

Official Report

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FIRST SESSION (2015-2016) 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

50TH Sitting

Wednesday, 7TH December, 2016

The Assembly convened at 10.05 a.m.

Prayers

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

PUBLIC BUSINESS

GOVERNMENT'S BUSINESS

MOTION

MOTION FOR THE APPROVAL OF THE ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR 2017

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 2017 have been prepared and laid before the Assembly on 2016-11-28.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly approves the Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2017, of a total sum of two hundred and thirty billion, three hundred and forty nine million and seventy nine thousand dollars (**\$230,349,079,000**), **excluding nineteen billion and seven hundred and seventy four million, and eighty seven thousand dollars (\$19,774,087,000)** 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 make further provision in respect of finance.”

[Minister of Finance]

Assembly resumed budget debate.

Mr. Speaker: The first speaker for today is the Hon. Vickram Bharrat. The Hon. Member, Mr. Bharrat, is making his maiden presentation to this House. I will invite Hon. Members to treat the presentation with the respect that you know is accorded to a Member making his maiden presentation. Please proceed.

Mr. Bharrat: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for that. Hon. Members of this House, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

It is indeed a great privilege and honour for me to stand in this noble House, representing the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) and the Guyanese people, to make my contribution to the 2017 Budget debate. I am opening batting on my debut. The onus is on me to get the game on. Permit me, please, Mr. Speaker, since it’s my first speech in the National Assembly, to express my gratitude to the membership and leadership of the PPP for affording me this opportunity. The testimony of the truth is that there is a role for all Guyanese in the development of our country and this has also been seen in the warm reception and words of encouragement from all Hon. Members of this House as well as the staff of Parliament.

On the subject of the development of our country, while I congratulate the Minister of Finance, Mr. Winston Jordan, and the dedicated and hardworking staff of the Ministry of Finance for the

early presentation of Budget 2017, it will be remiss of me not to mention that the Minister of Finance has made history in more ways than one in 2016, and not all of them good, to say the least.

In 2016, the Hon. Minister presented two national Budgets and levied on the Guyanese people – the poor, the working class and the business sector – the latest tax increases coming even as the Hon. Minister promises the building of a diversified and green economy to deliver the good life to all Guyanese. A nation that tries to tax itself to prosperity is condemned to fail. The haste to present, debate and scrutinise a national budget during this supposedly busy Christmas season is yet another attempt by the Coalition Government to jump-start our dying economy after the failed attempt of the extravagant Jubilee celebrations. This Budget document would have definitely made the visiting Prince of England very proud. The use of the Queen's language is worth praising but that is all it has to offer - good use of adjectives, paradox and, of course, irony. If good diction can translate to economic growth, then Guyana will be on par with Singapore and Norway.

The Hon. Minister will certainly go down in Guyana's history for the strangling and suffocation of Guyana's economy by putting the productive sectors on the path of an untimely death. As if the spiralling crime wave is not enough, Budget 2017 will further decapitate our flagging economy village by village, region by region and sector by sector. It has failed to create that much needed spark to reignite economic activities.

I can understand the Hon. Minister's desire to make the history books but I could not understand or comprehend the callous and inconsiderate posture of the Coalition Government as I reviewed Budget 2017. Certainly, the Hon. Minister will not be compared to that popular figure during the Christmas season, bringing goodies to the people of Guyana.

Before I go further, permit me to highlight a few comments made by Members of this House during their presentations. Since entering this National Assembly on the 27th October, 2016, and throughout the Budget debate thus far, I have heard Members of the Government referring to the 23 years of the PPP/C Administration with the insinuation that nothing was done. I wish to share my humble view on this matter but, before I do so, let me remind the Government of the state of the economy in 1992 when the PPP/C took Office: broken down infrastructure, poor healthcare,

no Ministry of Housing, massive foreign debts, poorest country in the western hemisphere, hopelessness of our people, people were running away from Guyana, and I can go on and on. However, I wish to highlight the single most fundamental achievement, in my view, of the PPP/C Government. That fundamental achievement is the renewal of hope and a sense of belonging of the Guyanese people - the Guyanese pride, a sense of patriotism.

No longer were Guyanese ashamed to hold their passports in their hands at airports; no longer were Guyanese running away from this country in search of better opportunities; no longer were Guyanese being considered as third class citizens; no longer were Guyanese ashamed of their heritage. And that is the achievement of the PPP/C Government – hope and vanity for the people of this country.

Secondly, my Colleague, the Hon. Member, Mr. Irfaan Ali, mentioned in his presentation that the band or restriction on the eight-year-old vehicle imposed in Budget 2016 has significantly reduced the revenue earnings for the country and, at the same time, deprived young people of a chance of owning a motor vehicle. Those Land Cruisers and Prados parked in the compound of this national building emit far more carbon monoxide than a Toyota Premio or Toyota Allion that a poor man can afford. Such a decision is senseless and malicious, much like the measures outlined in Budget 2017.

Thirdly, the Hon. Minister, Ms. Garrido-Lowe, mentioned that scrabble and chess will improve Mathematics grades. I am totally bemused. Maybe we should teach the children to play snakes and ladders too so that they can learn to dodge bullets and hide from bandits. The Hon. Member, Mr. Carrington, mentioned the abundance of natural resources in Guyana, including the oil and gas. It appears to me that the Government is becoming too reliant on the emerging oil and gas sector while neglecting the traditional sectors. However, oil and gas, as was mentioned in this very Budget, will become commercial in the next five years and I would like the Hon. Members of the Government's side of this House to know that, by then, the PPP/C will be back in power.

Finally, that erroneous H2O speech by the Hon. Minister, Ms. Dawn Hastings-Williams, outlining all the fulfilled campaign promises of the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC)... Nevertheless, water is important to all Guyanese and we commend

that. Our only hope is that they will afford to pay their water bills with the imposed 14% value added tax (VAT) at a time when the ordinary man is crying out for an extra dollar in his pocket.

Moving on, we have heard much about the green economy from this Government but we are yet to be presented with a framework that will see such a goal realised, a framework that does not speak to duty free concessions and tax exemptions for the boys, the financiers, and the very cronyism that the then Opposition now Government condemned. The famous Wind Farm deal readily comes to mind, enrichment of the rich and damned to the poor. The absence of a framework is evidence by the Government's lack of vision and logic in the conceptualisation of Budget 2017. It would seem that the only things the Guyanese people can count on in Budgets presented by the APNU/AFC Government are taxes and increased cost of living. If we look at the theme of the Budget, that, by itself, is a myth, a fairy tale. After 19 months and three Budgets, Guyanese are still awaiting the promised "good life", the increasingly elusive "good life", but what do they get? They get taxes and more taxes, restriction to freedom of travel, garnishing of personal bank accounts, a total violation of human rights and disrespect to the people of this country.

Cleaning up and beautification is good; planting a few palm trees here and there is good; patching a few roads in Georgetown is good; and the Government must be commended. This is the "nice life". However, where is the "good life" in this when there are empty rice pots, stagnant and dying businesses, non-performing loans, unemployment and massive brain drain? I further say that Budget 2017 reduces the spending power of our people with the massive increases in taxes and the admitted decline of all major productive sectors.

Budget 2017 speaks to a number of vague training programmes for young people, which are quiet commendable. However, where is the employment for these young people after the training? Or is it the intention to solve unemployment with underemployment? Youth entrepreneurship seems to be the only answer. But with the Government's rigid tax system, added tax measures and the current crime situation, I am not too sure about that prospect in the near future. The Government seems to have found the solution with a proposed phantom project, the Youth Innovation Fund. This is a national secret to the young people of this country. It is a project that has not been properly thought out; yet, \$50 million has already been allocated. My

only hope is that this is not another clean-up campaign or a ceremonial arch. If so, let it be in memory of the promised “good life”.

On a more serious note, many Guyanese are asking what Budget 2017 has to offer, and their search has come up empty-handed. Budget 2017 offers primarily five things and these are: it reduces the spending power of our people, with a marginal increase in disposable income which, of course, will be taken back through additional taxes.

10.20 p.m.

The imposition of VAT on water and electricity will have a rippling effect on the cost of living since businesses will pass on the additional burden to the ordinary man, the consumer. All the statistics that the Government is presenting is a waste of time, since the ordinary man will have to offset the cost of VAT charged to businesses.

The menu of measures recommended in Budget 2017 will negatively impact small-scale entrepreneurs. Young entrepreneurs, like me, may soon be out of business, bankrupt due to these added measures. I am very worried that a student attending my school will now have to pay VAT on stationery, VAT on snacks – a little egg ball or some pholourie - VAT on lunch, VAT on a drink or a juice he or she may purchase at the canteen. Added to that is the imposing \$10 environmental tax. Further, VAT on school fees... Young entrepreneurs are doomed. I am not finished. The poor parents will have to pay the 14% VAT on their water and electricity bills, unless they take a few words of advice from the Hon. Member, Mr. Charrandass Persaud, who is not here: bathe when necessary; cut off shower while soaping your skin; and flush toilet only if necessary. Maybe the Government could introduce a “one latrine per household pilot project” for the next budget. Tell me, Mr. Speaker, is this the “good life”?

Second, there would be greater burdens on the business community, with a range of increased fees, penalties and an increased bureaucracy that demands compliance from even the vendors and donkey cart operators, lest they face fines in the hundreds of thousands of dollars or even jail.

Third, a lack in incentives for investments, particularly the move to finance fiscal deficit with the issuance of local bonds, a move that will see local interest rates skyrocketing with no hope for

improved investor confidence, whether local or foreign. On this note, the APNU/AFC Government has failed miserably to attract a single substantial investment, whether local or foreign, since taking office. How then will young people be gainfully employed? It is a common fact that, with increased unemployment, the crime rate will rise. The Government has already conceded to this with the proposed \$2.2 billion upgrade of the Mazaruni Prison. The \$2.2 billion could have kept the Wales Estate open plus build a new detention centre. What kind of message are we sending to our young people? I ask again, is this the “good life”?

Four, lack of support to the major productive sectors and no policy on how to encourage future growth. It was admitted that the major sectors are failing. There have been decreases in forestry by 33%, in sugar by 18%, in rice by 12.6%, and in construction by over 7%. The decline of these bedrock economic sectors has resulted in significant unemployment that is having a domino effect on our economy. What is even more frightening is that there is no projected growth in the near future and the Government seems clueless, totally at sea, and it is not the Red Sea. The only surviving sector, mining, is now being pressured into submission as well.

The Hon. Minister Garrido-Lowe accepted that sugar estates should not be closed down but modernised so as to reduce production costs in order to compete with international markets.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 15 minutes.

Mr. Bharrat: May I ask, Mr. Speaker, was the Hon. Minister not a part of the Budget preparation? Was the Hon. Minister not there when the decision was taken to close the Wales Estate? Budget 2017 is a clear indication that the Government has signalled its intention to kill sugar. If I am wrong - I certainly hope I am in this particular instance - then where is the investment? Where is the plan? Where is the vision? Tell the people of Guyana what is being done to make sugar viable again. Or are we awaiting its natural death, a death that will be mourned by almost 20% of this country’s population? Over 150,000 Guyanese depend directly or indirectly on this sector. As a Berbician, who was fed and educated by sugar, I say that sugar is too big to fail.

All of the measures just highlighted will bring untold hardship for Guyanese. Worse yet, it will result in the escalating cost of living.

Budget 2017 lacks the evidence of meaningful consultations with all major stakeholders and, most importantly, the people of this country. Further, I challenge the Government to present the list of consultative meetings that were held, where they were held, how many persons attended those meetings and how many of the recommendations made were included in Budget 2017.

It is time that the APNU/AFC Government gets its act together - get busy. I have spent several hours perusing this Budget to find even an iota of substance, something to indicate that the Government has delivered on its promises. Maybe I was being too optimistic. What I found were further hardship for the ordinary Guyanese, suppression of the private sector and a slow painful death for Guyana's major economic sector, the agriculture sector. The battery that fuels support for this Government is dying as is, unfortunately, the positive prospects for our future.

In conclusion, the contents of Budget 2017 express an inexcusable level of incompetence and this Government's failure to deliver on its promises to the Guyanese people. If the Budget is implemented, it would bring untold hardship to every single Guyanese, regardless of political affiliation, gender, age, ethnicity or class. Our people deserve more; they deserve better. Hence, I join with the Leader of the Opposition and the people of Guyana to call on the Government to withdraw this Budget and to let due process take its course with meaningful consultation in order to alleviate the burdens intended in Budget 2017.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker. *[Applause]*

Minister of Social Cohesion [Ms. Ally]: Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members of this House, permit me to express sincere congratulations to Hon. Winton Jordon, Minister of Finance, and his competent staff for preparing a well-crafted Budget in which the contents so fittingly reflect the theme, *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*. We are cognisant that in order to achieve better lives for all Guyanese and a stronger nation, we need to have the resources and right measures implemented to get us there. I can say confidently that the 2017 Budget will put us on the trajectory of achieving this. Indeed, with Budget 2017, the good life beckons.

It is not by accident that this Coalition Government has produced three Budgets in 18 months. It shows how proactive we are and the high level of commitment we have to move Guyana forward. This country is now geared for operation development to take off on 1st January, 2017.

We are conscious that this Government started its mandate with troubling economic and social indicators. In many sectors, we are reaping a whirlwind of downturns, but this Coalition Government has indeed succeeded so far in developing a growth strategy that is broader in scope and has a more diversified inward as well as a forward outlook. As a matter of fact, for the 18 months we have been in Government, we have made tremendous strides and recorded colossal achievements. I want to remind this honourable House of some of those achievements. We have established the Public Procurement Commission – something the PPP/C did not want. We have restored local democracy by holding Local Government Elections after more than 20 years. We have addressed the issue of salary compensation. We have established three towns in Guyana, with more to come. We have established two new radio stations, one in Lethem and one in Mabaruma. We have improved our national drainage system all across Guyana. We have improved roads and general infrastructure works in many parts of Guyana. We have planted micro-economic projects to sustain the livelihood of our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Not exhausting that long list of achievements, worthy of mention is the introduction of the Ministry of Social Cohesion, a new Ministry.

The Hon. Minister, Mr. Winston Jordan, mentioned in his Budget presentation that this Coalition Government is committed to creating a society characterised by mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance. He further noted that a cohesive society is a key to improving the quality of life and, by extension, the enjoyment of the good life. The commitment is evident in the numerous programmes that the Ministry of Social Cohesion is pursuing since its establishment in 2015. I must say that I am extremely proud of the programmes that we have rolled out to date, given that we have been established a mere 18 months ago. I take great pride today in informing this honourable House of the initiatives that we have undertaken so far.

With the financial assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), we have been able to complete a series of sensitisation and consultations in all 10 Administrative Regions in Guyana to facilitate the development of the Ministry of Social Cohesion's five-year strategic plan for 2017-2021.

10.35 a.m.

This inclusionary democratic approach was implemented by the Ministry in keeping with the

Governments' philosophy to ensure that a significant mass of citizens, from all regions, were duly consulted, while ensuring that ordinary citizens were able to share their ideas, expectations and contributions to the Social Cohesion Strategic Plan. The aim was to ensure that citizens participated in determining the focus and direction of Guyana's social cohesion process. Stakeholders spanned a wide cross section of the Guyanese populace, Hon. Indranie Chandarpal.

Stakeholders have argued that the tension areas in Guyana are: economic equity and opportunities, citizens' safety and security, social inclusion and tolerance, inclusive and participatory governance, harmonious, ethnic and race relations. If these are being addressed, I am confident that we are capturing the kind of agenda that would produce results and impact the social cohesion land scape in Guyana. **[Ms. Chandarpal:** You do not have the ability to

do that.] And I am happy that the Hon. Member Ms. Indranie Chandarpal is aware of the five tension areas which we have to work on.

I must mention that the response that we received from participants was overwhelming. Persons were eager and willing to make valuable contributions to the proposed Social Cohesion Strategic Plan. Therefore, I must applaud their efforts for not only participating, but for doing so effectively and efficiently during the consultation process. Attendance and participation in these consultations were not tokenism, but meaningful from many categories. This was addressed by my Colleague Mr. John Adams yesterday. This was a guided process which allowed citizens to make valuable inputs that will now guide us on the way forward. The Social Cohesion Strategic Plan is currently in its final stage of formulation. We have organised a validation workshop, which is expected to be held early in 2017, to unveil the draft strategic plan. The implementation of the Social Cohesion Strategic Plan will bring us one step closer to achieving an enabling environment where persons are willing to embrace our unique diversities, and where we will support key actions that will replace confrontation with cooperation, facilitate the reduction of inequalities and promote greater tolerance and acceptance, mutual respect and improved livelihoods for all.

The Ministry commenced its first phase of regional training in diversity education and inclusion, in October 2016. The objective of this programme is to allow participants to explore some of the negative internalised attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes that may impact the ways in which they perceive themselves and others. The training also facilitates the development of cross-

community understanding and helps participants to learn about changes and challenges that are associated with our diverse nation. This series of workshops is intended to promote and encourage respect for other cultures by seeking to break down stereotypes and advocate for good relations within and across communities.

Prior to 2015, many students, especially those in the hinterland and riverain areas, were unable to attend school regularly and punctually. This was because of limited access to transportation or because their parents could not afford the daily transport cost for them to attend school regularly. However, since the coalition Government took office in 2015, there has been a sharp rise in terms of increase access to transportation services for our students throughout Guyana. [An

Hon. Member from the Opposition: How many buses?...[Inaudible] You had none, we have 13. This sharp rise is an output of His Excellency President David Granger's Five Bs Programme. The President initiated this programme because he strongly believes and recognises the importance of having an educated nation. That simply means that access to education must no longer be seen as a privilege for some, but rather as a basic human right for all our Guyanese boys and girls. [Ms. Teixeira: All of those buses were donated.] I am glad that you know that and you could not get them to be donated in your time.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I must ask you to stay within focus and to not be distracted from your presentation. Please proceed.

Ms. Ally: Thank you Mr. Speaker. The Opposition Chief Whip is tantalising me, but I can respond, Sir. The Ministry of Social Cohesion has been tasked with the responsibility to manage this programme because it is relevant to social cohesion. The Five Bs Programme sets out to bridge the inequality gap that exists in our society in terms of access to education. This is something which the previous Government did not have, the foresight to introduce.

Hon. Members of this honourable House, access to education is fundamental to the development of our human capital. It is an essential criterion to effectively participate in any democratic society such as ours. Everyone has the right to education, regardless of where they live, their race, their culture or geographic location and I urge all to embrace this. Our corporate partners have been playing a significant role in this aspect and we thank them. As a Government, it is a necessary social, economic and moral imperative to have the political will to remove barriers to

education. That is the reason emphasis has been placed on providing sufficient access to education in ways that will ensure that all children can benefit from such opportunities.

Our work is incomplete if we believe that we can just build schools. We have to find creative ways to get our children to access those schools, to receive a full course of primary and secondary education. That is the primary purpose of the Bs Initiative. This programme has brought much relief to students as well as their families. Students are now able to attend school regularly as well as punctually. We are collaborating with the Ministry of Education to assess the correlation of the programme with improved performance. I am, and so is my Government, interested in measuring impacts of this initiative implemented.

Boats are currently servicing the lower and upper Pomeroon, Barakara, Ebini, Maraikobai and areas within Demerara and Berbice. Buses have been servicing Region 1, Mabaruma; Region 2, Tapakuma; Region 3, Wales; Region 4, Kuru Kururu; Region 5, Fort Wellington, Region 6, Corentyne, Rose Hall and Sisters Village; Region 7, Bartica; Region 8, Mahdia; Region 10, Coomacka. We have distributed bicycles to students in all the 10 Administrative Regions.

In 2017, we intend to intensify our monitoring and evaluation efforts to measure the positive progress and the impact of the Bs Programme. The Ministry would seek ways in which we can further improve this programme. I am extremely confident that we are on the right path to improved access to education under this programme and we will continue to develop and forge ahead with this initiative to ensure that we provide the right resources that will aid in successfully restoring an educated nation. Guyana would be restored to the 96% literacy rate we boasted of.

This coalition Government is cognisant that schools are strategic institutions that can have a significant impact on social cohesion in Guyana. Schools are critical institutions in the promotion of social cohesion through the transmission of knowledge and the shaping of attitudes of individuals towards diversity and change. Schools can foster or retard students' tolerance, respect for the diversity of others, and provide a sense of overarching common identity and values and, if used positively, the system can forge a national identity which can unite diverse communities. Therefore, in an effort to foster social cohesion at the primary level of our education system and to sensitise our boys and girls about certain aspects of cohesion, my Ministry has been

collaborating with the Ministry of Education to create a booklet on civic education. The content of the booklet is currently being finalised and it is expected to be distributed in all the primary schools throughout Guyana to our students at the primary level. The booklet is intended to educate our primary age students about the value of being good citizens, about love and respect, knowledge about our multi-ethnic society and about valuable contributions made by our diverse groups.

It is a pity that the Leader of the Opposition Leader is not here at the moment and cannot revert back to his early childhood days. He will benefit from that booklet.

10.50 p.m.

The Ministry of Social Cohesion has also collaborated with the Ministry of Education to hold ‘Face the Community’ meetings in Regions 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. The objective was to discuss social cohesion with persons at the community level and to sensitise them about social cohesion processes. These ‘Face the Community’ meetings will continue to be an integral part of our work programme in 2017 and will be expanded to include other regions.

In addition to that, early in 2016, the Ministry of Education collaborated with the Ministry of Social Cohesion and hosted cultural pilot projects in all 14 secondary schools in Region 3. The purpose was to provide secondary schools students with knowledge and information on social cohesion. Students were exposed to all our diverse cultures and practices in order to have greater appreciation for differences. This budget gives us the opportunity to expand this programme in magnitude and scope in 2017. We will include other regions to enable our children to have this learning experience.

In an effort to take a stand against prejudice, racism and to raise awareness about social cohesion, 11th May, 2016 was officially declared Social Cohesion Day. In observance of our first ever Social Cohesion Day, a National Day of Prayer was observed in all 10 Administrative Regions throughout Guyana. Sir, this would now be an annual feature in our Calendar of Events.

In addition, a National Exposition was held at the National Cultural Centre (NCC), entitled *One* which showcased the historical legacy of Guyana from slavery to independence and the post-

independence era. These activities formed part of the Ministry's schedule of events to celebrate our 50th Independence Anniversary.

In an effort to promote cohesiveness in Guyana, we have established an Inter-Ministry Committee. This Committee is made up of representatives from the Ministry of Education, Department of Culture, Youth and Sport, Ministry of Communities, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Social Protection and the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs.

The purpose of this committee is to play key roles in the development of policies and programmes to foster social cohesion. It is been supporting the Ministry's efforts to effectively implement existing social cohesion policies by seeking opportunities for convergences with our Ministry as well as other ministries.

This budget will allow us to roll out the Strategic Plan and the committee will continue to provide policy direction in the process. In keeping with our multi-stakeholder approach, the Ministry has held a series of discourses and sensitisation programmes with the religious communities. We have engage the Muslim, Christian, Hindu communities and other groups. Core groups have been established as an output of these discourses. These groups are now collectively working along with my Ministry to seek implementable programmes that can foster social cohesion in Guyana.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have spoken for 25 minutes.

Ms. Ally: Thank you Sir. This would enable us to continue our engagements and work with these groups, undertaking initiatives determined by them, so that social cohesion could be fostered in our country.

Mr. Speaker and Members of this honourable House, the sum of \$90.1 million has been budgeted for social cohesion in 2017 and, today, I take pride in adumbrating some of our projections to foster social cohesion in 2017. Here, I would like to educate my Hon. Friend, Mr. Joseph Hamilton. This is what we will do with the money budgeted for in 2017 - will do 'Willy'. There would be national/regional art competitions and exhibitions to recognise positive contributions of diverse groups of Guyanese to the development of Guyana. These will be based on cross cutting themes, such as race, ethnicity, religion and gender. The objective is to recognise, promote and

celebrate the achievements of diverse groups of Guyanese to the development of Guyana. Our school children would have opportunities to be part of these initiatives, as we continue our collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

At the community level, the sum allocated to the Ministry would be used to organise inter-village and inter-regional youth exchanges that will allow 250 young people from Indigenous backgrounds or visible minority groups in selected regions of Guyana to come together for a multi-cultural youth exchange. This programme will expose participants to life skills and practical strategies for employment creation and information on further education.

This programme will allow young people the opportunity to explore the negative/positive internalised attitudes, beliefs and stereo-types that impact the ways they see themselves and others. The expected outcome is to have a cadre of young social cohesion ambassadors at the community and regional levels.

Budget 2017 will allow the Ministry of Social Cohesion to organise a week of activities designed to signal a stand against racism, prejudice and intolerance for diversities. The list of initiatives, include a day of prayer, open dialogue, educational and cultural festivals in schools and communities.

The 2017 Budget, for the Ministry of Social Cohesion, will enable us to undertake social cohesion community model projects and we will work to create an enabling environment to encourage activities within and across communities, aimed at enabling healing and reconciliation. It is expected that these initiatives will result in improved dialogue at the leadership level in communities.

Sir, the budgetary allocation for the Ministry in 2017, will see us establish a Social Cohesion Community Grant Project. Access to this Community Grant Project will promote the development of small infrastructure programmes, the Ministry's contribution to Guyana's pursuit of a 'Green Economy'.

Training has also been identified as a critical component that will nurture individual and community relations. The plan training will provide participants with increased awareness and

sensitivity about behaviours that contribute to building better relationships between individuals and communities.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must wrap up now.

Ms. Ally: I will. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The allocation would also position the Ministry to provide support to my Government's vision of a green economy.

Finally, this budget will allow me to continue to lead the ministry to ensure that our country becomes a unified one. Where diversities are embraced, conflicts are resolved, networks and collaborations with stakeholders are strengthened, equity is promoted and decision-making processes result in equal opportunities and benefits for all.

Despite the rejection by the Opposition, for us to bridge the gaps that existed for 23 years, despite their rejection for the Government to reduce the inequalities for our children, whom the People's Progressive Party (PPP) denied giving a good education, despite the Opposition's effort to divide the Guyanese population on ethnic grounds, this coalition Government is determined to give to Guyanese people a good life and that we will do.

The Ministry of Social Cohesion will put Guyana in the limelight with great prominence and will make Guyanese proud. I therefore, commend this 2017 Budget for approval.

I thank you. *[Applause]*

Mr. G. Persaud: Mr. Speaker, I rise to make my contribution to Budget 2017. First, I would like to extend, on behalf of the Minister of Finance and the Government, our sincere apologies to the public servants across this beautiful land of ours. Those very public servants, who the Minister of Finance, in his budget speech, painted in a manner seeking to stigmatise and reward hard and dedicated work, with statements that were extremely demotivating and very much falsified. I, therefore, wish to commend all our public servants across this beautiful land, who would have contributed to what is being touted here as three budgets in 19 months. I wish to commend the public servants for putting their shoulders to the wheel and for burning the candle, so that they could have made someone here and a group of people attempting to steal their thunder and display a high degree of ingratitude to people who would have given their best.

Having said that, it is time that I respond to some of the statements that were made. “We had put the Public Procurement Commission (PPC) in place because the People’s Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/Civic) did not want to do that.” Sir that is another storytelling. The Public Procurement Commission could not have come into being without the 32 people on this side of the House agreeing to the members of that Commission. Something that the 33 Members on that side of the House had failed to do for a number of years in this House. But the storytelling continues. Sir, I would like to use the type of language that would not offend you because, on this side of the House, when we use certain language, we are castigated.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, let me correct you, “That will not offend the House”. Not just the Speaker, but the House.

Mr. G. Persaud: Very well Sir. But I thought that I should make that point, Sir. It is said that we all should learn from our experiences, but it seems as if, for some people, it is very difficult to cause learning. It is, maybe, because the methodology used or the pathological will does not exist. I cannot understand that we would have come with one budget, with which we have had serious difficulties because what the budget was doing was bringing additional burdens unto the people of this land. We came with a second budget with added burdens on the people of this land and now we have come with a third budget, which seems to be giving all the burdens to the people in this land.

11.05 a.m.

Sir, in some other quarters it is said that the first time one missteps, one can excuse that and say it was a mistake. The second time one missteps, some persons may say that one was less than careful. But the third time one missteps, it is often said *three strikes and out*. So, I think that His Excellency should really consider and take the necessary action against those whom he has invested with this responsibility to prepare a budget that would bring some kind of vision to support growth and development. This budget is one that seeks to suffocate, stifle and rob the Guyanese people of the joy, happiness and comfort that existed during the period under the PPP/Civic Government.

We heard a very passionate appeal coming from the Hon. Member, Mr. John Adams, supported too by the Hon. Member, Ms. Garrido-Lowe, on how important sugar is to Guyana. Listening to

Mr. John Adams, I thought the gentleman, if he had space, would have knelt down and offer a prayer that sugar be saved in Guyana. Then, having listened to that, the Hon. Minister of Finance, in his speech, regaled this House that any investment in sugar would be a wasted investment. Contradictions upon contradictions - a hallmark of this Government. We also heard that the good life started on 11th May, 2015. We heard from the Minister, Ms. Amna Ally, that it will kick start on the 1st January, 2017. We also heard from the Minister, Ms. Dawn Hastings, that it will get a good head start, according to her, in 2017 around December. So, the good life seems to very illusive. It seems as if a good life is moving further away from the Guyanese people in this country.

We heard the Hon. Minister of State, stated that with the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) a programme that fitted a certain era and period, and Sir, as you know, these things have to be expanded and improved on. It was a wonderful statement. The contradiction is that, quite a number of people in the present Government are persons of a terrible past era; long gone past eras Sir, so more contradictions, Sir. If we continue, we will be hearing more. We got so much coming from that side of the House. How important equity and equality is to make sure that you work for all Guyanese. Well, Minister of Social Cohesion, Ms. Amna Ally, you have work to do at the level of your Cabinet. [Ms. Ally: Plenty.] Yes, I have not heard you mention that as part of your programme.

The Bertram Collins Staff College of the Public Service was established - real social cohesion. All the 18 persons are of one ethnic group, excellent social cohesion. No advertisement. I wonder who did the organogram for that organisation. Who did the Job Descriptions (JDs) and Job Specifications (JSs)? What is the remuneration package? [Hon. Member: Are you going to speak for another five minutes? Are you a Consultant?] Well, that is what I am, a consultant. I do not push my hands in the people *kitty* and take out *unauthorisedly*. Remember the piggy bank? That college was established, as I said, without any advertisement.

Further, that college is also training prospective public servants and this is worrying. How are these people identified, how are they recruited and how will that conflict with the statutory constitutional functions of the Public Service Commission (PSC)? It is only the Public Service Commission that has the authority to fill public service vacancies. Are we usurping the functions

of the Public Service Commission? Maybe that is the reason why we are trying so much, on the Government's side, to manipulate what is happening at the Public Service Commission.

We were told by the Minister of Finance, on pages 28 and 29, that 190 persons were trained as monitoring and evaluation (M&E) Officials. How were these people selected? Who selected them? What role, if any, did the Public Service Commission played? [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Then we come to electricity. On pages 20 and 21, there is more *story telling* from the other side. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I am requesting you... Hon. Member, could you take your seat please?

Mr. G. Persaud: Thank you Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Manickchand.

Ms. Manickchand: Your Honour, I apologise for disrupting you and the House in response to a heckle made by Mr. Ramjattan.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you Hon. Members. Just proceed.

Mr. G. Persaud: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Sir, electricity is a big issue. Electricity created serious problems in our country, in one of our 10 regions, a couple years back, riots and even the deaths of people talking about electricity and proposing increase in electricity tariff. We have a 14% Value Added Tax (VAT) increase on electricity bills. I am wondering what will happen? I ask from the Hon. Minister of Finance, will this VAT be paid by the citizens of Region 10 on their electricity bills and what would be the kilowatt hour charged in Linden? We are talking about equity, equality and social cohesion. We are talking about *what is good for one must be good for all*. So, we need to get that from the Minister of Finance.

I am certain that he has that information at his fingertip and he will tell us. From the Hon. Minister, Mr. Patterson, who will come later, he will tell us what happened with the lamps that

he removed from Bath Settlement? The grounds for removal were that the people could afford to pay for their electricity and the Neighbourhood Democratic Council (NDC) could pay for these street lamps. Who is paying for the street lamps in the city of Georgetown? Who is paying for the street lamps in Sophia? Who is paying for these street lamps that you have out all over the place? Sir, I hope you will tell us and you will disconnect and remove them. I hope the Hon. Minister will say why there are a number of street lamps on the West Coast of Demerara, including the ones on the road that are not lighting?

Everything is up there. My village too is like that. I want the Minister of Social Cohesion to look into this matter because it seems as if this thing is good for some places and bad for other places. We need to look at that, instead of running to the school system and trying to take over the education system.

Local Government - The Hon. Minister of Finance stated that they have held Local Government Elections (LGE) in Guyana.

I must say that the Local Government Elections are still incomplete. There are still six areas in this country in which the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) has failed and continues to fail to resolve those elections. There is one constituency in Region 6 in which there is a tie, and, until now, the people in that constituency do not have a representative. We boast about holding the Local Government Elections, the imposition of the Minister of Communities of the Mayor in the township of Mabaruma and the Chairpersons, in those NDCs that had a tie. These are things that are still engaging the attention of the Courts. How then can those elections be completed?

I have heard that a number of new Local Authority Areas will be activated. I wish to correct the Minister by saying that these areas were demarcated a long time ago by Mr. Earl and his team. These areas were not activated because there are certain criteria that must be met before an area is activated as a Local Authority Area. I hope the Hon. Minister, Mr. Bulkan, would be able to tell us what revenue stream will be established in these new Local Authority Areas to cause these people to be able to function as a unit?

What is the relationship between the Regional Democratic Councils (RDCs) and the new township? We have serious difficulties. The Ministry of Communities would have instructed the

RDCs to hand over certain assets to the Municipality. That is an area that would be contested and that is not right. Then the imposition...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 15 minutes.

Mr. G. Persaud: Thank you Sir. The imposition by the Minister of the REOs is creating serious problems for the Regional Democratic Councils' governance. I was very pleased when the Hon. Member, Mr. John Adams, and the Hon. Member, Ms. Jennifer Wade, spoke with passion and pride of how much work was done in Regions 3 and 5, respectively. Sir, could you imagine if we had those REOs that were working with these RDCs in the right manner, how much more would have been achieved in those regions? The Members of the People's Progressive Party/Civic are all pro-growth and pro-development. Amidst all those controversies, they are still achieving.

Budget 2017 - Allocations to the 10 Regions - The Minister of Finance, in his budget, has established a couple of categories and these are: General Administration, Economic Service Sector, Infrastructure Sector, Social Service Sector, Public Safety and Regional Development Sector. The 10 regions of this country got an allocation of 18.2% of the total pie, the current budget. For the Capital Budget, they got a woeful 6.7% of the total allocation. Overall, the 10 Regions got 15.4% allocation from this budget.

11.20 a.m.

Ten regions got less than what the social sector got, less than what the general administration got and less than what the infrastructure sector got, of the sectors there. These are the Minister's figures. How do we expect miracles, Sir, bearing in mind that these regions are responsible for 86.3% of the public servants in this country? This is from the commission of inquiry. Their current budget is only 18.2% of the total budget allocation. There is something we have to do.

On the capital side, the budget allocation is just 6.7%. What are these ten regions expected to do? All the teachers in these ten regions receive their salaries from the regions and not from the Ministry of Education. All the people in the agriculture sector, in the region, are paid by the agriculture programmes in the regions; all in the public works are being paid by the public works in the region; all the health workers and doctors are being paid by the regions. It means, therefore, something is terribly wrong. Then the health, education, admin, buildings are of the

responsibility of the regional administration. They have to maintain and renovate all the equipment they have to repair. I am happy that the infrastructure sector got 16 point something per cent of the budget. That one sector alone got more than what the ten regions got to pay all the people of this country who are within the regional administration and maintain all of these public buildings, public parks and public facilities. What a shame, in terms of the budget.

I am happy that the Minister of Finance stated, on page 30 of his budget presentation, that decision making will now be informed by proper data management. Well, Sir, one could expect that on the same issue we will not hear 33 different stories coming from over that side. The nation will get clear signals because decisions now will be made in a manner that is accepted to all. On any issue, you pick it, Sir, and ask three different Ministers over there you will get three different versions. We hope that this nation will be able now to see things and you will stop getting the statements, as we hear in here - "I am unaware"; "I do not know" and "I will find out." That is what we are getting here in the National Assembly. When we start in the Committee of Supply, I expect that we will get the information as we requested.

Budget 2017 certainly is a great disappointment to all of us in this country. What have our pensioners got before 2015? They got subsidy on our electricity, subsidy on their water, pension \$13,125, free drugs and medical supplies at the hospitals and all basic items value added tax (VAT) free. What do they have now?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must end now.

Mr. G. Persaud: Yes. Although I am being encouraged by the others, I will try to wrap up now.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must end now.

Mr. G. Persaud: Let me say that when the dust is settled there will be more than 75% of Guyanese in this country who will say that this budget was one of the gravest budgets that would have brought unto the shoulders of these people. I say to us that the Minister of Finance should go back to his Cabinet and sit there and seek to withdraw this budget and come with a proper financial proposal that can make growth and development positive in our country. *[Applause]*

Minister of Communities [Mr. Bulkan]: I would like to begin my presentation by offering a response and some clarification to the Hon. Member Mr. Ganga Persaud, who just spoke, and where he posed a few queries.

Firstly, the Hon. Member referred to the six local government areas, for which they were ties, and spoke of a failure for there to be a resolution. What the Hon. Member omitted to tell this House is that, following the ties in those areas, an offer was made by the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) coalition to honour the democratic principle whereby the party that obtains the plurality or the greater number of votes in those tied areas would be entitled to the chairmanship. The records will show that that offer was refused by the Opposition and that is what led to the lack of a resolution and the necessity, and the need, for me, as the Minister of Communities, to name the mayor in the case of Mabaruma and the chairs in the other regions, following our offer to have a resolution via the democratic principle and via democratic credentials.

The Hon. Member spoke about a tie in one of the constituencies in one of the local government organ in Region 6 and he said the residents of that constituency have no representation. I am surprised because the Hon. Member would know that the entire council represents all of the residents of the entire local authority area. If a constituency councillor from one particular constituency is absent, it does not mean to say that the residents of that constituency are denied and unrepresented.

The Hon. Member spoke about the imposition of Regional Executive Officer (REO), but he did not say what these REOs are guilty of doing. I am not sure. The Hon. Member gave two percentages for the total allocation to the ten regions. He gave the figure of 18.2% as well as the figure of 15.4%. I am not sure which one of these two figures he really wishes to refer to.

[Mr. Williams: He was not sure either.] Probably. However, he did identify the figure of 6.7% as representing the total capital allocation to the ten regions. Where my disappointment lies in the statement of the Hon. Member, my predecessor in this Ministry, is where he said that the salaries of the teachers and the officers and officials in the other programme areas are all paid by the region and come out of this capital allocation. I am disappointed in the Hon. Member because he would know that the salaries of those officials are paid out of the recurrent

expenditure and not the capital expenditure, the 6.7%, to which he referred. I do not wish to be detained any further with some of those common trivialities.

The Hon. Minister of Finance on the 28th November last delivered in this honourable House Budget 2017. Since then, the prognosticators of doom have been in overdrive denouncing this budget to the extent that the Hon. Leader of the Opposition calling for its removal, including the removal of many of its measures, and even the budget altogether. Members of the opposite side of the House have been busy since deriding and decrying this budget to be anti-working class, anti-business, ominous and on all manner of epithets. The reality could not be further from the truth and I make bold to say that this budget is the best of the three budgets that have been presented by this administration. It is transformative in nature as well as structure. It is pro-working class with equity promoting measures. The progressive tax rate, which it introduces, puts more money in people's pocket and even the 40% tax rate for persons earning more than \$2.16 million annually will see them taking home more than, under the current regime, given that one-third of their income is now non-taxable.

We, on this side of the House, are proud of the budget and the purveyors of doom are no different from *Chicken Licken* who was quick to jump to wrong conclusions and told everyone she met that the sky was falling. We know from that story what happened to all those who followed *Chicken Licken*. They were eaten by the fox.

On a more serious note, in the final analysis, it is the people who will be the ones who will pronounce on this budget as well as the next two that will follow and give their final verdict in 2020. I seem to recall that this very point was made by the Hon. Member Mr. Ganga Persaud when he spoke on the Budget 2016 earlier this year. This is what democracy is all about. It is part and parcel of the competitive nature of electoral politics. We recognise that the Members on the other side are looking for political space. We, however, are focused on the future.

In pointing out that this budget is the first of four decades to be presented before the start of the fiscal year, that it is not only a signal achievement but more-over a testament to our stated resolve in the word of the Hon. Minister:

“...to return budgeting to its deserved place within the accountability and governance framework so that it could best serve its critical functions of economic management,

financial management, management of Government, and effective implementation of Government's policies.”

In other words, a transformation is taking place. This transformation is taking place in other areas as well one of it being in the governance architecture. In this regard, the Constitution provides for three layers or rather pillars of Government namely central, regional and local. A proper interpretation of the Constitution would inform us that the relationship between these three governance structures is not hierarchical, but rather lateral, where each of the three layers ought to recognise the limits of their authority and respect the role and authority of the others. The analogy I would like to think of is the tripod that we can see before us. Just think of it for a minute. If anyone of those three legs were to be removed what would happen to the equipment that it is supporting. This is the relationship, that is, the respect for two of the layers, did not exist hitherto led to disfunctionality in governance and a corresponding crisis in communities countrywide. This was evident to all and sundry. This framework, of which I speak, is embedded in the Constitution which at article 12 states:

“Local government by freely elected representatives of the people is an integral part of the democratic organisation of the State.”

11.35 a.m.

A mere 20 words, but there is no ambiguity in that article of our Constitution. It provides all of the clarity that we need, with regard to the role of local government. We are committed to honouring this provision. We have tried management from the centre and it has not and will not work. One size solutions would not fit all the needs of the various communities. This bottom-up approach to democratic governance is central to development in a country as culturally, ethnically and geographically diverse as ours.

I am pleased to note, in this regard, yesterday when the Hon. Member John Adams was enumerating all of the accomplishments that were achieved in Region 3, the Hon. Member Ifraan Ali was quick to claim credit on the part of what he said was the People's Progressive Party (PPP) control of Regional Democratic Council (RDC) Region 3. When in fact, the next speaker, Hon. Member Komal Chand, spoke he underscored this very point in seeking to take credit for the RDC for Region 3. We saw the same when Hon. Member Jennifer Wade enumerated the

accomplishment in Region 5. It was followed by the Hon. Member Vishwa Mahadeo, who was quick to take credit. As he put it, the PPP controls RDC Region 5.

This is the transformation to which I refer. It is an end to winner takes all politics and its respect for the constitutional authority of our RDCs. The first manifestation of this transformation was evident with the holding of local government elections in March of this year. Those elections were described by President Granger as historic. The point His Excellency was seeking to underscore was not merely the fact that elections were being held after a period of two decades, but that the framework in which these new councils were coming into being was to allow for a totally different dispensation, one in which there would be allowed to exercise their authority, independence and autonomy in accordance with constitutional provisions.

Budget 2017 supports this agenda and programme. Budget 2017 allocates approximately \$41 billion via the Ministry of Communities against the overall strategic objection of strengthening the local government system. Approximately \$35.5 billion is allocated to the ten RDCs, an increase by \$3 billion over 2016. The previous speaker, the Hon. Member, would be pleased to hear that. The intervention is targeted towards the programme areas of health, education, agriculture, infrastructure and administration. I would like to pause here, to refer to the contributions of Hon. Members from this side of the House who have already spoken. Hon. Members Gloria Bancroft, Richard Allen, John Adams, Jennifer Wade, and others, who combined, spoke of the 2016 achievements as well as 2017 allocation in the budget now before us.

Funding for capital projects has been increased for every region, save and accept marginal reduction in Regions 2, 8 and 10. Note, one of them is Region 10. Allocations for recurrent expenditure have been increased for every region. It may be interesting to note that the greatest increase, both for capital as well as recurrent expenditure, is for Region 3. This ought to tell us something about the lens that this administration brings to bear in allocation of budgetary resources, that we bring a national and not a partisan perspective to allocation of budgetary resources. A review of the rate of execution for the regions shows that figure to currently stand at 88%, as of now. The projection, however, are that for the end of the year that figure would reach close to full expenditure, by the end of December.

I continue with regional administration. This administration would continue to move away from central Government's domination and in the strategy of decentralisation as well as the provision of services and devolution of decision making power, to facilitate improved coordination and communication within and among RDCs and between RDCs, Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) and the central Government as well as other key stakeholders, such as the business community and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The Ministry would implement early in 2017, an annual activity to be known as the National and Regional Development Consultative Committee (NRDCC). This activity is designed to strengthen and improve regional administration. The NRDCC would comprise representative of all RDCs as well as central Government. Its most important function would be that of financial planning and on administration. The committee would engage in planning future undertakings as well as reporting on the status of current initiatives, exchanging idea and coordinating activities within the strategic direction of the national objectives as set by the central Government. This forum would also service to improve and maintain accountability, transparency and partnership among regional administrations. Time permitted, I may elaborate a bit more on this.

In keeping with the agenda of regional empowerment as well as regional pride, consultations led by our RDCs would begin early in 2017 to allow people to be consulted on whether they wish to retain the name given to their regions or if they wish to have another name. Many have questioned why this initiative. The fact, however, in 1980 when the regional system was created and names were given to our regions, it was not meant to be permanent, that 36 years later most of our regions are referred to by numbers. It tells us that the names either do not resonate or they are too cumbersome. How many persons, for example, do we heard saying that they are from the East Berbice-Corentyne Region? Not many.

It is commonly referred to as Region 6. The same for Region 10, we hardly ever hear person referring to that they are from the Upper Demerara- Berbice Region. Members would remember that yesterday when the students from Bina Hill Institute Youth Learning Centre treated us to that very good song about climate change, in the lyrics of that song there was no reference to Region 9 or to Upper Takatu-Upper Essequibo, but rather to the Rupununi. The reality is that one cannot form an emotional bond with a number. Similarly regional emblems and flags have the

same purpose. It is not of balkanization as the Opposition was quick by reflex, to denounce this initiative.

The strategy of the Ministry of Communities for implementing the policies and priorities in the Budget 2017 is to promote the delivery of social, economic and environmental services (SEEs) by strengthening our local democratic organs (LDO). The vision of the Ministry of Communities is to improve the quality of lives of residents by promoting the development of cohesive, empowered and sustainable communities. Among the interrelated strategic initiatives set in place by the Ministry to achieve this objective are:

- (i) empowering and equipping of local democratic organs;
- (ii) promoting local economic development;
- (iii) instilling integrated waste management;
- (iv) promoting integrated water resources management;
- (v) providing quality and affordable housing solutions;
- (vi) supporting the strengthen communities disastrous management; and
- (vii) Strengthening policy development management.

For the Ministry of Communities, the \$41 billion, excluded \$8 billion, coming from the housing fund allocated in the Budget 2017 would focus on strengthening the capacity of our LDOs to delivery on those social economic and environmental leads. This budget, the focus is aligned with the medium term objectives and on promoting local economic development. The programme reaches across the other two tiers of the Government and would include the following components:

- (i) Infrastructure development
- (ii) Institutional strengthening and capacity building, and
- (iii) Public awareness and community participation.

The programmes, projects and activities of the Ministry, the Central Housing and Planning Authority (CH&PA), the Guyana Water Incorporated (GWI), the RDCs and the other as well as the Community Development Council (CDCs) would be executed accordingly. This approach would ensure that investment in communities, human resources development and communities ownership are achieved and not just the completion of the works in communities. It would help to ensure sustainability, promote participation and stimulate grass roots empowerment.

Strengthening regional procurement: In his budget speech, the Finance Minister expressed the administration's concerns regarding the impact of poor performance in Government's investment and the economy. The Ministry of Communities shares those concerns expressed by the Minister of Finance and are prepared to do its part to reverse this situation wherever it is obtained. Within the procurement regulations, where they exist, and with the creation of regional procurement units and training of regional procurement officials, the Ministry would continue to pursue a path of transparency and accountability in procurement at the regional and local government levels. Measures would be put in place to expand the number of contractors involve in executing Government contracts in the regions and to rebuild the village economy by deepening the opportunities for local content in the delivery of projects and activities promoting community participation and ownership.

Pre-qualification of contractors setting a threshold limited on award of contracts and instituting an ongoing list of works are among the effort being made to reverse some of the efficiencies in regional procurement to acceleration of the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) to open up opportunities for new entrance in the cohort of the contractors and to promote community confidence and better service delivery.

Strengthening regional development: An entire section of the budget devoted attention to the Government's priorities for achieving better governance. I have already spoken of the emphasis that would be placed on strengthen our regional development. I have spoken of the initiative for the NRDCC and what it is designed to achieve. Within the NRDCC there would be intraregional consultations during the year and at this level of consultation the following targets would result:

- (a) Improve the implementation of policies, programmes and knowledge sharing at regional levels related to sustainable economic development.

- (b) To foster regional partnerships and collaboration to resolve constraints and promote development within the priority area.
- (c) To provide a platform to consolidate ideas and articulate and contribute to coherent policy discussion for development.
- (d) For the coordination of local democratic organs to improve the (SEE) services and promote the green agenda.

11.50 a.m.

Strengthening local government: With regard to the strengthening of our local government system, the Ministry will be pursuing several paths to achieve this objective. Among these will include the partnering with the Ministry of Finance in the overhauling and modernising of the national valuation system, as announced by the Minister of Finance, in the budget. The objective is to secure the revenue base of our LDOs, currently their Achilles heel.

Following on with a prior commitment to have the community enhancement work component of the Community Infrastructure Improvement Project (CIIP) to be executed directly by our local government organs, with coordination through the RDC and support from the Ministry of Communities. The Community Enhancement Workers Initiative (CEWI) will see 1,500 workers employed across the 71 councils undertaking cleaning and clearing activities to promote the aesthetics and improve access to public facilities. After several years, the workers payment will now increase to \$30, 000, that is working for four hours a day for 16 days a month.

Leveraging the Caribbean Local Economic Development (CARILED) Project to build capacity in the remaining months of this Canadian Government funded programme, the activities under this programme only accelerated since this new administration took office. A number of activities will be completed under that programme, among these being to conduct training in local economic development planning as well as the completion of a training manual and a preparation guidebook for our councillors, manual that is expected to be completed by January of next year. Among other activities will be the developing and implementing of financial regulations for LDOs to improve the financial management of their councils. Budgetary allocations have been made for the strengthening of solid waste management across communities

in all of the regions of our country. In the Budget 2017, a sum of \$1.3 billion is allocated for solid waste management. It will include as well for the operation of landfill sites at Haags Bosch, Lusignan, as well as other areas, and the creation of new sanitary landfills across our country.

It would be remiss of me if I do not touch on the question of the Local Government Commission (LGC) where concerns have been expressed over the non-operationalisation of this commission. This commission, when it comes into being, will be responsible for the regulation and the staffing of our local democratic organs and in particular regarding disciplinary actions of officers. The Local Government Commission Act, at section 13 (5), however, requires that in the discharge of its functions the commission should have regard to Chapters 28:01, 02, 09 and 29:01. Those legislation give authority to councils to hire their own officers such as overseers without resort to any other authority. The issue and ultimate authority of the Local Government Commission is not clear-cut. Of course, article 75 of our Constitution states that local democratic organs shall be autonomous. Whilst I am not seeking to undermine the authority of the LGC before its operationalisation, but simply seeking to make the point that its oversight role will not allow it to control our local democratic organs. Of greater import is that the pace of local government reform is currently being accelerated so that when the commission comes into being, it will have a more functional system to regulate than currently obtains.

In conclusion, the focus of my presentation has been on these two vital pillars of governance, that is, regional administration and local administration as opposed to dealing with transactions. I am pleased to report to this Assembly that evidence of the reawakening and rebirth of local democracy is manifested and that local democracy is on the move. It is evident in the east and it is evident in the west. In the east, there is the example of the Corriverton Town Council where just one week ago, councillors stood up to central dictates and chose the person they wanted as mayor. They decided that they would represent the interests of their residents and not that of persons from outside. That is what local democracy is about. It is about people's empowerment, it is about the people's candidate, not the party's candidate. That is what prevailed in Corriverton. In the west we have the case of Mabaruma where despite the fact that the council was tied, councillors there decided that they would put partisan interests aside and work in the interest of their township. They have not allowed that tie to hinder the work and they have been meeting regularly. I am pleased to announce that the municipality of Mabaruma was the first of

our nine municipalities to approve and submit its budget for 2017 that is required under the legislation. Congratulations to the people of Mabaruma.

Those are the green shoots of local democracy. Finally, the transformative nature of Budget 2017 is infectious and contagious. It is also irreversible. We continue to invite the Opposition to be less emotive and more dispassionate to partner with us. Hon. Members, the country will benefit. I repeat what I said earlier. We on this side of the House are proud of this budget. I congratulate the Minister of Finance and his hard-working team for a job excellently done. I am pleased to commend this budget for its approval and passage.

Thank you. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: The next speaker is the Hon. Member Colin Croal. You have the floor, please. We will take the suspension after this speaker.

Ms. Teixeira: Sir we brought a motion here which states that the break is from 12 noon to one o' clock. We noticed that on the first day it was one o' clock and then it has changed. If we passed a motion in this House to break at 12 noon, could we keep to it? It is because we are trying to organise ourselves too. I am asking that we break as the motion resolved in this House, for 12 noon.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I gather from my enquiries that lunch is not yet here. It seems to me that we could take advantage of the time to complete one other speaker. However, if Members, as occurred yesterday, feel that we should break now then we will break now, and the time for our reassembling will be one hour from now. If that is the case, then let us stick with the time.

Minister of Natural Resources [Mr. Trotman]: Sir, if it pleases you, may I move a motion that in view of the exigencies of the situation that we work through and utilise the time properly.

Ms. Teixeira: I am opposed to the motion, incensed. This Parliament, it makes the second time that we are having a problem getting the meals on time. We cannot be passing resolutions in this House and going this way. This is disorganisation, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member Ms. Teixeira, you are quite in order, if you wish to insist on the time. I observed yesterday that any change from that would be by agreement on both sides. What you are saying today is that you do not agree with the proposal just made. We will then adjourn at this time and reassemble one hour from now, at one o' clock to continue our debate. Hon. Members, I would expect Members to hold their seats until the Speaker leaves the dais.

Sitting suspended at 12.00 noon.

Sitting resumed at 1.00 p.m.

Mr. Croal: I rise today to add my contribution, to the presentation of the Budget 2017 which was presented under the theme *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to all Guyanese*. Over the past three days, we have been listening to many themes. I wonder if the aim on the presentation of this budget, at this time, was to be able to boast that the Government is presenting three budgets in 19 months or two budgets in the year 2016. That is because this budget is being presented at a time when our public servants are being called and described in all manner. In fact, I think they have been described as being lethargic. They have been described as being lazy.

The question remains: Why is this coming so quickly after 19 months? Is this part of the defence to hide the performance of the various sectors, the performance of the Government in governing our country? Is this part of that defence? Is part of presenting the Budget 2017 at a time, when from all comments, it seems rushed in presentation, was to ensure that when we come next week when we will be in the Committee of Supply, where the budget numbers are defended and debated? We will necessarily have the final numbers for 2016.

We have listened to different comments coming from, for example, the Hon. Member Michael Carrington. He has described that the PPP has painted a dark picture and that the people of this country must have patience. The Hon. John Adams boasted - I will explain why I said the word boasted - is what this Government has delivered in 19 months the Opposition has not done in 23 years. [Ms. Ally: Very true.] Very true, the statement is very true. Correct. The Hon. Minister of State Joseph Harmon said that the PPP is using scare tactics. In fact, he has gone further to say this is part of trump up for congress. I do not see the relevance. My friend, the Hon. Member Jennifer Wade, "gave us space, do not lecture to us." My young friend - the only

person I accede to, the Minister within the Ministry of Public Infrastructure - the only young person on that side of the House, would have said: "Describe us and would have reminded us of us being fat cats.

1.17 p.m.

May I remind him that the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government, especially the Ministers, was called fat cat. Very early in your term and very sneakily - in fact we first learnt of the information via one of the daily news... There was a denial by one of the Ministers. We learnt subsequently, in September, where it was gazetted, about the massive increase of salaries, including up to 50%.

If we on this side of the House, our Ministers, were paid and we were called fat cats and then you would have given an increase to yourselves, therefore, may I describe yourselves as *fatter cats*?

The Hon. Member, Mr. Figueira, described our condemnation and comments to the 2017 Budget as us only representing a small section of the population. There are 32 Members on this side and so I was able to, over the past few days, review some of the newspaper articles that we have been having.

I have here *Stabroek News* newspaper of 30th November, 2016:

"New levies on electricity, water are a harbinger inflationary pressures."

Who wrote this? It was G H K Lall. Is that PPP?

Stabroek News newspaper of 1st December, 2016:

"Budget measures will have negative impact on growth, economy."

This was a Ram and McRae analysis. Is this from the PPP?

Stabroek News newspaper of 30th November, 2016:

"Budget has little to drive the engine of growth."

This is from a protégé of the Hon. Ramjattan - Sasenarine Singh. Is he a Member of the PPP?

Stabroek News newspaper of 2nd December, 2016:

“Phone company forces to pass VAT on to consumers.”

This is from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Guyana Telephone and Telegraph Company (GT&T). Is the CEO a member of the PPP?

Guyana Times newspapers of 2nd December, 2016:

“Budget confirms sluggish economy.”

This is from the Private Sector Commission. Is this the PPP speaking?

Stabroek News newspaper of 2nd December, 2016:

“New VAT regime to drive up prices and inflationary rates.”

This is from the Private Sector Commission. Was that the PPP?

Stabroek News newspaper of 3rd December, 2016

“Unlike zero-rated items, exempt ones do include VAT on production.”

This is from Peter Douglas. Is this the PPP?

“The \$10 environmental tax will pressure local manufacturers.”

Was this the PPP?

“Budget spells doom for Miners.”

That was from the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association and the Guyana Women Miners Organisation. Was that from the PPP?

Guyana Chronicle of 3rd December, 2016:

“Is the 2017 Budget malignant?”

That was by Apostle Vanrick Beresford. Is he a PPP?

Kaieteur News newspaper of 7th December, 2016:

“The local chicken industry will collapse and price for local chicken will escalate as 14% VAT was added to chicken feed.”

Under the PPP/C Government, chicken feed was granted 0% VAT to boost and protect the local chicken farmers.

Who was the spokesperson? It was one by the name of Robert Badal. Is he PPP?

The executives of the Guyana Poultry Association have said that the combination of these changes would send the price of chicken and other livestock meat up more than 20% and make local production uncompetitive.

Let me continue. I have spoken clearly. The views that have been expressed on the 2017 Budget... if you want enough information to work with, Hon. Minister of Finance, just take away the PPP's views and you will see it is all there, if you want to say that we are being critical for being critical sake.

Last night, we would have had the Minister responsible for housing as well as the Minister responsible for water and they would have quite rightly presented their plans for 2017. When I listened, I wondered if we, the PPP/C, did not do anything for housing and water because we had no acknowledgement of the sector for which they are continuing. We heard all the gloom. Let us give some information because it is important. For the last decade, or if you want to say the last 10 years prior to us coming out last year, over \$30 billion was allocated for capital works to develop new settlement schemes and rehabilitate the physical infrastructure in existing schemes. In 2009, a conscious decision was taken whereby we were going to diversify the activities from not just offering house lots but to provide housing units. Meanwhile, we also amended the New Building Society Act and the Income Tax Act, which expanded the low income housing market in the year 2000. The distribution of over 550,000 residential house lots across Guyana within that period alone brought the total number of house lots distributed to a total of 112,000 odd since the housing programme was initiated in 1993. Approximately 80% of the house lots distributed benefitted low income families.

If we want to talk a little on water, we focussed a significant attention to improving our sanitation infrastructure and to access safe water. While the description was given last night and

it was meant to sound like we have not done anything about water distribution within the regions, and it is new that all the Regions, for the first time, are now seeing potable water, we must recognise the sector from which they are continuing. In coastal regions, several new water treatment plants and wells were commissioned. May I also mention that the Hon. Minister did not state, and I must commend her that she is implementing, that she is continuing the five-year developmental that was left under the Ministry of Housing and Water. Since I am on water, maybe I should ask a question. This morning, on a local programme, *Jump Start*, hosted by Mr. Gordon Moseley, who, coincidentally, is probably doing more duties for yourself than the Department of Public Information... he is doing much more justice for you. I think you need to acknowledge the work that he has been doing. I am not sure where your Department of Public Information (DPI) staff is. I know I saw him earlier. Mention was made by a Guyana Water Inc. (GWI) official that they have not completed the calculation of the number of households that will be above the \$1,500.00 monthly threshold. **[An Hon. Member: You are misled.]** Just contact 94.1 Boom FM.

Where do we stand? We have had the Hon. Minister giving one position. They said that they have computed and calculated how many are above the \$1,500 bracket. We have heard various percentages and, in fact, the staff of GWI Inc. went on to say that, in their estimation, it will be just below 30% that will be above the \$1,500 threshold. If you are not sure how many households are going to be affected, you can understand why I said that the Budget was presented in a vacuum; it is all about getting back your numbers.

May I add this bit of information too? It is in our estimation that approximately \$400 million will garnered from the consumers of this country when the application of the environmental tax on bottled water is applied. Who are we penalising?

What are some of the interventions that were done that are continuing? It is important that we understand where we are coming from and then we will understand where we are going. In excess of \$1.2 billion over that period - the last 10 years - was implemented in Region 2 alone which included the new treatment plant at Lima. I can go on: over \$2.3 billion in Region 3 alone with the construction of the new water treatment plant at Vergenoegen; \$5.5 billion for Region 4 of which more than \$3 billion was directed directly to Georgetown and the remaining \$2.5 billion along the East Coast and the East Bank corridors; Region 5: over \$1 billion in capital

investments for the construction of new art, inclusive of new treatment plants at Cotton Tree Village, drilling of new wells at De Hoop, *et cetera*; Region 6: in excess of \$6 billion which included construction of new state of the art treatment plant at No. 56 Village and Queenstown, Rose Hall water improvement plant; Region 10: close to \$1 billion or more like three-quarter billion dollars for the construction of two new state of the art treatment plants, installation of a number of mains and service connections.

On the investments in the water sector for that period, the percentage of the population with access to treated water increased from 26% to 50%. The coverage within the hinterland increased from 25% to 84%, hence achieving, by 2016, the aimed targeted 90% as part of your work programme that was left; the increased coverage on the Coast from less than 70% to in excess of 95%; increased levels of service across the country and reliability for water supply systems; provision of new service in excess of hundreds of thousands of persons for the first time; and increase in the number of pensioners being subsidised from \$19,000 in 2010 to \$24,000. We speak about subsidising now.

Let us speak on local government. For the last three Budget debates, inclusive of this one, I have been repeating one question and this has to do with the swearing in of the Justice of Peace, our Regional Chairman and our Regional Vice-Chairperson. They have not been sworn in to date.

1.32 p.m.

I am not saying this for the first time; I am saying this for the third time. This is stated in accordance with Section 26. May I read it for the Hon. Minister?

“The chairman and vice-chairman, shall, by virtue of their offices, be justices of the peace for their region, but shall, before acting as such, take the oaths required by law to be taken by such justices unless they are, on the day on which they become entitled to act as chairman or vice-chairman...”

They have since been sworn in by His Excellency; they have been functioning. And for the third consecutive time, I am asking the Hon. Minister, when will our regional chairmen and vice-chairmen be sworn in as justices of peace? We are waiting.

Fiscal Transfer: there is nothing strange. The Hon. Minister, when he was on this side of the House, spoke so glowingly on the benefits of fiscal transfer, the application and also the formula, utilising the population, the rate of collection, the demographics, *et cetera*.

Last, I take this from the Hansard of our last Budget debate:

“Could the Hon. Minister confirm whether the Fiscal Transfers Act will be applied in the allocation of subvention to the municipalities and the NDCs?”

The response by the Hon. Minister:

“The answer is yes. That Act will be used to determine the level of transfers to the local government organs.”

And may I ask the Hon. Minister, for the 2016 Budget, the transfers and subventions that were given to the local authorities, was the Fiscal Transfers Act applied? It was not, and what is worse is that the application of this law was first started under the PPP/C Government in 2014. So, it means that the Minister has disbanded and disregarded the law of our country.

What about the Local Government Commission? The Hon. Minister gave us a big outline of the Local Government Commission, the purpose of it, *et cetera*. But the question remains, when will the Local Government Commission be announced? When will the Hon. Minister pass the order for the commencement of the Commission?

At the last Budget debate, the Hon. Minister committed to the commencement of this and, at that time, I can recall the Hon. Member, Mr. Irfaan Ali, asking the question, “Was the Hon. Leader of the Opposition written to?” Since that time, in 2016, the Leader of the Opposition was written to. The Leader of the Opposition provided the three names. But the Hon. Minister wrote a letter seeking clarification, “Did the Leader of the Opposition consult?” Consult with whom? When it is on the Opposition side... There is only one Opposition political party. So, who to consult with? [Mr. Hamilton: We consult with ourselves.] Well, no problem. The Leader of the Opposition probably had said yes; he has consulted with himself, so these are the three names. They have gotten those three names and, between the Hon. Minister and the Minister of State, they cannot decide on the timeline. They have said that they are still deciding on the names

for the Local Government Commission. But there are three names that have to be vetted on the Government's side.

There is still a fourth that has to come from the unions of local government. Has the Hon. Minister called the local authorities at a meeting to discuss their submission of names for the Commission? The Minister must say that. And so, the point I am making is that there is a deliberate, protracted attempt by this Government to delay the insulation of the new Local Government Commission. But why is that? As it is right now, he is applying the relevant section of the law where the Minister approves the appointment. So, the Hon. Minister is waiting until he has in place, by all the local authorities and all the regional levels, all the persons that he would like and desire to function. Until he has done that, then I am sure there will be a sudden hastiness in ensuring the Commission commences to function. And then they speak of democracy but democracy when the groundwork was already laid. I will stop there, Mr. Speaker.

The Hon. Minister has made mention of the National Integrated Solid Waste Management Strategy; I commend him for the commencement. Mention was made, since the earlier Budget of this year, for consultations to be done in this regard. But I want to urge the Hon. Minister, I am not sure what is taking so long with this. Firstly, a drafted Solid Waste Management Bill was completed. I would recognise that the Government may need to tinker with it, *et cetera*, as to its liking. But it has been 19 months and then we are going now to a further consultation. So, we are now talking about another year before the commencement of a proper strategy in dealing with solid waste.

Hon. Minister, I also want to ask the question about the strategy for the regional solid waste aspect because you would have had the commencement of a Regional Solid Waste Programme. Commendably, mention was made about the commencement of landfill sites in two of the regions for the expansion of this Solid Waste Programme. I also want to ask, since two will be done, what is the strategy for the other regions in the meanwhile? As it is right now, there is no clear strategy in terms of collection. And so the burden is left on the local authorities, when there was a draft system that allowed for a pricing strategy – advertisements are done for a pricing strategy where a private contractor can tender for such work and do the collection.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 25 minutes.

Mr. Croal: And so, Hon. Minister, this brings me to another issue with respect to the tied local authorities. The Hon. Minister made mention about Mabaruma. Firstly, let me clarify something. I commend the people of Mabaruma but he should acknowledge the role that was played by the PPP/C Councillors of the Mabaruma Town Council to ensure that that budget was submitted, the first of all the municipalities.

Hon. Minister, do you know the reason why? It is because, quite rightly, since the Minister went ahead – and the matter is in court, so I am just trying to tread lightly – and appoint his own Mayor, contrary to the law – I do not want to go further to explain – when the law clearly shows that what was required was a by-election that went back to the population, in general, within the six constituents of Mabaruma itself, not the Hon. Minister... Having had the by-elections, then the law gives the Hon. Minister his authority to intervene. Having recognised that, the PPP/C Councillors were not attending the Mabaruma Town Council's statutory meetings because of a non-recognition of the Mayor. And they have recognised that they did a wrong because those meetings went ahead without the Mayor. The Mayor was not chairing. And so, why there was an agreement on the budget was because both parties worked together with the recognition that the law supersedes. And so, Hon. Minister of Social Cohesion, it is to ensure that, if we work together on equal footing, there is a lot that can be achieved. [Ms. Ally: Tell Mr. Jagdeo that.]

May I make another correction, as you want me to tell the Leader of the Opposition? It was this side of the House, the Hon. Leader of the Opposition, who initiated and made the overture to your side of the House on a working solution for the local authorities. We proposed, because there were six tied local authorities, a rotation for the mayor, deputy mayor, chairman and vice-chairman. You, in turn, proposed to take three of those and make them fixed chairmen and mayor and the other three for the PPP/C and three for yourself, and there would have been three-three fixed. That was not workable because on what assumption would we have made that which Neighbourhood Democratic Council (NDC) or municipality was more important for the PPP/C or the Government's side. And that is why we proposed to have a rotational basis.

Let me speak a little on the Hinterland Employment and Youth Service (HEYS) Programme that the Hon. Minister within has spoken so glowingly about. The young people who have been recruited and getting stipends have to wait four months before they can receive their stipends.

And if the Hon. Minister thinks I am exaggerating, the HEYS persons under the Moruca sub-region have not been paid their stipends for the past four months. They have been promised that this will be done by 15th December. And since I can speak on Region 1, it is only recently the other sub-regions received. And the same can be replicated across the entire Region.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you will have to wrap up now.

Mr. Croal: The Hon. Richard Allen, a Member of Parliament (MP) for Region 1, who, furthermore, only goes when there is a ministerial visit, spoke about birth certificates and people crying about it, *et cetera*. He did not recognise that we started the process of enhancing the distribution and ensuring that we have fast-track mechanisms for persons within the hinterland to receive their birth certificates. It is for that reason that a department was set up with the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs. It was for that reason that the regions employed a person specifically for the issue of birth certificates. And what the Hon. MP did not state was that, right now, he is part of the distribution centre for birth certificates in the Matarkai sub-region; it is not given through the proper channels.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must wrap up now.

Mr. Croal: In concluding, I want to repeat, and I quote from an assessment that was done by Ram and McRae:

“The main take away from this budget may not be the wind farm initiatives, the infrastructural programmes or the increase in Police manpower. It is about the 57 tax measures set out in 30 pages of the speech.”

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must conclude now.

Mr. Croal: This is the conclusion, Mr. Speaker.

“In introducing his budget measures for 2017, Minister Jordan said that “we are about to embark on a new generation of tax reform, starting from Budget 2017.”

Unfortunately, he did outline the vision, the end product of this process and how long it would take. [*Applause*]

1.47 p.m.

Minister of Social Protection [Ms. Lawrence]: Mr. Speaker, please allow me to extend congratulations to the Hon. Minister of Finance, Mr. Winston Jordan, and his committed staff not only for his presentation on the 2017 Budget to this honourable House on 28th November, 2016, in advance of the fiscal year, but also for its timeliness in outlining Government's policies, projects and programmes to facilitate effective implementation. The 2017 Budget, under the theme, *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*, captures all aspects of the vision of His Excellency, President David Granger, who, in his address at the Opening Session of Parliament, stated:

“The economy remains undiversified and incapable of withstanding even small shocks. What we need is a growth strategy that is broader in scope and more diversified in its outlook.”

His Excellency further advocated the adoption of a green agenda aimed at promoting green economic sectors such as the development of climate-resilient agriculture, eco-tourism, and information and communications technology (ICT) with the overarching objective of ensuring a good life for all its citizens.

The 2017 Budget, with its focus on development of new green technologies and processes, creation of more green-job opportunities and support of the Government's drive towards the achievement of the green agenda, defines a sustainable pathway to the happiness and prosperity of all Guyanese and paves the way for enhancing the quality of life of all our citizens.

I wish to also compliment the Hon. Minister for incorporating in the Budget the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which all the Governments of the Caribbean have endorsed. In paragraph 4.6, the Minister stated:

“The Green Agenda encompasses environmental protection, citizen security...education, social protection, and resilience against climate change... It is about sustainable development, embracing a broad range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aligning perfectly with multi-dimensional progress.”

In fact, national, regional and international governments have all affirmed their commitment to the realisation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda of which the Sustainable Development Goals are an integral part. In examining the Budget, all 17 Sustainable Development Goals are reflected therein, but I wish to highlight a few of them, in this honourable House, which are crucial to ensuring economic progress and the good life for all Guyanese. Further, I wish to compliment the Hon. Minister not only for incorporating in the Budget these Goals, but also for ensuring that he addressed the several issues which were brought to him by several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and women's organisations, in particular.

In my last Budget presentation, I indicated to this House and the nation that our Government will continue to put in place measures to improve the effectiveness of our social welfare programmes that will enhance the quality of life for all, especially our vulnerable groups. I am, therefore, very pleased to report on what transpired in 2016 and to share with you some of the projections for 2017. However, before I do so, I would like to say thanks to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), the UNDP, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) for their tremendous contribution and collaboration with the Ministry of Social Protection over the past 18 months. I wish this honourable House to know that these initiatives are expected to continue, in 2017, with the support of these organisations and other agencies to boost the programmes of capacity-building of our most vulnerable groups.

I wish to report on another development which will certainly enhance our effectiveness. From the inception, we realised that one of the issues hampering the Ministry of Social Protection from providing an interconnected service to our clients is the fact that the Ministry is housed in five locations. This contributes to the loss in working hours, lack of coordination of our programmes and, in many instances, frustration for the persons whom we serve. Both staff and Ministers are extremely grateful that this will soon come to an end with the provision of some \$200 million to begin work on the High Street building.

In 2016, the Ministry of Social Protection framed its objectives and shaped its policies within the parameters of equitable distribution for the benefits for all Guyanese, as extracted from the Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 5. The Ministry's thrust, in 2016, as it executed its four

programs, namely, Administration, Social Services, Labour and Child Care Protection, took Guyanese and, more particularly, our vulnerable groups, much closer to the vision adumbrated by these laudable Goals.

I will attempt, given the time allocated, to speak on three of the programmes. I will begin with Programme 1 which deals with Policy and Administration. In paragraph 4.37, the Minister spoke about the rebuilding of our capacity to plan, especially with the coming into being of the Poverty Measurement and Analysis Unit indicated in paragraph 4.47. This should strengthen our capacity and ensure more effective management and results.

Let me share some of those successes from 2016. Under the Financial Support for Disadvantaged Persons and Persons in Difficult Circumstances, the Women of Worth Loans Programme, which was initiated in 2015, saw several females from the various Administrative Regions benefitting from loans ranging from \$100,000 to \$250,000.

Likewise, the People of Worth Entrepreneurial Resources (POWER) Loans Programme, which provides loans to male single parents and couples already engaged in business ventures, was implemented in September, 2016. To date, several persons have been screened and recommendations have been made to the Bank for the processing of loans.

We are also aware that many of these persons will not be able to repay a loan. Thus, the Ministry provided small grants to about 151 persons, mainly women, from all the Administrative Regions. It is the Ministry's view that a little goes a long way in transforming the lives of individuals and it is in this regard that the small grants are being provided. The Ministry is committed to transforming the lives of our Guyanese people, encouraging self-sufficiency through entrepreneurship, thus paving the way for the achievement of Goal 1, the Eradication of Poverty.

I wish to report, first of all, on the Ministry's collaboration with the First Lady's Capacity Building Initiative which seeks to empower beneficiaries through training on managing and sustaining small entrepreneurial ventures. Training was conducted in all 10 Administrative Regions and approximately 390 female single parents have been recipients of training in Self-Reliance and in Success in Business. In 2017, this training will continue in new locations in the regions and those who have been already trained in Success in Business will be provided with grants and linkages to markets.

In 2017, the Ministry will effect its strategic planning in launching a project to extract oil from lemon grass in the Buxton community, the output of which will be sold to the Rupununi Essence Project. In Regions 5 and 10, technical assistance will be provided for the rearing of pigs. In the long term, this training will expand to include the production of by-products, utilising it for a bio-digester towards the provision of green energy, as well as ham and bacon with small farmers in several communities. You can well appreciate, Mr. Speaker, the avenues for sustainable employment and economic self-sufficiency that will be generated through this initiative.

I would like to respond to Mr. Ceon Orie who wrote a letter in the *Kaieteur News* today and asked how youths can become entrepreneurs when they lack money and skills. I hope he is listening. The Ministry is planning to engage our young adults and, to a large extent, offer support both with business skills and financial grants to realise their business goals. Moreover, we will be focusing on implementing the Sustainable Livelihoods and Entrepreneurial Development (SLED) Programme for which there has been an injection of \$100 million in grants, not loans.

The second aspect of the Ministry's training programme focuses on initiatives for female single parent households and the building of green houses for the cultivation of cash crops. I am happy to inform this honourable House that several female single parent families in Region 6 were trained in green/shade house agriculture. Similar projects are earmarked for Regions 1, 4 and 10 in 2017. This augurs well for providing more opportunities for vulnerable residents in these regions to become more financially independent.

This same vision for capacity building through training targeted our teenage mothers in 2016. Thirty adolescent mothers from Yarowkabra, Region 4, were trained. This initiative, aimed at empowering youths to support their peers through awareness sessions on social issues, included a comprehensive programme for our teenage mothers, run by the NGO, Women Across Differences (WAD).

In 2017, the Ministry will intensify this programme for our teenage mothers to provide a platform whereby they can be fully re-integrated into the society. The Ministry will continue to partner with WAD to replicate what is being done in Georgetown, Yarowkabra in Region 10 and in Angoy's Avenue, Region 6.

The Ministry of Social protection is challenged, on a daily basis, by a myriad of social issues that impinge on the realisation of a good life for all our citizens. But the Ministry is determined to eliminate as much as is humanly possible, many of the social ills that are prevalent in our society.

2.02 p.m.

Hence, it is the Ministry's initiative to implement evidence-based policies and programmes to strengthen the capacity of its stakeholders, which will result in their empowerment. This serves as an introduction to Programme 2, which embodies the social services. I wish to report, firstly, on the Palms Geriatric Home and services for provided for the elderly.

In paragraph 4.149, the Hon. Minister, in reference to the care for the elderly and persons with disabilities, reported that a number of setbacks and poor management handicapped the process in 2016. He stated:

“In the new dispensation, elderly citizens can expect to benefit from improved care through the implementation of minimum standards, which seek to provide modern institutions for them.”

“In addition, our senior citizens' residential facility will benefit from substantial repairs to the tune of \$89.5 million in the new year.”

In 2016, several initiatives were implemented at the Palms facility. Two doctors assumed duties to provide round the clock medical service to the residents of the Palms Geriatric Home, night shelter and other homes for the elderly. In addition, an infirmary will soon be commissioned to provide on-site medical treatment for the residents.

In 2017, nurses will be deployed to supplement the service rendered by the two doctors in the infirmary and other wards, as well as off-site treatment. Further, lifts will be installed in the institution to help move patients, laundry, food and utensils. With regard to the building of the modern facility, discussions with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) are expected to continue so that works on this new facility can begin.

The Hon. Minister of Finance intimated in paragraph 4.151:

“...we believe that persons with disabilities should receive the same opportunities for improvements to be made to their quality of life as the next person.”

“...The Board of Industrial Training has expanded vocational training of differently-abled persons...”

Some 131 disabled persons have been trained and will graduate in January, 2017. The target for 2017 is 200 persons. With regard to the Deaf Association of Guyana, the Ministry of Social Protection pledges to continue working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education in the development of the sign language. We have seen the use of sign language interpreters initiated during the presentation of the 2017 National Budget, which was a first for budget presentations in the National Assembly. This speaks to having a broader section of the society having access to information.

In 2016, the Ministry provided assistance to visually impaired individuals by sponsoring blind cricketers for a tour in the Caribbean and providing computers for blind students to pursue studies at the University of Guyana. In 2017, the Ministry will continue to work even more to further the cause of our visually impaired persons.

On Friday, 25th November, 2016, Guyana joined with the rest of the world in observance of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women under the theme: *Orange the World: Promoting Equality; Ending Gender-Based Violence*. The Ministry is concentrating all of its energies to eradicate this social ill from our society and to create an ambience and climate where the good life can be engendered. The Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Policy Unit is a new unit within the Ministry, expressly created to address the high incidence of sexual and domestic violence in our society.

This unit, now well-staffed, has entered into discussions with several agencies namely the Guyana Police Force, regional authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as the Ministry of Public Security, to come up with strategies and to collaborate to combat the prevalence of domestic violence. With the resuscitation of the National Taskforce for the Prevention of Sexual Violence, in accordance with the Sexual Offences Act, it is envisaged that the taskforce will open its doors to incorporate others on board, so that a broader spectrum of stakeholders can deliberate and suggest recommendations to tackle this social scourge. A hotline

was established in Region 6 in 2016 to great effect, and it is envisaged that hotlines will be set up in several regions during 2017.

The Hon. Minister of Finance underscored in paragraph 4.45 the importance of data. In the light of this, a national survey on violence against women will be conducted and the data would be used to implement the action plan.

In 2016, the construction of a domestic and sexual violence shelter will now be constructed in Region 4 in the Mahaica Hospital compound, as there is much more space there. The drawings and plans are complete, and in early 2017, we shall continue discussions with the Islamic Development Bank on this Project. We shall continue discussions with several of our NGOs on this matter. There will also be the commissioning of the domestic and sexual violence centres in Regions 6 and 10. Additionally, in 2017, approximately 30 police stations in Regions 3, 5, 6, and 10, as well as the Georgetown and New Amsterdam Prisons will be connected to the integrated Crime Information System. Twelve police stations, across the country, will also be upgraded to handle domestic violence interviews, interviewing and case management. Further, the Government will develop community safety plans of which we will hear more from the Minister of Public Security.

The work done by one of the frontline fighter organisations has not gone unnoticed by this Government. The services provided to our many women and their families who suffer from abusers are commendable and after many years of request for an increase in their subsidies, approval has been granted. Sir, Budget 2017 has made provision for an increase of \$21.2 million for Help and Shelter.

I would like us, in this honourable House, to turn our attention to the probation and social services sector. The number of disadvantaged and vulnerable persons who appear at our office is alarming to say the least. It follows, therefore, that there is need for a dynamic and well managed unit to cope with the demands and to respond with a service of the highest quality. To this end, in July, 2016, a Social Work Conference for Professional Practice was convened at the Arthur Chung Conference Centre. This conference was the first of its kind in Guyana and was organised, in collaboration with the University of Guyana, to regulate social work practice in Guyana. This conference brought together social work educators and practitioners as well as

paraprofessionals in an effort to identify the best practices in social work and to craft standards, rules, procedures and policies that would guide social work practice in Guyana. In 2017, once these standards and best practices are formally tabled, the Ministry will embark on the issuing of a social work practice licence, which would not only regulate the service, but would bring prestige and respect to social work practice and enhance the quality of service offered to our citizens.

Plans are on stream to boost this social work sector, too, with the introduction of a Masters in Social Work Programme in the Department of Sociology at the University of Guyana. The Ministry, together with the University of Guyana, recognises the need for higher level skills to support the Government in its efforts to address the challenges of the social ills prevalent in our society.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 25 minutes.

Ms. Lawrence: Thank you Sir. The York University of Canada, in collaboration with the University of Guyana, is working to develop the programme that would respond effectively to the needs of the Guyanese people.

With regards to the Probation Department, we recognise that the Juvenile Justice Bill will be laid very soon in this House and with that will come the repeal of several pieces of legislation. We are seeking to put our house in order and so, assistance will be provided from CUSO International (Guyana) to meet the needs of the social work practitioners with the requisite tools by reviewing and evaluating our present status.

The Legal Aid Clinics in Georgetown and at Linden will benefit from substantial increases to their subsidies by \$18.6 million. Today, the Ministry is very proud that, in every region and sub-region, there is a representation by an office of the Ministry of Social Protection. We have just added Kato and Kwakwani.

Recognising that our officers must do a lot of travelling to the outlying regions, the budget has allocated \$7.5 million to assist with the purchase of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) for our officers to travel to the various villages.

We have heard a lot about old age pension. In the past 18 months, this Government, the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Government, have increased the old age pension by some 45%. I wish to state that the incentives that the Opposition implemented for the elderly to be exempted from the payment of electricity and water bills, lacked transparency and did not benefit all of the elderly consumers. One had to be a consumer of the Guyana Power and Light (GPL) Inc. In Region 1, in all three of the sub-regions, there is no GPL; in Region 8 there is no GPL; in Region 9 there is no GPL; in Region 7, in the Upper and Lower Mazaruni areas, there is no GPL; and I could go on and on. There is no GPL in several areas and, hence, the records will show that, in 2014 only, 10,000 persons benefitted from that electricity programme.

The Counter-Trafficking in Persons Unit has been very vigilant. In 2016, it received some 41 reports of suspected trafficking in persons, which resulted in 103 alleged victims being rescued, five persons being charged and placed before the courts. In January 2016, the Ministry signed an memorandum, of understanding (MOU) with Sisters of Mercy on their safe house for victims; and in July 2016, Guyana was removed from the tier two watch list of countries, after two consecutive years, to tier two, reflecting Guyana's concentrated efforts to combat this inhuman scourge.

2.17 p.m.

Sir, just let me wrap up. In 2017, the Unit will continue its vigilance, the Victims' Rights Handbook, the first of its kind, will be launched to explain the rights of victims as highlighted in the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act No. 2 of 2005. Further, there will be increased collaboration with the International Organization for Migration, Jamaica Trafficking in Persons and the Ministry of Education on the development and pilot testing of a Trafficking in Persons Module to be incorporated into the schools' social studies curricula at the primary and secondary levels. There will also be the creation and release of a local documentary on trafficking in persons, which is intended to eliminate myths on trafficking in persons through education.

We now have a Gender Unit. The Ministry is working with the European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) agencies to bring this policy into fruition by September, 2017. There is a lot going on in our foster care programme and in the institutions in which our children are housed. But I

would like to say that, during this year, we had a very painful incident where two children's young lives were stuffed out in a fire at the Drop-In Centre. We are now looking at rebuilding this centre, but doing it with modern facilities and ensuring that the safety procedures are all in place. Towards this, \$20 million had been provided in the budget to begin this project.

We have heard a lot and I am going to cut short and bring my presentation to an end. But as I conclude, there are substantial savings for women in the many items that are now zero-rated. Sir, these can be labelled as savings for women. I am convinced that with the collective efforts of all, we will bridge gender disparities and significantly reduce major social ills, such as youths in conflict with the law, violence and sexual offences, violations of the labour laws, trafficking in persons and youth unemployment.

In conclusion, I wish to agree with the People's Progressive Party (PPP), this one time, for stating that we have given with one hand and has taken back with the other. Yes. We have taken back. We have taken back the broken pothole roads and have given good roads to our people. We will take away the congestion on the East Bank and we will give a pedestrian overpass, we take away the congestion on the Demerara Harbour Bridge...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must wrap up.

Ms. Lawrence: Yes, Sir. I am wrapping up here. ... On the Demerara Harbour Bridge and give a new bridge. We will take away the tedious travel from Bartica and give a bridge at Kurupukari. We have taken away our children having to double up and triple up in mini-buses and have given them buses, boats and bicycles. We have taken away our children having to go hungry and have given them breakfasts and lunches.

The APNU/AFC Government will continue to take away that which is not good and give to all Guyanese the good life they all deserve to have.

Thank you. *[Applause]*

Dr. Persaud: Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to the Minister and it brought to mind a conversation I had, as recently as this morning, with a friend of mine who is a hairdresser and who is an entrepreneur of sorts. She complained bitterly to me because she said that for most of her working life she *threw box* and I am sure we all know what that is. She *threw box*, along with

her friends to educate her daughters because she wanted more for them than she had. She is now asking me how she will afford the private education that she wants to give to her daughters; how will she afford 14% on water and light, when her salon subsists on that. This is a woman and this is the plight of many women out there. She asked whether we were looking down a black hole? Do you know what came to my mind? This quote by Calvin Coolidge

“The collection of taxes which are not absolutely required which do not beyond reasonable doubt contribute to public welfare is only a species of legalised larceny.”

When we think of what VAT is doing to people; when we think that the collection of VAT is increased by as much as \$9.2 billion and the 14% that would now be added will increase that collection to more than \$10 billion. VAT is increasing taxpayers’ burdens and actual spending by more than 155% and the total expenditure by at least 7.5%. That is not me; it is the Ram and McRae’s Report.

When we talk of tax reform and progressive taxes, one needs to have a detailed list of tax measures that one is going to have, along with a policy statement. One wants long term, medium term and short term objectives; one also wants to have the plans for the year, the advantages and disadvantages and please heed the recommendations of the Tax Reform Committee. Was this done? Not at all.

In almost two years, three budgets and I am wondering about the sagacity of an early budget. While I commend the staff of the Ministry of Finance for their tireless work to make this happen and the staff of all the ministries across the country, I too, like they are, am wondering whether the Government was completely divorced of reality? What transgressions have the citizens of this country done to have all of this inflicted on them in one swoop. When the budget was presented to Parliament, I thought, why on earth would a budget like this be presented here when it is so anti–people, when people were already struggling with earlier tax measures, some 130 of them in the previous budgets? Now in just 30 pages, we have more tax measures than pages in the budget. Mr. Speaker, 57 tax measures.

A taxation type of budget will increase the collection for the coffers. But for whom? Is it to pay the top heavy Cabinet? Is it to pay the largest Cabinet in the region with 27 Ministers? Let me

just remind the House how much our Ministers cost this country - approximately \$333,859,680. This is just the increase over five years.

Minister Bulkan speaks of empowering the people. How? Definitely not through their pockets. I have a proposal for the Government, this being the season of giving and all. Do you want persons to have a good life? Why not take a cut in your increases of 50% and make it 10%, commensurate with what the public servants are getting. This would be a great gift for the New Year, 2017.

The protestations that people are taking home more money completely ignores that the cost of living will rise steeply in this country for all Guyanese. Marginal increases in one's disposable income cannot compensate for direct taxes nor those indirectly passed on to the consumers when prices will be hiked by those who contribute products and services because they want to retain profitability and keep their businesses open. Why is all of this happening? This is because we have, again, shifted all of those items on the zero-rated list to a tax exempt list, including food items and basic items. Is this empowerment? Is this the good life? The poor will get poorer. The growing middle class will constrict, contract and shrink.

That middle class is comprised of professionals, many of whom sit in this House as technical support to the Government. They have invested in their education over all these years. They will be severely hampered, especially if they are in the private sector also. What a vicious cycle has been launched on the people of Guyana. In one swoop, hope and optimism for the future, oneself and one's children, have been destroyed. Is it that the Government is totally and completely unaware that small businesses have closed or are on the verge of closing down? Where is the entrepreneurial spirit of which you speak? Was the thought entertained that the budget will effectively stifle the remaining entrepreneurial spirit in this country? Heavy tax burdens would impoverish many Guyanese and many anti-business measures will strangle the business community, the economy, and suffocate investment in growth of the economy.

More disheartening were the condescending things I heard emanating from Ministers of this Government. This was in response from civil society, from people out there who have to bear the measures in the budgets. Are people supposed to suffer silently? Really! The Hon. Member, Minister Trotman, chastised the private sector to stop complaining and whining and to get busy.

Just yesterday, the Hon. Member, Minister Valarie Patterson, made the statement that left me aghast. That, if any one goes to a private hospital, then they have lots of money to pay their taxes and that the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation (GPHC) is free and offers 'all' the services.

Let me just give the House one scenario. Dialysis - people depend on dialysis to live. There are about 120 patients at the GPHC. Aside from removing the subsidy, only 40 sessions of dialysis will now be allowed per patient. So what are you telling the other patients? Die? Are you telling them that they now have to pay VAT when they go to the private hospital to live? Is this care? Is this compassion? Do you not think that, whatever little money people have, they would not utilise it to keep their loved ones alive? I would have done that if it was my father, mother, grandmother or whomever it was. Why should people be penalised for that?

When I heard this, and I was not sure that I heard it, but when my Colleague, Mr. Nandlall, was in the Members of Parliament (MPs) Lounge, he verbalised what I had thought I heard, and it was this. The Hon. Minister said that the age of eligibility was now 18 years old to obtain a house lot, but it will take three years to get that house lot. How old will that person be? Twenty one years old? Now, he is/she is 21 years. But I will leave that for you to ponder on.

Then the budget also advises that fewer house lots would be given. Mr. Speaker, are you telling us that, in a country where there is so much land, you do not have land to give people house lots? Under PPP/C Government there was a boom in the housing sector and in construction. When I go to places, carpenters are asking me how they will live because nobody is building anything. Five thousand jobs were there for people. We talk of employment that was employment then. How could you tell someone to take a condo or an apartment instead? Do you know how a single mother feels when she walks into her own home with her children? I have my own home. It is a vast difference from what you want to hand to the people.

Then, when the Government speaks about these condos and apartments, what will the cost of those be and who will be the beneficiaries of those condos and apartments? People were so poor pre-1992 that they could not own their own homes. Today, lots of people own their own homes. The PPP gave a lot of people hope and it allowed them to dream and to have that dream of owning their own homes.

2.32 p.m.

Now, they are able to hand those homes down to their children. What are you telling people now? I will give you an apartment. What are you giving your children? What are you giving the future?

I have a little booklet on my desk, *Building the Nation*. What are you telling people? That you are building the D'Urban Park Development Project, when we are not even sure how much was spent on it. Then you are telling people that you have built D'Urban Park. I think I have lost the aesthetics that I use to enjoy on my drive to work. I used to like that view. What is that?

Still on Ministers and what was said in the budget. Our Minister of Business, in the year where the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), has fallen significantly to 2.6% from the period of 2010 to 2014, where it was almost four and over. This is what he said:

“The PPP has left us growth which we cannot sustain.”

God help the people of Guyana, if this is the stewardship that we can expect. We were told that VAT would be reduced from 16% to 14%, but what follows? A slew of items and services previously zero-rated that will now attract 14% VAT. My Colleague, Dr. Anthony, told the House all about that quite nicely. Tell parents, working two and three jobs or where there is only one breadwinner in the home, who maybe a single parent and who wants the best for their family, that they now have to pay VAT on healthcare, the doctor's fees, medication, education, educational supplies and we can go on and on.

This is the reality. Do you know what we are being told? Mr. Speaker, read between the lines. We are being told that we do not have the latitude to make choices and that our choices will now be confined by what has been imposed upon us. This is taking away from people who were exposed to a good quality of life and who were exposed to progressiveness and development. Now you are saying that those choices that we once had are now limited because of the burden that is being placed on our pockets.

A slew of young professionals comprise that growing middle class. Are you going to tell them that their choices are limited? Are you dictating which services they can access because now you have placed such an enormous burden on their pockets? Are you saying to the nation that there

should not be an objective to raise one's standard of living, lest you go over \$10,000 or \$1,500 because you want to buy new appliances for your home? Are you saying to not use them and to conserve? Are you saying that the concept of choice must be removed? Removal of allowances of all kinds in benefits could result in less income for the middle class, and significantly impact on management and professional staff's availability, and result in further brain drain. And we know what happened pre-1992. Have the economists in the Government been asleep or is this the era of imposition and dictatorship?

Yesterday, we were told by a Minister on that side of the House that we must manage and temper our expectations? The things they say are the things that will come back to haunt them.

Fourteen per cent taxes on water and light is not an easy burden on a single mother. You are telling young people to become entrepreneurs and to start their own businesses, what about the young group of men who want to start a car wash? What happens to them – water - lights? In fact, the same hairdresser told me that the price for a car to be washed will go up to \$1,500 in January.

Water and light are necessities for anyone. A little girl asked, after she was listening to the budget debates and heard the conversation between her parents, she said, "Mommy does it mean that we do not have to brush our teeth anymore? Do we have to take less baths?"

I want to share with you what one Ms. Nicole Cole, had to say from the Women and Gender Equality Commission:

"Women in Guyana who are poor and work for poor wages despite all their educational success how can the Minister of Finance sit there and tell me he cares when every time I look around women suffer? How does the Minister of Finance, expect women to survive and care for their children with 14% VAT imposed on water and light which will increase the cost of living?"

Then we are told of electric vehicles. Could someone tell me if the Government plans to buy electric vehicles? I am curious. Even so, the reliability of electricity from the Guyana Power and Light Incorporated (GPL)? Then there is talk of telecommunications, technology and communications, these are electricity driven sectors. How will the young entrepreneur, trained in

all of that, open his or her own business, when he or she is stopped by light bills? In fact, when we think about employment in this country, the unemployment figures remain staggeringly high. I have been exposed to a lot of young people who tell me, on a daily basis, I have 6, 10 and 15 Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) subjects, and I cannot get a job. These are bright people. I have also heard from young people who have gotten the Technical and Vocational Skills Certificates, but it seems that the training stops there. We do not think of the employment to come after. This is a real problem.

When we talk about drug rehabilitation, where is that in the budget? I have not seen that. That is missing from the budget. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit gavel.

We are told that a lot of the crimes are drug related. What happens to the youths in Regions 5, 6 and 10? Are there any programmes in place for these youths? I have been visiting these regions. **[Hon. Member from the Government: What were you doing there?]** I do nothing according to you people, but I do not need to say what I do. You are on trial, not me. One MP said, no more will Region 6 be more important than Region 9. In my mind, why should any region be more important? Each region has its peculiar set of problems and all must be paid equal attention to. Can I ask the Hon. Minister, Ms. Ally, whether this is social cohesion? How will social cohesion to the tune of \$90 million be realised, when it is consultant driven? We need to get out of our towers and talk to people.

Within the public sector, there exists professional and political persecution. Women are included in that group. The Minister said that she had the religious community at all of these meetings; intimidation and imposition they are afraid to speak. When we talk of social cohesion, safety and security, Minister have you not been speaking to your Colleague, the Minister of Public Security? The Minister of Public Security needs to not share his views on anything, unless he fixes crime in the country. People need to stop dying. Do not meddle in Hinduism and do not meddle in anything else, fix the crime. If report cards were given for performance, how would the Minister of Public Security score? In fact, we talk about the Ministry of Social Cohesion, it was not me, but it was Dr. David Hinds on 5th December, who wrote in a letter:

“Cohesion Ministry yet to prove its worth.”

Christopher Ram stated in his Ram & McRae Report:

“We are talking about transparency and accountability.”

Gifts given by donors unaccounted for bearing the name of the highest in the land. Tell me whether that programme could be sustained? How many beneficiaries? I heard 13 buses. What happens to the rest of the children around the country? Are half of the buses working? Will all the children benefit? *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

The draft of the Social Cohesion Strategy Plan needs to be given to all of us in sufficient time, to be studied and read for validation. Cohesion is premised on trust. Further, I say not. I must give Minister, Ms. Ally a lot of credit. She did say “the good life beckons”. She did not say it is here; we are still waiting. With a penchant for renaming, I would suggest social collision or social confusion.

If the Ministers remain in their towers, how will they know of the things of which I speak? With this budget the poor will get poorer, the middle class will contract and, yes, cost of living, the ceiling or beyond. Every strata of the population has been hit by taxation maladies and the repercussions in the future can only be disastrous.

The Ministry of Social Protection received 28% of this year’s budget. I beg the Minister of Finance to please give more to the Ministry of Social Protection. I will never say that the Minister is not doing any work. I know she wants to do work, but how could she do anything that she is supposed to do when the Ministry is starved of human resources and financial resources; when she is unable to deliver on all the strategies, plans and things which she promised in two previous budgets.

For example, like the Early Childhood Development Programme. Where is that? How is the Child Protection Agency going to function, when one worker or officer works in Regions 4, 5 and 6 and cannot even visit a shelter? I know, because I go to a shelter in Berbice every week. They cannot even visit a shelter once a month. The Child Protection Agency is a very important agency. Let me give this House on scenario, three children were removed from a shelter all

below the age of 10. They were found begging on the streets for three days without food and then brought back to the shelter. How is the Child Protection Agency functioning?

More children are committing crimes. Is that not true Minister of Public Security? Many children have lost their childhood innocence due to childhood poverty and hardship. Children are in the news everyday committing some form of crime. Locking them up is not the answer. What is in the budget for the children? Where are the rehabilitation programmes? We need trained staff to address these traumatic scars which have been inflicted on children. What measures have been put in place for these little ones who have been traumatised already? Others are suffering differently.

Mr. Speaker, let us talk about women. Under the PPP/C, what we saw was a steep increase in the number of females who graduated top of their class at the University of Guyana. What is happening to those young women now looking for jobs? We can talk of the Guyana Women's Leadership Institute. Where are the numbers of women trained this year? There is none. How many programmes were done? Two or three on domestic violence and on leadership involving women. That is something I believe, passionately, in and I feel that more attention needs to be paid on this. Thank you, Minister for agreeing with me.

The strategic plans and policies were there. Why are they now being placed in this budget as if they are new ones? How can women across this country access employment? Where are the measures in place for them to market their products and skills? We cannot only train. I keep harping on this point because this is important. We want to make women financially independent because at the end of the day, they can only get out of the cycle of violence and abuse if they are financially independent. We speak of empowering women and we talked about it under the PPP/C. Today, there are a number of NGO organisations headed by powerful women. We cannot lose the momentum that was derived of 20 years under the PPP/C. We need to keep it going for women.

What have the elderly gotten? I understand that the geriatric area will be fixed up; that is good. I know lots of people on that side of the House will be very happy about that. What is in the 2017 Budget for the elderly? Taxation. No respite from the 14% VAT on their water and tax. What about property arrears? A widow that is left a house by her husband, she is not working and is

probably not familiar with taxes, property tax or any of these things, but she, along with the rest of the population, will be charged from \$50,000 to \$200,000 to \$1 million to jail, if they are found to be part of tax impropriety. The poor woman does not know, but elderly or not, she will be taxed too.

2.47 p.m.

I must say that we were told so many times about the modernisation of the pension system, but all I see are very long lines when people are going to collect their pension. They are old; they are senior citizens; they are tired and some of them are sick. What has been done for these people?

What I am very happy to report...I think this is a season of Christmas because we have been getting fairy lights on a reliable basis, Christmas compliments of Guyana Power and Light Inc. (GPL). Low voltage, damaged appliances, long lines, what are we talking about?

Let us talk about pension. Eight hundred dollars on pension compare that with the Bill that is coming up in which a prominent figure will be getting \$20 million per year or \$1.4 million per month plus benefits. Then you are telling the pensioners that you cannot give them the \$20,000 which... [*Interruption from the Government Members.*] I am hoping I am getting all of this time back because I have been interrupted. This is something that is shameful. This is real life.

Mr. Damon told me that we will be getting a sour new year. I am seeing it.

Many retired public servants toiled for more than 30 years in the public service and are receiving a pension for less than \$100,000 monthly, tell them about the Bill that is coming up also tell them about your allotment.

When we talk about the differently abled, we are talking about what is being done for them. I am glad to hear that. In 2014 under the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) administration the Guyana Institute of the Blind received the Millennium Development Goal Award for the advancement of education, in which the institute got an 85% pass rate for students from the institute. That was something that was tangibly done. Under the One Laptop per Family, the visibly impaired got a perfectly fitted laptop for their abilities. What else is in store for the differently abled? I did not hear much. I want to hear more.

A person messaged Mr. Gill, he said to say this, in the National Assembly. He is permanently disabled and he is given \$7,500; he spends \$12,000; he is incontinent, and he has to buy pampers. How am I going to live? That is his question. These are real people, and real situations. Life in Guyana - which “good life”? There draconian measures - garnishment, now people can go into your bank account and take what little you have. What are we telling people? There is no promised salary increases for this year.

APNU/AFC promised during the 2015 Election that there would be a reduction in VAT income and corporate taxes. It actually increased it by expanding the list of ‘VAT-able’ items to include water, electricity, medicines, vitamins, educational items such as books computers internet and dozens of items that were previously exempted and zero-rated. A poor family, who might have spent \$25,000 a month on VAT items in 2016, would have actually paid a total of \$48,000 in VAT for the year at a 16%. In 2017, it will skyrocket from \$70,000 to \$100,000. What “good life”?

When I think of this budget I think it is a travesty. If this Government is serious, withdraw this budget. If this Government is serious, involve the people in the decisions that it has made. Do not give them this as a Christmas present gone wrong so they do not know what their 2017 will bring... uncertainty for sure. Whether we talk to farmers, doctors, lawyers, teacher, and homemakers, people all across the country they are complaining. Do not be sitting on your ears, listen to people.

In fact, when those who protest loudly examine themselves closely then they will not say things as loudly as they say them in this House. They know themselves. I want to tell people we live in a country that we do not need to take things silently. We must not be afraid. No matter if you are a farmer, a teacher or a homemaker, stand and speak out for your rights. It is to stand and say that you do not want this budget. Stand wherever you are, and do not live in fear. Do not be paralysed by anything that is thrown your way. This country does not like this budget. Stop telling people, or maybe this is what you want to tell people, we have what it takes to take what you have.

I rest my case. [*Applause*]

Minister of Public Telecommunications [Ms. Hughes]: Mr. Speaker, Members of this honourable House, I rise in support of Budget 2017 and to recognise its truly transformational approach to the growth and development of Guyana. The last speaker and several others over these last two days of discussions, in this Honourable House, have been very strong on the shouts of taxes, taxes, and more taxes. I note the deliberate exclusion by all on the other side in mentioning even one, just maybe one, of the exciting transformational projects in this budget and that in itself is a testimony to the level of this debate. To the Hon. Member on the other side, do not worry. I will tell you. To the last speaker, yes, you encourage us to stand up and yes the people of Guyana stood up last May 15th, 2015.

When last did we hear of concrete plans to erect a permanent fixed bridge over the Essequibo River in a budget speech, to de-silt the Demerara River which our shipping companies have been crying out to be done for decades? Finally, starting the road from Linden to Mabaruma, the first phase of the road to Lethem that truly will become the gateway to the hinterland, that will provide economic and trading opportunities that lies unrealised between us and our neighbours to the south; or the innovative project to develop the boardwalk at the seawall that will take the experiences of many of our visitors to the city of Georgetown by any tourist, returning Guyanese, or resident to another level. Yes. When last did we see these things begin to happen? What is strange is that none of the speaker on the other side could mention this.

We, Guyanese, have been downing in the sea of potential since we were born hoping that it would be realised in our lifetime, but look at delivery as the yardstick, Mr. Speaker, and you will see that we have been comatose for the last two decades, but things have begun to change since May 2015. Technology has geared us to moving and thinking at a pace fast. We all want a response to an email in a few minutes and not a few days, as it took many years ago. As a society, we understandably want Guyana to change today. We want it to change now. We want to see the promises realised now. We are not waiting 18 months and they will not be delivered as yet, but we forget how broken we had become below the surface.

We stripped away the independence of some of our key institutions; some we know decided that paying a bribe could be become standing operating procedures, and paying taxes. Why would I do that? These are the things that we do not like to speak about. It will take time to clean up the mess. It cannot be done in a year but look around you and see the positive signs. We have heard,

over the last two days, about water to communities that they never had before, roads where they never been there before, lights along the roads that had never been there before and flooding stopped in areas, as it had never happened before.

Today many parts of the world are in shambles. Economies under strain in Trinidad, Suriname, Brazil and Venezuela. I want to tell you that the sun is shining on Guyana right now, sending bright rays full of opportunities. We just have to see them, take advantage of them and not succumb to the petty politics of the other side. The screaming and shouting of gloom and doom will not disappear or destroy hope and never willing to come to the table and put Guyana first is something that we feel they need to change.

Today I can stand tall, excited at the promise of a good life for all and commend my colleague the Hon. Minister of Finance for thinking long-term, planning ahead, and for a truly transformational budget. Today's dynamic and competitive global economy demands an ambitious national commitment to technology, innovation and entrepreneurship. As I hope, we are all aware, technology and the internet are transforming economies worldwide.

In January 2016, the Ministry of Public Telecommunications was gazetted and conceived for one fundamental purpose. That was to develop the enabling environment at the policy and infrastructure level, to ensure that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are fully utilised for national development. The overall vision of the Ministry of Public Telecommunications therefore is the creation of a knowledge based society, which is globally competitive and productive. It is one that will give rise to the strategic placement of Guyana as a premier ICT hub in the region.

For too long in Guyana we have done things the same old traditional way, a rigid economy which for decades depended on two major agricultural products, mainly sugar and rice. Many countries started the process of diversification decades ago we did not and have been left out exchanging political rhetoric for sound economic principles over the years. Today, we recognise that we have developed but have we transformed this country and its people. We have not. I am here to tell this honourable House and my fellow Guyanese that this Government can and will transform this dear land of Guyana through the creation of a digital economy and the use of ICT.

I am pleased to inform you that we are now on the threshold of a transformation in public services and the way we provide these services to the citizens of Guyana. This we will do by providing online digital services to Guyanese consumers at key Ministries, at public sector agencies, in the areas of passport and driver's licence applications, e-commerce, telemedicine, online education and training and by encouraging our citizens, especially our young people, to take advantage of the increased entrepreneurial activities that the world wide web offers.

We have corrected several of the ills of ICT mismanagement and functional incompetence exhibited and perpetuated for many years by the previous administration, such as a fibre-optic network that did not work and we were still paying a loan on that, and the damaged cable to the hinterland that squandered billions of taxpayers' money. We are putting all this behind us, and starting from scratch so to speak and are now ready to realise real transformation in the public sector through ICT interventions.

The e-Government unit is the engine of our Ministry. The Government has reviewed, repaired and consolidated the e-Government network constituting the fibre-optic backbone around Georgetown with a long-term evolution (LTE) network spanning from Charity to Springlands. This network was first established in 2012 but only operationalised last year by this administration and is now the basis for connecting Government Ministries and agencies. To this end, this Government has connected and provided secure and controlled internet access to over 140 locations.

3.02 p.m.

With this level of interconnectivity we have equipped 86 secondary schools, three Regional Education Officers, three Cyril Potter College of Education locations, two University of Guyana (UG) locations and six technical and vocational institutions with reliable high speed internet access to educational content in their computer laboratories as well as advanced the effectiveness of law enforcement

Further, several poor, remote and hinterland communities are now digitally connected through the installation of 14 ICT hubs in Regions 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Hubs have been established in Good Hope, Charity, Dartmouth, Bagotville, Buxton, Better Hope, Lusignan, Sophia, Port Mourant, Liverpool and many more. Through this intervention over 66,000 would now have access

communities ICT hubs. We are conducting assessments to determine, through an evidence-based approach, the real and emerging needs of these communities and building the capacity to meet them.

Our President, the honourable David Granger, re-conceptualised and developed a modern project in the form of the One Laptop per Teacher programme. Today, over 8,202 laptops have been distributed to teachers across all ten regions of Guyana. **[Bishop Edghill:** They have to

pay for it.] They do not have to pay for it. The goal of this approach is to improve digital access and learning and is complemented by the Government's initiative to install high speed internet access in all secondary schools. Teachers all over Guyana now own their laptops that have been pre-loaded with marking schemes, e-textbooks with links to research materials, teaching aids for mathematics and science and much more. When my colleague on the other side, Member of Parliament Africo Selman, is still speaking of test papers and textbooks, we are preparing to move Guyana way past that in the future.

To the Hon. Member Damon, this is the era of science and technology as you said and it is our Government, this APNU/AFC Government that will take you there. We have overcome a major hurdle in terms of salvaging the e-Government network. Most notably, the fibre-optic link to Lethem was decommissioned at a loss of over \$1.3 billion of taxpayer's dollars, which must be placed squarely at the past People's Progressive Party (PPP) Government as possibilities of repairs proved impossible and fund for this purpose allocated in our Budget 2016 went unused. Nonetheless, we have just begun to scratch the surface in Guyana, in the context of our agenda to operationalise Guyana's e-Government framework and strategy.

As the Ministry began to build out its operational capacity during 2016, we recognised that a major priority was the creation of an open, liberalised telecommunication sector. To this end, in July 2016, we laid before the National Assembly and passed, the 2016 Telecommunication and amended the Public Utility Commission Bills. The passing of these Bills has established the framework and conditions under which our telecommunications sector will be liberalised. As part of this framework, we also completed eight sections of regulation as required by the new legislation and we have sent them out for public consultation. To come, very so, are electronic transactions, data protection and other relevant legislations.

With the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector, new frontiers of innovation and entrepreneurship would be opened up, higher levels of academic achievement would be realised by enabling a level playing field for all Guyanese children and students pursuing academic and vocational personal and professional development. New business models could now become the reality in Guyana, where our citizens could join their counterparts around the world in developing new entrepreneurial and e-commerce opportunities, all from the conveniences of their homes.

The implementation plan for 2017 is as follows: \$1.58 billion is budgeted for investment in e-Government initiatives of that, an estimated \$114 million is allocated for the provision of public internet access at over 600 Government buildings across the country. These public internet access points would increase the opportunities and channels through which thousands of individuals would access online resources as part of the Government's aim to reduce the digital divide and increase digital interaction and association with Government. The key to this initiative is the transformation of strategically located post offices into comfortable, refurbished ICT hubs, which will provide citizens, and especially our pensioners, an opportunity to visit, these hubs and to also access the internet free of charge related government services. All post offices within reach of the e-Government network, especially those located in digitally previously excluded communities such as Lethem, Linden, Bartica, Mahdia, Mabaruma and Port Kaituma would become community ICT hubs.

An estimated \$90 million will be used to provide ICT access for the hinterland as well as poor and remote communities throughout Guyana. We intended to expand the reach of Government services to the hinterland. Community ICT hubs would be established in Annai, Lethem, Waramadong, Paramakatoi, Aishalton, St. Cuthbert's Mission, Bartica, Mabaruma, Port Kaituma, and Kwakwani and many other areas, and at least 24 more pilot communities across Guyana.

The aim of this initiative is to improve the livelihoods of persons in these regions and to reduce the digital divide that exists between the coast and hinterland, the haves and the have-nots and urban and rural areas through access to educational resources. It also allows us to leverage local indigenous knowledge in the development of Guyana's natural raw materials. A further 30 pilot

community ICT hubs, serving an estimated 60,000 residents, will be established in Regions 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

In the next stage of expansion, communities in Regions 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10 will also be considered as well as other potential communities in the other regions. In rural, poor and remote communities, these community centres will be run by local people and will serve all members of the community in providing internet access, training and computers to equip these centres. These hubs would improve residents' access to information and services. An estimated \$30 million has been allocated for these projects and in the wider project is expected to come on stream in the latter part of 2017.

All of this will be accommodated through the e-Government network, therefore, maintaining and expanding the reach of this network is of critical importance. Approximately \$435 million is allocated for this activity. This includes approximately \$70 million for the expansion of the network into unserved areas, including Timehri, Amelia's Ward, Diamond, and further afield, \$50 million for ensuring the cyber security of Government's network and \$275 million for the maintenance and technical support services that are going to be required. A further \$674 million has been allocated towards the provision of connectivity and internet access to the over 140 Government locations already connected to the e-Government network.

Finally, the Government has also recognised there is a need to boost our ICT human capacity. Approximately \$160 million will be spent on the delivery of specialised ICT training, in collaboration with the Government of India, through the Centre of Excellence in Information Technology. I want to say at this point that the training, which will be provided at that centre, is absolutely free. The fully renovated, refurnished and adequately equipped centre will be opened in 2017 and will focus on the training of trainers' programmes and training in a range of basic and advance ICT areas of specialisation.

Just a month ago this Ministry held its first *hackathon*, which showed us that there is a growing, energised ICT community of vibrant young people, right here in Guyana, who are doing really amazing things. Our system has locked them out for a long time and they are frustrated. In just 48 hours the best of these young minds came up with applications to deal with several of the challenges we have been facing forever as a nation. We are all worried about crime, but when we

will stop, think and recognise that anyone that walks around with millions of dollars in cash in their hand is a sitting duck. Well, our own indigenous solutions are nearly here as this *hackathon* produce an electronic payment system that would allow people to no longer carry so much cash.

Utilising the systems of mobile money and the technology of an electronic payment system, the time has come when we would be able to pay our pensioners all over Guyana much faster and with an electronic payment system. It would also cause the Ministries of Public Telecommunications and Social Protection a lot less money to use this form of payment. I have attempted to show you that this *hackathon*, this opportunity to develop local ICT skills, has displayed the talent that we have right here.

Another application that was created that we intend to use in a very practical way in 2017 is an application that connects farms with real time information and data on existing local, regional and international markets, so that farmers could produce for an existing market. This is data again, that could on a farmer's phone in real time. It does not stop there. The highlight of our transformational strategy is the implementation in a phased way of the safe city, smart city programme, one that we are calling smart Guyana. Imagine an ICT driven programme, which integrates all sectors and services into one cohesive whole. A safe city model that is already being implemented by the Ministry of Public Security that uses technology, cameras on street corners, a command centre monitored 24/7 and new communication tools that will ensure that if you do the crime you will do the time.

No matter which side of the political fence you may be most should accept that never before have we solved so many crimes in such a small space of time in Guyana. Remember those days of the past administration when the unsolved file was full. The smart city concept builds on our efforts to bring to date an update technology to Government services, teaching, take a doctor through Skype or other form of technology, a remote villages, so that consultation with a health worker and a patient or maybe a doctor anywhere in Georgetown could take place. I am sure that you get the picture. Yes. Can we do it? As you know, yes, we can.

3.17 p.m.

With the development of our Smart Guyana Project this Government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) already and the gathering of information has begun. We will expand

the standing LTE and fibre-optic networks into inland areas, into new towns such as Bartica, Mahdia, into Kwakwani and the Berbice riverain communities as well as the areas that Phase I missed, such as Bush Lot and Bath Settlement in Berbice or the Pomeroon River in Essequibo. I want to mention here that for the last six months, our technicians at the e-Government unit have been going out and doing three things simultaneously. They are installing internet ready equipment in community centres, they are training community leaders and children in the use of the internet and they are installing more receivers to connect computer laboratories in secondary schools. Up to November, they had connected over 120 schools on the coastland and in the hinterland.

The implementation plan for 2017 is as follows: A sum of \$1.58 billion is budgeted for investment in e-Government initiatives. Of that, an estimated \$114 million is as I mentioned, allocated for the provision of public internet access at over 600 Government buildings. Very key to this initiative are the post offices – especially those located in communities that are waiting to be connected such as Lethem, Linden, Bartica, Mahdia and Mabaruma. In rural poor and remote communities, which will be run independently by local residents, improving residents' access to information and services is our priority.

Before I close, I would like to speak a bit more about our post offices. There are 64 post offices throughout the length and breadth of Guyana. While methods of communication have changed, this particular national resource has not undergone specific change and investment over the last decade. I wish to inform that the Government intends to recalibrate the post offices to ensure a mandate that is more efficient with services to be provided in the twenty-first century. These include internet ready services, bill payments, same day money transfer and, of course, as I mentioned, the electronic payment plan. The National Frequency Management Unit (NFMU) continues to operate as a regulator responsible for spectrum management and number administration. The NFMU Budget 2017 projections are meant to better position it to serve the public and to facilitate government and private sector's rollout of the telecoms ICT network services. With the liberalisation of the telecoms ICT sector, it is expected that more operators will enter the marketplace and this will lead to demand for additional spectrum.

The new liberalised technological environment also creates a new role for the expanded Public Utilities Commission (PUC). With respect to communications, rates are to be determined by supply and demand in an open competitive market economy and the commission will have oversight to ensure that these rates are fair and reasonable.

The new Guyana will be a country in which ICT skills will be the foundation of our education, preparing our young people to work in new areas of employment, such as digitisation of a lot of our Government records and what will be required within the private sector. Already Guyana is making a name for itself in the emergence of call centres. There are more coming on the table and for those expanding such as Qualfon and Teleperformance, we thank you for your commitment to Guyana. Let me allay your fears regarding any misinformation that may be pedalled to you. As an export lead company, the 14% duty on data will not apply to this sector.

All these measures cost money, but let us be honest and give *Jack his jacket*. A hue and cry has been made over the 14% tax on water, but the fact is as my colleague Minister Bulkan has explained to you, you would have to use over 12 400-gallon black tanks of water, as a citizen, every month to get to that level. The 14% tax on electricity, we heard of Guyana Power and Lights Inc. (GPL) 108,825 customers, of these, 80.09% pay less than the \$10,000 amount. Citizens out there, who are listening, please remember that.

The VAT on data has also received harsh criticism, but I want to remind us all that it is a necessary revenue stream, given the range of transformational measures that I have shared. In the long run with the new liberalised environment, which will spur competition, I expect to see our high cost of internet access, when compared to other parts of the Caribbean, reduced in time and that will benefit us all. Free internet access at ICT hubs will nonetheless provide valuable support to many. Budgets are difficult, even in our home. We do not have enough and do not always get all that we want. Therefore, I want to say that budget is transformational and we are laying a foundation.

In closing, I want to say that in Guyana our minimum wage has moved from \$39,540 to \$55,000 in eight months with workers taking home \$15,460 more. This has never been done in recent years by the PPP. It was not the regular 5% increase in salaries the PPP offered for over 14 years, but guess what? It is a 36.4% increase over the last 18 months. The former Minister of Education

shouts about the stoppage of the \$10,000 grant but this coalition made a one-off payment of \$50,000. Budget 2017 gives an increase in old age pension to \$19,000, a reduction in corporation tax, a reduction in value added tax and more. I look forward to the future with anticipation especially within my sector. I know that there will be transformational changes.

I therefore recommend the passage of this budget to the House and I say let the transformation begin. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: The next speaker is the Hon. Jennifer Westford. You have the floor.

Dr. Westford: Mr. Speaker, I would prefer to be addressed as the Hon. Dr. Jennifer Westford. I spent years studying for that degree and I think I deserve to be addressed the same.

I rise to make my contribution to the Budget 2017 debate. I would like to congratulate the Hon. Minister of Finance for his third hardship producing budget presentation, but most importantly I would like to once again congratulate the hard-working public servants who I know worked tirelessly to make possible this early budget presentation. I must emphasise that the public servants of this country are hard-working and have continuously demonstrated over the years their dedication to the growth and development of this country. These patriotic workers have been made to bear the brunt of this APNU/AFC coalition's manoeuvrings since their assumption to office. We witnessed the unceremonious dismissal of senior experienced public officers from their placement and their replacement with unsuitable political plants.

The contract/gratuity employed professionals had a guerrilla-type warfare tactic played on them when they were given a take it or leave ultimatum of forceful incorporation into the pensionable establishment. Notwithstanding the fact that the current standard operating procedures manual of the public service, known as the Public Service Rules, allow the worker the right to choose between pensionable or contract/gratuity employment as it is mentioned in section A, paragraph A8, of the said Public Service Rules. I envisage that these rules may shortly be abolished or amended.

It is against this backdrop that we are being saddled with the APNU coalition's budget captioned *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*. What was certainly delivered in this budget were taxes, taxes and more taxes. From the feedback of the

citizens, there was a common denominator running through the expressions that were received, and it was one that exhibited great concern, fears and in many cases outright alarm over the measures announced in budget. Our citizens are worst off today than they were five years ago. Our once hopeful, proud and enthusiastic workforce has been humiliatingly reduced to being the working poor. The Minister of Finance boasted about the increase to old age pensions and salaries to public employees, but how callous, how uncaring, how irresponsible and indeed how reckless of the APNU coalition to give to the poor in one hand and to take it back with the other, when the said poor, the said public servants, go to the shop. What a high-handed manner. They came like a thief in the night and snatched it back before the public officers could even be aware of it. One only has to go to the market or the grocery shop to realise that the increases they got amounted to really nothing.

All of my colleagues on this side of the House have bemoaned the implementation of the 14% VAT on essential items and services that will indeed deny the citizens of this country the “good life” mooted by the coalition, or, for that matter, any sort of decent livelihood. The smallest child in this country can recite the slogan “Water is Life, save it”. How then could any caring government impose a 14% tax on this vital commodity which is synonymous with life?

The Hon. Minister of Finance explanation, for the 14% tax, was that it is meant as a conservation measure. Indeed, the records may reflect less water usage by consumers but this will not result because of willing conservation. It will be because the water supply will be disconnected from a host of poor consumers who will be unable to pay their water bills. It is a fact that the poorer members of our society have the largest family nuclei and obviously will utilise more water.

Just try to visualise a home with six small children, three of whom are still wearing diapers. Will the mother now have to limit how many times she changes their soiled nappies in order to limit the use of water? I think not, or I hope not. Another important service, which is vital for a good livelihood for our nation, is electricity. This service will also attract the 14% tax.

3.32 p.m.

The impact of this tax will not only affect household consumption; it will be detrimental also to the manufacturing and business community. The movement of items from the zero-rated list to the exempt list and also the 14% VAT imposition on other essential items and services spell

disaster to our people. The first blow is that people will now have to pay higher prices for goods and services. Worst of all, food prices will continue to skyrocket which will not deliver the good life but deny citizens of the good life. With this impending food crisis, we may well see the return of childhood malnutrition, a disease which was prevalent in the 1980s, if this situation is not seriously addressed.

The average Guyanese who had hopes of owning their homes will not be able to do so as building materials and labour costs will continue to soar beyond their reach.

The Hon. Amna Ally spoke of colossal achievements and mentioned things such as the establishment of the Public Procurement Commission (PPC). But most importantly for her was the formation of the Ministry of Social Cohesion. Sadly, these colossal achievements did not mention the health sector. Our health sector is in a state of mismanagement and is bordering on a crisis situation. The crisis in the health sector and the accounts of the plight of the sick and suffering are numerous, well documented and undeniable. Some public hospitals are overcrowded, understaffed, infested with rodents, flies and mosquitoes and lacking basic equipment, drugs and medical supplies, despite huge Government expenditure injection and glib assurances of better services from the Ministers.

There are long waiting lists for surgeries. Imagine the plight of the young men who suffer from hernia, known as *goadie* in our Guyanese parlance, who require corrective surgeries, ending up with permanent bowed legs because they have to bend their knees while walking to accommodate their dangling discomfort while they await their turn on those long waiting lists. *[Laughter]* This is no laughing matter; it is a reality and we should be in sympathy with those men. Patients are made to wait for hours before being treated at the public institutions.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Valerie Patterson, regaled the Hon. Dr. Frank Anthony by telling him that there are free public hospitals and that persons will not have to go the private sector. This is the situation: when one goes to the public hospitals, he or she has to sit there for long hours and wait. If persons can afforded it - sometimes they really cannot - they opt for going to the private hospitals. I want to ask my dear Friend, the Hon. Minister of Social Cohesion, is this the good life that our people are...

It is a known fact that the private sector is the engine of growth of any economy. Yet, there are no positive plans to benefit this sector in this Budget. Our business sector has expressed a lack of confidence in the local business environment and is forced to compete on an uneven playing field. Government has failed to create an enabling environment for business development. Worse, it has eroded whatever business confidence had existed before. It is the view of several members of the private sector that the Government lacks the will, commitment or desire to formulate business-friendly policies, except for the benefit of their friends and financiers.

It is not enough that our people are worried about their ability to eke out a living or just to have a glimpse of the elusive good life. Our dear citizens continue to live in fear of being robbed, of being raped, or of even being murdered, as crimes continue unabated in spite of Government's A to Z crime plans.

Our private sector is reeling under the assault of criminals. Businesses are spending hundreds of millions of dollars with respect to providing personal security. This has become an added cost that will be passed down the line to the vulnerable consumer; once again, this is another burden on the poor. All of this is due to the failure of Government to deal with crime in a very comprehensive manner.

I, along with my Colleagues on this side of the House, have itemised the problems facing the standard of living of our citizens and the quality and substance of their lives. A responsible and caring Government would have addressed these priority issues in its Budget. This is wishful thinking on my part. Even the best spin doctors in the world will have difficulty in finding a method to the madness of this Budget.

It is useless suggesting recommendations to this Government. We all know that they know not what to do, they know not what they do, nor do they intend to listen. As the saying goes, *stick bruk in deh ears* so they cannot hear the cries of the people who they love to say voted for them, the cries of the fathers, the cries of the anxious mothers and the children of our nation. I warn them in the words of Proverbs 21:13:

“If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”

I say to my Friends on the other side, “Beware.”

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 15 minutes.

Dr. Westford: I, therefore, call on all right-thinking citizens of this country to reject this apology of a budget that is being forced upon us. I call on the Government to withdraw this Budget. The reality is that this Government has become irrevocably brutal, reckless and irresponsible, and is guilty of perpetrating the most heinous, abusive and offensive assaults on the lives and livelihoods of our citizens. This Budget must be withdrawn and reworked.

As I end, I would like to quote Proverbs 22:22-23:

“Rob not the poor because he is poor, neither oppress the afflicted at the gate for the Lord will plead their cause and spoil the soul of those that spoiled them.”

I thank you. [*Applause*]

Minister within the Ministry of Public Infrastructure [Ms. Ferguson]: Mr. Speaker, I rise to give my support and contributions to Budget 2017. Permit me to commence my Budget presentation by offering gratitude and praise to Almighty God, the Creator of the universe and the shield of this great nation of ours. The Psalmist declared in Psalms 66:7:

“He rules by his might forever; his eyes keep watch on the nations.”

I would like to commend the Hon. Member, Minister of Finance, and his team for putting together a well-articulated, comprehensive, balanced, fair and, above all, peoples’ Budget for 2017, under the theme, *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*. I commend, also, my other ministerial Colleagues and their staff within the various agencies who gave their unwavering commitment to the realisation of Budget 2017, a Budget that will take Guyana forward with structural, economic adjustments and diversification, pursuing a green economy for development, delivering a better quality of life and ensuring a good life for all Guyanese. To God be the glory; great things he will do in this nation.

With the time constraint, my presentation will focus on Transport and Harbours Department, Demerara Harbour Bridge, Hinterland Electrification Company Inc. and the Guyana Civil Aviation Authority (GCAA). My Colleague Minister, the Hon. David Patterson, will address the other agencies under the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Infrastructure.

Our Government is not a Government of few friends and cronies. We are a Government for all Guyana, regardless of your political persuasion; Budget 2017 does not discriminate along political lines. The days for political budgets are long over! Guyana is robbed when we put personal ideals above nation building. I am a proud Guyanese to be on this side of the House and to be speaking in favour of this Budget which caters for the working class, the true backbone of this nation.

I have travelled to quite a few regions in Guyana and I have met many Guyanese of different backgrounds, political persuasions and economic statuses, and they all want the same thing. What is that? It is an improvement in their quality of life.

3.47 p.m.

Budget 2017 is constructed to deliver a better quality of life for the citizens of Guyana. Hon. Members of the Opposition, do not give Guyanese a double whammy by denying them betterment. Now that you are out of power, Budget 2017 will give you an opportunity to change the fortunes of many Guyanese that contended with your 16% VAT.

Guyana is a blessed nation by God. The Almighty God has endowed natural resources to Guyana that many countries in the world dream to have. Therefore, the time has come for us to manage and exploit our resources in the most beneficial manner for this and future generations. This brings into sharp focus the issue of diversification of the economy. Times have changed; contexts and conditions, global demands, tastes and preferences have changed. Sectors have evolved, and traditional primary sectors must also evolve to the changing dynamics of the globalised environment in which we all exist. We must not *bury our heads in the sand* and ignore the global conditions which dictate local livelihoods. It is time to make Guyana resilient to external shocks which we cannot control, but we must be smart enough to set up a defence mechanism, whether in the form of investments, manufacturing, fortifying our borders or promoting green development. We must act now, and swiftly. Let us not get caught like the five foolish virgins who turned up at the party waiting for the bridegroom without enough oil.

Prior to the introduction of VAT on the 1st January, 2007, the Private Sector Commission, the Red Thread and other civil society groups spoke out against the PPP/C's 16% VAT and the burden it will place on consumers. The then President and now Leader of the Opposition, Mr.

Jagdeo, had given assurances, like he always does to the Guyanese people, that VAT should not result in a higher cost of living. This is according to a *Kaieteur News* article of the 9th July, 2008.

After the introduction of VAT in 2007, the Bank of Guyana reported average inflation rate of 12.2% and 14% inflation rate in urban Georgetown, and a whopping 28.8% increase in current revenue as a result of VAT.

Ram and McRae, in 2008, dubbed their VAT review, "*The VAT Runneth Over*".

The colourful language used by the Hon. Members of the Opposition during this debate to describe Budget 2017, such as "pressuration", "sufferation", "murderation", "upset", "dark days", "lack of vision", "no new initiatives", "helplessness", "impoverishment", "shocking", "distressing"... I can go on and on. This can only come from Members of the PPP who are experienced in putting Guyanese through these very colourful descriptions. The real pressuration, sufferation and murderation came from the PPP/C Members, and it is their imposition of the 16% VAT on Guyanese that our Government now seeks to reduce. The real crafters of oppression, suppression, depression and frustration on Guyanese are the Hon. Members of the Opposition. If 16% VAT was then promised not to increase cost of living, how can 14% VAT lead to all the destruction that the Opposition posited during this debate? Distractors I call them.

The PPP wants to force this Government and Guyanese to keep doing the same old things it did and expect different results. But that is the definition of insanity. Albert Einstein said:

"The definition of insanity is doing something over and over again and expecting a different result."

The PPP's mantras are: keep the VAT at 16%; keep old aged pension low; keep public servants wages low; keep income tax threshold low; keep pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) at 30%, and you will get growth and development. That is the PPP's model for a better life for Guyanese.

Today, I say and we say, on this side of the House, stop the suppression - no more; Guyanese deserve more spending power to enhance the quality of their lives for their betterment.

Diversification of economies is the long-term solution for sustainability. That is basic economics and rational thinking. If one is interested enough, just take a look at the oil rich stars of the Middle East – Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and others - and see what they are doing. These oil dependent nations have recognised the importance of diversification and are now focusing on developing their aviation, tourism and financial service sectors to ensure the sustainability of their economies and people. Might I also add that with arid land and little vegetation, they are also now planning on greening their economy for development.

Infrastructure, whether in the form of sea defences, bridges, airports, wharves, stelling and roads or in the form of software, technology systems, structures or processes, is absolutely critical for economic growth and development. I am elated that I am part of a Government that has produced the largest Works and Infrastructure budget in the history of Guyana, representing \$34.6 billion, a whopping 13.82% of the overall Budget.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, if you would allow me one moment, there is an alarm of a motor car. The number is PVV 558. I am told that that alarm is going off continuously. If there is anyone in the Assembly whose car it is, it is suggested that it be attended to now. Thank you.

Hon. Member, please continue.

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I was saying, it is the largest Works and Infrastructure budget in the history of Guyana, representing \$34.6 billion, a whopping 13.82% of the overall 2017 Budget cake.

With the 20 plus years the PPP/C boasts of being in power, it has never sought to create a strategic direction for the Ministry of Public Works now Infrastructure to ensure a result-oriented operation of the Ministry, and this holds true for most of the agencies under the PPP/C's watch. When I assumed office at the Ministry of Public Infrastructure, there were no long-term development strategy, no vision, no mission or core values to govern the conduct of employees and the affairs of the Ministry. This is not to mention the shortage of staff and major understaffing of some departments. Under our Government, staffing capacity at the Ministry increased by 7.5% and is expected to further increase by 1.6% in 2017.

The PPP/C Administration destroyed the morale of some within the Ministry to just one officer. An example is the Hinterland Aerodromes Unit which was previously staffed by at least six persons but the PPP/C reduced it to one staff – an Assistant Aerodromes Inspector to oversee 60 odd aerodromes in Guyana. No wonder cows, horses, dogs and other animals traverse the airstrips in Guyana, thus endangering the safety of aircraft operations.

Our Government has a vision of where Guyana must be in relation to the rest of the world. It is not last or second to last; blacklisted or impoverished; dubbed as the worse country to do business with or most corrupt country. Rather, it is a Guyana that we all can be proud of, one that is productive, diverse, vibrant, clean, prosperous, and where our citizens would want to raise their families and build their lives. Budget 2017 is the Budget to get us there.

The PPP/C was in power for 20 plus years and, after a constitutional amendment in 2001, which required the establishment of a Public Procurement Commission, the PPP/C Government had almost 14 years to implement this very important oversight body that should oversee billions of dollars in annual expenditures. What it could not do and refused to do in 14 years, our Government did; it delivered the establishment of the Public Procurement Commission in just a mere 19 months in Office.

Our Government delivered what we promised Guyanese in our Manifesto – a reduction in VAT - something the PPP/C Administration blatantly refused to do. This reduction in VAT will benefit all Guyanese, including my Hon. Friends on the other side of this House.

After the announcement of Budget 2017, the Hon. Leader of the Opposition dubbed the Budget the worst he has seen in Guyana's history. I believe the Hon. Member of the Opposition may be right, if only the years were 2011, 2012 and 2013, when the PPP/C Administration presented Budgets where increases in tax revenues were 11.7%, 11.1% and 8.6% respectively, and when non-tax revenues increased by 107.21%, 41.26% and 19.46% for 2011, 2012 and 2013 respectively.

Since our Government took Office in 2015, on an average, year on year increases in taxes were less than that of the PPP/C Government. For the years 2015, 2016 and 2017, the year on year increases in tax revenues were 5.4%, 4.9% and 8.1%. In 2015, non-tax revenue decreased by 36.9% while, for 2016 and 2017, it increased by 12.3% and 2.2% respectively. When you look at

the two periods 2011 to 2013 and 2015 to 2017, it is looking at the PPP/C as the oppressor and the APNU/AFC as the liberator.

Looking at the numbers, it does not take a genius to figure out that the tax system under the PPP/C Government was more oppressive and burdensome on the people of Guyana.

4.02 p.m.

Many who do not understand the measures of Budget 2017 will be misguided and will be tempted and fall victim to misinformation and they will say that Government gave 2% reduction in VAT but is now taking it back on electricity and water rates. Let the truth be told. The cumulative savings a household will enjoy from VAT reduction and PAYE reduction will far exceed the VAT that will be paid by that household if it is charged on their electricity bill exceeding \$10,000.

I will now turn my attention to examine the agencies I identified earlier. In many cases, the PPP/C has left this Government with a basket to fetch water – dilapidated stelling and wharves, buildings, roads, ferries and airstrips.

The Transport and Harbours Department, one of Guyana's oldest river transport agencies, continues to offer scheduled services to the people who depend highly on river transport. Despite its old and rapidly aging fleet of vessels, the ferry service is a link in the transport network, primarily in the riverine areas of Guyana.

We have started our strategy under the theme, *Transport for a Sustainable Future: Restructured, Reinvigorated, Repositioned*, to turn around the agency to make it a better ferry service provider in all areas – governance, management, operations, procurement, customer service and financial viability. The agency suffered from neglect under the PPP/C Administration, as it was confronted with limited financial and human resources constraints and a systemic decimation of capital forming assets. Our Government inherited malpractice in fuel usage, mishandling of vehicular ferry pass and severe leakage of revenue from the agency.

During 2016, stricter monitoring of the fuel consumption was initiated along with a cap system for fuel usage. The cap system for fuel usage was abandoned in favour of a more robust, long-term solution. As a consequence, in 2017, to fix the challenges at the Transport and Harbours

Department, there will be the establishment of an inspectorate division to deal with inspection of traffic management, quality, safety and compliance. Also, additional staff will be employed in the Audit Department to stop or cease all the malpractice that prevailed under the previous Administration.

The first half of 2017 will see the establishment of an advisory council, as per Section 5 of the Transport and Harbours Act, Chapter 49:04. This Council will function as an oversight body providing supervisory oversight and governance of the Transport and Harbours Department and ensuring that management implements policies to run the day-to-day affairs of the agency, in an efficient and proper manner, to better serve the public.

To improve the facilities and services offered to Guyanese, \$240 million was allocated in Budget 2017 for the reconditioning of ferry vessels, the Motor Vessel (MV) Malali, Motor Boat (MB) Sandaka and MV Lady North Cote. The Government has made provisions of \$294 million for the rehabilitation of stellings in Regions 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7.

I now turn my attention to the Demerara Harbour Bridge. The Demerara Harbour Bridge continues to be a vital transport link between East and West Demerara, facilitating the movement of vehicles for commercial, social and educational purposes. The agency continues to ensure that maintenance works are conducted on the more than three decades old bridge, so as to ensure that services are not disrupted. The sum of \$150 million was approved as subvention in the fiscal year 2016. The sum was used for rehabilitation of three large pontoons, fabrication of buoys and the rehabilitation of the hydraulic system of the retractor span.

The management of the Demerara Harbour Bridge must be commended for its initiative in addressing the traffic flows on the Bridge. As publicised in the media, the Bridge has instituted night retraction and double lane usage during certain peak hours. This means that commuters can reach faster to their destinations and this will lead to less stress and a more productive use of their time.

It should not go unnoticed that Government cannot continue to make provisions for a Bridge that has outlived its lifespan; hence, the construction of a new bridge is imminent. In December, 2015, expressions of interest were received from 23 companies for the feasibility study and design of a new bridge. We anticipate an increase in vehicle importation and internal migration

and, as a consequence, the usage of the Bridge will increase. Therefore, for the first six months in 2017, the final study on a new bridge will be done by Dutch Company, Lievens CSO, an engineering firm from Netherlands. Thereafter, the tender process for the construction of a new Demerara Harbour Bridge will commence.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 25 minutes.

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In Budget 2017, an allocation of \$2 million was made for the Demerara Harbour Bridge, which will be used for the provision of control and hydraulic cabins.

During 2016, the Ministry of Public Infrastructure commenced a study to address the management, maintenance and sustainable development of hinterland airstrips, with the principal aim to develop an aerodromes policy and plan that addresses the deficiencies and problems affecting hinterland aerodromes. During the course of that study and other ministerial assignments, I had the privilege of visiting a few of the airstrips in Guyana and the conditions and facilities of those airstrips are below expectations. I am happy to inform you that Cabinet has given its no-objection for the establishment of a national airports authority of Guyana. This body will be responsible for the management and overseeing operations at both international and domestic aerodromes.

The imbalance between hinterland and coastland in accessing the information, communication and technology platform is glaring and a major constraint for this is the unavailability of energy in the form of electricity. We must create the infrastructure that will improve energy availability for the rural communities. The wellbeing of rural communities, over time, will be transformed through increased economic opportunities. There will be greater socio-economic interactions between urban and rural communities, between coastland and hinterland, thereby spreading access to opportunities to all Guyana. I believe His Excellency, President Brigadier David Arthur Granger, puts it best when he said that the hinterland is an essential element in Guyana's development and the frontier of Guyana's economic progress.

The vision of our Government is to allow all hinterland households and communities to have access to affordable, reliable, modern energy systems and services for sustainable hinterland development and improvement in the social welfare of the hinterland.

During 2016, we kept our foot on the pedal, pushing for the improvement of the people's livelihood in the hinterland regions. Transformers were procured for Port Kaituma Power and Light Company and the Mahdia Power and Light Company. The generators at Port Kaituma and Mahdia were upgraded. There was the procurement and installation of solar power at Fort Island, Region 3.

Budget 2017 indicates that the Ministry will increase its efforts at implementation of projects. Special projects, which include the construction of micro-grids in 25 hinterland communities, the upgrade of distribution network and switchgear at Mabaruma, the installation of light-emitting diode (LED) street lights in Lethem and the extension of the power network in St. Ignatius, are planned. To this end, the sum of \$264 million has been allocated for these activities.

I now turn my attention to my pet area, the Guyana Civil Aviation Authority. In my presentation on Budget 2015, I announced to the House that Guyana, which falls under the auspices of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), suffers the indignity of having the lowest level of compliance with the standards and recommended practices of ICAO – a paltry 44.24%. Under my stewardship and under this Government's vision, Guyana will not be left behind while the rest of the world flies ahead. I am happy to announce that we did it. Guyana's fortunes have turned around after much investment in staffing capacity, institutional strengthening, the provision of technical training, both locally and overseas, and the development of modern regulations and enhancement in the management of the GCAA.

After an International Civil Aviation Organization Coordinated Validation Mission Audit, just last month, Guyana's preliminary results showed that Guyana moved from the paltry 44.24% to 64.66% level of compliance, a noteworthy achievement for the country. This is highly commendable. I am tempted to sing the song, *Clear the way, Guyana coming back*.

In 2016, \$32.8 million was invested in eight Air Traffic Control Officers, who are currently in Jamaica undergoing training to become full-fledged Air Traffic Controllers. This will ease the constraints at the Timehri and Ogle Control Towers respectively. A sum of \$24 million has been allocated for 2017 for further institutional strengthening and capacity building of the GCAA to ensure ICAO compliance and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Category 1 Rating. Plans are also afoot to construct a new and modern GCAA Headquarter at Turkeyen.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must wrap now.

Ms. Ferguson: Yes, Sir, I will do so shortly. We want to rebuild the pride of aviation in Guyana so that our national flag can, once again, be proudly displayed on the tails of aircraft.

In concluding, Guyana belongs to all Guyanese. Our Government is resolute on providing a better quality of life and a good life for all Guyanese. This Government will not be distracted by the shouts of empty promises from the PPP/C who was the author of Guyanese suppression. I commend Budget 2017 as a modern, forward-looking Budget for the betterment of all Guyana. Its passage can mean, as the theme suggests, *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*.

May God richly bless us all. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, when I call on you to wrap up, what I do mean is that you really should end your presentation, not just now or a little later, but after I would have spoken to you.

4.17 p.m.

Mr. Charlie: I have listened to the Hon. Minister within the Ministry of Public Infrastructure, Ms. Annette Ferguson, who spoke very eloquently on the projections that the Ministry had made in the year 2016. I would like to remind the Hon. Minister that the Government of which she is part, while in Opposition, in 2014, had cut all of the allocations for hinterland airstrips. Be reminded. Now, you, over there, are reaping the ignorance.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I must ask you not to make personal references. Hon. Members, over here...

Mr. Charlie: Okay, Hon. Speaker, I withdraw. I will say the Government over there.

I bring greetings to this honourable House from the people of my geographic region, which I represent, Upper Takatu/Upper Essequibo, Region 9. To every Hon. Member of this honourable House, *Kaimen wa chic pun* from the Waspishans; *Mareman* from the Macushis; *Kaydowahay* from the Wai Wais; *Wa ku pay na me sang* from the Patamonas; *Na ruu* from the Akawaios; *Bow kai ya* from the Warraus; *Orika - haa lee co ha* from the Loconos of this country. A pleasant good afternoon everyone.

It is with distinct honour that I rise to join with my Colleagues, on this side of the House, to speak on the 2017 National Budget which was presented to this House by the Hon. Minister of Finance, Mr. Winston Da Costa Jordon. With no hesitation, I directly turn my attention to the budget theme: *Building A Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering The Good Life To All Guyanese*.

First of all, the national budget theme is nothing more but an appealing statement in an advertising world since the disbursement of \$250 billion cannot and would not reveal any action of substance to build a green economy and deliver the good life to all Guyanese, particularly the Amerindian people of this country.

This national budget exhibits irrationality and mental unsoundness of this Government and devoid of truth to the citizens of our country. The 2017 National Budget is nothing more but morally objectionable and is not in accordance with what is usual or expected. It is an injustice done to every citizen of this country. It is purely a budget that attacks the intelligence of taxpayers, inclusive of the Amerindian people. It attacks to their freedom, and it attacks to their freedom to earn and their ability to an environment of certainty.

From the Amerindian peoples' perspective, the 2017 National Budget failed its purpose for the Amerindian people of this country, since we, as a people, are uncertain whether we should grab a bite or go home to eat a bowl of soup in 2017. The expenses are universal now; the Amerindian people of this country can no longer prioritise their spending and manage their hard earned moneys. The Amerindian people and the Guyanese people, as a whole, can no longer identify wasteful expenditures by this 19-month old malnourished and incompetent Government. We, as a people, cannot adapt quickly as financial situations change, since there is no space to cushion in this rigid environment settings created by this incompetent Government and our financial goals are far from achievable, since the Amerindian people have not gained any real increase in income, but are burdened with expenses and taxes.

Instead, the 2017 National Budget decreased the Amerindian peoples' stress levels. Hon. Minister of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, it has increased it. Look at the fruits in the future - increased crimes; increased prostitution; increased teenage pregnancy; increased bullying and begging on the streets; increased suicides; increased domestic violence; and increased high risks

activities to make money, for example, drugs and guns on the streets, along with organised crimes and even white collar corruption.

Generally, all the increases in taxes will bring burden to the Amerindian people since, from the businesses perspective, there will be price increases for almost everything from food to construction materials, stationery supplies for our hinterland school children and even for services. One may ask: What do the Amerindian people know about taxes? I must say that the Amerindian people were schooled for 23 years under the successive PPP/C that has a successive track of progress and development. Today, we the Amerindians cannot be fooled. This budget is a wakeup call for every citizen of Guyana to be vigilant and not to be deceived by this Government as the mere fact is that all will have to pay the 14% Value Added Tax on their light and water bills, respectively, whether we like it or not.

Some Government speakers are alluding that some citizens will not be required to pay the VAT since they did not exceed the stipulated amounts, respectively, but that is not true. Do not be fooled Guyanese. The bottom line is that you will pay the tax in one way or the other. There is no escape. The prices for chicken, beef, wild meat, pork, *et cetera* will definitely raise at all meet shops. Hence, this will be a blow of black and blue to all Guyanese citizens for the Christmas holidays, inclusive of the Amerindians people.

The \$800 increase in the old age pension will definitely get absorbed when the other hand is reached out to recollect, especially from our pensioners in Region 9, since there is a donation box placed, right now, at the Lethem Post Office. Our pensioners are asked to place their donations. The donation box is there as I speak. Hon. Minister of Social Protection take note. Our pensioners pay transportation cost from their respective villages to get to the Lethem Post Office to collect their monthly pensions. Pensioners of the North Rupununi have complained bitterly about the payment of their monthly pension, which is paid to them by a prominent businessman in that sub-district. There, too, pensioners, as well as Toshaos, travel long distances to Annai and sometimes moneys are not made available to pay pensioners on time. Pensioners and Toshaos have to, sometimes, wait long hours or even overnight. Where is the good life here?

As I speak, the Regional Democratic Council (RDC), at line item 6211 – Expenses specific to the Agency, is in zero. There is not a cent to execute the mandates of the RDC at present. In the

month of July, 2016 the Regional Chairman had written to the Hon. Minister of Communities, through the Regional Executive Officer (REO) of Region 9, requesting a supplementary provision. To date, absolutely no supplementary provision was made available to the Regional Democratic Council of Region 9.

I must bring this to the attention of this honourable House that because of no supplementary provision, the last sitting of the Regional Democratic Council of Region 9, which is conducting its meetings during this week, is now being sponsored by Conservation International (CI) Guyana. CI is paying for the transportation and accommodation costs for every councillor. What a shame on this maleficent Government which is failing its obligations. There will be more questions than answers as to why CI is doing the Government's job, since CI is an autonomous body.

This Government boasted about producing the only young female Deputy Mayor in Guyana from Region 9, but what is happening today? What happened to the investigation surrounding the allegations made by the same young Deputy Mayor against the Regional Executive Officer of Region 9? Where is the report on the investigation promised, when 1200 Amerindians of Region 9 petitioned for the removal of the REO? Why is this kept under the carpet?

The construction of a \$60 million wooden bridge across the Tabatinga Creek is just a waste. It is a campaign promise with no consultation. That wooden bridge will be of no use during the rainy season, since the area of construction is prone to flooding. Lethem was named a town - no consultation; mapping of the town boundary - no consultation. Maintenance to double bituminous surface treatment (DBST) roads was done in the commercial zone in Lethem. Look at its state today, so ashamed to explain the shoddy works. If there is one heavy rainfall, the road will be gone.

There is a claim that this Government inherited the public servants, oh yes. The very public servants who were responsible for over a decade of positive economic growth, under the successive PPP/C, that this APNU/AFC Government took over. Today, those very public servants are lethargic. What a low punch to the many in the public service, inclusive of the Amerindians who are employed, who are young, over qualified and more experienced than the

many sitting on the Government benches. Yet, this Government chose to pay themselves first rather than the public servants.

With such erroneous and absurd statements made by the Government speakers during this debate, I can safely say that this Government cannot manage the resources it took over, especially the human factor, since this Government has dismissed many of them, inclusive of the Amerindians who were responsible for past positive successes under the PPP/C.

4.32 p.m.

This Government had promised a significant salary increase for Government workers, including nurses, teachers in the primary, secondary and tertiary education, security personnel and civil servants. Where is that promise in 2017? It is not in the national budget. I ask this Government revise and fix this budget and pay our nurses, teachers, security personnel and civil servants right. This Government promised that. Yet, while the present Government ministers and officials, in the capital and elsewhere, are making glowing statements about the benefits, privileges and good life that the Amerindian people now enjoy, at the level of the Amerindian communities it is a different reality.

It is clear that the gains made over the last couple of decades are being reversed at a Usain Bolt speed. The Amerindian people of this country are aware that there are serious violations of our rights. We are being dispossessed, marginalised and criminalised under the APNU/AFC Government. The examples are many...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 15 minutes.

Mr. Charlie: The examples are many. Our young Amerindians people were dismissed, due to witch-hunting by this coalition Government and they were replaced by their supporters. It will not be forgotten, the figure 1972 of our Amerindians youths who were dismissed, who were not seen as enthusiastic Guyanese with much to offer, but instead as PPP supporters who must be gotten rid of, immediately.

There is nothing more than marginalisation of our Amerindian youth. The Hinterland Employment Youth Services (HEYS), which replaced the CSO programme, is now in lay mode. The Amerindian youths and facilitators of the HEYS have not been paid their stipends on a

timely basis, as set out in their contracts. What is the Hon. Ministers of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs doing? What criteria did they use to employ the master trainers on the HEYS programme?

I now turn my attention to consultation, which is a downfall of this Government, yet the gospel of social cohesion is preached, which is like applying face powder to paint the face to indicate that all is well and beautiful, when the Guyanese people know it is repulsive.

It is public knowledge that, at an international meeting, this Government pledged two million hectares of forest for conservation. No Guyanese knew of this until it was announced, after the pledge was signed at the Conference of Parties (COP21), at the United Nations (UN). To date this Government... *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Sukhai, you are Out of Order. Ms. Teixeira, would you please resume your seat. Ms. Sukhai, would you stand please? Ms. Sukhai, you are disrupting the proceedings of this House.

Ms. Sukhai: I responded to a comment...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, would you listen to the Speaker. You are disrupting the proceedings of this House. If you cannot contain yourself then I will ask for you to leave. Now, resume your seat and let us continue. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Ms. Teixeira you have risen on what?

Ms. Teixeira: On a Point of Order, under Standing Order 40 (a). The Members of Parliament on the other side were calling our Comrade, who was speaking, "stupid" and that is what led to the response by MP Ms. Sukhai. One cannot call another stupid in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker: Ms. Teixeira, if you follow the rules then by now you should have been sitting.

Ms. Teixeira: Yes, Sir. On a Point of Order, under Standing Order 40 (a).

Mr. Speaker: Then would you sit. If something untoward occurs, there are rules which guide us as to how we should conduct ourselves. Every Member here should know that and if they do not, then they ought to know. That applies to Ms. Sukhai equally.

The Member will continue. Any interruption, there are provisions in the Standing Orders, which all of us will observe. If one is angry about something or if someone interrupts, then one would know what to do because that is contained in the Standing Orders. We cannot allow Members to feel... Hon. Member, Mr. Lumumba, please retain your seat. We cannot allow Members to feel that this could simply be any place. It is not any place and we will act according to the rules, on both sides of the House. Mr. Lumumba, I will listen to what it is that you are saying.

Mr. Lumumba: Under Standing Order 40 (a), on a Point of Information. Is it okay for a Member of the House, on the other side of the House, to call a Member of Parliament “stupid”?

Mr. Speaker: I do not understand the question. How could it be okay Hon. Member?

[Interruption]

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have asked your question so please resume your seat. The answer to the question is that everyone should know that. There is a proper way of bringing to the Speaker’s attention any transgression. When an Hon. Member conducts him or herself in that way, it seems as though the Speaker’s help is not required. If an Hon. Member makes use of language that is not acceptable in this House, then the Member who hears it should rise and bring it to the attention of the Speaker.

There will not be a shouting match in here and it is late for you to now do it, Hon. Member. Unless, you too are going to accept that you were wrong. We cannot have it on one side. That was wrong and unacceptable to do – whatever it was that you were complaining about. But you were also Out of Order in what you were doing. If we accept that on both sides, then we could sit or if not, we will proceed with proof. Please go ahead Hon. Member.

Ms. Sukhai: Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order 40(a), I would like to bring to your attention that, I would have believed that a Chief Whip in this House would have been able to contain her anger or her...

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, the rule is that you state the Standing Order, state the point which you wish to bring to the Speaker's attention and then you resume your seat.

Ms. Sukhai: Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order 40 (a), I would like to bring to your attention, well I would not say "abuse" because you may just stop me, but I would say that I overheard the Chief Whip on the Government's side refer to my Colleague as "stupid" and loud enough. I was not the only one who heard, others heard, but I am bold enough to have responded. If I am wrong in responding, without bringing it to your attention, I admit I was wrong, but I will not stand in this House as an MP and allow an Indigenous brother to be abused. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, there is a way the Speaker could deal with this.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, may I ask that the Chief Whip on the other side...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Ms. Teixeira, there was a question raised by Ms. Sukhai and I will treat that question before I address you.

Ms. Teixeira: Thank you.

Ms. Speaker: The complaint is that the Government Chief Whip used language which is unacceptable in this House. Hon. Member, Ms. Amna Ally, if that is the case, would you withdraw that answer right away.

Ms. Ally: Mr. Speaker, I did not. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Ms. Ally: What I said, when the Hon. Member was speaking, was that, presently, consultations are going on in Region 9. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Member for her statement. Ms. Teixeira, do you have a point to make?

Ms. Teixeira: Yes. Mr. Speaker, you pre-empted my request that the Hon. Member apologise for what she said. She said that the Hon. Member is “stupid” and there are people in this front row who heard it. Regrettably, this is the second time that the Hon. Member is denying saying things in this House, in full face of the House, when 30 odd people heard her say it. So if she is not going to apologise then we need to go to the video.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Member. Hon. Ms. Ally, do you recall what Ms. Teixeira has just said?

Ms. Ally: No, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Teixeira, we will seek to discover the right or wrong of what was said.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, the whole front row heard it. Therefore, each one of these persons can get up and vouch for whether she said it or not.

Mr. Speaker: Ms. Teixeira, we will seek the only uncommitted matter here. When that is available then we will continue with this matter. Hon. Member, Mr. Charlie, please continue. We will return to this when we have the proof.

Mr. Charlie: Thank you very much Mr. Speaker. Sometimes we do err, but I just want it to be registered that the behaviour of this Government towards Amerindians, when they try to discredit and test their intelligence, gets nowhere. We are always strong and we always stand firm. I want it to be recorded in this House that every leader listens. Always remember that. I continue, Mr. Speaker.

Take a look at the Hon. Prime Minister, Vice–Presidents and Ministers’ *fat cat* salaries, not forgetting their benefits, including housing, 24–hour security, housekeeping staff, utility vehicles, fuel, vacation allowances, increased allowances for both local and overseas.
[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Similar increases have not been granted to our Toshaos, teachers and other public servants who toil on a daily basis in the hinterland under difficult circumstances. This Government is all proud of this budget, while the citizens out there are not.

4.47 p.m.

When the Government funds itself through taxation, it causes other effects and affects every citizen. Be reminded Government, very soon our dear country will be plagued with inadequate income, low wages, high prices, shoddy products, products unavailability, the discontinuation, loss of jobs, evictions and homelessness, poverty and high crimes, chronic recessions, real taxes and revenues and I could go on. The Amerindian people tell this Government that.

Today, under this Government, the citizens of our country will have to put up with an erosion of the standard of living, poverty, lack of jobs, especially for the Amerindian youth. The citizens are subjected to lawlessness of a proportion never experienced in Guyana before. However, the clock is ticking, approximately 42 months to go and the citizens of Guyana waited because they truly believed that all good will come to those who waited patiently. Since to date, the batch of politicians on the other side of this House are running their fears as raw, uncoordinated, with lack of imagination and no proper leadership. In fact, they are destructive as seen in their own budget and are rated the worse of all in Guyana's political history. The citizens of our country are now accepting that, of the two political groups in Guyana, the PPP/C has been far more productive, adventurous and skilled in their jobs, and the people of all races benefited more under that Administration.

I am asking that the \$1,000...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you need to wrap up now.

Mr. Charlie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am asking that the \$1,000 and \$5,000, respectively for the Tax Identification Number (TIN) Certificates be revoked and exempted for the Amerindian people that I represent from Region 9.

In conclusion, long gone are the days of the People's National Congress (PNC) dictatorship. We will not be subdued by this we will take on the Government. This killer budget is footless and cannot carry our country forward. I call on this Government to take this budget back to the

drawing board because this Government has every Guyanese dancing one step forward, two steps backwards and they are trembling.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you must wrap up now.

Mr. Charlie: To remedy this, I join with my Colleagues on this side of the House to withdraw this budget, consult more and fix it.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker. *[Applause]*

Minister within the Ministry of Natural Resources [Ms. Charles-Broomes]: Mr Speaker, please permit me to endorse Budget 2017, a budget that speaks to the lives of miners. Before I address some unsolved matters, allow me to give you the opportunity to know against which background I am speaking from.

I have heard in this House a presentation from the standpoint of a rice farmer's daughter. I am going to tell this House and I will invite them to the reality of what mining really is. A woman leaving her children, a baby nine months old, and heading all the way to 14 miles on what we then called *the road to death*; that was the state of the road. Not being fortunate to move through, by the grace of God in that time, and made to stuck in a swamp one mile long, spending a night in a pool that covered the trail of a vehicle. In that time, women were known to have a stigma as a prostitute. So, the owner for that vehicle, who sat himself with his wife in the front seat and the lone woman on the trail at the back, would get stuck in the swamp, in the middle of the night in the rain with shining eyes staring at her. Any miner knows that when the eyes in the night stare at you, you are looking at what is called a *puss*. With one night passed and another day, one is in the same position. That is what the PPP Government had put miners through.

Allow me, at this time, to recognise miners in this House. The indication of the miners in this House is a clear that they know. It is because His Excellency, the President, named the Hon. Ms. Simona Charles-Broomes in the Ministry of Natural Resources. And it is because of her experience that their lives are in good hands. Allow me to recognise the workers from the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC). I want to stand and make it clear in this House, I heard the Hon. Members talked about workers and how we so love workers. Some of these workers sitting in this House spent one month on the streets of Brickdam for what was a

signed agreement for moneys to be paid to them. After one month, they received a bit of the money. I am pleased to announce that this Government, without any placard, paid them all wages owed to them.

I want to add that, when the Minister of Finance heard that these workers were with the union and announced the 10%, even if some said not to pay them, the Hon. Minister of Finance said “Pay it must” and they received their 10%.

Everything on miners was imposed. When the 16% VAT was imposed on miners, at that time during those years, one did not have any internet service. All one knew was that when he/she came to town to shop, everything *sky rocketed*. We who suffered in the fields did not benefit. It was imposed upon us and it was the goldsmiths and the jewellers who benefitted from the VAT exemption. I call that cruelty to miners.

One talks about tax, may I place it on the record, that it is the first time in history, in 2015, an Investment Development Agreement (IDA) was signed with small miners. Before, such agreements were signed with the large scale miners. On that note, Minister of Finance, allow me to apologise for my dear friends to whom I am an associate member of the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA) and the founding member of the Guyana Women Miners Organisation (GWMO) for misleading miners by saying that the Minister of Finance will take all tax concessions granted to them. The mere announcement by the Minister of Finance that all concessions were intact proved to the nation that that was a lie, but I beg your forgiveness Minister of Finance.

The exemption and the concessions that were given to miners were for matting, hosing, impeller, pumps, 4x4 vehicles and fuel for the first time ever. I am saying to the miners that if there were some situations there, we, for the first time ever as women, were recognised by having a seat on the Board of the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission.

I advocated for a seat to represent women. Where were all these women in the House when Ms. Charles-Broomes was on the road struggling at the hands of the PPP? I was incarcerated; I was locked up by the police. Why? It was because I was assaulted and because of hands and instructions. It was then said that Ms. Charles-Broomes assaulted. Then do you know what happened? When the matter was dealt with and the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) asked,

they said that they could not find the doctor who gave the medical nor the person who gave the complaint. It is because I serve a living God. Do not come here and ask me about miners.

To the Hon. Leader of the Opposition, he knows well, these people who have travelled from Mahdia to come here today to sit in the House, they came in droves in a picket exercise against the PPP Government. It was for what we had spoken about, the shutting down for small miners in the extractive industries. It was the then Opposition Leader who called on the Special Land Use Committee, where he appointed Ms. Charles-Broomes as a member. He recognised, Hon. Mr. Hamilton as you had identified me, as a champion of the extractive industry. That is who I am. So, if you are going to ask me how will I defend which side I am on? Are you on the mining side or are you on the Government's side? I am pleased to announce I am on the miners' side because the miners' side is the Government's side. We are a Government for the people and all the people.

Long gone are the days when the Government will sit at the table with a few. Persons were calling workers out to picket because they had to pay a 20%. I said to the workers, that the Minister of Finance said in his budget presentation that consultations were ongoing. Any matter that the miners have, I would lead the way to the Minister of Finance for consultation. We are a Government that listens and the reason why the Minister of Finance left the door open is because this Government is a Government with an open door policy.

Let me turn my attention to land. I want to declare it in this House today that long gone are the days when land was for a selective few. This Government, next year, and I know that my Hon. Friend, Mr. Lumumba would love this, will open the doors for small miners in clusters. Be it if one is in a wheelchair or from the media, as long as one is a Guyanese, the natural patrimony and the wealth of this country belongs to all of us. We will be giving out lands, Hon. Ms. Pauline Sukhai, so if you have your people and they mobilise themselves, we will set aside land for all Guyanese. At the Special Land Use Committee, the biggest cry was landlordism and that, Hon. Mr. Lumumba, we will address in the amendment of the Act. It is unfair... [An Hon. Member: Is he a landlord?] No, he is a wonderful Member. He is not a landlord.

[Interruption]

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

We will address landlordism. Let me help out my friends because there are special skills within everybody. In this House there are persons who could chew without a *chico*, but let me address the Hon. Member, Mr. Dharamlall, that when he talks about *kaimoo*, it would be a word of the past. We inherited a Government who had women in *kaimoos*. Let me put you on notice that we will have them in hotels. That is what the Government will do.

5.02 p.m.

I will put on record that *kaimoo* will be a word of the past. I think if the Hon. Member had an intention of building a *kaimoo* he understands the position with the Government now.

I make some special announcement. What we inherited when His Excellency sent me at the Ministry of Natural Recourses, in January, and the Hon. Minister Mr. Trotman gave me a heap of complaints...Among those, do you know what we found? We found persons who were being robbed, the level of corruption that was being taken place, shifting of Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates. It was so bad that there was a man, who now cannot even hear, who was robbed of his wealth and when we examined it, the Chief Judge of this country was misinformed by information that was taken out by members and by some persons. We have already started to eliminate those.

I want to say, at the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC), we have talented people.

Mr. Speaker: Are you speaking about the budget?

Ms. Charles-Broomes: Yes. I am speaking about the budget.

Mr. Speaker: I must ask you to stay in-line and do not go to the courts.

Ms. Charles-Broomes: I am speaking about the budget from a standpoint of knowledge and the “good life” that this budget offers to miners. That is why I was making the point that what we inherited was nothing good but that is what we have started to fix.

It is under this Government that it was mentioned by the Hon. Minister of Finance that we will not only look to gold and diamond, but we will look to all other minerals in this country. From that background, I am pleased to announce to the hard-working members of the Geological Service Department who suffered a press down over the past 23 years that this Government will

support the mapping out of this entire country by 2020. We will be mapping for all 40 minerals and at the same time we are looking at water as a natural... We will reserve our water. I want to thank our hard-working staff some of those who stood tall against the waves of corruption, the Government will. It is the first time ever \$2 billion is being given and had the blessings of this Government for the Geological Service Department so that it can start the mapping of this country.

In Budget 2017 Minister Trotman, myself, with wide collaboration, are going to hit the grounds in the first quarter to ensure that all six mining districts we will be covered so that we can say to the country how many dredges are there, in which location, what property. We will educate; we will train on ground. We will deal with the matter of safety on ground, in the pits where the miners are. We will be there with the miners. We will walk the walk with the miners. When we come back and we present a map we can say to Guyana how many properties are being mined in Puruni and where the dredges are positioned, the condition of the water, and every detail. That is the kind of management that we are talking about.

We will look at the structure of the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission. The board will be charged in the new year to look at a structure that could deliver to the miners. Too long miners have a claim located 23 years. A claim is 800 feet x 1,500 feet. To this date, there is even a miner, after 20 years, and invested over \$5 million to get to the location, now to be told a mistake was made 20 years ago. The miners are suffering. We have recognised the contribution. I am pleased to announce that, while one could label me as a *porkknocker*, one cannot label me as somebody who is associated with murder or theft. I am not that kind of person. I am a proud miner. To some grumping and humping, anybody has a right to talk, including without feeling threatened, even if it is by a bull's horn.

This Government is a Government for the people. I want to speak to all Guyana, all miners across this country, that the Government recognises the contribution of miners. We recognise the gross domestic product (GDP) contribution for mining - just a bit of research - to this date, from 2012, from an 8.0 to 12.1. I am no economist, but I can tell you that we recognise the great contribution of the miners. Miners, I want to say to you that this Government is worthy of your contribution. I can see persons here from Mahdia who before 1992 and 1995 could have driven their vehicles from Mahdia straight into Bartica. It is over 15 years that that piece of road was

damaged and the two regions could not have linked. Persons had to drive all the way around. When water is high in the river the people in Mahdia had no way out. Several times they were protesting. I am pleased to announce that the both Ministers of Public Infrastructure have declared to this nation that the road will be fixed. All types of speculation miners went through, Hon. Member Mr. Williams, that the road was deliberate, but this Government has taken into consideration the importance of infrastructure in the hinterland.

It is because of the roads, which the Government will fix, persons will have access to their properties. Issano is a village. Persons talk about the love of Amerindian, and that caused the Amerindians to move all over, from their comfortable zone at Issano shifting all over the river, because they could not have got there anymore by truck. They could only go by boat. Is that the love, Mr. Speaker? The wildness of persons that the lack of care and attention... I want to say in this House and for the record, because of these misinformation, that the Hon. Ms. Charles-Broomes had, in those days, at the hand of the Robeson Benn, under the PPP/C Government, in the most challenging of time...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you will rephrase that.

Ms. Charles–Broomes: Mr. Speaker, it is the former Minister. I withdraw, Mr. Speaker. I withdraw the name. I apologise, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Please proceed.

Ms. Charles–Broomes: ...who when he was the Commissioner of Guyana Geology and Mines Commission, at that time the land, which I am talking that this Government will make it so open, was not for all. After being victimised and the seizing of my fuel, I, as a miner, went to the then Commissioner who said to me... My story is a miner's story and I have to tell it because it is out of that when the then Commissioner, who was an ex Minister, recognised and there is where I earned the three blocks at the then time in 2005. This Minister did not come here taking anything from anybody. The truth hurts and what I am speaking here is what we call hard facts. Hard facts are what we are talking about. After sitting at the Special Land Use Committee for weeks, it was only to know that all the representations, Hon. Members Odinga Lumumba, it was said to us, went to the Cabinet. I will now ask the Hon. Minister of State if he could check the Cabinet to see if indeed it went there, that is how miners was treated.

What I am saying to the miners is that Budget 2017 offers a “good life for all.” The Government of Guyana with its concessions of fuels and all the addition will not sit to the table with a few. For the consultation, we will invite the small syndicates and small organisations to have their say. That is what we call consultation. Consultation does not take place with a few persons. All the bombarding I received over the past couple of days, when persons were saying, let us hear what Ms. Charles-Broomes will say to the miners, what Ms. Charles-Broomes just did was to apologise because somebody is trying to stir up mischief.

The Hon. Member, let me inform, since you are so excited to know, I do have to explain, that there is a proposal by a board. A proposal is just a mere proposal. I put that one there. This APNU/AFC Government has the greatest respect for all Indigenous people of this country. It was embarrassing when I went to the same region, which the Hon. Member came from, with the Hon. Minister Hastings-Williams and I went about, walked and saw the conditions of Amerindians. I went aside and said, “Minister, I cannot take this. Is this the condition of how our Amerindian brothers and sisters live?”

What are you coming to tell us about Amerindians? It is this Government that was in Region 9, the same region. We will not give handout neither to Amerindian. Let me say from my standpoint that I love all Guyanese. I live my life well respected. This is Government is a Government for all Guyanese. The point that was said I just wanted to place on record that the Members of this Government in this House, leaded by the Hon. Prime Minister Mr. Nagamootoo, have never sought to disrespect nor will ever disrespect the Amerindian people.

The geologist section and how we intend to enhance that division. I have just returned with two young officers, from that division, from Bolivia. Early next year, in February, we are looking to attract some of the greatest professors, one mainly for laterite mineral, the kind of minerals that we have in this country. He will come here. The ABSU University that will join with the University of Guyana, through the Ministry of Education, to look at the curriculum that we offer at the University of Guyana to train our officers in that division and also to sit with our engineers to see how we can start to prevent fatality in the extractive industry.

It is this vision of the Government that any miner will be able, that is our aim, to walk into the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission and have information on any property in this country.

5.17 p.m.

The 16% VAT, the items that we are now receiving... I am going to put it on record that early in the year we would invite the miners to look at the agreement that was signed - let me say it again, ever, first time - agreement to get fuel and 4x4 vehicles to miners. We would look at the agreement. We would ensure that the consultation takes place, that all miners would benefit.

I want to say to all Guyanese and to my friends on the other side of the bench that the property and the land at the Guyana Geological and Mines Commission is not my land. It is the country own and you also are invited to come in and partake. If there is any Member in this House, be it you are a journalist...I am saying today that even the man - because we are talking about the people with disability - the wheelchair could come in with his group. We are encouraging these cluster, we would have what you would call syndicates, so the miners could come together.

Why are we doing this? This is in my wrapping up. It is that because we have found before, in the past, one person is given a piece of land and the other. Sometime in that whole area, it is only one of the properties which would have some gold. One person benefit and everybody else on the outskirts does not. What we would do, because of the experience, and the know-how, is that we would have them to come into cluster so that they would follow the regulations. Let us say, for example, when the Hon. Member Irfaan Ali gets his piece of land in his syndicate and he bores the gold he gets a 300-feet. Anybody comes after then would take a 150-base on the regulations, so more persons would be able to develop themselves. We are talking about human development and the wealth.

It gives me great pride and pleasure to commend this Budget 2017 to this House for passage. I want to say that we are the Government for the people, by the people and for all the people.

I thank you. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we would take the suspension now. We would return at a quarter past 6 o'clock.

Sitting suspended at 5.19 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 6.17 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we would continue our debate, but before we do so, there was a matter which arose out of the debate during the last period of proceedings or suspension. I undertook to turn to the only non-committed impartial, whichever one of those words, source to provide us with some form of evidence, as to what transpired in the room. You would recall, Hon. Members, that there was a statement by one Member who was alleging a particular conduct by another Member to wit, Hon. Member Pauline Campbell-Sukhai and Hon. Member Amna Ally. I undertook to find supporting evidence, in this case, from the recording which were taken during that interval.

I am going to ask Mr. Umrao with the assistance...It has been connected. I understand that this is the method which has been used on any occasion when a question as to what was said came up in the House, so I adopt this method and we would use this method.

Audio recording played.

Hon. Members, am I to take it that you are no longer interested in this?

Hon. Members: Yes.

Mr. Speaker: Well, if you are, then silence would assist us.

Mr. Gill: It does not make sense playing that now.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, you must let me handle this. I undertook to provide you with whatever evidence is available. I thank you for your suggestions, but I would handle this and do it my way. What you would do, please, is to go back, and then we would start. Hon. Members would give their attention to the recordings so that they could hear what is on the recording. Go back further, because I think, Hon. Member had an idea it is further back.

Audio recording played.

6.29 p.m.

Hon. Members, what I have been told is that the recording could only be taken from the microphone of the person who was speaking. Unless another device was on elsewhere, then whatever else is said by someone else cannot be picked up. That would seem to mean that there

will be nothing there that can add anything additional to this. I am given to understand that this procedure has been employed before, so Hon. Members would have known that. There is nothing further that we can do with this.

Mr. Lumumba: It is with great privilege and pleasure that I stand before this National Assembly as a representative of the PPP/C. I must compliment the Minister of Finance for his bravery to come before this House and present a budget that has serious flaws, in particular since it contradicts the APNU/AFC pledge to empower the poor and working class and set the stage for national development. Before I go further, it is very important that I respond to a few items.

The Hon. Minister Catherine Hughes spoke about the transformation of the society in particular since APNU/AFC has taken power. I want to remind her that there has been some transformation. Nigel's Supermarket, which we built up during our period, has now downsized. That is transformation. I am not saying that because he is Afro-Guyanese. I am saying that because he is a good businessman and we supported him. We took him out of the market and helped to put him on Robb Street and make him become a very important and big time owner of a store. Now he has been downsized – transformation. Transformation, a man was robbed and shot in the compound of the Ministry of Finance. That is transformation. He was robbed and shot in full view of armed police. Transformation – business is down by 30 to 50% in this country right now. That is transformation.

I do have to respond to my dear friend Ms. Simona Charles-Broomes. I want to remind the Minister that consultations on issues pertaining to the budget should have started before the budget, not as an afterthought. The Minister of Finance should have called in Ms. Simona Charles Broomes, Mr. Trotman, Minister of Natural Resources, and the miners and have the necessary consultations. It is not as an afterthought. I want to compliment the Minister for bringing the staff of the GGMC to this honourable House. I think the Minister should have brought the miners who will have to pay the 20%. You should have brought them. There has been a pledge by both Ministers, in particular my friend, the Minister of Natural Resources Mr. Trotman, that land would have been set aside for small miners. Ms. Charles-Broomes will agree with me because she has been on the forefront of that issue. He has not listened to his other Minister, because so far no land has been set aside for the small miners. History will show, and history will continue to show that the small miners, the little miners, are people from Buxton,

Plaisance, Golden Grove, Hopetown, Linden, Anns Grove. I do not want to say the Afro-Guyanese, but I want to say they are good Guyanese. So far there has been no obligation by the APNU/AFC regime to empower them. It is important to note that every major mining project in this country has been facilitated, developed and implemented under the PPP/C – every single one, including oil and gas, including the petroleum industry. [*Interruption from the Government Members.*] Thank you Mr. Speaker. Keep them humble.

It is very important that I separate the Government's budget from the personality of the Minister of Finance Mr. Winston Jordan. As a Minister of Finance, and a Member of Parliament, I know that he is a very caring person. I believe that it was very traumatic for him to present a budget that has the shades of economic genocide and a budget that contradicts his private position.

The budget outlines a number of infrastructure projects such as partial development of a highway to Lethem, two bridges over the Essequibo River and countless others. This budget has failed or for better words, lacks the fundamentals as to infrastructure development and its relationship to economic development and economic growth. Some of these projects are political gymnastics. The Minister of Finance has a responsibility to this nation to show how the spending of billions of dollars on a partial road will lead to the increase of trade between Guyana and Brazil or at a minimum will serve as a catalyst for the economic development of Region 10's communities.

Where are the commitments from the Brazilian government? Where are the commitments from the Brazilian companies? On what basis can the Government of Guyana take billions of dollars from the people's treasury to splurge on a piece of road with no economic development? Where are the feasibility studies? Where are the studies? Are we just going to take billions of dollars from then treasury to do a piece of a road with the assumption that our Brazilian counterparts will build another piece? Is that how a Government is run? [**Mr. Williams:** You had the road to no-where.] Mr. Speaker, would you please control, Mr. Williams? This Government has access to economist. It has access to the noble Dr. Clive Thomas. How can this waste of time project come before this National Assembly?

Two bridges over the Essequibo River, as proposed by the Government, sound nice in theory, but where is the cost development analysis? Is the objective of the budget to generate claps from the Government supporters in the National Assembly? These two proposed bridges must a

relationship to a significant increase on our gold production or at minimum access to new forest concessions. If this is the case, where are the project documents? What is the justification of these projects?

My good friend and Comrade, Minister of State Hon. Joseph Harmon, sounds very much like the late Minister of Planning - God rest the dead - Haslyn Parris. He spent most of his time outlining the presidential position around the green economy. As a matter of fact, it is my view that the Hon. Minister of Finance should have followed Mr. Harmon's path of providing us with an outline of a ten-year national development plan instead of sounding as Christopher Ram by listing projects at cost with no economic analysis to justify them. Even though Mr. Harmon, Minister of State, did a fair job of outlining projects, there was a lack of cause, lack of implementation time and projected results. In essence, I must say to Mr. Harmon, like the lady in the Big Mac advertisement, "Where is the beef?"

I spoke of economic genocide but my Comrades on this side of the House have already shown their disdain for the 14% tax. It has also been placed on things given to us by God, including water. The genocide, I speak of, affects Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese. It is important that we understand where I am going with this, very important. Since we have been children, bauxite, sugar, rice and gold, to some degree, logging, have been the mainstay of Guyana's economic development. What is interesting, these industries have all been dominated by certain ethnic groups; bauxite, Afro-Guyanese, rice, Indo-Guyanese, sugar, Indo-Guyanese, gold, Afro-Guyanese and timber by a mixture of ethnic groups. What is interesting here is that these industries are also located in areas and communities dominated by the particular ethnic groups, with the exception of gold and timber.

For well over 15 years, the bauxite industry was in decline and on several occasions, national figures, since the late President Desmond Hoyte, had called for the closure of the industry. This is a recorded fact and not fantasy. The PPP/C Government took a reverse position. We understood then the historical role that bauxite had played in the development of Guyana and what adverse effect the closing would have had on the Linden-Wismar community if thousands of persons were put on the breadline. The Hon. Minister Mr. Rupert Roopnaraine, Professor Clive Thomas, Eusi Kwayana and many other leading Guyanese nationals had always taken a position that the sustainability of communities was more important than the capitalist notion of

closing it down if there are no profits. As a matter of fact, my good friend, the Hon. Minister Rupert Roopnaraine, led many demonstrations against the then leader of the People's National Congress (PNC), Mr. Forbes Burnham, when he attempted to close the industry or at least to muzzle the industry. My good friend Dr. Roopnaraine remembers those days when he and Dr. Walter Rodney had to do a long jump over several trenches. He has to remember those days.

The PPP/C, even when the economy was on the ropes, it supported the Linden-Wismar bauxite industry to the tune of millions of US dollars annually. We did that, even though those communities continued to vote for the People's National Congress. We did not discriminate. Those communities continued to vote for the People's National Congress and the PPP/C continued to put millions of dollars in those communities. *What is good for Peter is good for Paul.* Yesterday it was bauxite and Afro-Guyana based at Linden, today it is Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) and the Indian based community. Are our memories short? What about sweet sugar and how it sustained Guyana when the other industries collapsed.

6.44 p.m.

It has been said that the AFC, in particular, selected East Indian members of the AFC to state that they will not support GuySuCo and Indian communities of the sugar belt because they did not receive their votes. There was no notion that they will ever receive their votes. What are we doing with this country? The PPP/C did not discriminate against Wismar/Linden because of the political position. There is GuySuCo and the dozens of Indo communities which this Budget will impact. They must be treated in the same humane manner in which the PPP/C treated the people of the Linden community.

I am not accepting the theory that disallows economic analysis. I heard the Hon. Vice-President, Mr. Greenidge, say where am I going with this. [Mr. Greenidge: Yes, a presentation on electricity.] I am going down your road, Mr. Greenidge. I am going straight down your road.

I am suggesting that humanity must be the hallmark in developing countries and profit should not always be the hallmark of developing countries. Let us take an example; let us look at the transportation system in New York. The train system in New York operates at a great loss annually. It survives because of Government's subvention. [Ms. Lawrence: Where did

you get that from?] You are not an economist. You are a Social Worker; stay in your loop. [Ms. Lawrence: Operates at a loss?] Yes, Ma'am. Speak to the Hon. Minister Greenidge and he will help you. As a matter of fact, the transportation system in America, especially trails, suffer economic loss but they are subsidised heavily by the Government of the United States. There is a reason why the Government subsidises them. There is a nexus between transporting people to Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and Stanton Island. If the train system should collapse, imagine what will happen to the economy of those communities. It is a relationship and I say that to say that, if GuySuCo is closed down, what will be the impact on the dozens of Indo Guyanese communities and the mixture of Afro-Guyanese communities throughout this country? Those are the fundamentals. The fundamental issue is humanity. We cannot do a balancing act when it comes to Region 10 with Wismar/Linden and do a dance in Wismar/Linden and, when we come to the sugar belt, we do not want to dance. If you will dance, you have to dance everywhere.

When I first spoke of genocide, my mind focussed on the potential economic destruction of the Indo-Guyanese communities in the sugar belt. On further reflection, I realised that I was wrong and that the economic genocide that faces the sugar belt also faces the total Guyana. In essence, the APNU/AFC Coalition is unleashing a class warfare on the people of this country.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Mr. Williams, do you have a...

Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs [Mr. Williams]: Standing Order 40(a). We cannot leave that unchallenged. The Hon. Member is imputing improper motive on this Government. It is not just in a normal context but it is in a very dangerous context.

Mr. Speaker: The Standing Order, the reason for rising and then it is left to the Speaker...

Mr. Williams: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Did you say Standing Order 40?

Mr. Williams: Standing Order 40(a).

Mr. Speaker: What is the point of rising?

Mr. Williams: The Hon. Member is imputing improper motive to the Government of the day and it is a very dangerous statement.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, after you have given that, you should then leave it to the Speaker.

Mr. Williams: Yes, Sir. What I am saying is that he is saying that we are fixing ethnic genocide. These things cannot be left unchallenged.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, try to avoid these references that can be misunderstood. Please proceed, Hon. Member.

Mr. Lumumba: I am proceeding. I said earlier that my focus was whether these activities were directed against the East Indian community. I said I was wrong. The reflection was wrong. I said it is class. Maybe the Hon. Attorney General does not understand the meaning of classes.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member Mr. Lumumba, let us proceed.

Mr. Lumumba: Alright, Sir. Let us talk about the mining industry. I am glad that the Hon. Minister of Natural Resources is here tonight. The mining industry represents the most successful sector in our country today. The Minister of Finance, Hon. Winston Jordan, and the Minister of Natural Resources, Hon. Raphael Trotman, have publicly applauded the tremendous increase in production. Therefore, one would have thought that the Government's Budget would provide more incentives as it relates to the increase in production. In essence, this Budget tends to halt the development of the industry by attempting to drive the small and medium-scale miners into the twilight zone.

As Chairman of the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on Natural Resources, I am indeed disappointed with the lack of support for the mining industry in this Budget. On this side, I want to call for an immediate consultation between the miners and the Government in order to prevent a rapid destruction of a vibrant industry. Let me quote the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA) and the Guyana Women Miners Association (GWMA) of *Stabroek News* newspaper of 3rd December, 2016. I brought the newspapers here so I would not be doing like Mr. Nandlall.

“The two major mining groups, the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA) and the Guyana Women Miners Organisation (GWMO), are calling on the government to reexamine the proposed budgetary measures...”

[Interruption]

Mr. Lumumba: Mr. Speaker, would you protect me? I have named the newspaper and the date.

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

“...that they say will lead to further decline of local mining.

The 2017 Budget in its current form spells doom.”

It is doom and gloom, Hon. Minister.

“The mining sector will decline without help...”

That is without any help from the Government. The APNU/AFC, during the last Elections exercise, unfairly accused the PPP/C of racial discrimination and pledged... **[Mr. Williams: Again?]** ...to empower Afro-Guyanese. Those were your words on the campaign - from Buxton to Golden Grove and from Hopetown to Fryish; you pledged. I believe that the APNU/AFC had an opportunity to show the world and Guyana that it could broaden ethnic participation in all aspects of the economy without being biased.

Let us look at the mining industry. Historically, over 80% of the workers have been Afro-Guyanese. Workers from Buxton, Golden Gove, Plaisance, Minister of Natural Resources - Hopetown, Mahaica, Minister Patterson – Linden, Region 3 and many other African-based communities. **[Mr. Patterson: Were there any from Lodge?]** A few. The 10% tax that they have to suffer with, placed on the back of these workers, has already represented the economic oppression. Now, an additional 10% will further sink them in the mud. As a matter of fact, my Friend, Joseph Hamilton, said “murderation”. Ten per cent plus 10% is murderation. In addition to the murderation, you are asking these dead people to also file income tax at the end of the year so you will murder them twice. Further, these workers will have to file income tax at the end of the year and just face the possibility of double taxation.

What is wrong with this Government? You taxed water; you taxed electricity and now you propose double taxation for the residents of the villages such as Buxton - and I want them to listen and I want them to hear me... [Lt. Col. (Ret'd) Harmon: They will run you out when you go there.] I can run. Villages such as Buxton, Hopetown, Mahaica, Linden, Den Amstel, Dartmouth and others... This is economic genocide. This is what I spoke of earlier. This issue has a potential of impacting 70% of our national population.

In many countries, economic genocide will call for international intervention as we see in Syria and other parts of the world. [Lt. Col. (Ret'd) Harmon: Do you want foreigners to come in now?] I just said economic... [Lt. Col. (Ret'd) Harmon: It is the same thing.] We do not want them to come in; we want them to overlook.

Most of the large gold producers of Guyana sell their gold to licensed gold dealers because of the benefits brought about, such as loans, advances, *et cetera*. The Guyana Gold Board, on the contrary, offers nothing. Now there is a proposal for a 3% discount from the miners from the gold declared. This madness proposed by this Budget is clearly anti-mining and is a calculated decision to drive the smaller, medium-scale miners out of the industry. If this is not the case, why is it the small and medium-scale producers in Guyana are faced with a situation where there are no concessions given to them, a major capital equipment. Yet, on the other hand, major mining companies have all these concessions. Are we saying that it is okay for foreign companies to come to Guyana and have all the concessions and the small and medium-scale mining operators cannot have these benefits?

The other important issue before us is oil and gas. Oil and gas present Guyana with a situation, if handled properly, handled correctly, can bridge the economic gap between the classes and among the races. If it is not handled properly, like Nigeria, the few will reap the benefits from the industry and the many will suffer.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 25 minutes.

Mr. Lumumba: Thank you. The few will gain the benefits and the many will suffer. I believe that the Government is late. It should have already set before this nation a plan as to how the potential revenues in this country will be spent or utilised. What are the benefits of the oil and gas in Guyana? What are the options for small business people?

6.59 p.m.

What would be in store for the ordinary man from the villages that I had named earlier. Already, the few rich in Guyana are getting richer from the initial investment of the oil and gas company. Already, a few are benefiting and the many are watching and hoping.

I call on the Minister and the Government to begin to put plans together and put them before the people of Guyana. I understand the Minister proposed a wealth fund, which I think is a very excellent idea. But such a fund will have to be brought before this Parliament and such a fund will have to be based on a non-partisan agreement between both organisations – the Government and the Opposition – because it is so important to all of us. And such a fund will have to go to a Select Committee for proper discourse and discussions.

The Minister of Natural Resources is behind me and he is saying that he agrees with everything. But I know that, by the time this information gets to Congress Place, he is going to shift gears. I know this because, every time he has said he agrees with me, the Hon. Minister of State, Mr. Harmon, watches him and blinks his eyes. So, I do not know who is speaking for whom.
[Mr. Williams: Direct your remarks to the Speaker.] I am directing my remarks to the Speaker.

This Budget is an attempt to trick the Guyanese people before Christmas. It is an attempt. It is a Budget that will have limited impact. It is a Budget that disrespects teachers, nurses, policemen and soldiers. It is a Budget that will not lift the ordinary man from the bottom and bring him to the top. This is a Budget that will further empower big contractors and businesses. This is a big business Budget.

I am suggesting and I am requesting - and I am not saying the Government and the Minister of Finance should put their tails behind them - that the Government writes or calls the Leader of the Opposition, and I am willing to facilitate such a meeting. That is no disrespect to my Chief Whip.

In closing, I believe the onus is on my good Friend, the Prime Minister, His Excellency Mr. Moses Nagamootoo, the gentleman who used to walk around with me with the old camera in the old days... [Mr. Nagamootoo: It was with the rockets.] You like to talk.

[*Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.*]

And I believe that the onus is on you to save GuySuCo and to work hard to save the Indian community and the sugar belt. Just as Mr. Greenidge, Mr. Williams and Mr. Harmon are going to save the African community in Region 10, the onus is on you and Mr. Ramjattan to save the Indian community and GuySuCo in Region 6.

Thank you. [*Applause*]

Minister of Citizenship [Mr. Felix]: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Under the theme, *Building a Diversified Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*, Budget 2017 represents a manifestly bold attempt to ameliorate the lives of all Guyanese, and I rise to make my presentation in support of this transformative national financial plan. I am elated to be associated with the Minister of Finance, the Hon. Winston Da Costa Jordan, whose visionary projections in this 2017 Budget will ensure that all Guyanese enjoy that good life, as promised by this APNU/AFC Government.

We inherited an anaemic economy, requiring an APNU/AFC Budget to invigorate it. This Budget has been crafted and promoted by the APNU/AFC Government in challenging times, when the sugar industry, having been wrecked by an inept PPP/C Government which cannot now contribute to national development, but, instead, is sucking the life out of the national Treasury by threatening other progressive areas of national life. Therefore, the Opposition's consistent demand on Government to withdraw our developmental plan is backward and we should not give it any attention.

The recently created Department of Citizenship within the Ministry of the Presidency, an initiative of His Excellency the President, David Arthur Granger, encompasses such activities as applications for passports, processing of applications for visas and work permits by foreign nationals, processing of persons seeking naturalisation and registration as citizens of Guyana, and the registration of births, marriages and deaths. For national development, Guyana embraces visitors and, where applicable, visas are sought to enable the arrival of visitors for various reasons, such as tourism, business, employment, education and those engaged in Government

business. Therefore, various categories of visas have been applied for and issued to facilitate visitors entering Guyana and arriving at a port of entry.

In 2016, up to September, 1,163 visas of various categories have been issued to nationals from 76 countries, as compared to the year 2015 when similar applications for visas were approved and issued, 1,171 foreign nationals from 74 countries were affected. Visas to enter Guyana is a requirement for foreign nationals but the location of many of those persons in their countries in relation to our consular offices, embassies and high commissions, requires the ability to travel long distances to apply for permits to enter Guyana. This APNU/AFC Government proposes, in Budget 2017, to create a facility to set up online applications for visas to enable foreign nationals to make their travel arrangements successfully prior to arrival in Guyana. In addition, this Government is exploring with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for the employment of online visas to reduce or to prevent the possibility of fraud. Appropriate allocations have been placed in the Budget to render both proposals realities.

It is now common knowledge that obtaining a Guyana passport provided a disconcerting experience for Guyanese in 2016, when the public bemoaned the large crowds which assembled outside the Passport Office from as early as 5.00 a.m. each morning. This became a source of inconvenience which attracted several negative criticisms. Our Coalition Government inherited this most unpleasant imposition on its citizens. His Excellency, President David Granger, then in Opposition, during his campaign meetings, met Guyanese locally and overseas who complained about the inordinately long wait to obtain a passport. Now in Government, the Department of Citizenship was given the responsibility, *inter alia*, to correct this untenable situation with alacrity.

This honourable House would recall that, while considering the Supplementary Estimates of Expenditure in 2015, a request for the release of funds was sought to acquire equipment for the Immigration Department. This was in response to the need to address local and foreign needs for speedier processing of passports. This request was approved; the equipment arrived in August, 2016 and was put into immediate use. The result was that passports for the Diaspora is processed within five to seven days and the impact locally was the elimination of long lines and the removal of unnecessary inconvenience to the public seeking a simple service. In addition, recently, many sceptics have expressed satisfaction with the transformation of the service.

Our quest for improvement in the passport service has led to the consideration of decentralisation of the service to parts of the country where citizens would benefit the most. The Georgetown Office is overcrowded and, up to the 25th November, 2016, that Office processed 105,068 passports and, of that number, 14,456 passports were prepared for the Diaspora. By decentralisation, this Government seeks to improve efficiency of the system by allowing the acceptance of applications for passports to be a regional activity and the completed passports are returned to and delivered in the regions, consequently, delivering a higher quality of service to our citizens.

His Excellency, in developing the concept of Capital Towns, intends that services offered by the Government could be accessed in these Towns and this has informed the decision to decentralise the service. In August, 2016, one such office was opened in Linden, Region 10, and, at the end of November, 2016, another was established in New Amsterdam, Berbice, in Region 6. Other Capital Towns under consideration are Mabaruma, Region 1 and Bartica, Region 7. It is possible that Regions 8 and 9 would be considered for mobile service.

The foregoing is the first instalment of the plan to decentralise the service. Arrangements in place are temporary, allowing for receiving applications and delivery of passports on separate days of the week. This activity is proceeding smoothly. Budgetary allocations have been made to construct two permanent structures to be utilised as passport offices - one in New Amsterdam and the other in Linden. The completion of these buildings would accommodate equipment to facilitate first-time applicants being processed, which would be an upgrade of what is happening now, thereby completing the entire application process in its decentralised state. Given that these buildings are completed in 2017, start-up could be anticipated late in the fourth quarter of 2017.

Every project has its setbacks. In this case, though we have planned to have passport applications made online, connectivity is the issue to note. The failure of those in Opposition, while in Government, to lay the fibre optic cable to cover all 10 of the Regions, for reasons we know of, wasted billions of dollars. Work is nearing completion, connecting Regions 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. That linkage would soon be assured between Mabaruma in the North West Region and Moleson Creek in the Corentyne. However, no such optimism can be harboured about linkages between Regions 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10, but this Government will get it done.

In his Address to the National Assembly on 13th October, 2016, His Excellency the President expressed his intention to table the Immigration (Amendment) Bill, in 2017, to delink the Immigration Department from the Guyana Police Force.

7.14 p.m.

This is a follow-up to a recommendation of the Disciplined Forces Commission in 2004 where recommendation 15 on page 52 of the Report states:

“Civilians should be contracted to perform police functions that do not require police training as follows:

- a. Examination of vehicles for road fitness certificates
- b. Processing of Passport applications
- c. Typing and secretarial work.”

This is an area where the Opposition, while in Government, never sought to implement this recommendation, but this APNU/AFC Government would do so. The benefits of delinking immigration services from the remainder of the Guyana Police Force is an important requirement since manpower would then be available to the police through their recruitment to fill the void created by the delinking and more policemen could then be available to patrol in vehicles and on the beat. This matter will be moving quickly in 2017.

Birth certificates are important identity documents for everyone, particularly children. Birth certificates facilitate immunisation which protects children against diseases. The document proves to school administrators that the child has reached school age and could be admitted. It also enables law enforcement to determine whether or not a person in custody is a child or an adult. In circumstances, it establishes the age of the child when it must be known whether the child is capable of committing a crime and contracting guilt.

Our children are our future and we must protect them. In this regard, this APNU/AFC Government is working with UNICEF to ensure that all children are registered at birth. We are proceeding to achieve 100% birth registration of children. There have been outreaches in the outlying Regions in Guyana, except Regions 3 and 4, funded by UNICEF, and there were 491

late registration recorded in the other Regions. Late Registration occurs when the one-year period required by law passes without the birth of the child being registered. There are more unregistered births which will be pursued in the new year.

The need to have all births registered supports a wider plan to digitise the records at the General Register's Office (GRO). Already, a project has commenced and is continuing to build a database of records between 1987 and the current period. There is another period between 1896 and 1986 which will commence shortly. This project is about to commence as the procurement process is being pursued. When both projects are completed, we would be prepared to print our birth certificates, achieve faster searches for birth records, reduce the time it now takes to produce a birth certificate, and the system would become a reliable database to create a national identity system which is supported by biometric features.

We should recall His Excellency's recent pronouncement while addressing the Parliament on 13th October, 2016. Then, he promised to table the National Registration (Amendment) Bill to allow for the inclusion of biometrics of citizens to be recorded on their national registration cards. Currently, work is being done to identify international best practices to aid the development of our system. This is a work-in-progress. This process envisages that, once a person's birth is registered, he or she should carry one registration number to death. In other words, there is no need for 15 or more identification cards. The same identification one would have at birth would be the one at the time of registration. The same number proceeds to one's driver's licence, taxpayer identification number (TIN) and bank account. This is useful to prevent fraud. Recently, in the *Stabroek News* of 13th November, 2016, there was a story where cricketers had been using falsified identification cards for their own personal benefit. A system like this intends to prevent situations like that. These are all Budget funded projects.

Finally, I have listened to the speakers on the Opposition side and they are all opposed to paying VAT spread across a wider range of goods and services. The Opposition's obsession with the payment of this tax, which was implemented by their Government in 2007, explains the existence of tax cheats, as was referred to by the Hon. Minister of Finance. This Government intends that all persons must pay their taxes or face the consequences.

The Opposition has not seen the value of the infrastructural component of Budget 2017. It has not seen the value of completing the first stage of the road to Lethem, between Linden and Mabura. It does not recognise the value of the road from Parika to Goshen in the Essequibo River. And it does not recognise the effect on the public that the proposed construction of overpasses for vehicles and pedestrians in Region 4 would result in.

With the commencement of these projects, jobs will be created; wages will be paid; and consumer spending would increase, leading to improvement in the economy. The PPP, in Opposition, would see nothing good in an APNU/AFC Government.

The Opposition has been commenting on the crime situation as if that could be remedied by the flick of a switch. The worst period of criminal activity in this country occurred between 2001 and 2011, and we know who was in charge. They never accepted responsibility for their failure to keep this society safe, but blamed everyone else. It was the PPP/C Government that presided over the escape of the prisoners from the Camp Street Jail on 23rd February, 2002, when they unleashed a reign of terror on citizens. It was the PPP/C Government that transformed the New Opportunity Corps (NOC) into a state of rebellion with one set of inmates setting fire to the complex and releasing another set of inmates. **[Mr. Dharamlall:** Who was the

Commissioner?]
Ask the man who had the Ministry at that time. **[Ms. Teixeira:** It was not a man; it was a woman.]

You want to be noticed but I would not mention you. In this confusion and mayhem, new crimes were committed, like kidnappings and a frequency of carjacking. A learned behaviour was created and continues to this day where a firearm is the weapon of choice to commit crimes. We must not forget the reckless manner in which firearm licences were issued to so many citizens who should not, in normal circumstances, be granted firearm licences. Today, those whom Guyanese have relegated to the other side of this House point fingers to the Government and call on us to repent. They must be reminded that, as soon as they left Government, the Guyana Police Force has been endeavouring its best to investigate and solve many serious crimes which would have gone unsolved had they been in Office.

This Budget will not be withdrawn. I commend this Budget to this honourable House for approval and encourage my Friends in the Opposition to give it their support. I commend this Budget to the National Assembly.

Thank you. *[Applause]*

Opposition Chief Whip [Ms. Teixeira]: Mr. Speaker, I rise to support my Colleagues on this side of the House in their condemnation of the 2017 Budget and the repressive measures imposed on the Guyanese nation. I support wholeheartedly the parliamentary Opposition's call for the withdrawal of the 2017 Budget and the removal of the repressive and oppressive taxation measures. Our call, prior to and during the debate, includes an overture to the Government that we stand ready to offer our knowledge, experience and expertise to bring a new budget that will stimulate the economy and improve the quality of the lives of our people. This is a serious and sincere overture which is grounded in patriotism and duty to the people of our country.

Having listened, in this House, to the 2017 Budget Presentation by the Minister of Finance, I must say that I was flabbergasted that the APNU/AFC "*I don't care*" Government - borrowed from my Colleague, Mr. Damon - would impose such an anti-people, anti-developmental budget on the people and the nation. No sector has been left untouched; no section of the population is left unscathed, except for a tiny autocratic political elite shrouded in the secrecy and the cloak of Cabinet. It is the cloak of Cabinet that is protecting you!

My initial reaction was utter disbelief that the Government could be so short-sighted, anti-development and anti-people. On further reflection, however, I am convinced that this Budget has been conceived by a philosophically devoid, technically bureaucratic, unimaginative, uncreative, uncaring Cabinet. I would not blame the Minister of Finance; all the Ministers have been shrouding themselves, hiding behind the Minister of Finance. No Budget comes to this House unless it has a Cabinet memorandum that states that it has the approval of the Cabinet.

You are all responsible - collective responsibility, as Minister Ramjattan advocated! I have difficulty comprehending what kind of leaders could have conceived of and dared to bring such a treacherous Budget. It is an indictment of a hapless Government that seems bereft of any capability or capacity to stop and reverse the downward trend that Guyana's economy is experiencing since the APNU/AFC "*I don't care*" Government's term of office began.

Even in the debate during the last three days, the Ministers seemed to have difficulties defending this Budget, to explain the 57 tax measures. There were contradictory statements. In fact, half of

them have not read the presentation. When I come to that, you will see that things they said in the House are not reflected by the Minister's presentation here.

In the 18 months we have observed this Government's inexplicable lack of political will and capacity to take urgent action that is so logical and commonsensical to reverse these trends. This "I don't care" Government appears to have a narcissistic – remember my Friend, Mr. Prime Minister, I used that word in relation to another situation – desire to demonstrate that it is different and known for a fresh start, denoting that all that came before it is of no value. The Government claims that it is the harbinger of change. Let us examine what is so different in this Government and this Budget.

7.29 p.m.

First, it is the first Government, going back to British times and since independence, that has produced three budgets to the National Assembly within 19 months. This is the first Government to bring three budgets totalling \$670 billion in 19 months. Yet, it says in this House that it inherited a bankrupt country and that the PPP left the economy in a perilous state. Where did the \$670 billion come from? Did the Government manufacture it? Is it printing money? What is it doing? It is certainly not from loans and grants.

This is the first Government in the history of British Guiana and Guyana, as an independent nation, to impose 200 new tax measures [Mr. Jagdeo: In one year.] In 10 months, not one year, Mr. Jagdeo. One hundred and forty-three tax measures in February, 2016 and 57 tax measures in December, 2016. Are you not ashamed of yourselves? Two hundred tax measures?! Since independence, in the 1960s, there has never been anything like this in taxation in our country. This is the first Government to bring a budget that has been criticised so heavily by all and sundry, including supporters of the Government and those who voted for the Government, where the clarion call of all is for the withdrawal of the budget and for the removal of these draconian, anti-people and anti-developmental taxation measures.

Do you want to be the change Government - the fresh start? I am reading all of your fresh starts and these are not things that the Government should be proud of by the way.

The Private Sector Commission (PSC), which includes all of the bodies like chambers of commerce, regions, manufacturing and so on, have come out to speak. They took the trouble to bring 43 recommendations to the Government on how to kick start the economy. What kinds of measures? What did the Government say? There are five of the 43 recommendations that the Government would think of considering. They were not implemented because there are no reflections of them. That is the way in which the Government consults.

The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Guyana (FITUG), which represents thousands of workers of this country, has condemned the budget. The Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association and the Guyana Women Miners Association have also come out and spoken about the budget. I assume that when the Gold and Diamond Miners Association spoke, it spoke for all miners - small, medium, large and the artisanal miners. This is what it stated in a press statement in the *Stabroek News* newspaper dated 2nd December, 2016:

“The Minister of Finance in the 2017 Budget has brought proposed measures that will hasten the sector’s decline. Already, despite the high declaration figures, there are clear signs of decline.”

The article goes on to explain, in a number of ways, what that means. In the *Stabroek News* newspaper dated 2nd December, 2016:

“The 2017 budget has no good news for miners...”

As stated by the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association and the Guyana Women Miners Association because we have a limitation. It also goes on to point out that the Government has forecasted a 35% growth in the sector in 2016. The miners’ association stated:

“Careful examination will show that there has been a slowdown in the local, small and medium scale operations”.

This is because of the hardships that this sector faces. Several concessions were removed from the industry and despite the Minister’s utterances, none of these have been returned. The sector, in 2015, did not have to pay VAT on heavy-duty equipment. In 2016, VAT was required and a phased removal of all other concessions was implemented. As the last line states:

“We cannot do more with less.”

There were also statements from the private sector where the Guyana Telephone Telegraph (GTT) Company had pointed out:

“Our concern is the impact on the consumer. Governments are reducing taxes to attract business but this budget is little less business friendly.”

It goes on to point out that:

“We see that as US\$6 million increased cost per year on current services, they have to be passed to consumers and it will create a negative cycle involving we can invest. This negative cycle will affect the company’s ability to grow. The business case for expansion has significantly changed giving the increased cost to consumers. We see VAT proposals having harmful impacts on the consumer and view them as having 180 degree inconsistency with Government’s stated desire to expand the ICT industry.”

What say you, Minister Ms. Catherine Hughes, in relation to that? You did not refer to that in your speech today.

I will refer later to Ram and McRae, but imagine that the famous Mr. Anand Goolsarran, who is no lover of the People’s Progressive Party, as you all well know, came out highly critical in relation to the budget. He said that “it was highly doubtful that a number of the projections being made were in fact feasible and achievable”.

Mr. Lincoln Lewis has added his comments as a trade union leader, Mr. Sase Narain, Mr. Anand Goolsarran and a range of others, people on the websites, sugar workers, rice farmers, vendors, taxi and minibus drivers, bakers, sales clerks, restaurant workers, hairdressers and barbers, youths, elderly, Amerindians, disabled, poor, rich, women, men, heterosexuals, bi-sexual, gays, lesbians, third gender, doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, accountants, public servants, small, medium and large business women and men, contractors and even children. The man on the street is opposed to this budget. Yet, the Government appears to be oblivious to the concerns of the people. The Government seems to be living in some *la la* land, in some bubble somewhere that it feels that it did not have to answer to anyone and to explain to the people what the budget is all about. **[Mr. Ramjattan: Your bubble is now burst.]** Mine burst a long time ago.

The first Government to ignore the recommendations that had been made by these bodies, the first Government to bring a budget, while one is still being implemented and bringing another one before one is completed, with no actual figures. The first Government to bring a budget that is devoid of any developmental strategy to resolve the challenges that the county faces at the national, regional and global levels. There are only platitudes and descriptions. For example, we will, we shall, we will, we shall, but it is not telling the citizens where in the budget is the allocation for the Demerara Harbour Bridge that is being talked about with the Dutch company. Where are the allocations for these different things found? There is no reflection in the budget to guide us.

The first Government, in two decades, as I have said, that is totally oblivious to what the people think and is uninterested in upholding Article 13 of the Constitution. In fact, in a number of the measures that are being brought before this House that the Government seems to be totally unprepared to protect - the rights of property, freedom of movement, freedom of association and freedom of speech, the Government does not appear to have any interest in these.

It is also the first Government in 23 years that, to use my Colleague, Minister Felix's, word, has presided over the decline of the malnutrition and immunisation figures of this country.

The first time in 23 years that immunisation rates in this country have dropped. This is one of our flagships as Guyanese in the Caribbean and globally. We made these Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets. How dare you, in a matter of 19 months, take Guyana's immunisation figures, put our children at risk, dropped them from 96% for the Bacille Calmette-Guerin (BCG) vaccine, for the Diphtheria, Tetanus, and Pertussis (DPT) vaccines, for the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, to 70% and 60%. How dare this Government do that? Do you know what you are doing to our children? Do you know how you are putting our children at risk in this country? This was a flagship for Guyana and not for the PPP only. The Government should be ashamed, and it comes to this House, sanctimoniously, and tells us about the "good life".

Look at the level of malnutrition since the time of 1985, with all the Beriberi and malnutrition, which my Friend, Mr. Greenidge, knows all about. We have not had an increase in malnutrition in this country in 20 odd years. How dare you? This Government has increased moderate malnutrition, it has increased severe malnutrition in 19 months and then it tells us about the

“good life” and that it is doing all of these things and that nothing was being done before. How dare you? This is the “fresh start”. Is the Government not happy about its “fresh start”? Well get cracking because your “fresh start” is an abysmal failure.

Regrettably, this Government inherited a nation that had shown a positive economic growth rate of an average 5% for over the last 3 years. Now, the economic growth rate has dropped to 2.6% lower than what was before in the period that we were in Government, and lower than what the Hon. Minister projected in 2016 would be the target for the this year. He said that the country was going to achieve a 4.4% growth rate. In 10 months the country made a 2.6% growth rate. This is the lowest recorded growth rate in the last six years. If you do not believe me Comrades, please go to your budget document, Appendix 1, and look at the figures in the first two lines and you will see that Guyana’s growth rate has declined from 4.8% to 2.6%. It was 4.8% in 2012, 5.2% in 2013, 3.8% in 2014, 3.2% in 2015 and 2.6% in 2016. These are not Gail Teixeira’s figures, these are your figures.

The Minister is projecting that there will be a positive growth rate of 3.6% in 2017. However, this seems to be illusive; it is some kind of concoction. If, as the MP Ms. Wade declared passionately, last week, that the PPP had failed with the positive growth rate and has failed with the foreign resources, which we left this Government, of US\$780 million versus what it has today of US\$600 million in the coffers. Where did the US\$100 odd million go? If we are a failure for having left this Government with all of these reserves and a positive economic growth rate, then we are willing to accept you calling us a failure, but the people will know who the failure is. This is because the Government is the one that has taken a positive country on the move and slide it backwards.

What are the facts: Guyana was deemed as one of the fastest growing economies in Latin America and the Caribbean. The fact is indisputable that the Government is now underperforming. No efforts have been given in this House to explain and enlighten the people as to why this Government has underperformed with its capital projects. Why has the Government not been able to perform with all of the money that was put out there and for which it cannot account for? Why?

In fact, during the pre-2015 elections, sugar showed a 16% growth, rice 19% growth, forest showed 14% growth, manufacturing showed 11% growth, construction showed 18% growth and service sectors showed 3% growth. What is it now in 2016, sugar showed a minus 19% growth, projecting 3% into 2017. Rice is projected at a minus 14% growth rate, manufacturing is projected at a minus 7%, services are projected at 1% and the Government is telling us that this is a good life. Is this what you are telling the people? This Government has not inherited anything, it is “hard ears”.

The less we produce, the less we sell, the less money we get as a country, the less revenue we get as a country, the less foreign exchange we get as a country, therefore, the country will begin to go down. This is simple economics. My Colleague and Leader of the Opposition will explain the real economics. I am dealing with simple people’s economics. Therefore, if Guyana does not have the money and is not making the foreign currency, then people will be laid off, there will be shortages of foreign currencies and, therefore, people will lose their jobs and as such they would not be able to pay their bills.

7.44 p.m.

President Clinton had said, years ago, that “it is the economy, stupid”. He was not saying you, of course, but he had said “it is the economy, stupid”. It all comes down to how one manages the economy on behalf of the people. Who benefits? It seems that this Government is suffering from poor Mathematics and it is not the primary school children’s Mathematics assessment that is the problem in this country, it is the Mathematics assessment of the Cabinet of this country that is the problem! The Government inherited a country that was progressing and moving forward with emerging sectors contributing to the diversification of the economy, such as tourism, hospitality services, information based technology and construction which created over 8,000 jobs. A country that earned over US\$170 million from trading carbon services, one of a few and one of the largest in the world.

New investments in gold mining, oil and gas, new fuel depots, a new five-star hotel, a speciality hospital, a private developers’ scheme and new hotels in Regions 2, 3, 4, 6 and 9. There was hope and optimism. Tentative yes, but real... [Mr Nagamootoo: Lots of corruption.] I

am coming to corruption. Despite its \$90 billion unpatriotic slash of two budgets, Guyana was finally climbing out of this quick sand sucking past and curse of the past.

What has it done with this legacy? What has it done with the inheritance which it has inherited from the past Government? What has it done with the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS)? As I said the Government wanted to be new and fresh, so it has a green strategy, but no one knows what it is. It has not defined it. Even the Minister who spoke on it does not know what he means when he talks about green strategy. He has not got a clue, nor does nobody else. So I do not, particularly, quarrel with him.

The US\$80 million from the Amaila Falls Hydropower Project - while they palaver over whether it is feasible or not the Government has to face, from its condemnation, the project. But all of the Hon. Members on that side have to save face because they condemned, voted against and prevented the Amaila Falls Hydropower Project. As of today, if the Amaila Falls Hydropower Project had gone through in 2014, we would have almost been finished building the Amaila Falls Hydropower Project and the horizon would have been closer to having cheaper electricity in this country. But we have lost three years, hundreds of jobs and support services. Yet, in the 2017 Budget, the Government has the audacity, after killing the Amaila Falls Hydropower Project, to come to this House and to say to the Guyanese people that they now have to pay VAT on their electricity bills. It is so audacious to be bad.

The Government has seized concessions from people; it has refused to meet foreign companies to resolve differences; and it has myopically and vindictively thrown away almost 1000 jobs, making room for the financiers of the 2015 Elections campaign.

The Government had established nine Commissions of Inquiry, millions of dollars were spent and what has happened? For the most important one of all, the Commission of Inquiry into the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo), the Government threw away the recommendations and did its own thing. They are closing the Wales Sugar Factory and all the words that are being spoken about.

As a Government, you have the amazing acknowledgment that since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been no period in this country that jobs have been lost, as in the last year. There has been no other time, except in the year 1978 with the deployment of the workers and the firing of 4000

bauxite workers. This is first time, in almost 30 years... [Mr. Jagdeo: The year of job loss.] The year of job loss and then the Economic Recovery Programme (ERP), which was the next wave in the 1980s that led to the public service shrinking from 40 odd thousand to 28,000.

The *Crème de la Crème* of this Government's history of 19 months is the 26 scandals of no mean order. The most recent one to come to light has been the D'Urban Park Development Project. The PPP/C was accused of corruption, but I challenge anyone in the Government to find 26 scandals of corruption during the 23 years of the PPP Government, versus the 26 scandals in 19 months. [Mr. Jagdeo: They have an Olympic Record.] So the Government has the Olympic Record. [Interruption]

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

I wanted to talk about the rice industry, but I will leave that to my dear Colleague Mr. Seeraj. I do want to say that when the Prime Minister spoke the last time about going to Mexico, I do not know what has happened to the Mexican market. It did not seem to have taken place. As my Colleague from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs knows, the Cuban market is being explored, as I understand, for Guyana's rice. It is not by the Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB), but by an individual who has sympathies to this Government. He alone is going to be representing the rice farmers and looking for the Cuban Market, starting at around 10,000 – 50,000 tonnes. [Mr. Jagdeo: Is it Larry King, again?] No.

Then, of course, there is my Friend, Mr. Greenidge, and the Partial Scope Agreement of Brazil. Why are we not lobbying with the Brazilians in the Administrative Commission for our quota to go up from 10,000 to over 100,000 tonnes of rice? I will give an example as to why I am raising Brazil. It is because of our exports to Brazil in 2015, which has grown to \$1.881 billion and had dropped, by the way, in 2016.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have been speaking for 25 minutes.

Ms. Teixeira: So Brazil is a market. There are many other issues to talk about. However, there are no transformative projects and that has been pointed out. The Government has been scaring away foreign companies that have hired people and, as I said before, this is not good for our image as a country.

The Government has underperformed as a central Government, as a region, local government and statutory body. The Minister admitted in August that only 50% of the capital budget had been spent.

If one looks at Appendix 1, one would see the figures for private consumption as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which has fallen from 70% to 56% in 2016. While public consumption has increase from 10% to 16%. Therefore, it seems as though the Government wants to be competing with the private sector in relation to this issue.

I would just like to raise the issue as to why the rush for the budget in 10 months and there is a profound concern about that and I will try to synthesise it. Since the books do not close until the 31st December and these books, documents and so on, were published somewhere before the 28th November when we received them, we are, therefore, not looking at the close of books figures - actual figures. We are looking at the *guesstimates* maybe. So how are we, as a people, as Parliament and as an Opposition are to do what is correct, which is to scrutinise the accounts of this country and the expenditure of the taxpayers' money? We cannot because we are dealing with the *guesstimates*. The figures have not come in.

In a way there is a sinister aspect to this because, by this rush, the Opposition is being prevented and I know that if we were on that side and they were on this side and we had dared to do that, there would have been *bruk up* in this place. I know that and one could ask the former Speakers. This Speaker, Mr. Speaker with due respect to you, has not really seen a *bruk up* in this place yet and I hope he never does. It would not be from our side, I assure him.

I believe that this Government just wants to get this budget over with, as quickly as possible. Using its one seat to railroad and ram this down the throats of people and bring in the 200 tax measures in a matter of 10 months. I think that this is all the Government wants to do; to get it over with because it is bad news and it will pray that, by Christmas, everyone would have *sport up* and enjoy themselves, and we go into the New Year and they are going to forget about it until 1st January, until the taxes start to *lash* them.

This is a very authoritarian and undemocratic approach to the conditions in this place. [Mr. Jagdeo: It is a military approach.] Militaristic. Believe me one cannot move an economy

by platitudes and by thinking that the Almighty is on his or her side. It just does not work. One has to do, make or produce to facilitate growth in this country.

One of the Members had pointed out that the Government was going to lose money by the VAT. I had asked them to go because it does not seem that they would have read their budget document. I really cannot help you. Could that Member please turn to page 73, paragraph 5.9, second line where it states,

“Tax revenue is expected to increase by 8.9% to \$162.6 billion reflecting a considerable increase in the collection of VAT due to the measures to be implemented in 2017.”

Did you all not read this document? So, go ahead and live in your cloistered chambers of your Ministers’ offices. But I ask for the sake of this country and for the sake of us as Guyanese to have the Ministers walk the streets and all over, to see the empty barbershops and hairdressing salons. Ask the vendors what is going on and what business is like. Ask the people who have closed down... Mr. Speaker, I am sure you do not go to many nightclubs, but a number of nightclubs have closed down, which were opportunities for young people. Restaurants have closed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Teixeira you have to wrap up now.

Ms. Teixeira: Yes, thank you Sir. I encourage them to walk the streets and convince the people that all of us are wrong and that the Government is right. But the Government has not even tried to convince us that they are right in this Parliament.

In conclusion, the Ram & McRae Report stated, not Gail Teixeira nor the PPP, that:

“We believe that the budget measures, if implemented, as they are proposed, will have a negative impact on the economy and growth. In our view the achievement of the projected growth will be extremely difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

The review makes it clear that if the measures are passed, as proposed, Guyanese can expect a rough ride in 2017. Therefore, I would like to debate one day on what is a good life. Therefore, I would like to say withdraw the budget and the impositions of these things. Let us sit and make a budget for the development of our country and for our people.

Thank you Sir. *[Applause]*

Minister with the Ministry of Finance [Mr. Sharma]: Mr. Speaker, please permit me to congratulate you, personally, for the way in which you handled the Hon. Member, Mr. Charlie's matter. In this case, the Hon. Member Mr. Charlie received justice, but a young man, by the name of Mr. John Adams, who was called stupid and it was said that he would have been slapped. That individual did not receive justice. So I must thank you.

I would like to respond to a few presentations made here. The Hon. Member Mr. Odinga Lumumba indicated that he did not know where the feasibility study is that was done for the Linden/Lethem Road. The feasibility study was done by the Inter-America Development Bank (IDB). There were five such studies and they were under the PPP Administration.

So the PPP Administration is aware about the feasibility studies and everything else that was needed for the Linden/ Lethem Road. I would like to ask where is the feasibility study for the Amaila Falls Road. It is because that road started at US\$15 million and ended up costing about US\$45 million.

Also I heard from the Hon. Member that no sector was left untouched. The Hon. Member was indicating that the sector was not properly dealt with, but Budget 2017 is replete with billions of dollars going to various sectors. So I do not know whether the Hon. Member read the estimates or the budget to realise those things.

7.59 p.m.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Gail Teixeira, also said that this is a "Don't care Government". I do not know how a "Don't care Government" could give \$32 billion to the GuySuCo. So these are things that need to be addressed.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Gail Teixeira, also said that since this Administration started presenting budgets, some \$650 billion was budgeted. The Hon. Member is questioning if their Administration did not leave this Government in good position, where did this Government get all of this money from. Where did we get all this money from? We got all the money from the prudent administration, stringent tax collection and control of expenditure. So, there was no money in the Consolidated Fund, it was the revenue collection and the way that the Government

collected the money and accounted for it, that gave this Government the money to present the largest budget ever.

As I rise to participate in the debate of the motion for the approval of the *Estimates of the Public Sector and Budget for the financial year 2017*, let me first commend my Colleague, the Minister of Finance, the Hon. Member Mr. Winston Jordan, for delivering the 2017 Budget totalling \$250 billion on 28th November, 2016. This would not have been possible without the hard work and dedicated staff of the Ministry of Finance and with the cooperation of the staff of the various budget agencies and their subject Ministers. I participated in some of these meetings. Each of the Ministers here, accompanied by their various Permanent Secretaries (PSs) and Regional Executive Officers (REOs), has defended his/her own budget.

From all accounts, Budget 2017 has raised the spirit of the majority of the Guyanese in this festive season, with the exception of a small disgruntled minority. Christmas and the holidays are seasons for and of giving. It is a time when people are more kind and openhearted, which was evident in the crafting of Budget 2017, as it promotes equity, fairness and focus on the poor.

Budget 2017 is the third consecutive and largest budget of the coalition Government in just 18 months in office. This is the first budget in four decades to be laid before the National Assembly, before the commencement of the financial year, in keeping with Article 218 (1) of the *Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana*. There can be no doubt that the early budget envisaged by our Constitution was intended to facilitate the effective implementation of Government's policies and the timely delivery of Government projects and programmes, immediately, in the New Year, in order to deliver the good life. Therefore, it is no wonder why the Opposition is annoyed over the early budget submission and has called for the withdrawal of this budget.

Budget 2017 was presented under the theme: *Building a Diversified, Green Economy: Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*. I have no doubt, that our coalition Government, utilising the experience learned from overcoming the daunting challenges after challenges, commonly referred to as the *cleaning up of the mess* for the past 18 months in office, will now be in a better position to achieve its goals.

Budget 2017 will continue to set the platform of the Government's vision for the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, in keeping with the year 2020 and beyond. Also, Budget 2017 is in keeping with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which each budget will repeat, the A Partnership for National Unity (APNU) mantra of a good life for all Guyanese.

Budget 2017 continues from Budget 2015 and Budget 2016 to provide measures to ease the financial burdens of the earning season. While improving the living conditions, these measures will result in more money in the pockets for our citizens and encourage more spending, supporting local businesses. In some areas of the measures, as you could recall Mr. Speaker, there was a 54% increase in the hourly rate paid to schools sweeper/cleaners that was announced in Budget 2015. That was for every part-time hourly paid Cleaner who receives \$312 per hour with effect from 1st September, 2015.

Workers no longer have to pay income tax on their National Insurance Scheme (NIS) Contributions as was announced in Budget 2015 and which had resulted in a loss of revenue then, of about \$1.3 billion annually, but most importantly, it resulted in a net income increase in the disposable income of workers.

The recent months have seen marked, a dramatic increase in non-contributory old age pension paid to pensioners over the age of 65. Old age pensioners received \$13,125 for 42,500 pensioners budgeted in 2014 to \$19,000 for 53,000 pensioners budgeted in 2017, representing a 44.8% increase. Contrast this achievement of the APNU/AFC Government with the previous Government's third budget in office, of an increase from \$10,000 in 2012 to \$13,125 in 2014, only representing a 31.2% increase.

Public assistance has increased from \$5,900 for 9000 persons in 2014 to \$7,500 in 2017, representing a 27.1% increase for over 9,600 men and women who are disabled. There was an increase in the minimum wage from \$39,540 in 2014 to \$55,000 in 2015, representing a 39.9% increase. Increase in the tax threshold from \$600,000 per annum in 2012 to \$720,000 per annum in 2017, which would see an additional 7,600 persons being taken off the tax register in 2017. Reduction in the personal income tax rate of 30% to 28% for individuals earning less than an \$180,000 per month, a new rate of 40% will be applied to an individual earning in excess of \$2,160,000 per annum and which was proposed after just 18 months in office.

Contrast this achievement with the previous Government. A reduction in the personal income tax rate of 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ % to 30% which was proposed in the 2013 Budget and this was after 20 years in office. They took 20 years in office to reduce that rate. We did it in 18 months. Measures, such as the increase in the income tax threshold and the removing of income tax on NIS and the reduction in the personal income tax rates, will benefit everyone, whether they are a public servant, a private sector employer or self-employed. Everyone will now be paying less tax.

We also increased foster care stipends to \$20,000. A reduction in cooperate tax from 30% to 27% for manufacturers and non-commercial companies. Introduction of a dual tax system of 27.5% and 40% for companies carrying out both non-commercial and commercial activities. A reduction in the VAT from 16% to 14%.

To answer my question as to how long the Guyanese nation would have had to wait for the PPP small “c” Government to reduce VAT? The answer could be found in the *Hansard* of Tuesday, 17th April, 2012, where the PPP/C Minister of Finance, Dr. Ashni Singh, in the 2012 Budget Debate, in a rebuttal to the Opposition’s demand for a reduction of VAT and the implementation of the PPP/C’s promise to conduct a review of all taxes, the former Minister of Finance stated:

“...anybody who departs or abandons or casts aside the temptation of popular political appeal and objectively and seriously examines the Value Added Tax will soon discover that a reduction in the Value Added Tax will bring little or no benefit to the poor people of this country. In fact, for reasons I will outline shortly, the most vulnerable will benefit least...”

This will tell us that the PPP/C would never have reduced VAT. This is the Minister of Finance, in 2012, saying that he would not reduce VAT. We did this anyway. We also increased the VAT threshold from \$10 million to \$15 million, which would reduce the VAT base and, consequently, less VAT registrants to administer.

The VAT on electricity consumption of 14% in excess of \$10,000 per month was also proposed. The VAT of 14% on water consumption, in excess of \$1,500 per month, was also proposed. The proposed VAT on electricity and water consumption and the proposal to expand the list of exempt items and eliminate all zero rated items have caused much unnecessary grief to the Guyanese nation, based on the remarks of *the Prophet of doom and gloom*.

The truth is that the proposed changes to the VAT regime were based on careful consideration and were evidence based. As it relates to VAT on water, based on the data from the Guyana Water Incorporated (GWI), the average monthly water bill for a household of four was \$731. A recent analysis of the GWI data, based on November, 2016, revealed that a total of 182,609 customers, of which 155,011 or 85% of the customers, are below \$1,500 per month, and, therefore, would not pay VAT. This is a recent update I received before attendance.

Just for the record, my water bill is below \$1,500 per month and the Ministers pay their own water bills and not the State. As it relates to VAT on electricity, a recent analysis of the Guyana Power and Light Inc. (GPL) database for September, 2016, revealed a total of 184,800 customers. This includes 135,875 post-paid customers of which 108,827 or 80% of the customers are below \$10,000 per month, and 49,000 pre-paid customers of which only 29,000 purchased tokens monthly and of which 27,222 of the customers are below \$10,000 per month and therefore will not attract VAT.

The Prophet of doom and gloom is spreading misinformation that the large increase of the VAT projected in Budget 2017, is as a result of the VAT on water, electricity, medical supplies and school items. However, what they are not telling the nation is that they left a large unpaid refund of input VAT, as far back as 2010, when they demitted office and this is part of the mess that we are speaking about.

The Guyana Revenue Authority (GRA) VAT refund paid in 2016 totalled \$3.7 billion. Therefore, the revised 2016 figures in Budget 2017 represents a net VAT which resulted in the larger than usual variance, when one tries to compare 2016 to 2017 projected VAT collection. The Opposition is now claiming that this increase is because of the VAT that will now be imposed, but it is because we were paying off their debt.

Budget 2017 presented a broad transformational approach to building a greener more diverse economy, in the face of numerous headwinds to growth.

8.14 p.m.

I am sure that all of us were disheartened to hear that the economic growth for 2016 is now projected at only 2.6%. Factors such as *El Nino* reduced the operation of some companies in the

agriculture sector and supplementation of the PSIP, the PSIP's contribution to this slowed down. The reason I mentioned this and the low growth rate is because the Hon. Member Ms. Teixeira in her presentation boasted that the PPP for many years have positive growth rate 4%, 6% and 8%, but it did not do these things for 23 years that we did in 18 months. However, this slow growth rate is inevitable result of years of reliance and high global commodity price of sugar, rice, and gold support growth by failing to address the decline efficiency and viability of our traditional agriculture sector.

To respond to the moderate growth rate our Government is presenting a Budget 2017 aimed at stimulating the economy. Improvement in our macroeconomic forecasting capacity is improving our ability to interact counter cyclical fiscal policies when growth is expected to exceed or fall short of the long-term potential. Budget 2017 also indicated that our Government is seeking and taking on challenges necessary task perform our traditional agriculture sector sugar and rice must become driver and growth and not drag on the economy. We need to focus less on preserving these industries as they were in the past and focus more on solution that protect individual workers and create sustainable employment for them.

In the rice industry farmers are already taking encouraging steps including beginning to cultivate higher value added aromatic variety of rice. With regard to GuySuCo, we look forward for the report of the subcommittee of Cabinet for the recommendation for the reorganising and the revitalising of the industry. Our traditional and agriculture sectors are important part of our economy and they have received a great deal of attention. However, we must pay equal attention to other growing sector such as manufacturing, construction and services.

Budget 2017 takes steps towards providing the sound analysis and flexible innovation policy that these new risk and opportunities call for us. To guard against the menace of the corresponding banking crisis, the Government of Guyana, led by the Ministry of Finance and the Bank of Guyana, is partaking with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other countries in the Caribbean to advocate for more clarity with regard to the Anti-Money Laundering and Countering Financing Terrorist (AMLCFT) regulations in advance economies and greater willingness on the part of the international bank to work with local banks to address the regulatory concerns.

We are also pursuing a multi-dimensional approach to financial sector development to both make Guyana an attractive place for international bank to do business and to improve the financial production and productivity available to our citizens. This includes the modernisation of Guyana electronic system payment to allow businesses, banks and individuals to conduct transactions more easily and cheaply through the automotive transfer. Our citizens should not have to put themselves at risk to carry large sum of moneys to pay rent or purchase a vehicle or appliances that they diligently saved for. To this end, \$50 million is budgeted in Budget 2017 for a project that would cause some \$1,050,000,000.

Our Government is committed to promoting a green economy so that our people can enjoy a safe healthy and beautiful Guyana and so that we can do and share the environment and the problem affecting every country. Budget 2017 includes a plethora of measures to promote sustainable development, including tax exemption for importation of items for wind and solar energy investment. These initiatives will create jobs. They will create green jobs. Mr. Speaker, you would have heard that the Leader of the Opposition had questioned the Minister of Finance figures in relation to Guyana Office for Investment (GO-Invest), in terms of the proposed job creation and direct foreign investment (DFI).

What was amusing about that is that the Leader of the Opposition - I think I read in the newspaper – was saying that the figures from GO-Invest are unreliable. He knows that the figures are unreliable because he was saying that, as the Minister of Finance and as President, he relied on these honourable figures. These are conflicting statements but I could say to you, under the stewardship of Minister of Business, who means business, GO-Invest is doing business. The figures and information are correct and accurate.

What was also amusing is that the Leader of the Opposition also questioned some of our revenue measures in the budget and he was surprised about was put in the budget about garnishment. He said that he would carry us to court because we are going against the Constitution and the rights of the people. I do not know. If he does carry us to court, how he will defend himself when he would go before the judge to answer question on why was it in the VAT Act. Section 49 of the VAT Act speaks about distress proceedings. These are some questions that left us in some amount of surprise.

Going back to the GO-Invest, it surprised me when the Leader of the Opposition said what he did because in the forensic audit, which was concluded with GO-Invest, was submitted to Cabinet. What came out of the forensic audit is that what the Leader of the Opposition indicated probably is correct. What happened at GO-Invest was that it was supposed to do the investment agreement and send it to the Commissioner-General, the Commissioner-General was supposed to send it to the Minister of Finance. What that audit revealed is that some of these agreement went directly to the Office of the President, then they went to the former Minister of Tourism to the Minister of Finance, bypassing GO-Invest. GO-Invest cannot get the true figure. When he said that he cannot depend on the figure, he knows what he was speaking about.

Also from a forensic audit, Mr. Speaker, as you know, the National Industrial and Commercial Investment Limited (NICIL) forensic audit is before the Guyana Police Force; the Guyana Marketing Corporation (GMC) is before the Guyana Police Force; there is the *Pradoville II* which is Central Housing and Planning Authority is before the Guyana Police Force; the Cricket World Cup is before the Guyana Police Force.

There is an addition audit that is presently being conducted and it is yet to be concluded and this is the Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) audit which every single transaction is highly questionable. What I am saying is the Guyana Police Force, whichever it is given to, if it is given to Special Organised Crime Unit (SOCU) or Criminal Investigative Department (CID), I do not think that there is sufficient police officers to investigate these forensic audit. We may have to look at employing additional investigators.

With these few words, in closing, I urge the Hon. Members of the House to support Budget 2017 and be mindful that, for all of us, our desire is for a “good life for all Guyanese”. [*Applause*]

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members we have completed our business for today. I request the Prime Minister to move the adjournment.

First Vice-President and Prime Minister [Mr. Nagamootoo]: Mr. Speaker, I move that this House be adjourned until tomorrow Thursday at 10 a.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members the House stands adjourn until 10 o'clock, Thursday morning.

Adjourned accordingly at 8.26 p.m.