, to convey our sympathy to the Minister of Agriculture and the Ministry. It is apparent that this important sector, one of our fundamental pillars of our economy, is being marginalised year after year. We have cuts in the Budget and, of more recent, we have noticed also, under the Public Sector Investment Programme, that the implementation rate keeps slipping to such an extent that, as of half year, we had only implemented 29% and it is expected to go up to 76% when production of food, food products, agro-processing, agro-manufacturing form such a critical part of our day-to-day lives and, indeed, support an extensive population of our people across the different regions. This important sector, save and except one instance, in the menu of measures, is mentioned.

The Minister spoke extensively - said a lot - but little about budgetary measures. It all reeled down to programmes, execution of projects, what was done, what we are going to do and, more importantly, implementation without that human phase. For example, a motion was brought to this Parliament to address the proposed increase in rates and other chargers for farmers in the Region 5 area, moving from a total of \$3,500 to \$15,000.

One would have expected that, in this Budget, recognising the slippage in the productive sector, the Minister of Finance would have put some measure in place to address the plight of thousands of farmers who are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their obligations not only in the commercial banks, but also with the Government itself. The Mahaica Mahaicony Abary (MMA) Authority continues to lament being unable to collect on the old rate of \$3,500. What would happen now with the imposition of the \$15,000?

The Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) is also now complaining about being unable to collect on credit given out in fertilisers and some of the reasons being cited, of course, are effects of flooding, reduced productivity, reduced prices, and delayed payments. Even the GRDB is unable to collect on a timely basis from this sector. But where are the measures to address the real plight of our farming community? Where is the reaching out of partnership between the Government and our citizenry, our farmers, our agro-processors? Nothing is in the measures to do that, save and except with one incident that has to do with forestry, which also comes under this sector, and I think Hon. Member Joseph Hamilton mentioned that, the increase in the common external tariff (CET) from 5% to 40% on pine wood. What effect would that have? How is it going to help our forest producers, our lumber producers? It would make it more expensive for our consumers. How is it going to help the competition locally? What about the Government extending to our forest product producers incentives so as to allow them to compete with this foreign imported product instead of making it more expensive for consumers down the line? As the Hon. Member mentioned, we do not have a product that could compete in terms of the quality and the type of the pine wood importation.

The plywood, for example [*inaudible*]... One would have expected a Government with vision that has the agriculture sector as one of the main pillars of our economy to create incentives to address this deficiency in our production sector. Year after year, we continue to talk about this and, world over, this sector is given tremendous amount of support by governments all over the world. Here we are seeking to tax the sector and we are now even reducing budgetary allocations to this sector and we are expecting it to do better. It is no surprise that the production keeps slipping. The Minister spoke about an increase. He spoke about an increase in a couple of the sectors - rice, for example, will increase by 12.7% - but, even with that increase, it would still be 85,000 tonnes less than what it was two and half years ago.

The fishery sector, while it will increase, will be increasing by 2% from a more than 5% decline, so these are not real increases and these are supposed to be indicators to the Government that things are going bad here and this sector needs a boost, a shot in the arm, like the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA). There is a budgetary measure here that addresses the plight that it would have faced where the tributors tax was initially increased by this Government, but now it has been reduced or, as the Hon. Member said, they are just taking off what they put on initially after the impact would have been felt. It is stated here, at page 77, that following strong representation by the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association, this measure was taken.

In the agriculture sector, there have been massive protests by farmers in front of the Ministry of Agriculture, in front of the Ministry of the Presidency, at the MMA Authority, at the Hope Estate and at Mahaica Creek about this draconian increase on the backs of the farmers. We brought a motion here in the National Assembly. It was debated; some Members spoke extensively on this motion. If that is not strong representation, then what is strong representation? I do not recall the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association moving to those measures, but, at least, we tried to get this Government to see the light that this sector that was doing so well needs continuous support so that we could compete out there. We are export oriented and we are being taxed when our competitors are being given incentives. To what end? Is it because the agriculture sector is not perceived to be politically aligned with the Government? It should not be about politics; it should be about economics. And that is why I think, in the compilation of Budget 2018, I would venture to say that it falls below the standard of the highly competent and qualified staff of the Ministry of Finance, and that is why I strongly believe that this is the handiwork of the Minister of Finance. I do not think that all the recommendations given by the technical staff would have found themselves in this document because, if they had, those critical issues would have been addressed. The bread and butter issues would have been addressed.

In the Minister's presentation, which reads, like I said, like the programme of works for the Ministry, I have not heard anything about the use of information and communications technology, for example, in the agriculture sector, what kind of incentives would be given to agro-processing and agro-manufacturing. What will we do to reduce the cost of energy? From the time you move from seeking to address value added, you are talking about energy. These measures are not here or probably the Minister is well aware that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is not really going anywhere and that is why it did not form part of his presentation.

I recall when there was this Commission of Inquiry into the plot to assassinate His Excellency, the major complaint of the Commission was about blackouts and internet connectivity. They could not do their work because, when the blackouts came on, the generator went on and the noise was affecting them and then there was not the internet connectivity, so probably the Minister of Agriculture learnt from the complaint of that particular Commission in addressing this matter and failed to really address the use of information and communications technology in agriculture, agro-processing and agro-manufacturing.

Having said that, I would go properly into my presentation on this Budget. The Minister said a lot, Sir, and I ask that you would see that the clock be zero so that I start proper. Cde. Speaker, I would like to start where the Minister left off in his conclusion when he said, on page 83, paragraph 7.2:

“Mr. Speaker, we did not promise that the Good Life would be achieved in our first term...”

My recollection is totally different from this statement. I heard Hon. Members over that side passionately appealing to our voters, our people of Guyana, to give them a chance and, if they do not do good, then boot them out. It was said on the platform, “Give us one term. Give us a shot at it. Nowhere did they ever say, *“We ain’t promise you this thing in the first term.”* They said clearly, “Give us a shot at it. Give us one term and, if we do not perform, then you could vote us out because we will do much better than them. Give us the chance.” And they were given the chance, but what happened?

The menu of measures that were rolled out is still to reach our people. The first to feel the effects of the ‘good life’ were our Colleagues over there. They received 50% or more increase in salary, secretly gazetted on the 25th September, 2015. Prior to that, there was denial that there was even any move to increase the salary of our Ministers and other Members of the Government and we see the expenditure ballooning out of proportion with what is happening. We are still to feel the reach down effect.

I recall some time ago - I think it was on the 26th September - that the Minister of Finance was complaining about the increase in nonperforming loans and he said clearly that sugar and rice were mostly responsible for the increase in nonperforming loans. The Hon. Member, Irfaan Ali, said that 61% of businesses are experiencing this phenomenon of moving into the bracket of nonperforming loans.

1.45 p.m.

The agricultural sector is also contributing significantly to this area. As the Minister of Finance said, sugar and rice... Where are the measures to address the plights of our farming communities? I recall, during our debate, Hon. Member Mr. Felix spoke on the motion for the increase in drainage and irrigation (D&I) charges extensively and quite eloquently, I must admit, about cost for production, average cost of production per bag, cost of production per acre, income per acre, the price and average price. I and the Minister of Agriculture joined and did the calculation as to how much this increase will cost per month and per week. I used those numbers to point out the increases in productivity during the period that was under consideration and the numbers that were being used by the Hon. Minister Mr. Felix. For example, he said that the average yield is 32.4 bags per acre and the average cost of production

is \$72,000 per acre. This is one of my figures; the average price for that period was \$2,600. When I calculated how much a farmer will make per acre over the one-crop period, which is 182 days, it comes down to \$66 per acre, \$66 per acre, using the numbers from the presentation made by Hon. Member Winston Felix. If we were also to take down the rental of one acre per day, it would have been \$41 per acre per day and one has to minus that from the \$66 that the farmer would have made to get the profit he made.

We could compare that to the salaries of our Senior and Junior Ministers and, of course, we could even compare that to the salary of our Prime Minister. Notice how our Prime Minister said that they will not take any more increases. I do not know how much weight that will have but the fact of the matter is that they already took a hefty increase. While the farmer would have been making \$66 per day per acre, a Senior Minister would have been making \$40,150 per day; take into consideration a work week of five days. I suffered from indigestion last night when I was looking at these numbers to do the comparison between what was happening here. It is no wonder they do not need any more increases. But our farmers need it and we need budgetary measures to be put in place to address this disparity.

From this \$66, the farmer does not have the luxuries of free transportation, free light or free water. He still has to pay for that and, mind you, there is Value Added Tax (VAT) on electricity, water and other consumables and they still have to provide for their families. I did a quick calculation on the Prime Minister also because I expected that the Hon. Prime Minister would make representation on behalf of this particular sector, the agricultural sector.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, do you rise on a point of order?

Ms. Teixeira: Yes, Standing Order No. 40. Mr. Speaker, I just heard the Chief Whip on the Government's side accuse this Comrade. She used the word "thief". She said it twice. "Bring back the money that you thief." Could you please guard our Member speaking from this level of abuse, please, Sir? Everybody heard it and I ask for your protection too from the gentleman across the row there.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, when you have a point of order, you raise it, you address it to the Speaker, then you reclaim your seat.

Ms. Teixeira: Yes, but these people are interfering with me. I would like to bring to your attention the point of order.

Mr. Speaker: You have addressed the point of order to the Speaker and I am suggesting that you take your seat.

Ms. Teixeira: Yes. I just want to make sure you heard me clearly because there was a lot of noise on that side. Did you hear me clearly, Sir? I am just checking. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we must avoid going back where I thought we were walking away from. Pejoratives and comments of the kind which were made cannot be tolerated in the Chamber. Hon. Members should not make use of language of that nature.

Mr. Seeraj: Thank you, Cde. Speaker. I expected the Hon. Prime Minister to make stronger representation on behalf of this sector, given his historical association with rural areas, rural development, rural sector and agriculture. If he did, there is no evidence of it bearing fruit in the budgetary measures that were mentioned in the 2018 Budget. Again, I compared the plight of our farmers using the numbers that were presented in this Chamber with the salary of our Prime Minister. I saw that, when our farmers were making \$66 per day on an acre, our Hon. Prime Minister was making \$79,153 per day, taking into consideration a five-day work week. This is why some of us are unable to live and appreciate the reality of our farming population, workers and ordinary people.

Yesterday, I read a news article which shocked me. It has to do with a recent murder/suicide in Berbice, where a young cane cutter murdered his wife and apparently committed suicide. This, to my mind, is an indication of what is going to take place in the sugar belt, given the decision to close estates and to take employment away from people. They are going to come under severe economic pressures which will lead to other issues, domestic issues and so on, when people are unable to grapple with the challenges of day-to-day life.

I noticed that the *Kaieteur News* of today mentioned a matter about the premature release of redundancy letters to sugar workers. I recall reading an article penned by the Hon. Prime Minister, which stated that, basically, to sum it up, the whipping boy for the Opposition will only be sugar. In an attempt for that not to happen, these letters were not supposed to be sent out until next year. The Government took that decision to postpone the closure of these estates until after the Budget debate so it would not be, as the Prime Minister said, the “whipping boy” of the Opposition. They spoke about the release of the contract between ExxonMobil and the Government of Guyana. We are still to see that release but that is what we were told. The cane cutter’s name is Krishna Latchman and the wife is Indramattie Totaram. They are

both victims. This is where we see the agricultural sector being marginalised by budgetary measures, lack of support and incentives to bring about the necessary increases in the wellbeing of the sector. [Ms. Ally: Special Organised Crime Unit (SOCU) is coming for you tomorrow.] They were there before.

In getting to appreciate what our farmers are going through, the Government made an attempt to get into rice cultivation with its flagship project at Wales Estate. I think Hon. Member Winston Felix would want to do an analysis of costs associated with this project. While our farmers have been grappling with bringing down the cost of production, our Government's venture into rice production, I can clearly say, is a dismal failure. Now it is feeling what farmers have been going through all along.

An amount of about \$220 million was taken from the Guyana Rice Development Board to give support to this venture for the production of paddy at the Wales Sugar Estate. I think it was supposed to be a partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) to make seed paddy available to farmers. What we found happening is that this pilot project that benefitted from expertise at the different levels turned out to be the failure I mentioned. Now that the Government has an appreciation of how difficult it is to produce out in the fields, I hope there will be some supplementary measures being put in place to address the plight of our farming communities. While farmers were able to bring their cost of production per bag in the vicinity of \$2,400/\$2,500, based on information I have, the Government's cost of production for this pilot project, benefiting extensively from all the expertise available, would be somewhere in the vicinity of \$5,000 per bag, more than double the cost of production for the farmers. That is why we made this appeal, recognising the difficulties farmers are going through. I am certain that, at the Wales Estate, the Government did not have to pay the \$15,000 per acre rental and other charges that our farmers are faced with.

2.00 p.m.

Throughout this sector - fisheries, forestry, sugar - when small progress is being mentioned, it is against the background of a year that was bad. So if one reads the numbers and the percentage increases that are being mentioned and one would want to think that these are success stories, they are really not success stories. They are performances that are below par for the years that we would have had them. Much more needs to be done by the Government to address the overall development of the sector. Markets and all of that form a critical part. I must admit that, when the Government and other representatives of the sector

received some amount of success in accessing the Mexican market, we all were looking forward to what would have likely been a lucrative market for our sector. But it turned out to be not so lucrative and, when I made mention about the Mexican market and the role it was supposed to play in enhancing our income earning, the picture was dismal.

This year, on the 30th September, the Rice Producers Association made a statement that the price that we would be exporting to Mexico at, that price would further pauperise our farmers and industry. It was a public statement printed on the 30th September, 2017, on page 12 in the *Kaieteur Newspaper*. There was a deafening silence from the Government and from the Rice Board or the other stakeholders so I assumed the statement to be true and correct that the prices that we would be receiving from Mexico would pauperise our farming communities. I read a submission by our Hon. Prime Minister when he claimed success with the visit to Mexico and this is a document that was circulated in this Chamber on answers to questions asked by the Hon. Gail Teixeira on overseas travel by the Hon. Prime Minister.

The Hon. Prime Minister stated, in terms of the trip to Mexico in October, 2015:

“To date, some 70,000 tonnes of paddy have been shipped to Mexico, representing one-tenth of Guyana’s total production.”

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five minutes remaining.

Mr. Seeraj: The discount was not taken into consideration. Thank you very much, Sir.

When I did some research, I found this not to be so. I am stating clearly that the Prime Minister misrepresented the facts because, when I checked the record, and I am giving him an additional month, at the end of August, the actual export to Mexico stood at 35,832 tonnes and the Minister claimed in a document submitted to this Chamber that, at the end of July, 70, 000 tonnes of paddy would have been shipped.

The answers would have gone down well if it were not for the conclusion that was given by the Hon. Prime Minister. I wish to quote two paragraphs. In the second paragraph of the conclusion, it is stated:

“Except where required by Government to do otherwise, the Hon. Prime Minister has made it a matter of principle to participate in events overseas, where air fares and accommodations are provided partially or fully by the sponsors.”

Sir, what this is telling me is that our hardworking Prime Minister is available to travel overseas once someone offers sponsorship. Once sponsorship is offered for airfare and accommodation, as a matter of principle, the Hon. Prime Minister is willing to participate.

Sir, the last paragraph:

“This is unlike the wanton waste and squandermania under the previous Administration”.

This is what the Hon. Prime Minister went on to say in an answer to this House. And I when I look at the submission, it is in contradiction to the statement because the “wanton waste and squandermania” took place right here in these documents, numerous travels by the Hon. Prime Minister with some success. But, at the end of the day, it clearly demonstrates that they are spending a lot and achieving a little. And, in trying to look good, the Hon. Prime Minister even went so far as to double up on the actual export of paddy to Mexico.

But I must admit, too, on page 3 of the document, the Prime Minister admitted:

“Admittedly, the return air fares were too costly and the Prime Minister had requested an inquiry as well as for bookings of alternative, cheaper flights in the future.”

So the Prime Minister does recognise squandermania and waste but this was after the fact. This is what we have to pay for with our taxes, increased taxes and more taxation and now increased charges for our farmers, our working people and no incentive or support for a sector that is critical for our food security, our export and value added.

In closing, I must add that we are talking a lot about value added, agro-processing and manufacturing but we are not addressing the energy need. But under deliberate programmes and policies, this Government seems to be encouraging the export of primary products and when I look at the figures, especially in the rice sector, I see clearly that there has been a massive increase in the export of primary products as against well-established measures to promote the export of value added in our country so that our citizenry could benefit.

Sir, I would like to thank you very much and I would take my seat. *[Applause]*

Mr. Adams: Mr. Speaker, if it pleases you, I rise to add my contribution to the debate of Budget 2018. But, yesterday, there was much talk about the removal of the \$10,000 cash grant from the children. But

not one of the Members on the Opposition made mention to the Five Bs Programme where our children are going to school free of cost under this APNU/AFC Government; whether buses, boats or bicycles, they are going there. They were only giving them \$10,000 per school year. Now they are going to school free of cost. My Hon. Friends on the West Coast would see the 'David G' passing up and down.

Budget 2018 is one which caters for every Guyanese, irrespective of their standing in society, whether it is a businessman or the lowest paid public servant. It is a balanced Budget that would bring some measure of relief to every Guyanese, a Budget that introduced no additional taxation but one which saw the removal of taxes in several areas. This would certainly see the Government losing billions in revenue but it must be borne in mind that it was the APNU/AFC Government that promised a good life to all Guyanese. This promise still stands and there is more evidence in the theme of Budget 2018, *The Journey to the Good Life Continues*.

The national valuation exercise made mention of in Budget 2018 will bring no additional revenues to the Government. This exercise seeks to garner more revenue for the Towns and Neighbourhood Democratic Councils and it further seeks to bridge the gap of inequality. Take for instance that there were two similar houses constructed in an NDC area in 1989. The owners paid equal amount of taxes at that time but one has since demolished his modest home and reconstructed a three-storey building but they still pay the same amount of taxes. How could that be fair? There were several housing schemes built over the last few years, most of them not handed over to the Towns or Neighbourhood Democratic Councils and so they pay no rates and taxes. This equality must be removed and it will be removed by this APNU/AFC Government.

The Councils are often bombarded by some homeowners who do not contribute a dime to the revenue collection for developmental works to be done in the areas. Their roads are in a deplorable state. Their drains are clogged with weeds, but would it be fair for the NDC to provide them with a service? Certainly not. The subvention the Councils receive from Central Government and the revenue they collect from their rates and taxes must benefit the ratepayers. Let us be fair. Their properties must be valued and so they must pay their fair share of rates and taxes to the towns and Neighbourhood Councils and they will get the service.

It must be done and, as my Colleague, the Hon. Jennifer Wade, would remind us, it is a fresh approach. Although national evaluation is nothing new to Guyana, it is the only way of bridging the gap and

removing the equality that currently exists in the various towns and NDCs. The theme for Budget 2018 is self-explanatory. It seeks to continue the journey this Government started when we entered office in May of 2015, promising a good life to all Guyanese. There is enough evidence for all to see that we have made great strides in this Administration to provide that good life. The 2018 Budget is yet another road map set out by this Administration to continue that journey of providing a good life to all Guyanese.

At this time, I must offer words of commendation to the Hon. Minister of Finance and his team for providing us with yet another Budget which clearly seeks to set out various innovative measures and setting the stage and pathways for our Government to achieve its goals. This APNU/AFC Government is at its mid-term in office and there can be no denial that there has been great transformation under this Administration. Sir, no pun intended, but I am certain that our renowned calypsonian, the Mighty Tempest, can also attest to the changes and the many strides that we have made since entering office. She no longer walks Water Street or Main Street after half hour rain and it is flooded. There has been development in every region, town and village.

Very importantly, as a nation, we have regained our respect in the region and internationally. Like never before, crimes are being solved and the drug dealers are being apprehended and brought before the Courts. There have been many new innovative measures in this Budget and we have promised to do more.

The various measures in Budget 2018 seek to bring some relief to all Guyanese, whether be it in the public or private sector. Our senior citizens will now receive the sum of \$19,500.

2.15 p.m.

The additional sum of \$500 may seem insignificant to some. Lest we forget, when this Government assumed Office, our senior citizens were receiving a meagre amount of \$13,125 and from the onset this Government increased their pensions to \$17,000. From 2015 to present, our senior citizens are in receipt of a 49% increase in their pensions. It was this very Government that, under the former Minister of Social Protection, the Hon. Volda Lawrence, visited every post office, if not all, to see the conditions under which our senior citizens were being served. It was through collaboration with the private and community and businessmen that we provided shelters and seating at some of the post offices. I do not know how, all of a sudden, the Opposition seems to love our senior citizens. They cared nothing about them. They sat in the rain for days, they fainted and they sat in the sun. It was this Government that

ensured that there were seating and sheds provided for them. As we are reminded by the scriptures that the less fortunate will always be with us and this year they will receive \$8,000 as a public assistance. This speaks to a 36% increase in two and half years. Certainly, *the Journey to the Good Life Continues*.

This Government remembers well, the phrase “You have your say, we will have our way”, but being a responsible and caring Government, we engaged all individuals and organisations who seek to engage with us, and in this regard, Budget 2018 saw the removal of the Value-Added Tax (VAT) on not some but on all the educational services.

In Budget 2018, we have seen a reduction or an exemption on VAT. We met it there. You said you could not move it from 16%; we brought it down to 14%. We saw the removal of VAT on the importation of some vehicle and on the completion of some housing units built by or on behalf of the Central Housing and Planning Authority (CH&PA). We witnessed an increase in budgetary allocation to every sector and every region. These increases will certainly aid in the continuation of providing that good life.

[**Mr. Nandlall:** Even a rubber stamp] Rubber stamps are very important. There was one time there was a stamp in this house that had not any rubber. This A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Government is not one that promises to deliver, but one that delivers on its promises.

I wish to now place emphasis on my constituency, Essequibo Islands/West Demerara. This region is not without its share of challenges, but we are resilient people and despite the challenges, we forged ahead and has done exceedingly well over the last reporting period. I am extremely overjoyed to inform this House of our achievements for 2017 and our projections for 2018, as was presented in the Budget Debate 2018. It was William Rutherford Alexander (W.R.A) Pilgrim, reputed to be one of Guyana’s most prolific composers who penned these words in one of our national songs:

“The regions must unite for the country,
The regions must unite for the land,
Each region has its chosen mission
But they all have one ambition
Can we do it? Yes we can.”

There must have been some reason for the late W.R.A Pilgrim's choice of words in composing this National Song. In Region 3, and maybe in other regions, this unity is lacking. I am of the firmest view that for us to move forward as a region and as a nation there must be that important ingredient of unity. This is far from it in Region 3, but despite those shortcomings the region was able to complete 85% of its capital work in 2017 and before 31st December, we will achieve that 100% target. This was made possible by the regional administration, led by the Regional Executive Officer (REO), Mr. Dennis Jaikarran, and his hardworking staff.

Education - this sector is certainly one that is on the move in Region 3. The regional administration was able to complete most of its work under this programme. We have seen the completion of the Department of Education's building to the value of \$35 million. Our officers can now operate in a spacious and comfortable environment. There is a cold storage bond to store the juice for the children so that it would not spoil anymore. [Mr. Dharamlall: Like the drugs.] We shut it, after a while. A new ramp was constructed at Bonasika, Northern Hogg Island Primary Schools; and new modern solitary blocks constructed at Noitgedacht Nursery School, Leonora Primary School, Met en Meerzorg Primary School and at Hague Primary School. First of its kind in the region, is the construction of a special needs school at Schoonord. This building is 50% completed but we have foresight. Despite the delay in the construction and the completion of this school a portion of the Wales Primary School is being used for the purpose of teaching children with disabilities. The construction of the Head Mistress/Master's (HM's) quarters at Northern Hogg Island and Karakara Primary Schools are currently in progress. We have completed the HM's quarters also at the West and Long Island Primary School.

This Government do not send teachers to schools outside of their regions where there is no housing. In this year's budget, we will see an increase in harder allowances for teachers going out of their regions. We want to ensure that every child in Guyana receives equal quality of education. The gas lines are being installed at the labs at both the Patentia and Essequibo Islands Secondary Schools. A truck was also purchased to aid in the distribution of the biscuit and juice for the School Feeding Programmes.

Health - this sector in Region 3, although there have been some glitches, like the pilfering of drugs, we have seen some improvement like several pieces of equipment such as defibrillators, incubators, probes for laser machines, haematology analysers. We have seen the construction of a sanitary block at several health centres; the extension of the dental x-ray, emergency and outpatient departments at the Leonora

Diagnostic Centre; the extension of Morashi, Lanaballi and the Mildred Cox Younge Health Centres; and a new maternity department is soon to be commissioned at the Leonora Diagnostic Centre.

Agriculture - control sluices were constructed at Schoonord, Zeelugt, Endeavour, Leguan, Maria Johanna, Wakenaam; heavy duty bridges were constructed at Leguan, Leonora and Met en Meerzorg; asphalted concrete roads were rehabilitated at Unity Street, Mandir Street at Ocean View, Uitvlugt and at Jeseme Street at Windsor Forest.

The Essequibo Islands/West Demerara Region has accomplished much in 2017, but it will be an indictment on my part if I fail in my duty to inform this nation of our plans and projections for 2018, as we continue the journey to the good life.

In 2018, we will witness more developmental work in every sector. There will be the construction of a nursery school at Schoonord and the construction of a secondary school at La Parfaite Harmonie. There will be major rehabilitation works to the Wales Primary School and the installation of gas lines to the labs at the Uitvlugt Secondary School.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have four minutes remaining.

Mr. Adams: In 2018, after more than a decade of closure - and the Ministry of Education had continued to pay a head teacher - we will see the reopening of the Fellowship Practical Instruction Centre - agriculture - where my Friend, Comrade and Colleague, the Hon. Ganga Persaud was once head or he taught there.

There can be no denying that it is indeed the continuation of providing a good life for all Guyanese. We will see the flooring of the West Demerara Regional Hospital Head of Department Unit (HDU) completed, the oxygen system will be centralised, a fibre glass boat with shed and fitted with the necessary equipment will be purchased to be used as a river ambulance, which will indeed help our residents in the riverain areas.

Public Works - The following bridges will be constructed: Centre Dam, Good Intent, Zeeburg New Scheme, La Grange Street, Vergenoegen, Middle Street Pouderoyen and other parts at Stanleytown, First and Second Street De Kinderen, completion of an access road to Fellowship, Dundas Street, Church Street, and Takelall main access and cross street.

In addition to the capital works listed to be carried out in this region, the region will also benefit from some additional works being done by the Central Government. Some projects will include the expansion of the water supply system with two new water treatment plants at Cornelia Ida and De Kinderen on the West Coast Demerara.

Please envisage that with Budget 2108, Region 3 will benefit from the construction of a new bauxite mine. The Ministry of Public Infrastructure will construct and rehabilitate sea defences at Ruimzeight, Wallers Delight, De Kinderen and Zeeburg. We will see a hype of activities with the passenger and cargo ferry plying the Parika to Mabaruma route. Region 3 will witness the completion of the second phase of the construction of the Den Amstel youth camp and the completion of the JP Latchmansing Highway.

Budget 2018 is before us as a plan of action to take Guyana to another level. We can get there if we try. We can achieve our set goals if we work together and we will certainly have better villages, better towns, better regions and a better and brighter Guyana. Let us all continue the journey to the good life.

I now commend Budget 2018 to the House for passage. *[Applause]*

Mr. Chand: Mr. Speaker, I take the floor to make my contribution to this 2018 National Budget Debate. In so doing, I join with my Colleagues on this side of the House to express my strong disagreement and disappointment with the 2018 Budget especially with several anti-people policies that the Budget is rife with.

Many Guyanese, having seen the eye-catching and costly billboards advertising the Budget, must have had high expectations from the budget and are looking forward to a brighter tomorrow and a better life for their offspring. Alas, Budget 2018 has dashed their hopes. Instead our people themselves are been pushed even closer to life's precipice, and not to the promised 'Good Life'. The low bar that the Administration has reached has made me wonder if what Mr. Christopher Ram recently said about lethargy in the Government is indeed true. Really, it is not difficult to reach such conclusions when one puts the 2017 and 2018 Budgets alongside each other. There we would see several projects which appeared as if new in the 2018 Budget also appearing in the 2017 Budget.

2.30 p.m.

Is it that the Government is recycling projects, many of which were advanced by the PPP/C Administration? It tells us that the APNU/AFC really has nothing new to offer us and Budget 2018 comes across, largely, as a cut and paste document - unoriginal and unconvincing.

It seems that the Government, through the budget, has gone to great lengths to obscure our harsh realities from the Guyanese people. Fanciful, eloquent language has been employed, and lofty declarations have been made; but, as the last 30 months have shown, there is every likelihood that many of the measures may hardly be translated into any concrete and definite actions at the end of it all.

The situation of the working-people.

I feel it necessary, to today, call attention to the widening gap between the “haves” and the “haves not” in our society, as I see little or no emphasis being placed on uplifting and improving the lives and well-being of the working-people and their families. Undoubtedly, this glaring fact tells us where the allegiance of the Government lies.

Today, as the workers look hopefully to the Government, they are woefully let down. For the people, there is little inspiration that can be drawn from the budget, as they see the *airy-fairy* promise of a ‘Good Life’ receding rather than coming closer. I ask: why is the Government taking such an unsympathetic approach to the plight of the working-people, who, with their families, comprise a major segment of our population?

On the matter of wages, the Minister made a lot of hay about the public servants’ increases. While I am happy that those workers benefitted, it is surely insufficient to meet the rising cost of living. Besides that sad reality, the Minister glossed over the fact that the increases were not a product of the Collective Bargaining Process which the Administration in its manifesto committed itself to, and which is sacredly guarded by the workers and the trade union movement. The fact that the Minister simply whitewashed the situation speaks volume. Clearly, Collective Bargaining is a meaningless talking point for this Government.

Mr. Speaker, from the budget measures, one gets a vivid picture of what lies ahead. For the ordinary worker that is living payday to payday, there is really nothing much that will put some much needed dollars in his or her pocket or make his or her life easier. Indeed, what is being offered are pressures and burdens. While the Government triumphantly speaks about the removal of taxes on vacation allowances in the private sector, though a welcomed move, at the same time, I must note that many ordinary workers

will not benefit from such a measure. Similarly, the Minister's tinkering with the income tax regime will certainly not benefit very many of our ordinary workers, as they cannot afford to stop working during the year.

The Administration refers, boastfully, to the removal of VAT on Education, also a welcomed move, but let us not forget the determined actions by the people for its removal. Also, we should not forget that VAT is still charged on electricity, water, private medical care, medication, school supplies and many essential and critical items, while many of the massive increases in the cost of Government services remain in place. Clearly, the pressures borne by our ordinary working people are continuing.

For our nation's elderly, whose contribution to society we are proud of, the Government has chosen to *rub salt in the deep wounds* that they have inflicted on them. After taking away their water and electricity subsidies, they are now being given a pittance of \$500 more a month, which is just about \$16 a day, a pittance which can hardly buy a *sweetie*. What can that really do in these hard times? The Government should hang its head in shame.

A lot is being said about the tax amnesty. Such leniency and largesse will go to benefit some, but where is the benefit also for our working people, the vast majority of whom are facing growing hardships? There is plain and patent determination Mr. Speaker. For workers, many of whom are hard-pressed because their taxes are remitted before they receive or even collect wages and salaries, there is no tax relief for them although they are deserving of such.

Indeed, the Minister did not introduce any new taxes at the national level, though there was little left to tax, maybe except the air we breathe. However, his tax gun has turned to the local level. We are told that, in the near future, properties will be re-valued, indicating that higher rates and taxes are on the way.

The Sugar Industry.

Nowhere have disregard, disdain and determination been practiced by the Administration, as is seen in the sugar industry. For the thousands of workers employed in the industry, it is sad and painful to say that their pay rates have remained unchanged since 2014, while the Minister boastfully says that the public sector minimum wage rose by 50% since July, 2015. Sugar workers are the exception. They see their hard won benefits undermined, and the protection that they are entitled to being disregarded, while the Government remained docile in the face of the massive injustices perpetuated by GuySuCo. Naturally, the workers are at a loss as to what is the driving force behind this attitude to them and their

plight. They have reminded us, time and again, of Government's 2015 Elections Campaign, when they were promised betterment and improvement, and the security of their jobs and benefits. Like many other promises made by this Administration, today, the sugar workers are being left, literally, almost empty-handed and jobless by the slick talking, *would-be leaders*.

The Minister also told us that sugar production would be, presumably, 152,000 tonnes, but that would represent a drop of 35% between 2015 and 2017. Clearly, something is definitely wrong. Evidently, there is a massive failure of the industry's leadership, but the workers are being made the fall guys. We are told that 22,000 man-days were lost for the year, but simple mathematics revealed that for an industry with 16,000 employees, each worker struck for a little more than a day. Obviously then, the strike argument is being plainly magnified to cover the tracks of mismanagement and the bad treatment meted out to the workers generally.

I cannot refer to sugar without calling attention to the sad situation that the people of the Wales Sugar Estate face. The budget avoided mention of the Wales Sugar Estate and it seems that the Administration wants us to forget about the depression and desperation that it created along the West Bank of Demerara. All of the glorious plans for non-sugar diversification at the estate location seem to have evaporated, and as we meet here, a number of workers who were retained, are being let go, compounding further the misery that gripped the area.

At this time, I must place on record a strong protest that the State Paper on the Sugar Industry, presented since May this year, has not received due and rightful Parliamentary attention. This, for us of the PPP/C, is deeply disturbing, especially given that thousands stand to be affected by the decisions laid out in the paper. Is it that the Government is unsure whether it can defend convincingly the wrong decisions it is taking? It appears so, given that those inefficient estates are attracting several interests, which should tell us that Government's decisions require a second, unbiased look. The mere fact that the estates can be saved and in that process, protect thousands of jobs and assure the future of the next generations, demands that the Administration undertake such a review.

As we get ready to celebrate, in a few days from now, Christmas, thousands of sugar workers are being made redundant and must face a dismal future. Shame! It is depressing to imagine the situation in the sugar belt at this time. This year there will be no smiles, no presents and no goodies for the children of

the sugar workers. This is a heart-breaking situation and will surely be assessed as a defining feature of this dispensation.

It will be remiss if I do not say something about Region 3. As a Member of Parliament representing Region 3, we heard about the West Demerara Regional Hospital from our Colleague, Cde. Frank Anthony, this morning. The Hon. Member, Mr. Adams, should answer because he has the political responsibility I understand. I wish to put on record, my disappointment to note that several of the decisions of the region are those of the Regional Executive Officer (REO), rather than by the Regional Democratic Council (RDC), which was elected by thousands of the region's citizens. Such an obstructionist attitude is not just a sad reflection of the responsible Ministry, but also crucially affects the region's development and puts a brake to continuing progress. The undermining also represents a disregard, and even disdain, for democratic norms and practices, which the APNU/AFC has a responsibility to uphold and which I call on them to abide by.

Minister Jordan regaled us by telling us that the *Journey to the Good Life Continues*. Instead, it is a stretched out journey with only a favoured handful really enjoying the ride.

2.45 p.m.

Today, while the average Guyanese is made to wait for hours in order to receive medical care at the public health facilities or to pay exorbitant costs at the private institutions, our administrators are jetting off to foreign lands to receive their medical care. While the ordinary people are paying VAT on electricity and water, our Administrators do not have to foot such bills.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have three minutes remaining.

Mr. Chand: Thank you Mr. Speaker. Budget 2018 is just another reminder of the perilous and difficult path we are on. Today, in the space of 30 months, the optimistic outlook and high confidence, which we have had, have vanished and an atmosphere of despondency and gloom has stepped in. Our economy has found itself, clearly, in rough seas and the ship's captain is at a loss to put it right.

As I conclude, I am reminded by the budget that President Granger told Guyanese that a 'Good Life' is about happy people. People would be happy when they know that they have a Government that cares for them; when they see a bright future for their children and grandchildren; when they could be assured of life's basic needs – food, clothing, shelter, safe water, safe streets, a sound education and high standards

of care. Good words by the President. But they do not match the reality of thousands of sugar workers and others being sent into the army of the unemployed, since this 'caring' Government took Office. Are they not also deserving of such a life?

This budget is not deserving of my support and the support of thousands of Guyanese. Thank you.
[Applause]

Mr. Figueira: Mr. Speaker, I rise to support this budget in its entirety. The Minister of Finance and his staff have once again demonstrated their genius and consistency in keeping true to form in presenting yet another budget, in observance of his Excellency's vision and promise of providing a good life to all Guyanese.

Anyone who can say publicly that this budget is pathetic, that person is either ignorant, insincere or point blank insane.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, we must try to temper our exuberance in creating pictures with our words. I believe the word that you first used should be withdrawn.

Mr. Figueira: Withdrawn, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: We have to help one another in this Chamber and we have to have sensitivity to other peoples' views. We cannot just treat them in that manner. Please proceed.

Mr. Figueira: Thank you Mr. Speaker. Vacuous utterances like those remind me of a blind young man...
[Interruption]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I am sure that you would withdraw that word and try not to let the Speaker work so hard.

Mr. Figueira: I will help you, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Please.

Mr. Figueira: I am reminded...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, have you withdrawn the word?

Mr. Figueira: Yes, I did, Sir. It is withdrawn.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. Figueira: I am reminded of a blind young man who had asked his father, “What is worse than being blind?” The father had responded saying “Having sight and no vision.”

Let me state from the outset, the only indictment to this budget is the time one is allotted to speak. It is like placing a child in a candy store and saying you only have two options out of many.

There are many things of significant importance that command my unwavering support for this year's visionary budget. I am of the firm conviction that Budget 2018 far supersedes, in my humble opinion, others of the past. I am persuaded that the policies contained therein will positively affect this nation way beyond 2020 and the people of Guyana will continue to see and experience an even greater degree of the good life the Granger Administration guarantees the people of Guyana.

Before I do so, kindly permit me to comment briefly on some of the extra ordinary remarks that came from the Hon. Member, Mr. Komal Chand, a very experienced and passionate unionist. I believe in this case, however, that his passion had interrupted his ability to reason rationally in some regards.

No man in a rational state of being will deny that this Government has not demonstrated its commitment to GuySuCo and its workers, with its continued provision of billions of dollars in subsidies each year since it took Office. The question one should ask is: “When should this end”, since these demands keep getting greater?

Sugar's present conundrum, blossomed under the PPP/C and the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) or anyone in Guyana, be it the private sector head who is now concerned about other employment or the PPP's maximum leader, who is now the author of all knowledge. Let them say to Guyana, how is it that the well-managed GuySuCo had no moneys to pay wages or to do business, seven days after the PPP/C were voted from Office in 2015? Hon Member, Mr. Chand, was always on the side of the PPP, even as GuySuCo fell to pieces, hence he is guilty by association for the present state of GuySuCo's enigma and one only has to look at the cost of work stoppages he presided over during the last 40 years.

These are things the Hon. Member, Mr. Seeraj, will not speak about; these are things that the Hon. Member, Bishop Edghill, would pray we forget; and these are things that the Hon. Member, Mr. Damon,

would overlook once the Hon. Prime Minister can assist him and others to have access the rice market in Mexico.

Nevertheless, the Government is now duty-bound in performing forensics on GuySuCo, after the handy work of Hon. Member, Mr. Chand, and the PPP's previous Administration. I am from a place that lived unemployment under the PPP/C's Administration. Thus, I am qualified to empathise on the issues of jobs displacement. My region lost thousands of jobs in the bauxite industry and in the Omai Gold Mines (OMAI) during the PPP/C's reign. Things were never the same since but we had to move on. The people of Region 10, despite being beaten to the ground like bauxite dust, we still rise without the many options that our brothers and sisters of GuySuCo are now being offered by this caring Government to start anew.

Budget 2018 addresses the needs of the youth in and out of schools. It provides for the young and aspiring entrepreneur, the seasoned businessman or woman, the miners, the loggers, the tourist providers, public servants, GuySuCo and yes, our senior citizens who are forever remembered by this caring Government. It is a budget that twins the journey of a good life with the green agenda.

As we debate the budget, it is important that we acknowledge the theme *The Journey to the Good Life Continues*. These are very profound words in this evergreen budget. It presents real truths and nothing but the truth. It provides the facts, not imaginary and hypothetical realities that consume the minds of many of our Opposition Members. It is the good news of this Government moving Guyana forward. The good life continues is not an event, it is a journey. It is not a sprint but a marathon. On this journey, we are not where we want to be, but we are much better off from where we once were. As we continue to progress with this Government, much more will be attained for the people of this nation. In a serious Parliament, where we have a serious Opposition that is present most of the time, the Government presents its policies and the Opposition presents its alternatives and not just criticisms. A responsible Opposition takes the opportunities afforded to it to say to the Government where it believes the Government has gone wrong, proposes where it should go, where it thinks there is a completely different path to do things better. It says, in-principle, where it believes the country should go forward and why. Sadly, as was expected, this has not happened. Ninety per cent of the Opposition Members who have presented thus far, failed to do so.

The PPP's recommendation for the removal of all taxation measures introduced in 2017, though a political sound bite from the PPP, is not necessarily practical, unless it is saying that the tax laws & policies that it left are perfect.

Yesterday, we were regaled by the Opposition's opening speaker on the performance of traditional sectors. The Hon Member failed to point out that they were totally dependent on world market prices. Rather, the Hon Member behaved as though it was the Government that caused export and or prices to decline. This is the first time, in my short time, that I was forced to listen to such a flat opening rebuttal. There were not enough words about our external environment in which we have to function and not a comparison of how we contrast against other countries in the region.

We have to be very careful about the calls for subsidies for industries - less subsidised local manufacturing to the benefit of foreign citizens. A case in point is the argument we continue to have with regard to the subsidising of sugar because of the numbers of workers involved. We ended up selling sugar to Europe way below production cost. Do we want the Guyanese population to be paying for foreigners to get cheap Guyanese products?

The Hon Member spoke of the Auditor General's Report findings in 2016. I, as a Member of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), applauded the Auditor General (AG) for his unconstrained probing of the management of public finances and the findings that accompanied same. I also hope that when the Government moves to address those findings the PPP and the Hon Member will support those efforts and not play politics.

Yesterday, I acknowledged the passion with which the Hon Member, Ms. Veerasammy, made her views known. However, she wandered out of lane on the issues of women in Budget 2018. The Hon Member inferred to not being able to identify benefits for women in this budget and or the word "women" mentioned in the document. This is nothing but a vale attempt in trying to dance between the rain drops since this budget, as presented, is informed by the input of eight Women Ministers. It is the first time in our history that 10% of our MPs are female Ministers.

The other point to note is that they are managing sector Ministries that impact and interface directly with women - health, social protection, housing and indigenous affairs.

3.00 p.m.

Thus, the notion that women's issues are not prioritised in the Budget 2018, at best, is misplaced. I believe you will agree with me that fortunately or unfortunately we have a substandard Opposition that opposes everything that is good and celebrates what they perceive is bad that this Government allegedly did.

Budget 2018 is instructive to the realities of the nation's resources at this point in time. It reflects the needs of the Guyanese people birthed out of extensive consultations, which informed the measures outlined therein. I, as all Guyanese, heard the political sound bites about the increase in old aged pension, and I was in awe at the audacity of some Members on the other side to even raise this topic. I say that to make the point that in no three years of the Government of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) had it given an increase that this Government has done, in the same said time since we took office in 2015. I further say that there were years under the PPP rule when the pension increase was less than \$500, but this is the paradox of our times.

I have the good fortune of collaborating with the Caring For Others Incorporated in providing breakfast for all pensioners on the day for pension at the Wismar Post Office. I was recently asked by one of our pensioners: What is it that the Government will be giving? I said to her at the time, that I am unsure of what it is that the Government will be giving. However, what I can assure is that this Government will ensure that you get something. I asked the question: What is it would you like? Ms. Vieira said that this Government has done more than anticipated in such a small span of time. She said an attitude of ingratitude makes servitude of one's attitude.

The people of Region 10 are happy with the \$3.4 billion plus allocations. This continued increase in financial resources to the region over the last three years is a testament to the Government's commitment to regional development. With this said, in my Budget 2017 presentation, I referred to the measures contained therein, as efforts to remove some of the kinks in the economy. Today, I postulate that as those measures mature we shall see in 2018 greater positive strides in the journey to the "good life".

The road to development is the development of roads, and I am most pleased that the allocation of \$20.8 million to Region 10 for the upgrade of several roads at Mackenzie will enhance accessibility to countless residents and provide improved mobility of motor operators.

I am pleased that this year's budget will cater to improve access to citizens of Wismar and the students and teachers of Wismar Hill Primary School. I am also thrilled at the investment in education at the Bamia community where a facility for a nursery and primary school students will be catered for.

The "good life" certainly beacons as funds are budgeted for another school bus to further complement transportation for students in the region, thus, reducing another hindrance to acquiring a good education. This is a much better trade-off than a once per year \$10,000 grant to a parent. All year round students will be transported free, and on time, to and from school. When the investment in transportation for education is costed against the impact in education delivery, no \$10,000 per child grant from the PPP can withstand the test of time. The Government's initiative in education is a solid investment in our youth of our country.

The introduction of 11 information and communications technology (ICT) hubs across several communities by the hard-working Minister of Public Telecommunications speaks to Government's commitment of ensuring that the people are not left behind in this interconnected world of ICT.

Similarly, the work of the Minister of Social Protection is being felt in communities throughout Guyana that were once deprived. It is because of the frequent ministerial outreaches of taking Government to the people, that Minister Ally has made it possible for the community of Victory Valley, once known as the 'Valley of tears', in getting a playground with all the paraphilia to facilitate a child-friendly space for the children of that community. They are no long shedding tears but share smiles. This is another investment in the youths of Guyana and the people of Victory Valley say thank you, Minister.

Additionally, the miners and loggers in my region welcome the decisions of this Government in incorporating their expressed views in the offerings of Budget 2018. What is fundamental in this regard, and it holds true to the removal of VAT on education as well, is that we are a Government that listens to the people and we act in their interest. This solidifies the importance Government takes in its consultations with the people very serious. We are a Government for the people and we are a Government by the people. It is in this regard the people of Region 10 endeavour to have further consultations with our Government to be incorporated with Regions 1, 7, 8 and 9 for reduction in the rates of excise tax on the importation of overland transportation used for tourism purposes. It is our belief that we possess the aesthetic for vast tourism potential, and moreover, it is the only region where one can have access to seven of our regions and our three main rivers. We are the bastion and the hub of tourism.

Region 10, more than ever, is strategically positioned to benefit from the \$520 million being made for sporting facilities and programmes to nurture the young people's athletic abilities. It is no secret, Region 10 is the country's hub for talent in the various sports of discipline, and we have the titles, records and world-class athletes to back it up. When I say we are the best, it is by no means to boast, I am just stating the facts. What these upgraded facilities and the synthetic track will do is unearth greater potentials in our sportsmen and women. It will discover the next Shantoba Bright, De Shanna Skeet, Daniel Williams and yes, the next Usain Bolt.

Having perused this document, it would be remiss of me if I did not speak of the plethora of benefits this budget offers to our nation's youth. I believe you will agree with me that Guyana's youth are intelligent, bold, strong, resilient and endowed with enormous potentials to succeed in life, to succeed in this life in their own country, the country of their birth. Our youth represents the possibilities and have the solutions for Guyana's development, today and in the future. Page 63 of the budget speech speaks to this fact, that the Government is cognizant of the increasing youth population, and that is an important stakeholder. *[Applause]*

Mr. Damon: The Hon. Member, who just spoke before me, I want to correct you because you are so wrong. The Hon. Member Komal Chand has an international reputation as a trade unionist and is recognised throughout the world. You will never achieve that in your lifetime.

The Hon. Member Irfaan Ali is superior in finances and has expertise more than the Hon. Minister Mr. Jordan who is a sleeper. Let me remind you, Hon. Member...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, let us ensure that we do not make personal references which can be interpreted as being rude. Please proceed.

Mr. Damon: All right.

In Region 10, where this Hon. Member posted such a beautiful picture, I was in Wismar only three weeks ago, poverty everywhere, drugs everywhere. Where are all of the wonderful things the Hon. Member spoke about? Hon. Member, I beseech you, say it as it is. Do not be afraid. In the future, say it as it is.

Let me go into my speech proper. Mr. Speaker and all other Members of this Parliament, I stand here to debate this Budget 2018 presented by the Hon. Member Mr. Winston Jordan who claims to be an expert

in crafting budgets. The Hon. Minister of Finance crafted a budget that can be described as a cut and paste budget. Hon. Minister of Finance, in preparing a budget, you focus on the things that would be good for Guyana and the people, be it new industries to create jobs because of job shortages; be it incentives for businesses; be it development for poor infrastructure; be it gainful employment of our young people; be it improvement of all-weather roads and improvement of health delivery or proper salaries and incentives for our workers. This budget was very poorly crafted and in all the areas pointed out, little attempt was made to address the issues in these areas of concern. I wonder, should we recommend that this Hon. Minister of Finance have an upgraded course in budget crafting? Yes is my answer, to avoid the shortcomings of the Hon. Minister in the crafting of a budget.

After the reading of the budget, nothing sounded right in the ears of the attentive listeners. This Budget 2018 is another piece of garbage and, as I said before, garbage must be dumped.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you can express that differently, and you will. Please withdraw that word.

Mr. Damon: Thank you. Withdraw.

...a piece of valueless paper.

The Hon. Minister made mentioned that Guyana was robbed and scorned under the PPP/C Government. Hon. Minister of Finance, I wonder, what kind of assumption was this? Are you now dealing with psychic? The PPP/C Government, we had a task to rebuild a country which was the second poorest in the whole of the Western Hemisphere, only second to Haiti. This country was destroyed by our dictators, FB and DH, to the extent that starvation was everywhere. Hon. Minister of Finance when the PPP/C left there was plenty of money in the bank and the economy was viable and stable. What is happening under this A Partnership for National Unity and Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) 'I do not care' Government? Is the Hon. Minister's memory poor and cannot remember? Let me remind you, Hon. Minister.

3.15 p.m.

Is it true that US\$20 million from ExxonMobil was siphoned by this Government? Is it true that corrupt practices are everywhere by this corrupt Government? Is it true that the Hon. Member Hon. Ms. Lawrence had breached the procurement procedure to the tune of millions at the Ministry of Public

Health? Is it true that moneys were spent by this 'I do not care' Government on Jubilee Park without the knowledge of this Parliament? Well, the answer is yes.

The Hon. Members, on that side of the House, APNU/AFC, have corruption being part of their deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) from the top of their head to their toes.

In Region 2 nothing is going right. The Regional Executive Officer (REO) of Region 2 continues to behave like Roy Rogers, ready to shoot. I said it before, how incompetent the REO was, but, remember as it was yesterday, Mr. Speaker, you reprimanded me, because I gave a definition of the REO of Region 2. The REO of Region 2 got from bad to worse. There was an incident. This incompetent REO of Region 2...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, if you proceed in that way I will have to ask you to take your seat. Now, you will conduct yourself appropriately, or take your seat.

Mr. Damon: All right, sorry. There was an incident, this REO of Region 2 made derogatory remarks.

Mr. Speaker: You cannot do that. You cannot say that.

Mr. Damon: All right. A public official of Region 2 made derogatory remarks to a councillor of Anna Regina Town Council and the Mayor. The Hon. Member Mr. Bulkan used his judgement and reprimanded the public member. This public member spent 20% of the Region 2's estimates from January to June and deliberately kept the remainder, 80%, to be spent in July to December. Many things could have been completed, to date. Some 40% of the region's estimate has not been advertised, to date. Hon. Member Mr. Bulkan, the original tender board life came to an end, so I wonder what will be the position with the remainder of the estimates.

The public figure is giving out large sums by three quotations. This is wrong, Hon. Minister. Hon. Minister, the public figure does not make out the quotations. I urge you, please find out. I was told that this dishonest public figure collects a fortune.

Mr. Speaker: There are two things about that, Hon. Member. One is that, you are talking about someone who is increasingly being easy to be recognised. Secondly, you said, "I was told". You have no way of knowing if it is true or otherwise. What are we doing?

Mr. Damon: All right, I would not call the name anymore. I am sorry.

The dishonesty at the top simmers down the chain to the bottom - corruption everywhere. Our farmers in Region 2 had to use bowsers to transport their paddy, especially in the downstream area, because of the deplorable state of the mud dams. This administration returned in excess of \$150 million last year and over \$160 million this year. These moneys could have been applied to do dams by notifying the Hon. Minister Mr. Bulkan. Hon. Minister Mr. Harmon, if the horse cannot pull its weight, we must replace the horse with another. I appeal to you, remove this public figure and put him in your office, the Ministry of the Presidency, where he would be guided by you, Hon. Member, before it is too late.

In Region 2, there are no jobs for our young people, no proper prices for our rice farmers. Our Amerindian communities are no exception, hardship, deprivation is everywhere. I call on this 'I do not care' Government to give our Amerindian children back their jobs, 1,997 of them. They need their jobs.

Hon. Member Ms. Garrido-Lowe, you spoke about the processing of cassava at Kwabanna, Santa Crus and Waikrebi would be benefiting. Hon. Minister, you did not tell this National Assembly how far Kwabanna is from Waikrebi. It is almost 15 gallons of gasoline it takes to travel that distance. Hon. Minister, I implore on you to give Waikrebi also a cassava mill that it could also accommodate the villages where Stratus Gold was, and Kokerit. Hon. Minister, what about Koriabo and Barima and Kariako and Barama? I implore on you, please find some moneys for these projects in these areas. Also, things are really bad in these communities.

Hon. Minister of Agriculture, you continue putting the cart before the horse. How could you, Hon. Minister, talk about new varieties to increase the yields of our rice farmers and no new markets for rice? Hon. Minister, do you understand rice cultivating, how perishable rice is? I doubt it. You must seek market before you talk about increased yields. Hon. Agriculture Minister, our rice farmer's needs subsidies and incentives on paddy and the Institute of Private Enterprise Development (IPED) bank must be made to reduce the interest on RPC loans for rice farmers.

Flooding continues in Region 2, especially in the Pomeroun when it rains heavily. The other crop farmers need the mouth of the Pomeroun River to be desilted.

The health sector is taking a severe licking in Region 2, shortages of drugs too numerous to mention. The Hon. Minister within in the Ministry of Public Health, Dr. Cummings took off like a train in the 1960s from Parika to Vreed-en-hoop and forgetting her luggage at Parika. Hon. Minister Dr. Cummings, you thought you sounded so good, but you forgot the bigger picture. These are the things you need to

address: blatant disregard for the sick people in most of the regions, by not providing enough and a stable supply of drugs to the regions. The drug supply in Region 2 is a catastrophe, causing lives. Only three weeks ago, a resident from Lima Sand took an emergence case to the Suddie Hospital, and what happened? Blackout at the hospital, and that patient barely survived on some oxygen. Hon. Minister, when you travel to these regions do not listen to the REOs and the heads of the hospital only. Hold some meetings and then you would get it right and you would have enough luggage to put on the train. Hon. Minister, without consultation with residents, you will not get it right. Hon. Minister could build new hospitals everywhere, new pieces of health equipment everywhere, but if you, Hon. Minister, do not get it right, it is useless.

Hon. Minister, were you serious about sabotaging the procurement procedure? What were the results when they were caught? This is a bluff. Hon. Minister, not far from where you sit, the Hon. Minister Ms. Lawrence breached the procurement and went for sole sourcing. Is the Hon. Minister Ms. Lawrence, too hot to handle? Stop the bluffing and act now. Call in Special Organised Crime Unit (SOCU).

The Hon. Finance Minister spoke in his budget about miles to go before you sleep. Does the Hon. Finance Minister understand what he meant? This Hon. Finance Minister is a sleeper and started sleeping from his first day on the job. Today, that is why the budget is a sleeper budget.

The Hon. Member Mr. Greenidge is no exception. The Hon. Member Mr. Greenidge and his boss slept through an important meeting in Saudi Arabia. That is why nothing was achieved for Guyana at that meeting. After ten o'clock in this National Assembly, look around, the sleepers are everywhere across there. Indeed, old men and old women must have their rest. Continue to sleep, Hon. Finance Minister, time is running out. The tide is turning. The year 2020 is coming when this Government would repose for a long time. This Government will be going back to redundancy.

Hon. Attorney General Basil Williams, why do you, Hon. Member, always have a problem with very intelligent brilliant young lawyers at the Attorney General's office? Honourable Attorney General, the world is watching as you try to destroy the future of tomorrow. This is a deliberate act by the Attorney General to try to reduce these young Indo-Guyanese lawyers to very low repute. Honourable Attorney General, this is an act of deliberate intrepidity and the honourable Attorney General does not understand the magnanimity this could have on the honourable Attorney General. Stop this somnambulistic

behaviour and show respect and regard before it is too late. We must at all times show cordiality and respect to our young brilliant women lawyers. The honourable Attorney General should.

The Hon. Member Mr. Ramjattan, the wine sipper, the day is quickly approaching when you would have no wine and 'Grey Goose' to sip. The year 2020 is just around the corner, when this 'I do not care' Government will be spoken to by the masses of this country. In this sleeping budget, presented by this sleeping Hon. Minister of Finance, mention was made about evaluating businesses and all buildings. This will hurt our masses badly. The pockets of our desperate and poor Guyanese will feel the heat. This speaks about billions and billions more that would come out from the pockets of our people. There should be no new evaluations and I call on the citizens of Guyana - do not pay too much taxes.

3.30 p.m.

Hon. Member Trotman, how do you do? I hope that you are enjoying marriage life. I have some information for you. I went to 30 meetings and met more than a thousand persons at those meetings. Speaker every one of these Guyanese are calling for an oil refinery in Guyana to refine 25% of our crude extractive from Guyana. [Applause]

Mr. Rajkumar: I rise in full support of the approval of the budget for the financial year 2018 as presented to this honourable House by the Hon. Minister of Finance Mr. Winston Jordan on the 27th November, 2017, under the theme, The Journey to the Good Life Continues. I join with the thousands of citizens to compliment and congratulate the Hon. Minister and his staff for a job well done, the crafting of the Government's plan for the continuance of "good life" for us all.

Budget 2018 maps out Government's plans for the continued development of our country. An estimated \$267.1 billion dollars will be spent by APNU/AFC Government in 2018 in its continued effort to provide the "good life" for all Guyanese - The Journey to the Good life Continues.

This Government proposes to spend in 2018 the sum of \$41.9 billion in improving the quality of education for our students. The sum of \$4.7 billion will be spent on improving educational infrastructure throughout Guyana. The University of Guyana will benefit from a subvention of \$2.4 billion to improve the quality of tertiary education to our students. There is an 80% increase in the remote area incentive for teachers who work in the hinterland. This is an example of our continued emphasis on educational development for people.

The sum of \$33.3 billion will be spent on public health in an effort to deliver quality and efficient health care to our citizens, \$2.4 billion will be spent on the upgrade and maintenance and construction of health infrastructure across the country, \$600 million for the procurement of medical equipment and over \$2.2 billion for the procurement of medical drugs and supplies.

In the public security sector, \$30.7 billion will be spent to strengthen, modernise and provide suitable accommodation for our disciplined forces.

Public Infrastructure, this Government intends to spend \$35 billion, this sum will be spent on the construction and the upgrade of maintenance of roads, reinforcement our sea defences, modernisation and expansion of our airports and airstrips. There would also be the establishment of solar farms at Mabaruma, Port Kaituma and Bartica among other projects.

This Government will also be spending \$19.4 billion in the agriculture sector, maintaining and upgrading infrastructure and maintenance of drainage and irrigation canals, creating a super environment for farmers to cultivate their crops. There is no doubt in my mind that the sums allocated to these sector and the projects proposed will play meaningful roles in improving the lives of our people as “the journey to the good life continues.”

Our public servants, our workers, always look forward for an increase in their wages at budget time. Their Government has not disappointed them, and more so, the increase is retroactive from the 1st January, 2017. Our workers are very much appreciative of this. Our pensioners are also grateful for the increase in their pension.

In 2017, this Government had imposed a standard rate of VAT on private education, there was a call by our citizens for the removal of VAT on private education, our Government listened and despite a potential loss of \$342 million in revenue, a mature decision was taken by our Government to remove VAT from all educational services from the 1st January 2018.

Our Government recognises the important role, small businesses and young entrepreneurs play in the development of our country, in 2018 there will be the establishment of a \$100 million revolving fund to help finance businesses whose goods and service are sustainable and environmental-friendly. This is a good initiative and Government must be applauded for encouraging and supporting the development of small businesses and young entrepreneurs, and directly providing an opportunity for job creation.

Our youths are our most important assets, they are our future, we in the Government recognised this, in 2018, \$1.7 billion will be invested in youth development programmes to ensure that our youths are gainfully employed. These are some of the thing that Government will be doing in 2018 to provide the “good life” for our youths.

We, in Region 2, recognise Government effort in providing the “good life” for all of our people. In 2018, \$3,546 million will be spent in regional development. The works that were scheduled in 2017 budget for Suddie, Good Hope, Fisher, Mabel Sandy and Charity Primary and Charity Secondary Schools have all been completed. In 2018, over \$1 .900 million will be spent on education in our region. We will see the construction of the Abrams Zuil Secondary School, the Mainstay Nursery School and the extension of the Cotton Field Nursery School. Our students will also benefit from the purchases of school furniture, equipment and educational material. We in the region are happy for Government initiative in extending the School Feeding Programme to include schools in the riverine communities. Our children from the Pomeroon and the riverine areas will benefit greatly from this initiative. We, in Government, are committed to continue to provide a conducive environment for our students. Our Government must be applauded and congratulated for its continued efforts to provide quality education to our students.

The streets in Good Hope, Pomona Housing Scheme, Johanna Cecilia, Perseverance, Queenstown, Anna Regina, back street Better Success, back street, West Berry which would have been scheduled to be rehabilitated in 2017 were completed. Works on the sea defence at Better Hope to Andrews were also completed. Curry Street, Perseverance, Essequibo Coast, was transformed from a mud dam to an asphalted road, much to the delight of all the residents of Perseverance. This project would have cost this Government a sum of \$20 million, there was also an installation of light-emitting diode (LED) street lamps on the road from Aberdeen to Queenstown in the tune of \$15 million. This Government is committed to the continued infrastructural development in our region as “the journey to the good life continues.”

The three new generating units for the Anna Regina Power Station have been purchased. They are in the country, but the building to house engine is under construction. Within a short time, we in the region will be enjoying a continuous and reliable supply of electricity. A promise made and fulfilled by this Government.

The residents of Lima Sands on the Essequibo Coast have been calling for an upgrade of their road. In 2018 this road will be a reality, as well as the streets in Sparta, Coffee Grove, Danielstown and Richmond will also be upgraded. These are some of the infrastructural work which will be done in 2018 in our region by our Government in the continual deliverance of a “good life” to our people. Approximately \$1.29 million will be spent on the infrastructural development in a region in 2018.

This Government through the Ministry of Public Infrastructure has created employment for ten young persons in the region, under the Community Organised for Restoring the Environment (CORE). In fact, the CORE project has employed over 200 persons countrywide. Ten persons in our region employed by the CORE Project are earning approximately \$60,000 per month. They are engaged in cleaning Government and school compounds, road shoulders and senior citizen's yards among other works. The citizens of our region are pleased with the effort CORE group, in keeping the environment clean. We are happy to learn that the CORE Project will be continued in the new year providing jobs and maintaining its environment in the region.

In an effort to improve the health service in the region \$890 million will be spent in this sector. The operation theatre at the public hospital at Suddie will be re-constructed. The drugs bond at Suddie will be extended to increase storage capacity. The water system at the Suddie Hospital and Oscar Joseph Hospital will be upgraded so that patients who are staying at these institutions will be more comfortable. We, in the region, welcome the construction of the new hospital which will commence in 2018.

Our sector is heavily dependent on agriculture. In 2018, Government intends to spend \$355 million in the construction of culverts and maintaining of drainage and irrigation canals, maintenance of road and bridges, providing an infrastructure for supporting the efforts of our farmers.

Region 2 welcomes the implementation of ICT programme in the region. Our students are enjoying free internet access at our secondary schools, enabling them to access information to complete their assignments in a timely manner. There are also the ICT hubs where our citizens have free access to internet. There are hubs at Charity, Anna Regina and Queenstown. We, in the region, are happy for this programme. No one had been complaining about the speed or the connectivity of the internet, but they are telling their friends and their neighbours about the free access they are now enjoying and they are welcome.

Local government elections will be with us here, again, in 2018. It is the second time in our first term, never before in our country that we had two local government elections within the prescribed time. This demonstrates Government's commitment to local democracy and fulfilling its promises to the nation.

With Government's firm plan to continue development in our region and our country as a whole, I have no alternative but to support this budget for the financial year 2018 and commend it to this House for its passage.

Thank you. [Applause]

3.45 p.m.

Mr. G. Persaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, let me take this opportunity to extend birthday greetings to the Hon. Neendkumar. On behalf of all of us, I think we should say, "Mr. Neendkumar, happy birthday."

Mr. Speaker: The Hon. Member was given the opportunity to address the House on the Budget, but he chooses to steal the speaker's thunder. So, I will then interrupt him to say, Hon. Members, during the course of this segment of this debate, it was brought to my attention that the Hon. Neendkumar, who I would ask to rise so that we can all see him, celebrates his birthday today. I think he thought we would not know and so he would be able to pass off quietly, but you will join with me in wishing him a happy birthday. Now that I have done that, you have the floor to speak on the Budget, sir.

Mr. G. Persaud: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. You are so kind.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to join with all those who would have spoken on Budget 2018. From this side of the House, which is the Opposition benches, I endorse the comments made earlier on Budget 2018. I must say that my disappointment is similar to the disappointment of the other Hon. Members on this side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to make some brief responses to some of the Hon. Members who spoke earlier. The Hon. Member, John Adams, pointed out to us that the Government has constructed a number of sheds for our senior citizens for when they turn up to their respective post offices so that they can collect their pensions. It is unfortunate that we would have had to do something like that. It means, therefore, that we will continue with this delaying of payments, untimely payments, and having our senior citizens

going and coming all the while. We call that providing comfort for them. I thought the better thing to do would be to pay our senior citizens promptly.

The reduction of Value Added Tax (VAT): The Hon. Member, Mr. Adams, reminded us of the reduction of VAT from 16% to 14%. I am wondering if the Hon. Member did any survey to say how effective that reduction was. How much did that reduction impact on the lives of our people when over 200 taxes were increased simultaneously and there was also the removal of items on the no VAT list, but were placed on another list. I am wondering if it is a deliberate ploy to stay away from what Hon. Member Ms. Hughes was advocating, speaking the truth.

In Region 3, we seem to have taken very much the whole idea of a green economy which means painting buildings green. It seems as if we have taken that so well. Every construction that is done in that region has the green paint already ordered. I am wondering if that is the kind of development my good Friend, the Hon. Member, John Adams, was speaking about.

The Hon. Member from Linden regaled us in terms of a number of positives in Linden, Region 10, and I want to join with him in wishing the people of Region 10 all the best. Let me remind the Hon. Member that the bauxite industry that exists today in Region 10 exists there because of the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C). If the PPP had taken the approach that the APNU/AFC is taking with regard to sugar, the bauxite industry would have been no more as part of our landscape. So, we want to get that point very clear; whether you like it or not, that is the fact. I want to remind that young man. I want to remind the Hon. Member that the Linden Economic Advancement Programme (LEAP) was taken to Linden by the PPP/C and, because of mismanagement by some people who are high in Government today, the people of Linden were denied the full benefits from that project. Only couple mornings ago, this new Government took the Linden Enterprise Network (LEN) project to Linden and it suffered the same fate. The Hon. Member, Minister Jordan, had to intervene in rectifying that situation. It continues.

It was the PPP/C, through the Rural Enterprise and Agricultural Development (READ) Project that empowered several farmers across Region 10. Empowering of our farmers did not start now; it started a long time ago. 'Continued' would have been a better word.

My good Friend, the Hon. Member, Hemraj Rajkumar, from Region 2, said to us that the blackout woes in Region 2 would soon come to a closure. This is the descriptor: the generators are here and the stations are now being built, and we were told last year, during the Budget debate, that the people's electricity

woes in Region 2 would have been halted long before now. But it is so sad that, from one Budget to the next Budget, all the story gets is much more interesting.

When we look at Budget speech 2018, on page 22, the Hon. Minister stated:

“...the sum of \$1 billion has been budgeted to be transferred to NDCs and the 9 Mayoralties.”

Mr. Speaker, the Fiscal Transfers Act, section 9 (1) states:

“A sum equal to fifty percent of the sum appropriated by Parliament annually to neighbouring democratic councils shall be allocated equally among the neighbourhood democratic councils.

Section 9 (2) states:

“The remaining fifty percent of the sum appropriated by Parliament annually to neighbourhood democratic councils shall be allocated to the neighbourhood democratic councils in accordance with their population size, geographic area and rate of collection...”

The Ministry of Communities is taking us down a very dangerous path and that is a path of being disrespectful to the laws of our land. The practice of giving a lump sum as a final subvention continues to be the operational mechanism by the Ministry of Communities, although we have such an Act in place. The Hon. Members on that side of the House argue vehemently that the system practised by the People’s Progressive Party/Civic Government in allocating annual subventions to the Local Authority Areas was terribly wrong. They used examples such as to say that Local Authority Area number 5274, deemed the largest in our country, as against Local Authority Area Maida/Tarlogie, which just has about 800 listed voters, was getting the same sum and that they found as a terrible injustice to describe some of the terms used when we were discussing this. It is unfortunate that that Ministry continued to ignore the laws of our country and is giving lump sum without using the formula as is stated in the law. To say the least, it is illegal and we are hoping that some form of action would be taken to ensure that the laws of our country are respected and we should stop breaking the laws of our country. Those on that side of the House need to pay serious attention.

When we go to Budget 2015, it states, on page 52:

“The objective is to break the stranglehold, domination and usurpation of local democratic organs and their statutory functions, as practiced by the last administration.”

Mr. Speaker, may I say that, in 2016, local representatives elected by citizens will play a critical role in ensuring the towns, the municipalities and the villages will have better management, more accountability and autonomy in local affairs.

What is the reality? The reality is that we have some handpicked persons whose only qualifications were being loyal to the Government and they were placed into positions such as Chief Executive Officers.

Only last week, the Hon. Minister had to remind one such Chief Executive Officer of his roles and functions *vis-à-vis* legally elected bodies. We are talking about stranglehold, now suffocating hold on legally elected councils across this country. The programmes that are agreed upon by Councils are changed and modified without the approval of Councils by these tin gods.

Life is becoming very difficult for elected bodies across the local authority environment and the Regional Democratic Councils. Yet we hear these loose, empty statements about good governance, respecting the rule of law and supporting elected officials. We are undermining good governance by the use of these chief executives.

In 2015, this is what the Minister said to us:

“In collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Communities and other stakeholders, each Region will be assisted in the development of a plan of action for regional development.”

4.00 p.m.

As I said, the story only gets longer. In 2016, the Budget stated:

“In keeping with the philosophy that strong regions will lead to a strong nation, this administration has undertaken to prepare a Plan of Action for Regional Development (PARD) in all of our administrative regions.”

It continued. It is the same story, same objective set. In 2018, update;

“The PARD for Region 9 is in its final stage of consultations, and the input of the final 2 of 56 communities... Region 9 is scheduled for early 2018... In addition, consultations have commenced in Region 6...”

The storytelling in this House consumes so much time and deviates so much from real, objective target setting and achieving targets. If there is one thing that we could commend the Members on that side of the House for it is to think big and act small; plan big and implement nothing. More and more, local government, in this country, is being made to look like a toy by the Members on that side of this House.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five minutes remaining.

Mr. G. Persaud: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

We have a lot of lip service taking place and, when we come to this august House and we listen to hours and hours of discourse, and all these fancy statements... There are some words that cannot be used in this Chamber and I do not want to really get on the other side of the...

Here we go: we are planning that we are going to do PARD and we are going all the time. It is stated that Local Government Elections and back to back Local Government Elections and so on... It is unfortunate that the 2016 Local Government Elections are still incomplete and we are moving towards the 2018 Local Government Elections, we are told in this House. One constituency in the Municipality of Rose Hall had a tie. [Hon. Member: Same thing.] Whether same thing last year... You are right. It tells you that we are paying no attention; we listen here but do not hear. That constituency has not benefited from its constituency representative since the Local Government Elections were last held.

The situation with the Municipality of Mabaruma is still engaging the attention of the court. We do not have a ruling on that as yet and we are going to the next Local Government Elections. We had ties in a number of Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) - Malgre Tout/Meer Zorgen in Region 3; Industry/Plaisance in Region 4; Woodlands/Farm and Woodlands/Bel Air, both in Region 5; Macedonia/Joppa and Gibraltar/Fryrish in Region 6. All these are unresolved issues. The Minister stepped in highhandedly on the advice of some people who seem to be strangers to the laws of Guyana. They acted and those matters are challenged and are still in the Court. And we are going into boastfully holding Local Government Elections again.

I wish to say, very clearly, that, if we are going to do something, we have that do that thing well. There is no sense that we say that we are doing things and we are doing them quarter way and halfway. We are doing to tick. We are not doing for development. We are not doing things to improve. Good governance is still a myth to my Friends, the Hon. Members on the other side of the House.

On this whole bit of valuation, I want to caution very clearly. It is the responsibility of the Local Authority Area to determine whether it would increase any tax as a result of valuation or any other variable. No Minister has the authority to direct...and I want to caution very early because I have read in the Budget speech and I have heard from so many Hon. Members of this House how important my good Friend, the Hon. Member, Mr. Michael Carrington, was saying to us, and how valuable getting additional taxes will be. I wish to say that that would be another area in which we need to respect the laws of our country.

In concluding, I wish to say very clearly that Budget 2018 is another disappointment. It is another disappointment for the wide cross section of the Guyanese society and I could only hope and pray that budget 2019 will benefit from the discourse of this House and we would have a real budget coming to fore. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Minister of Communities [Mr. Bulkan]: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I rise to make my contribution on the 2018 Budget debate, I would like to refer to some statements and comments made by Hon. Members on the other side of the House during their presentations.

First, I would like to refer to Hon. Member, Nigel Dharamlall, who, when he spoke yesterday, made some very disparaging remarks at the efforts of this Administration towards providing good quality housing to the Guyanese people. The Hon. Member, in his presentation, said that Guyanese do not want to live in half of a house and that they want a full house. Well, the last time that I checked, the good quality units that are being built by this Administration do not have half of a bedroom, half of a living room or half of a kitchen. Yet the Hon. Member, in his presentation yesterday, went on to say that the people need house lots; they need their own homes and not split units.

With your permission, Sir, I would like to edify the Hon. Member because I am not sure that his Colleague, the former Minister of Housing and Water, would have educated him as to the track record of the previous Administration on this same question of house lots. Just briefly, the facts are that, in the 2000 to 2015 period, approximately 55,000 house lots were “developed”. Of these, approximately 28,000 or more than 45% remain unoccupied. But when we look at the statistics, during the period 2011 to 2015, which was the life of the Tenth Parliament, the previous Parliament, the figures get even more skewed or alarming. Those figures are, in the 38 schemes that were “developed” during that period, which yielded

approximately 20,000 - and again I say – “house lots”, less than 4,000 of those had houses built on them. So there was...*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member sitting in the rear, I will just remind that Hon. Member that, maybe, this is a special day for him and he might want to consider that before the Speaker acts against him. We will not accept outbursts.

Mr. Bulkan: I was saying that, of the 20,000 house lots that were yielded in those 38 schemes, the rate of occupancy is less than 20%, less than 4,000 units or the rate of unoccupancy is greater than 80%. Yet, almost \$13 billion with a ‘b’ was expended towards those schemes and a further \$16 billion is required to consolidate the infrastructure in those schemes. Yet, what we have is a rate of occupancy of between 20% to 25%. So we have a duty to be constructive in this honourable House when we make statements. By all means, be critical, yes, because I am aware that what we are in is a very competitive arena, but we should not be condemnatory simply for the sake of it.

The Hon. Member went on to say that the *proof of the pudding is in the eating* and, in this regard, I would encourage the Hon. Member to engage those homeowners who are occupying and who will occupy those very units that he spoke disparagingly about and then he would learn about the *proof of the pudding*.

Earlier yesterday, we heard from another Hon. Member, who we just heard from again, Hon. Neendkumar, and, in his presentation, among other things, he said that the local government system is “in chaos”. I am not sure if I should have been annoyed or amused, coming as it is from a member of a political party that has displayed total disregard for the local government system, a party that treated our Local Government Organs and the system as if it only had cosmetic value...*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

...and organs and councillors to be seen and not heard.

We heard from the same Hon. Member and we heard a moment ago from the previous speaker that the question of property valuations will be resisted, and the previous speaker spoke about the responsibility of rates being a determination of the local organs, something that I do not question and is a point that was made clear by the Minister of Finance in his presentation. So nowhere in the statement of property

valuation has there been any reference to an increase in rates. I acknowledge that it will be a determination of an individual council to make and this was a point that was made yesterday by the Hon. Member, Mr. Carrington. But what these statements tell us is that Hon. Members on that side of the House are wedded to this concept of centralised governance and that they are not interested in the restoration of functionality in the local government system. Perhaps, they labour in the hope that they will return to this side of the House. To that I say that they need to be very patient because they have a while to be on that side.

Earlier today, opening the batting was the former Minister, Dr. Frank Anthony, who, in a tirade, accused this Administration of, among other things, unilaterally downsizing the sugar industry. Among his many accusations against this Administration was that it practises vindictive politics, that it has betrayed the sugar workers, accused us of backstabbing, saying that nothing tangible is being offered in this Budget. Well, the facts, among others, were revealed by my Colleague, the Hon. Member, Catherine Hughes, where she reminded Hon. Members that this Administration provided, so far, \$32 billion to subsidise the sugar industry and that this Budget contains a further \$6 billion in support of the sugar industry. But not one word from the Hon. Member did we hear about that white elephant or rather that blue elephant that is called the Skeldon Factory... *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

...a structure for which over US\$200 million was spent but all it achieved was to bring the sugar industry to its knees, almost crippling it in the bargain, so that is why I say that we have a duty to be responsible when we speak in this House. As I said, "critical", yes, but constructive and responsible.

4.15 p.m.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Ganga Persaud, my predecessor who just spoke, expressed... **[Mr. Damon:** He did not burn down your house.] No. He left a big mess. He spoke of his disappointment and the Fiscal Transfers Act and is accusing this Administration of practising illegalities with regard to the implementation of that Act. For now, I will say that that is a view which I do not share. If the Hon. Member is going to be condemnatory of annual subventions currently being provided to facilitate the work of the Local Government Organs, we have no apologies for those subventions we are currently providing.

The Hon. Member also characterised the actions of this Administration in relation to the local government agenda as storytelling, setting targets but achieving nothing, of making the local government system look like a toy and paying lip service to the concept of local government. In my presentation, I hope to address a number of these accusations and to prove the Hon. Member incorrect.

The Hon. Minister of Finance, on the 27th November, delivered, in this honourable House, Budget 2018, the fourth Budget to be presented by the Coalition Administration. My Colleagues who have already spoken have expounded and extolled on some of the many virtues contained in this Budget and I endorse every word of theirs, for this is a budget that we are proud of. I am pleased to offer my congratulations to the Minister of Finance and his hardworking team. I say proud because this Budget builds on a foundation already laid for a country that is more inclusive, cohesive and hence more sustainable.

This Budget provides for the working man, the business man, the young, the pensioner, indeed, for all sections of society. This Budget of approximately \$267.1 billion invests massively in infrastructure, some \$35 billion, which will spur economic activity, stimulate growth, create jobs and support businesses, whether micro, small, medium or other. This Budget invests in people, posterity and our national potential. This Budget is informed by a vision which is essentially striving for a better Guyana by offering more people a good life. It rests on several pillars. Among these are better government; a knowledge driven government; infrastructure for integration; building sustainable communities with investments in water, sanitation and housing; national security; harnessing our human capital with investments in education to the tune of \$41.9 billion; health - \$33.3 billion; youth \$1.7 billion; the elderly; culture and arts; hinterland development and the preservation of Indigenous culture.

Of these, I will focus on governance, government and, in particular, local government. Here I refer to the opening of the Minister of Finance's presentation, where he spoke of the abiding wish of this Coalition Administration to become a change agent for healing and reconciliation in recognition of the role that conflict and strife have played in destabilising race relations, and of the devastating consequences it has had on the development of our country or rather its underdevelopment. This is in keeping with our Manifesto's pledge and where Foundation 1 of the 15 Foundations refers to the imperative of national unity and of us turning our backs on the practice of one-party rule and the winner takes all approach to governance. We are convinced that the surest way to realise this ideal of national unity and social cohesion is by rejecting the winner takes all philosophy that has characterised the greater part of our post-independence years. Rejecting winner takes all is to embrace local democracy in keeping with

constitutional provisions. This is the course that this Administration has set, the direction in which it is travelling, which is decentralised governance and empowerment of organs created by the Constitution; these are Local Democratic Organs.

This agenda is not based on anyone's whims and fancies, but rather with a determination to respect constitutional provisions and to ensure there is democratic governance, arising out of a conviction that those provisions are not the product of happenstance, but rather of the searing analysis of our post-colonial leaders and of their distilled experiences. This is why this Budget provides \$2.9 billion in addition to a considerable sum already in its coffers to fund Local Government Elections scheduled for the end of 2018. In this regard, I recall, in the year 2015, one Hon. Member of this House, after I made reference to the fact there will be two Local Government Elections during the life of this Administration, - a point just made by the Hon. Member, Mr. Rajkumar - Hon. Member on the other side, retorted very derisively, "Hansard is listening." For him, it sounded as if it were something make-believe but we are seeing it now as a reality.

It has been widely reported that the Leader of the Opposition has labelled the Budget as lacking vision and uninspiring. I beg to differ. One vision this Budget speaks to is that of decentralised governance and empowerment of people to manage their own affairs at the regional, municipal and local levels. That vision is one that rejects centralised decision-making to one of community participation in the development trajectory. Those reported labels coming from someone who was one of the main architects of local government stagnation, of stifling the local government system, of depriving the system of needed resources and, more recently, of discouraging local leaders from participating in the rebuilding of the system which can only redound to their benefit and to the benefit of their communities, are indeed unfortunate. This deliberate attempt at undermining the empowerment of our people and constituencies is, perhaps, the best example of lack of vision.

Budget 2018 makes substantial provisions to advance our work towards empowering and equipping Local Democratic Organs to be effective and meaningful partners in our development thrust. This Budget caters to both our vision for local government as a critical partner in development and the continued strategic direction of rebuilding the institution and making available the capacity and resources for our people to chart their development. A total of \$1.6 billion is allocated for local government. These areas include, but are not limited to one, democratic renewal, 2018 and the Local Government Elections we have heard about; two, participation, institutional strengthening and capacity building; three, financial

security and funding for councils; four, housing; five, water with provisions to the sum of approximately \$2.743 billion; six, Local Government Commission; and, seven, regional development with a budgetary allocation of approximately \$37.9 billion.

Hon. Member Ms. Valarie Patterson-Yearwood, yesterday, presented on housing and, later, Minister Dawn Hastings-Williams will present on water. In relation to water, however, the Government's priority is on water production and quality, treated coverage, coastal and hinterland service and water governance at the national and operational level. In collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, a proposal is under development for consideration by the Caribbean Development Bank's 2016-2021 Country Assistance Programme, in which these form the core focus for intervention. An allocation of \$15 million is provided for the commencement of project designs in 2018.

Regional Development: The Regional Development Agenda is guided by the principle of expanded participation in decision-making to enable the regions to be effective in keeping with the policy of decentralisation. As articulated by His Excellency President David Granger:

“We have to break the mould of an over-centralised Government in Georgetown and, over a period of time, encourage strong Regions which could better administer, which could raise revenue, which could ensure that their populations and their regional interests are met.”

That excerpt was from an address made by His Excellency to Guyana's Ambassadors on 25th July, 2016. In furtherance of this, when I spoke one year ago, in the 2017 Budget debate, I informed this honourable House that the Ministry would implement, in early 2017, an activity to be known as the National and Regional Development Consultative Committee (NRDCC). The NRDCC is designed to strengthen and improve regional administration. Therein, I expounded on the important work that would engage such a forum. The inaugural NRDCC was held as scheduled but, sadly, the seven RDCs, for which the main Opposition party has a majority, chose to stay away. A forum which provides for engagement and consultation is rejected. On a forum that seeks to advance the process of empowerment and devolution of authority, thanks, but no thanks is the response. What kind of leadership is this? The NRDCC will be an annual event and it will be held next on 19th January, 2018. This time, we do not expect a repeat of the boycott and we look forward to engaging the regional leadership on issues critical to the development of their respective regions. In addition, in keeping with the agenda of empowerment and regional pride, the forum will receive reports and deliberate on the activities and progress on the renaming initiative,

regional flags and symbols, one which some Members on the opposite side of the House have misguidedly characterised as *balkanisation*.

I am pleased to acknowledge that Region 9, Upper Takatu/Upper Essequibo, has led the way with its submission, following a broad-based consultative process. The progress is slow but it is irreversible. Those who may wish to stand like Canute on the foreshore and bid the incoming tide to recede are free to pursue their will. We will continue with ours and, ultimately, the people will decide which path they prefer - empowerment or central control. The people will make the decision in the end.

This Budget constructively references the PARDS.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, please resume your seat. Hon. Members, I, once again, require you to be mindful of the fact that, if a Member is on the floor, other Members at least do not disturb the presentation. That has been happening all too often by persons who know better and who can do better. Hon. Minister, please proceed.

Mr. Bulkan: Those plans are critical in ensuring bottom-up consultative and community-led development. Communities and their desires will be accounted for by the Regional Democratic Councils in their decisions and determination for regional development - the PARDs, the NRDCC and the subsequent Regional Development Consultative Committee (RDCC). Regional democratic consultations are critical vehicles for RDCs to engage with citizens, commerce and corporate actors, all important parts of the communities.

4.30 p.m.

Together, they will decide on the development initiatives of their regions and, through their combined actions, ultimately, that of Guyana. The budget's recognition of this important vehicle for consultative development highlights this Administration's emphasis on community input into our growth. In his speech, the Minister of Finance, articulated on the National Regional Development Consultative Committee (NRDCC) and revealed that the forum will produce a Regional Development Report, which will be laid in the Nation Assembly. Approximately \$19 million is allocated to enable the work of the NRDCC and the Regional Development Consultative Committees (RDCCs) in 2018. In this regard, I say to Members on the opposite side of the House to participate or be left out.

Another new initiative on the regional calendar is the promotion of race. I am not referring to that feature that has divided us and impeded our development, but rather to the Regional Agricultural and Commercial Exhibitions (RACEs), which will be held annually in every region. These exhibitions will showcase and promote local products in their respective regions and will be held in conjunction with the Regional Democratic Councils (RDCs) and the Ministries of Agriculture, Business, Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, as well as the Private Sector organisations and other key stakeholders. The objective is to spur and support local economic development. The Demerara/Mahaica region held theirs one week ago and the Potaro-Siparuni region will have theirs this weekend at Monkey Mountain. Others have been held in Mahaica/Berbice, Pomeroon/Supenaam, East Berbice/Corentyne and the Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo regions. The Regional Democratic Councils, combined, received Central Government funding in 2017 of approximately \$35.3 billion with recurrent appropriations of approximately \$31.6 billion and \$3.9 billion for capital investments. Admittedly, The Public Sector Investment Programmes (PSIPs) for the regions suffered from sloth in its implementation and this came out in the 2017 mid-year report, dated 4th August, 2016, from the Ministry of Finance. However, the report spoke of:

“A combination of targeted interventions to address the sluggish pace of spending in the Public Sector Investment Programmes (PSIP)”

This led to improvements and I wish to report that overall implementation, according to the Integrated Financial Management and Accounting System (IFMAS) report in the capital programme, at the end of November, stands at 74% with the Pomeroon-Supenaam region being the highest at 93% and the Upper Demerara-Berbice the lowest, just below 60%. The overall end-of-year projection is that the implementation rate will be approximately 94%, admittedly still a shortfall.

Notwithstanding this, the proposed capital allocations in the 2018 Budget for the regions have been increased by approximately 8%, with the highest allocation of approximately \$554 million going to the East Berbice-Corentyne region and the lowest to the Potaro-Siparuni region of approximately \$226 million.

All of the hinterland regions have enjoyed 10% or more increases in their 2018 allocations. The proposed recurrent allocations stand at approximately \$33.8 billion, an increase of more than \$2 billion and I would wager that these proposed sums would be approved by the honourable House.

To address the question of sluggish implementation in the PSIP, the Minister of Finance, at paragraph 4.37 of his speech, spoke of “...a significantly sterner disposition” in the preparation of Budget 2018. All “...Budget Agencies were mandated to ensure that procurement plans were prepared in support of their 2018 work programmes...”and the need for them to be “...in a state of readiness to implement the PSIP come January 01, 2018”. We are not shy in acknowledging our shortcomings; we are being very open about it.

In the latter half of 2017, approval has been given for the creation of planning units within each agency and within our RDCs and a Deputy Regional Executive Officer (DREO) – planning - will be appointed to support this critical area of more effective implementation in the PSIP.

To give the briefest of accounts as to what these capital investments will fund, I would refer to the following:

In the Barima-Waini region there would be the construction of a nursery school at Kamwatta that would accommodate approximately 42 nursery school children. It replaces a building that currently houses approximately 120 pupils from Grades 1 and 2 and nursery. It is inappropriate for that amount of students, and this new school will cater for approximately 42 nursery school children. The investment in education is \$130 million for Region 1.

In the Pomeroon-Supenaam region, the 2018 Budget will fund the construction of a new school at Abrams Zuil for an approximate budgeted sum of \$106 million where the beneficiaries will be approximately 500 students and 40 teachers. This school has consistently achieved the second highest academic performance in the Pomeroon-Supenaam region; second only to the Anna Regina Multilateral School. This new school that would be built in 2018 replaces the one that has been in a state of disrepair for several years. The students at Abrams Zuil Secondary School will enjoy a well-designed structure with modern classrooms, science labs and a generally improved academic environment.

In the Essequibo Islands-West Demerara, among the many capital investments and activities, will be the rehabilitation of the sluice and revetment at Hogg Island. The purpose of this project is to prevent erosion. It will allow for the continuous drainage of approximately 6300 acres of farmlands and to benefit 18 households to allow for them to continue their cattle rearing, planting of cash crops and ground provision farming.

In the East Berbice-Corentyne region, Budget 2018 will allow for the construction of a theatre at the Skeldon Hospital. When completed, this theatre will allow for major surgeries among these being C-sections, Hysterectomies, Appendectomies and many more 'ies'. It would also allow for minor surgeries and for residents on the Corentyne Coast, who live closer to Skeldon and do not have to travel all the way to New Amsterdam. Approximately 32,000 residents will benefit from this new facility in 2018.

In the Cuyuni-Mazaruni region, Budget 2018 will allow for the construction of a Primary school at Paruima, which will cater for over 145 children. It replaces the school that was affected by erosion and the shifting of the soil which affected the foundation and that building had become unsafe and a threat to the students. It would be replaced in 2018.

In the 2018 Budget, for that very region, we would see the completion of a CT scan building to accommodate the CT scan that is currently in the region and that we have heard about earlier.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, you have four minutes remaining.

Mr. Bulkan: The backbone of the local government system is our towns and villages or the municipalities and NDCs that have responsibility for managing and developing their respective areas. In this regard, the democratic renewal, though a prerequisite is not sufficient for the restoration of functionality within these organs, for that, the need for institutional strengthening, capacity building and the revenue base need to be addressed.

In 2017, the Ministry produced a very important training manual or handbook for councillors. This document extracts the key sections of the two pieces of principal legislation, namely Chapters 28:01 and 28:02 and presents them in a user-friendly manner to inform and guide councillors on their authority, roles and responsibilities. It has been distributed to each of the approximately 1,170 councillors, as well as administrative staff in the 71 local democratic organs. In my accompanying message to councillors, I urged them to take ownership of their areas, which is what the law allows for. Yesterday, we heard the Hon. Member, Mr. Carrington, underscore the point which is that local government organs have to individually take charge of their affairs and not wait on a Central Government agency to dictate their development. This is all new and it will take time for councillors to understand the independence which they have by law.

As we have heard, this Administration in 2018 will take steps and make efforts to provide for property reassessments – re-evaluation of properties. This will allow for the long overdue update of the property

register in the municipalities and NDCs and allow councils to have an updated register to make equitable decisions on rate percentages that they want to utilise.

In conclusion, there are two other important bodies that came into being this year, one being the Local Government Commission and the Guyana Association of Municipalities (GAM). The Local Government Commission receives the sum of approximately \$110 million in Budget 2018 and the sum of \$10 million is being provided to support the work of the Guyana Association of Municipalities. In his Address to the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce, on the 24th March, 2016, under the title *Capital Towns and Economic Development*, His Excellency, speaking about the roles of our capital towns, said,

“This is their moment in history.”

The same can be said of the entire local government system.

I return to the charge that this budget lacks vision. This budget is informed by many visions. I have presented one, Colleagues who have spoken before have presented others on business, Indigenous peoples’ affairs, housing, health, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), agriculture and rural development, among others. Later we will hear of our vision and programmes on education, infrastructure and natural resources, including the emerging oil and gas sector, among others.

We say emphatically that we are proud of this budget and I ask for its passage by unanimity - *The Journey to the Good Life Continues*.

I thank you. *[Applause]*

Mr. Croal: Last Monday, we listened as this document, *The Journey to the Good Life Continues* was read. It was probably over 84 pages of speech presented by the Hon. Minister of Finance. My timing is that it lasted for about 3 hours and 15 minutes. The journey for this speech started when we saw the mounting of billboards, probably for the first time. **[Ms. Lawrence:** They look good *eh.*]

Yes. The picture looks good and it looks much more beautiful in the context when billboards are being mounted and there is that amount, whereby there is a crying nation across the sugar belt and across our pensioners.

4.45 p.m.

The only way it could have gotten our attention was to hype the Budget Presentation. Had the Hon. Minister concentrated more on the task at hand, maybe he would not have, not once, but twice, predicted wrongly the growth rate for 2017.

Yesterday, the Hon. Member, Mr. Jermaine Figueira, described our calls on this side for the removal of tax measures in 2017 as *vacumous*. If the Government feels so...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I interrupt you. The word you used, may I inquire? Hon. Member, Mr. Croal?

Mr. Croal: I am listening to you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: You used a word a moment ago, purportedly used by another Member.

Mr. Croal: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Could you tell the House what that word is please?

Mr. Croal: You want me to repeat myself? I said *vacumous*.

Mr. Speaker: I believe the word that Mr. Figueira used was *vacuous* and I believe he did withdraw that word.

Mr. Croal: Well, if he did withdraw it, I will withdraw mine.

Mr. Speaker: He did not say *vacumous* but please proceed.

Mr. Croal: If the Government feels so, I challenge it to support our motion which called on many proposals to stimulate the economy and to reduce poverty and hardships in the 2018 Budget. A number of measures, which we had proposed, were not brought to light for debate. If they feel so strong about their measures, I call upon them and challenge them to debate it.

The Hon. Minister of Finance, in his report on the Public Sector Investment Programme and for which the Hon. Minister of Communities alluded to, reported that the national performance is far below our expectation and economic needs. The Minister said that they were honest about it.

What is of further concern to me is that when the Minister stated that we have worked to accelerate implementation, it sounded good, but what are those measures, may I ask? The Hon. Minister did not say

what they were expected to do about this. An examination of Regions 1 to 10's mid-year reports will show the dismal figure about the performance. The comparisons are there, which the Hon. Minister alluded to. The average for Regions 1 to 10, in the mid-year reports, showed a performance of 29.50%. I see that the Permanent Secretary (PS) is here and I am glad that he is listening. It therefore means, notwithstanding that figure that was just given by the IFMAS Report, there is an average implementation within the last half of the year of 63.92% among the 10 regions. How is this going to be done? Within the Ministry of Communities, I want to mention the 20% implementation in its mid-year report. Based on their numbers, we expect an 82% implementation within the last half of the year. When it comes to next year, are we therefore going to get a thicker volume of the audit report? If one looks at this across the 10 regions, the number of pages of audit queries has increased. For Region 1 alone it has moved to 29 pages of audit queries.

Yesterday, the Hon. Michael Carrington called upon us and said that the Opposition needs to work with the Central Government. [Mr. Patterson: We work with everybody] Well, we need to all work together. Maybe the Hon. Minister of Communities needs to inform his Ministry, as well as his regions, that there is a difference between the Regional Administration and the Regional Democratic Councils. There is a big difference. I will give you one example. There is a brewing matter regarding a proposal for a landfill site in Region 1 at [inaudible]. The Regional Democratic Council objected to the proposal for the location of that site, which would involve the removal of a number of persons, *et cetera*. What concerns me is the response by the Ministry and I will quote one section of the letter:

“The Ministry of Communities, in collaboration with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), engaged the Regional Democratic Council of Barima-Waini through the Regional Executive Officer and the Deputy Regional Executive Officer, inclusive of the region's Senior Environmental Health Officer.”

That is in response to a letter which was written by the Regional Democratic Councils, bypassing many of the RDCs that are controlled by the People's Progressive Party (PPP). That is what is happening at present. So, Hon. Member, Mr. Carrington, when you want to ask us to work together, we will work together, but you must recognise where authority lies. When you speak about budget preparation and that these are PPP/C's budgets, and I am guessing you were referring to the majority of controlled regions, you must therefore ask what the budget's submission was. I could go on and start giving numbers about

what was placed or provided or asked for and which was not necessarily what was provided. We cannot say definitively that it was wholeheartedly the PPP/C's budgets that were provided.

The Hon. Ganga Persaud referred to the fiscal transfer and the subventions for the Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) and municipalities. When we were in Government, we were accused of depriving NDCs and municipalities of resources, but when one looks at the allocation for this year and he/she compares it with the allocation for last year, the subvention allocation is of a similar amount. The Minister of Communities said that while they are calling:

“Next year Government will be exploring the possibility of conducting a countrywide valuation exercise to bring all property values up to date so that NDCs and municipalities are equipped with appropriate revenues streams to deliver their mandate.”

The Hon. Minister of Communities clarified that the intention was not to raise the taxation within the local authority areas. May I ask if that is not the case and if, at the same time, you are saying that the local organisations are deprived of revenue streams, then how come there has not been an increased allocation in the subvention in 2018?

There was a big announcement that there would be no new taxation measures for 2018. They probably could not find any more to put at the national level because there were over 200 increased taxation measures in 2017. Therefore, they moved to the local authorities. I say there is probably a motive in moving in this direction.

About a month ago, across the board, we would have seen the renewal of the regional tender boards, which entailed the replacing and placing of new members. What we now have is the stacking of those regional tender boards with *political hawks*.

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

Okay, I will retract that word.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, this is not the first occasion in which that word was declared unacceptable in this Chamber. Please bear that in mind.

Mr. Croal: Political supporters. What is of importance to note, is that, while the Regional Tender Board states that three members are appointed from the National Tender and Procurement Administration

Board (NPTAB), and I am reading from the Act, two members are appointed by the Regional Administration. Yet, a majority of those positions are now filled with known supporters of the Government and the Government is talking about transparency at the tender board level and increased transparency.

The Hon. Minister of Communities referred to regional flags, the emblems, *et cetera* like if the regions do not have recognition, and as if the regions do not have an identity. Because Guyana does not have a federal system, the regions fall under Guyana and in Guyana we have one flag, the Golden Arrowhead. To create much more confusion, having had the flags drawn at the central Ministry and placed in the regions, seeking consultation for adaptation, we now have confusion in Region 9. Region 9 has moved in the direction of redesigning its flag and not adopting the one sent by the Ministry. Yet, in Lethem there is confusion because there is an instruction coming that there has to be the “Ministry’s flag”, the region’s flag and then the Golden Arrowhead. There is an instruction that there must be three flag poles being placed when there are certain ceremonies. And the Hon. Minister is talking about democracy.

5.00 p.m.

I want to refer to line item 6211, under the Ministry of Communities, Sustainable Community Management. The allocation has moved from \$131.2 million to \$196.9 million. Very well, we welcome such an increase, but it is my hope, therefore, having recognised very early that you would have given the REOs increases in salaries, I do hope that the increases that we have under line item 6211 caters for the Regional Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen too and not hidden costs. We will know them next week - for selected persons, honorariums and for finding resources for every other thing, but when it comes to the hard core hardworking people of this country, amongst which are the sugar workers, we say we do not have fiscal space.

I remind the Hon. Minister of Communities that we are still waiting for some of our Regional Chairmen and Regional Vice-Chairpersons to be sworn in as Justices of the Peace (JPs). I know that you may want to remind me that you had an activity where you would have facilitated such swearing in. That was the activity you referred to a while ago about the first National Regional Development Consultative Committee meeting. May I explain to the Hon. Minister of Communities that although the Regional Chairpersons and Regional Vice-Chairpersons, *et cetera*, would have written the Hon. Minister of Communities explaining their absence from the meeting. From the letter which I would have seen, it was

clearly stated that they were asking for certain information so that they could have understand the nature of the meeting that they were attending. Yet, the Regional Chairmen were called a day before, or let us give it two days before because it was late in the afternoon, by telephone saying “You are being invited to a meeting at the Guyana Marriott Hotel Georgetown with His Excellency”, without any explanation of the nature of the meeting, what was going to be agreed upon, *et cetera*. I can say Minister of Communities, having been written to, you have not responded to clarify the real purpose and the intention of that meeting. So, I go back to my original point that they are still waiting to be sworn in as Justices of the Peace and, hence, are deprived of providing much needed services to the people of their communities and in their regions.

The Local Government Commission has finally commenced its work, no doubt through months of delays by the Government’s side. The Hon. Minister of Communities preaches local democracy well and though he preaches it well, he does not necessarily practice what he preaches. There is a question mark on the appointment of one of the members of the commission because one of the members is supposed to be identified through a consultative process with the local democratic organs. I ask the Hon. Minister to state when that consultation was done with the local democratic organs for the commission. The Hon. Minister may want to say yes and that they were consulted among the Guyana Association of Municipalities, but GAM represents only the municipalities, Hon. Minister.

I now refer to programme code 251100 under Agency 42, whereby \$20 million is budgeted for 2018. I ask: Where is the autonomy for the commission? This is because the Local Government Commission is an independent commission and its expenses are expected to be charged directly from the Consolidated Fund. Part 4, Section 24: Budget and Resources of the Local Government Commission Act No. 18 of 2013, it provides:

“the commission shall determine its own annual budget for submission to the Minister of Finance for inclusion in the annual budget presented to the National Assembly;”

Not falling under a subject ministry.

May I use the opportunity now to inform the House that the Local Government Commission has *reached a bottle neck* in accessing the funds for the 2017 subvention? Therefore, I am urging and asking the Ministry to ensure and to facilitate, as well as to help, the commission to have its bank account opened so that it can access its funds and the money could be spent before the year is finished.

I want to refer to a matter and we would have heard from the Minister within the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs. May I ask for their intervention and for them to awaken from their slumber to address the matter at Four Miles in the Matakai sub-region? Four Miles has received titles to their community and yet, recognition is not being done for that community as a title community. Instead, we have a member of this House, who sometimes I wonder if he thinks he is the Minister of Region 1 because that Hon. Member moves around, picks up his phone whenever he reaches an officer, calls a Minister's by name and says "X, Y and Z", but is encouraging the inequality that is taking place on the ground in the Four Miles community. **[Ms. Ally: You are worried.]** I am not worried because we are Region 1 and we will never be worried.

When the Hon. Mr. John Adams boasted about the removal of the Value-Added Tax (VAT) on education, I ask therefore, who put the VAT on education in the first place. **[Ms. Ally: So what.]** Now we are hearing "So what?" Had the Government been listening, it would not have wasted a whole year. It would not have wasted the effort and the time which would have been the amount of protests that were held and the additional burdens on our people. If the Government had listened and had removed the VAT on education, immediately, then it would not have had to say "So what?" Having said that, we want to remind the Government that the Used Tyres Association is in a similar plight... **[Lt. Col. (Ret'd)**

Harmon: The next thing that we are going to hear about is the parking meters.] I will tell you about the parking meters just now. As you want me to continue, I will tell you. On the same vein, may I remind the House that it was because of pressure by our side of the Government – on our side of the House. We will be in Government, Sir. I am predicting.

Because of the threat of the Mining Association, the Government immediately sought to remove the 10% additional on the royalties and the 2% tributors tax. Again, I want to use the opportunity to say that our pensioners are still waiting for the removal of subsidies on water and electricity. In addition to the removal, even if the Government did not touch that, there is a moral obligation to touch on the removal of the VAT with the application after \$10,000 consumption on electricity. The VAT application is not even being applied on the \$10,000, and after, but when one consumes \$10,000 and \$1 and above, the VAT application is applied on every amount.

I agree with the Hon. Jermaine Figueira that the budget is real. The budget is real because it shows the numbers, so when we boast about the reduction of VAT by 2%... The Hon. John Adams was not forthright in his information. What he did not remind us of was the percentage of taxation measures that

were implemented at the same time after having removed 2% of the VAT. Hence, within the two years period, \$6 billion more was gained in revenue and yet there was a reduction in VAT of 2%. That is more burdens on the backs of our people. While the Government speaks about prudent management of the economy, we must speak about the prudent management of the lives of our people. Hence, we call on the Government to put measures in place to deal with the 10,000 odd sugar workers that will be displaced.

Finally, I urge the Hon. Minister of Communities to pay more attention to the Regional Executive Officers. Minister, you have been speaking about local democracy but the Regional Executive Officers must recognise that the Regional Democratic Councils are the authority of the regions. It is only because the Regional Executive Officer of Region 2 was exposed by video that we had quick action and condemnation of the action by that Regional Executive Officer. *[Interruption]*

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

I ask, where is, and where was, the Hon. Minister of Communities for Region 5, where there is the Regional Executive Officer disrupting the functioning of the RDC of Region 5? He does not even attend the meetings of the RDC. Firstly, he walked out of the many meetings and now he does not attend. Where is the Hon. Minister of Communities in Enmore; where there a Hon. Member from the coalition Government disrupting the Neighbourhood Democratic Council meeting?

5.15 p.m.

Where is the Hon. Minister of Communities, where at La Grange, West Bank Demerara there is an Hon. Member of the coalition Government disrupting the NDCs meetings from functioning? When we want to speak about cohesion, cohesion must never be a word just by title. I pity the now new Minister of Social Cohesion. Cohesion must be made both in action and in written form.

With those few remarks I pledge, on this side of the House, our non-support of Budget 2018. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, before you take your seat, at the commencement of your statement you made reference to a motion. Perhaps, you did not know that that motion was not accepted. It was rejected for publication and use in this House. Were you aware of that, Hon. Member?

Mr. Croal: I am aware that...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, were you aware of that motion?

Mr. Croal: I am aware that a motion was tabled.

Mr. Speaker: You are not aware that it was rejected?

Mr. Croal: No Your Honour.

Mr. Speaker: It has been rejected. I think that the mover of the motion is aware of that. You would withdraw the reference to that motion. You will announce that you have withdrawn the reference to that motion.

Ms. Teixeira rose to her feet.

Hon. Member Ms. Teixeira, please take your seat. I would deal with your Point of Order later.

Hon. Member Mr. Croal, you made a reference to a motion that was rejected by the Speaker for use in this chamber. You said that you did not know of it. The Speaker is now bringing it to your attention. What the Speaker expects you to do is to withdraw it because you used it in error, unless of course you intended to use it, notwithstanding the fact that it was rejected for use in this House.

Mr. Croal: I intended to make reference to a motion that was submitted by this side of the House.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I have brought it to your attention. That motion must be withdrawn from this House. It is not for use here. The Speaker rejected it. Let us be clear when we are knocking around words. The process for a motion to be accepted in this House is by its approval by the Speaker for such use. Until that time, the motion is not approved, then that motion is not a motion before this House. It could never be submitted here without the approval of the Speaker.

Mr. Croal, I have spoken to you clearly enough and long enough. I order you to withdraw that reference. I await your withdrawal of the motion, Hon. Member.

Mr. Croal: Would you allow me to rephrase my sentence?

Mr. Speaker: I will listen to you.

Mr. Croal: I rephrase to say that the motion was submitted and was rejected. Would that be appropriate?
Mr. Speaker, I was referring to the contents in the motion.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member...

Mr. Croal: I acknowledge that it has not been approved so...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you prefaced your statement by saying, “Let this motion be debated if they are not afraid” or something to that effect.

Mr. Croal: Yes. It is the contents of this motion.

Mr. Speaker: I did not hear you say that, Hon. Member. You read the title of the motion also.

Mr. Croal: That is what I am asking. Can I rephrase it?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, please remain standing.

To steal a march and to have things the way that we would like them by ignoring the rules, by just simply changing it, that is what we are doing here. If a motion is rejected, then that motion has no place here precisely. The point is that some Members would feel differently. That is how it is gun. If a Member feels differently about something, then what the Member does is accept that. When the Member gets a response he likes he accepts that too. We talk about democracy, but that is democracy.

Hon. Member Mr. Croal...[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member, I am speaking. However strongly you feel this is not the time for you to speak. Hon. Member Mr. Croal, I gave you a chance to put yourself in order there. I have told you everything. You understand everything. You are a Member of this House. Put yourself in order in accordance with the rules. I wait on you.

Mr. Croal: Mr. Speaker, the motion that was submitted...[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we are not going to have this. I am addressing you and this applies across to everyone. I expect leaders to show leadership. I expect that here. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Members, we would not go there.

Mr. Croal, I am waiting on you. You would need to go back to the beginning of your statement to correct yourself.

Mr. Croal: I correct myself to say, Mr. Speaker, “the motion that was submitted and rejected.”

Mr. Speaker: Mr. Croal, you have to go back beyond that to put yourself in order.

Mr. Croal: Mr. Speaker, just guide me. I am just trying to be guided.

Mr. Speaker: When you commenced your statement in this House, Mr. Croal, you would know what you said.

Mr. Croal: I spoke from my head. I am trying to remember. I will be guided by you, Mr. Speaker, as to what needs to be corrected. I corrected the portion that refers to the words “that it was rejected.” I inserted that, but I cannot remember what else needs to be corrected. I am guided by you.

Mr. Speaker: Speak to the House as to what it is that you are saying.

Mr. Croal: I did not hear you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Speak to the House as to what you are saying in relation to a motion that ought not to have been here. If the motion is not approved by the Speaker, it ought not to be in the House.

Mr. Croal, would you please put yourself in order?

Ms. Teixeira rose to her feet.

Hon. Member Ms. Teixeira, I would deal with your Point of Order afterwards, and not now. Please take your seat. I would deal with your Point of Order after I am through with Mr. Croal.

Mr. Croal: Mr. Speaker, I referred to a motion that was submitted by this side of the House that was subsequently rejected.

Mr. Speaker: You also mentioned the title of the motion in your speech.

Mr. Croal: Yes Mr. Speaker. I read what was in the title of the motion, hence, I added to say that “the motion was submitted and rejected”.

Mr. Speaker: Very well, Mr. Croal. Ms. Teixeira, do you wish the floor?

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, at this point, it is no.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you. Hon. Members, we would now take the suspension and we would return at 6.25 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.26 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 6.31 p.m.

Mr. C. Persaud: It is with a sense of pride that I rise to support my colleagues in the debate of Budget 2018. I would also like to commend the Minister Mr. Jordan, the Minister of Finance, and his team for presenting a budget that I would describe as one that encompasses all.

I have a slight difficulty trying to figure out where to start, because of all that have transpired prior to me taking my stand. I would like to refer to one speaker who referred to a Member of the Government as having... He flashed papers showing that he has three copies of the speeches that the Member made, and they are all the same. I would like to go down in the records as having said something three times also. It is for the sake of emphasis and for the Members on the other side to not forget what we want them to understand.

It is sad that we have to sit here..., and listen and this is the third time that we have heard Members of the Opposition speak of the withdrawal of subsidy for electricity and water from pensioners.

While that is a fact, it would help the people that they are trying to convince, the old people, like myself, that we have been cheated of \$30,000. In fact, in 2015 old-age pension was \$13,125 per month. That was moved to \$17,000, a difference of \$3,875 and when multiplied by 12 would give \$45,800 per month. The \$30,000 for the combined subsidy is far less than the \$45,800, the increase that the pensioners received. It unless we are playing domino and the game is closed and small numbers win, but this is where the big numbers win. The pensioners are way better off since 2015.

6.35 p.m.

The increase of \$500 was criticised. It that was dealt with in some extent, very extensively, I should say, by my friend and colleague, the Hon. Minister Catherine Hughes. I will leave it at that. I would like to ask the Hon. Members when they are peddling the propaganda to the extent that they want to convince people that they are the good persons. They must also say, "Well, they took \$30,000 from you, but they have given \$45,800, you are way better off." We did not do as well as they have done. That would be a good thing.

I also have a situation where... I must admit that there some very educated people on the opposite side, as we have on our side, also, but there are also very talented people. One of them, in my view, would be qualified as a stand-up comedian. He presented a very funny debate, and it is the one time that a speaker

presented any kind of discourse in this House. It was funny, and all of the Members laughed. It is really good. What was clear with this particular speaker, as it is with all the other speakers on the Opposition's side... It is raining outside but there is a storm inside of here. The storm is in the minds of the Members of the Opposition. A storm sweeps everything in its path – good, bad and ugly, everything gets swept. They are bent on criticising, because they are in the Opposition. What is good is criticised; what is bad is criticised; what was theirs, because we have adopted it, as they have claimed, they criticised. The storm is going to destroy them. Earlier today, I have got a line in relation to storm. You cannot calm the storm, so stop trying. What you can do is calm yourself, the storm will pass. Leave it as it is. You are there and you are going to be there. My friend has given you up to 2025, but I do not see that happening. I may die - that is an aside. What I would suggest to my friends is to take your time. Look to see where we have erred and present the House with a solution to what you see as a problem. That is what I think oppositions should do. We have done a few good, such as the bridge at Hope that took almost a lifetime to complete. We had to fix that. It was just the other day it was done. Those of you who have travelled on that bridge know that you had to come to a full stop and really manoeuvre your vehicle before you tear the bottom off. **[Mr. Dharamlall: What about the sugar workers?]** We will get there.

All we need to make this a successful debate is not just criticism, construction criticism would help, but you criticise everything. We have a theme, *The Journey to the Good Life Continues*. Any journey has a beginning and there is a course of travel and during the course of travel one may encounter difficulties, no matter what the journey is. If one reaches the end of that journey, then the destination has been reached. This is not a magical wand. Our policies cannot be waved and, say “bang”, it is going to happen the next day. We took office in May, 2015 and certain promises were made, the “good life”. The “good life” is going to happen. From what we are seeing, I do not know that they can justify denying that we are on the road to a “good life”. We will get over the hurdles, as we have been getting over, and we will present the “good life”. We are just at the halfway point.

One of the things that have been presented in this budget is what I would call, or what has been described, the tax amnesty. Even that is being criticised and I can safely say that there are perhaps a few thousands of people who have not filed the tax returns. What is being given to them is something on a silver platter. What is being criticised is that the words in the tax amnesty states that the tax return must be true and correct. The words “true and correct” seem to be a problem with the Members in the Opposition. We have listened to television programmes; it is already a violation not filing your tax

returns on time, in a given year. Having to go back several years magnifies that violation. That is being set aside. You are being given a break, a pardon, to file your tax returns. What is wrong with the words “true and correct”? Do you want to cheat on your tax returns? You have already gone wrong. Do not magnify the wrong by trying to file an improper tax return. Declare your income. The amnesty covers a hundred per cent of interest and penalties if it is filed before June, 2018. What is wrong with that? Yet, it is being criticised. We should welcome that. We should grab our friends and relatives, and say, “You did not file your tax return come and do it now. You will get a tax break.” Be happy about it.

[**Mr. Dharamlall:** Tell Mr. Ramjattan to file his tax.]

We are not allowed to name anyone,

so I am asking that we do not do that. We are not going to tell anybody anything.

The question was asked, what about sugar? I will also say, what about rice? We, as a Government of two and a half years old, could not, in a month of Sundays, destroy a multi-billion dollar industry. GuySuCo has been on the decline for over a decade and it was managed by a bunch of people who did not know what to do. That is why it went down to zero, or minus zero, or minus something, now.

These are some of the things that prevent us and are preventing us from presenting the “good life” on a shorter time frame because we have to undo what was done wrong. It is the fixing that is creating a hurdle that we have difficulties surmounting. We are not saying that we cannot get pass them. We will, but they will take time, so the “good life” will not happen overnight as has been the case. It will come in time, stick around.

The same can be said about rice. We did not do anything. We took office and found that rice prices were plummeting when it was \$2,000, or whatever it was, per bag. Today, and I have got it from a reliable source, the price for rice is \$3,200 per bag, and that is not the ordinary bag, it is the 65 kilogram bag. That has been a significant improvement in the price of rice from the time we took over the business to now. What is wrong with that?

There was contention that we have caused Members to have nightmares. Really, that is not catered for in the budget, there are some people in strong quarters who can fix that. We will leave that out for now.

My friend, the Hon. Member Mr. Nigel Dharamlall, spoke about half of a house and it was touched on by the Hon. Minister Bulkan. What is described as half a house, in Canada – they have relatives and we all have relatives abroad – it is called “semis”. It is a simple thing. It is a structure with just one wall dividing the two units, but they are independent households. To say that one is getting half of a house...

Maybe you cannot afford a whole house, but that is another story. It is not a half of a house. We are looking to make it affordable. That is why when we talk of a “semi”, it is not half of a house even though the word “semi” means half. We love his vocabulary here. There is also what we can describe as “row houses”. In foreign countries they are called “town houses”, a string of houses along, independent units, mind you, but with walls separating each unit, not a single or detached foams.

There is so much that can be said about Region 6. A lot has been describes already. What we need to know is that it was said just the other day. We have a hospital... [Mr. Dharamlall: Which hospital?]

The New Amsterdam Hospital that is now going to have a Maternity Unit and that is something that this Government is looking to construct in two and a half years’ time. [Mr. Dharamlall: There was always a Maternity Unit. I was born in New Amsterdam Hospital.]

We are not talking about the bed that had to be shared by two pregnant women. We are talking about a Maternity Unit where husbands can sit and watch their wives deliver babies – a state-of-the-art Maternity Unit. At the Skeldon Hospital, a theatre is being built there. We are simply looking to improve facilities to make our lives better, so that we can look at the “good life”. That is what we are looking at.

I have statistics that show the development. On the East Bank of Berbice, Region 6... [Mr. Dharamlall: That is East Berbice/Corentyne.]

All right, that is East Berbice. All you see is Region 6. In Region 6, several canals have been dug. There is a health centre that was built up on the East Bank of Berbice. They want statistics and the statistics are all available to them. I have a few and so I will read them out very quickly. On the Upper Corentyne, Numbers 54, 57, 51, and 40, Number 19, New Amsterdam and also Whim, electric lights were installed. Number 19, 290 plus lights were put in place just to illuminate the community. I might add, we are not looking to see which communities supported the governing party, or which supported the PPP. We are doing it for everybody. We are a Government of the people of Guyana and we do things that will benefit the entire nation.

We are looking at millions of dollars to the tune of about \$815 million was allocated for maintenance work in Region 6 and out of that \$639 million was spent, meaning developmental work. Those of you who have been to Liverpool, it was a depressed community. I was not the one who did anything there. I can tell you that much. I made a request and four Ministers went inside there. It is a very depressed community, handicapped for all kinds of reasons. Now, that community’s centre is being developed. Minister Ally, Minister Charles-Broomes, Minister Cummings and Minister Henry were there. The road into Liverpool, you could not even ride a bicycle, it was a dam. Now, I call it a glass-top road. These are

developments. Right now, in New Amsterdam, the main road is being looked at from the other end of the hospital, the structure that could have been a museum but was destroyed by the previous Government.

6.50 p.m.

From that end, the road is being looked at. Several streets in New Amsterdam have been built. Those of you who know Cumberland Canje, the road in Cumberland Canje new street, has been built from the beginning to the end of what is called Bones Bush, we commonly say, 'Bun Bush Dam'. It is currently happening. That is all I would like to tell the Hon. Members on the other side. The development is not going to be an overnight thing. There is no magical wand to wave and say *shuzam* or 'Captain Marvel', or whatever, and it happens. [Mr. Dharamlall: What about the rubber stamp?] I could tell you about rubber stamp, but it is made out of good really shine hardwood and rubber, very sturdy stamp.

More will be said about the developmental work in Region 6.

The list is very long. I will leave the rest to my learned colleagues and the various Ministers who still have to speak. I wish to commend this budget to the House for its passing.

Thank you very much. [Applause]

Dr. Mahadeo: I was trying to take some notes from my colleague Member of Parliament of Region 6, but there is nothing for me to answer. There are two things that the Hon. Minister of Communities mentioned. One of it is the theatre at Skeldon Hospital. The theatre at Skeldon Hospital, since 2014, was supposed to be a rolled over project into 2015. We had got the people from the standards department to come and help us to draw the plan and everything. However, this Government, when it took over, changed the contractor who went into a theatre, who had no experience with a theatre and who literally built, as a kitchen or a house would be built, or something, which did not meet the standards. And so this is why we are going through the expense again.

The Hon. Minister, within the Ministry, mentioned quite a bit, but I noticed in her speech there is repetition. The Hon. Member said, maybe for emphasis, "we are emphasising that we are going to resolve suicide; we are going to set up a mental health unit since 2016", that was mentioned. These things keep coming in budget after budget. The Hon. Minister also said that we have graduated a batch of medex. That is excellent. When did they start? Under which Government did this programme start? All I am saying is – all the specialists who would be sent out; that is also in every budget speech - to give *Jack*

his jacket. At least, it is to mention who incubated those students there, whose effort started it and the benefits are now being reaped.

I want to start by saying that the staff of the Minister of Finance are very competent, very efficient and hard-working group of professionals and they deliver what is asked of them every time. However, they have to follow instructions. Here is a scenario. The Hon. Minister of Finance has all the available data at hand, very competent hard-working staff, he cannot make correct predictions, not once in a year, but twice. Of course, could we trust the predictions, the policies and the projections that are proffered by this Minister of Finance?

Last year projected real growth rate was 3.8 at the beginning of the year, mid-year 3.1% and the third projection was down to 2.9%, and with more than a month left after this budget would have been prepared, maybe it would go down one more time. The Hon. Minister said:

“Within the short period of 18 months, between July 1, 2015 and January 1, 2017, we increased the minimum wage by over 50 per cent.”

The Minister forgot to mention, and I would want to correct his statement... “We increased the minimum wage”, but, he forgot to mention that 200 taxes were either added or rates rose, sometimes by 1,000%. Then to quote the Budget 2018 speech which states, again, “We reduced the marginal rate of the VAT to 14 per cent...” The complete sentence should read, “We reduced the marginal rate of value-added tax to 14 per cent and made all items VAT-able not forgetting to add VAT on water and electricity also.” I challenge anyone to compare the prices of goods pre APNU/AFC Government to the prices today, and you would see the reduction of the so-called “reduction in VAT”. Even the real title of this budget should read, “the journey to the good life for a few continues”. The emphasis is on the words “a few”, since it is only a few of the Hon. Members in this House who may be enjoying the “good life”.

I quote from Budget 2018 speech which states:

“Budget 2018 focuses on a number of strategic actions, including: ...fostering higher growth for more and better jobs; improving the quality of life...”

The Hon. Minister must have been referring to the more and better jobs for the boys and girls, the multitudes of advisers. I continue, the Hon. Minister also said in the Budget 2018, “...stimulating growth and employment in the productive sectors...”

Is the Minister for real? For this Government, it seems that stimulating employment in the productive sector is done by sending home hundreds of sugar workers. Guyana is a multicultural society and we all celebrate each other's festivals. Christmas is one such celebration. I am the geographic Member of Parliament for Region 6, and over 700 of my constituents sugar workers for Rose Hall Estate, already received their green and yellow 'go home, stay home' letter. The Grinch has stolen their Christmas and their children's Christmas. Sadly, unlike the Christmas story, this Grinch is for real. Could you imagine, Mr. Speaker? Santa Claus would not bring gifts to the children of these sugar workers this year. Then on to next year, what do we have? There is no breadwinner in the family. How will the children go to school? Who will buy their expensive textbooks, pencils schoolbags that this caring Government has added 14% VAT to? Where will they get the money to pay the taxi? My colleague forgot to mention that Canje does not have any green and yellow buses. We heard in the press that there are different views as to whether the letter should have been given or should not have been given. My nephew told me that instead of being a strong and stable Government, this Government seems to be weak and wobbly, the coalition falling apart.

Let me turn your attention to Region 6. I will use Region 6 a microcosm of what is happening in Guyana. I visited with some colleagues the New Amsterdam Hospital, a few months ago, and it was a sad state of affairs. Shortages of drugs and medical supplies were so bad, that surgeries were postponed for months. The theatre was down for months. Up to March 2017, with four qualified surgeons, three general surgeons and an ophthalmologist, only one planned surgery was done and the surgeons said that the list is long, over 400 planned surgeries for one surgeon.

The shortages of medical supplies: I have here a list of one of the regional hospital. There are 96 drugs that are unavailable on the 20th November, 2017, 96 out of a list that is called the essential drug list.

Most of the equipment in the New Amsterdam Hospital are down. As of today, as I am speaking, more than 50% of the equipment in the laboratory are not working and less than 25% of the test are being offered. There was no maintenance contract, no preventative maintenance, and this would lead, only break down downtime, but also to short lifespan of this very expensive equipment that we approved in this House. The health staff at New Amsterdam Hospital are afraid. They are scared to raise their concerns. The number of complaints you get from residents who go to that hospital is alarming. I have been receiving complaints from someone who lost a close relative in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), that she was mocked by the man who is in charge of the hospital. It is because she stepped out of the ICU and

was crying in the corridor. In fact, she said she was even asked to leave the hospital premises. This is the kind of caring person employed after June 2015.

Interestingly, the same manager does not listen to the heads of department's advice to the cost of the taxpayers. The building to house the High Dependency Unit cannot be used for that purpose due to its location. Although, the surgeons advised that it should not be located there because it would be of no use as a High Dependency Unit. When this same surgeon requested a piece of medical equipment called an underwater seal, or what we term a test tube, the managers advised doctors to go to the stores and uplift the seals that he bought. When the doctors received the seals, they were shocked, because what they received were some pieces of equipment that turned out to be seals that are used to repair the submersible pumps in the septic tanks. When this said manager was asked to purchase surgical mesh to repair hernia, the surgeons were provided with mesh, definitely not surgical mesh, and they were told that this is what he bought. Now, patients have to buy surgical mesh, if they want to have surgeries and each mesh is \$40,000 from the private practitioners, and sometimes there is need for more than one for one hernia repair.

Region 6 has riverine communities such as other regions. We have two Amerindian communities, Orealla and Siparuta located up the Corentyne River. When the PPP/C demitted office in 2015, there were two doctors there. I am not going to call their names, but there were two doctors resident in Orealla and they had their all-terrain vehicle (ATV) and their boats and engines, so that they could service Siparuta. At the end of 2015 when those doctors left, what happened to the services? In fact, I was advised that for this year, from January to now, if you check the Outpatient Department record, you are going to find that a doctor, who is supposed to be stationed there, worked for 22 days out of the area. Is this what we call equity of access to care? Definitely not, it was there when you had two doctors to serve those communities, communities of over 1,500 families. It was boasted that in March, when we were there, New Amsterdam Hospital alone had 74 doctors. Previously, pre 2015, when the entire region did not have 74 doctors, we could have afforded to send two doctors to Orealla and Siparuta.

Let us turn to the national ophthalmology hospital, fully staffed, 16 Cubans dedicated specialist staff, including a retinologist, one of the scarce super specialists in the region. Let us look at the number of cataracts that were done - 2014 - 467, 2015 - 290, 2016 - 152 and 2017, to date, there was a grand total of zero. Reason, there was no knife blade and this has got to be termed as travesty, because of knife blades. Previously, pre 2015, persons used to come from Suriname, Trinidad, Barbados from the

diaspora, our Guyanese used to come home to get their surgeries done in the National ophthalmology Hospital. Now, even the residents of Port Mourant, where this hospital is located, cannot get services. In addition to that, they do not have chloramphenicol eye drops, no ciprofloxacin eye drops, pilocarpine eye drops, no lidocaine injection, no vancomycin injection, zero. The list is very long. I do not want to spend more time on it. This simply means that not only surgeries are not done, but patients cannot get services at this facility, not even regular services that do not need surgery.

Those who steal from children and the mentally ill and the physically handicap are deemed the worse criminals. The Auditor General's report 2016 states that a sample of 25 payment vouchers revealed that the items purchased to the value of \$24.693 million cannot be accounted for at the Fort Canje Hospital's stores. That was just a sample.

7.05 p.m.

My honourable friend forgot to mention this. Fast forward to 2017, *Guyana Times* headline, and it boldly screams, 4,500 pounds (lbs) of chicken disappear weekly from the psychiatric hospital. It went on to say that, for weeks, patients were forced to eat sausages and bread and, in some cases, four patients shared one sausage. What do we term this? Is this how we care? Is this equity of access to healthcare? These are mentally ill or mentally challenged persons. Yes, Mr. Speaker, persons, people, human beings like you and I and everyone in this hall.

A healthy, wholesome diet is important to mental health as it is to the physical wellbeing of normal persons who are not sick. In fact, some of my medical colleagues declare that it is even more important for the mentally challenged and the mentally ill. I do hope that an investigation was done and corrective measures were taken.

In addition, not once in the last two and a half years of this Government did the National Psychiatric Hospital receive its full quota of medicines - not once. This includes basic medicines for mental healthcare, like chlorpromazine, Stelazine, Piritonne, diazepam, Phenergan, arte, Septilin, Prozac, Dilantin and Tegretol. Mr. Speaker, the list is long. This is easily verifiable by the Combined Issued and Received Vouchers (CRIVs) that are available. These patients get relapses and, if they do not get their required medications in their required dosages at the required time, a relapse could maybe never resolve.

I want to bring to the House that I have received calls from relatives of persons working in the health sector in Region 6 that threats were issued to staff working in the health sector that if they talk or provide information to Opposition Members of Parliament (MPs), especially me, for this Budget debate, steps will be taken to find them and someone will have to go home. Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to say that I...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five minutes remaining.

Dr. Mahadeo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to say that I, like all my Comrades, are elected not selected. No one should overtly or covertly prevent me from doing what I was elected to do. If Guyanese want to share issues that bother them, they should not be threatened nor should they feel threatened. They should not be victimised, like the nurse for Region 5 who provided vital information about abuse of the narcotic drugs and then was transferred immediately.

Mr. Speaker, just to say clearly, the information I have here, I got from the Regional Chairman and from users of the facilities, together with the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on Social Services' Committee Reports. I dare those who threaten to send people home to try to send the Regional Chairman home if they can.

Crime in Region 6 is high; it is high and rising. There seems to be a *modus operandi* of arresting a bunch of people after a crime. Their names and most times their pictures are on front pages of some dailies and on social media and, within 72 hours, they are quietly released. There is nothing on social media, nothing on the front pages. Is this to provide an impression that something is being done? I want to know, on those who are convicted, what is the conviction rate? That will reveal whether we are really working or not.

The Regional Chairman said that, only today, he received complaints that a pensioner went to him to say that since July she has been going to get her pension book and they could not have found it. Every month, she goes. This month, this morning, they found it and, when she went there with all those pages there, she could have only uplifted her December pension, after spending \$5,000 to go to New Amsterdam every month.

It is the same thing for the social public assistance. One person went several months to New Amsterdam and the person who is there could not have been found. She was always told, "Come tomorrow; come tomorrow." When the Chairman called, he was told that the person was on training. Where are we going with this? A lot of small contractors are complaining that there is splitting of contracts. This needs

investigation. They complain also that works are detained so that they become emergencies and then the three-quotation system is used.

Mr. Speaker: Hon Member Dr. Mahadeo, there is a constant narrative taking place. I will ask that person who is doing that to desist. Please proceed.

Dr. Mahadeo: Mr. Speaker, if I may, how much time do I have left?

Mr. Speaker: You have five minutes remaining.

Dr. Mahadeo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also want to say that, at Crabwood Creek, not a single dollar was released to be used in maintenance of drainage and irrigation structures, although they have the Water Users Association. Presently, all of these drains are clogged. The rainy season is due; it will be blooded, thanks to this caring Government.

I close with the parts of a song that is a favourite to many, regardless of religious persuasion. Maybe Pastor here can help me. Tell me what it is. The name of the song is *One Day at a Time*. It goes:

“You know if you are looking below, it is worse now than then
Cheating and stealing, violence and crime
So for my sake, teach me to take one day at a time.”

Yes, it is definitely worse now than two and a half years ago – cheating, stealing, more violence, more crimes, but Lord, do give us the strength to do every day what we have to do to fight for the Guyanese people.

With a clear conscience, I cannot support this document presented that caters for the good life of a few. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Allen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to support and to give my take on Budget 2018. Mr. Speaker, before I get into my presentation, please allow me to go back a little into Budget 2017 and lay to the Members of the opposite side who said they have not seen anything in this Budget nor have they seen anything in Budget 2017...I will just bring to their attention some of the achievements of this Coalition Government under Budget 2017.

I will start with roads and I will look at Mabaruma first. I say to the Hon. Prime Minister that, Sir, you can now go to Mabaruma and travel on a road without being annoyed and without fretting so much as when you were there in Mabaruma of the condition that the people were living under for all of those years. I say that that is what a caring Government is like and I say thank you for taking the plight of the people of the Mabaruma sub-region to Cabinet, and Cabinet approved, having Hon. Minister David Patterson and his team taking up that challenge. You have brought the people of Mabaruma out of deep struggle.

The roads of the Matakai sub-region, which is a mining sub region in District 5, for a number of years... When we took office in 2015, that road was in a deplorable state. The people of the Matakai sub-region, right now, are singing a song and the song is: “Thanks to the Coalition Government which has relieved us from the struggle and the pains that we were going through.”

Business personnel, miners and other community members can now travel from Port Kaituma to Matthew’s Ridge within hours, which used to take them one day and long hours. Hon. Minister Ferguson was on that road a couple of days ago and, within six hours, she got to Mathews Ridge, did business and got back to Port Kaituma. You could not have done this, not just even a year ago. Public infrastructure has taken up the task of our main roads. It was left under the Administration which is manned by the PPP, Region 1. The road would have still been in the same condition. Thanks to the coalition Government. This is what caring is all about. They no longer have to wait on vehicles to travel in a convoy to get to their destination or to push in large pools of mud and heavy slush.

The residents of Baramita were able to receive over 500 birth certificates in 2016. This was a community that was neglected for years. Do not ask me why it was neglected. We have processed and delivered as we promised and that is what a caring Government is all about. We delivered. We promised and we are now looking into the plight of that community. One person, when that person heard that we would have registered over 800 persons for late birth certificates in the month of May, was asking “What was happening all the time with that community?” So I told the person to go and ask our Opposition right now, which had that community all the time in its hands. The Hon. Member who speaks a lot spoke about Amerindian communities and what is there for them, tell me what you were doing for those people all the time. **[Hon. Member: You are there now.]** We are here and we will fix it and we will continue to fix it.

Baramita now has a Nursery School for the first time in its history. Children from Baramita are now attending secondary school in numbers for the first time and it is under this APNU/AFC Coalition Government. We are not talking care; we are demonstrating to all of Guyana that we will do and take you into that journey.

Baramita has a newly built Primary School. All of this came out of Budget 2017. The community of Baramita is well on its way to experience the 'good life'. They were neglected over the years and they have recognised that.

The region saw a number of young people being employed under the Ministry of Public Infrastructure's Community Organised for Restoring the Environment (CORE) Project.

I heard comments from the Opposition benches that nothing is being done in this country for youths. In Budget 2018, there are so many programmes for our youths.

Mr. Speaker, I would now turn my attention to Budget 2018, The Journey to a Good Life Continues. I must commend Minister Jordan and his team for a job well done.

7.20 p.m.

Some of the things in Budget 2018 for Region 1: the region would be having its second radio station which would be Radio Moruca, coming out of Budget 2018. Solar farm in the Mabaruma sub-region will be completed out of Budget 2018. There will be construction of the bridge in Moruca that the residents were crying out for over a number of years. The APNU/AFC Government would ease the plight of the people of Moruca with that bridge.

A bridge will be built in the Falls Top community in the Matakai Sub Region. Culverts will be done in Mathews Ridge, Falls Top and Waramuri. There will be construction of a wharf in the Moruca sub-region and completion of the Baramita airstrip. All of this...and I do not understand how... Well, their eyes are fixed to see one thing and so they cannot see these things happening, and they are all placed in Budget 2018.

The Region, Barima/Waini, would be seeing a passenger cargo ferry which would make life easier for the people travelling to and from the region to Georgetown.

Moruca needs electricity; Moruca would be getting a new generator. Distribution of electricity: we will be seeing the establishment of electrical network in the Arakaka area and rehabilitation of the distribution system at Port Kaituma river crossing. Rehabilitation of roads and drain in Oronoque will occur and we will see the Oronoque junction to the Port Kaituma District Hospital being upgraded. Kumaka junction to the main road junction in Moruca will be upgraded.

Education sector: The Baramita Nursery School will be furnished and ready for the new term. The Practical Department of the Mabaruma Secondary School would be upgraded. There will be construction of a Nursery School at Kamwatta; construction of the sanitary block at the Kamwatta Primary School; extension of school buildings at Santa Rosa Nursery School; extension to Sacred Heart, Warapoka, and Assakata Primary Schools and the Port Kaituma Annex. These were all mentioned in Budget 2018. We will deliver what is there. We would see some of our schools being equipped with musical and sports equipment.

Health services: We will see the completion of the Port Kaituma Hospital Complex. On completion of this project, it will serve to benefit over 9,000 persons. Once again, the people of Mathews Ridge will see and access services under this coalition Government. There will be reconstruction of the X-ray room and laboratory. We will see the completion of the Doctors' Quarters at Port Kaituma, and the mortuary is to be constructed and fitted in Baramita. With completion of this mortuary, residents will no more have their loved one's body parts being fetched by animals and being laid on the medic steps. We will also have the sanitary block at the Karaburi Health Post.

Water distribution system: We would see the Community of Oronoque receiving potable water for the first time in 16 years. We would also see the upgrading of water supply systems in all three Sub Regions of Region 1.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five minutes remaining.

Mr. Allen: Thank you, Sir.

Public security: The police officers in Mathews Ridge will now see the rehabilitation of the building they are occupying. This work started a number of years ago and it was left. We had so many issues with buildings and I remember, under the previous Administration, when I asked the Minister then about the building that housed the Officer, he said, "Police do not have land." Do you know what? In the findings

of it, the land was to be given to a close colleague, who is a businessman, and, because we stepped in, it stopped so the police will not have any quarter. The Officer, right now, is paying rent out of his pocket.

Coming out of Budget 2018, where it is mentioned, will be the reopening of the manganese mines in the Mathews Ridge community, which will secure jobs for a number of residents.

In concluding, we are also going to be seeing rehabilitation of the Guyana De-force base at Morawhanna at our security point where our officers would have left their homes and are living under rough conditions for a number of years. These quarters will all be done under this Government.

With this, I have no hesitation in saying to this House and to my Colleagues on my right that Budget 2018 I commend for safe passage to this National Assembly. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, this concludes our business for today.

Hon. First Vice-President and Prime Minister, I invite you to move the adjournment.

ADJOURNMENT

First Vice-President and Prime Minister [Mr. Nagamootoo]: I move that the House be adjourned until tomorrow, Wednesday, 6th December, 2017 at 10.00 a.m.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Prime Minister. The House stands adjourned until Wednesday, 6th December, 2017 at 10 o'clock.

Adjourned accordingly at 7.31 p.m.