



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE PARLIAMENT OF
THE CO-OPERATIVE REPUBLIC
OF GUYANA

OFFICIAL REPORT

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FIRST SESSION (2020-2024) OF THE TWELFTH PARLIAMENT OF GUYANA UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CO-OPERATIVE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA HELD IN THE DOME OF THE ARTHUR CHUNG CONFERENCE CENTRE, LILIENDAAL, GREATER GEORGETOWN

73RD Sitting

Tuesday, 23RD January, 2024

**PARLIAMENT OFFICE
HANSARD DIVISION**

The Assembly convened at 10.17 a.m.

Prayers

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (71)

Speaker (1)

*Hon. Manzoor Nadir, M.P.,
*Speaker of the National Assembly,
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MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT (38)

(i) MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S PROGRESSIVE PARTY/CIVIC (PPP/C) (38)

Prime Minister (1)

+ Hon. Brigadier (Ret'd) Mark Anthony Phillips, M.S.S., M.P.,
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[Absent – on leave]

Vice-President (1)

+ Hon. Bharrat Jagdeo, M.P.,
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[Absent – on leave]

Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (1)

+ Hon. Mohabir Anil Nandlall, M.P.,
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+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Speaker**

Senior Ministers (16)

+ Hon. Gail Teixeira, M.P.,
(Region No. 7 – Cuyuni/Mazaruni),
Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance,
Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance,
Government Chief Whip,
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+ Hon. Bishop Juan A. Edghill, M.S., J.P., M.P.,
Minister of Public Works,
Ministry of Public Works,
Wight's Lane,
Kingston,
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+ Hon. Dr. Frank C. S. Anthony, M.P.,
Minister of Health,
Ministry of Health,
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Georgetown.

+ Hon. Priya D. Manickchand, M.P.,
(Region No. 3 – Essequibo Islands/West Demerara),
Minister of Education,
Ministry of Education,
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+ *Hon. Brindley H.R. Benn, M.P.,
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Ministry of Home Affairs,
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+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Minister**

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Minister of Amerindian Affairs,
Ministry of Amerindian Affairs,
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South Cummingsburg,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Joseph L.F. Hamilton, M.P.,
Minister of Labour,
Ministry of Labour,
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+ Hon. Vickram Outar Bharrat, M.P.,
Minister of Natural Resources,
Ministry of Natural Resources,
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Ministry of Tourism, Industry and Commerce,
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Ministry of Housing and Water,
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* **Non-Elected Minister**

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Minister within the Ministry of Public Works,
Ministry of Public Works,
Wight's Lane,
Kingston,
Georgetown.

Hon. Anand Persaud, M.P.,
Minister within the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development,
Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development,
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Hon. Mr. Faizal M. Jaffarally, M.P.,

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Hon. Mr. Roysdale A. Forde, S.C., M.P.,
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Rupununi.
(Culvert City Lethem)

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Hon. Ms. Annette N. Ferguson, M.P.,
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Hon. Ms. Juretha V. Fernandes, M.P.,
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[Absent]

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(ii) A New and United Guyana, Liberty and Justice Party and The New Movement (ANUG, LJP & TNM) (1)

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Officers (2)

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Clerk of the National Assembly,
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Public Buildings,
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Georgetown.

Ms. Hermina Gilgeours,
Deputy Clerk of the National Assembly,
Parliament Office,
Public Buildings,
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Hansard Division Officers (16)

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Senior Editor

Ms. Shawnel Cudjoe,
Senior Editor

Ms. Carol Bess,
Editor

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Reporter

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Reporter (a.g.)

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Reporter (a.g.)

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Mr. Parmanand Singh,
Pre –Press Technician

Mr. Saeed Umrao,
Audio Technician

Mr. Daison Horsham,
Audio Technician

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ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE SPEAKER

Birthday Wishes

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, before we start, let me take this opportunity to extend on your behalf, on behalf of the Clerk of the National Assembly and the staff, birthday wishes to the Hon. Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Mr. Charles Ramson and His Excellency, the Hon. Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo.

PUBLIC BUSINESS

GOVERNMENT'S BUSINESS

MOTIONS

MOTION FOR THE APPROVAL OF THE ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR FINANCIAL YEAR 2024

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 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 the expenditure;

AND WHEREAS the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana for the financial year 2024 have been prepared and laid before the Assembly on 15th January, 2024, as summarised in the attached Schedule 1;

AND WHEREAS the Constitution requires that the expenditure of each of the Constitutional Agencies listed in the Third Schedule of the Constitution be financed as a direct charge on the Consolidated Fund determined as a lumpsum by way of an annual subvention approved by the National Assembly after a review and approval of the Constitutional Agency's annual budget as a part of the process of the determination of the national budget;

AND WHEREAS the Fiscal Management and Accountability Act, Cap. 73:02, requires that the annual lump sum subvention recommended by the Minister with Responsibility for Finance for each Constitutional Agency be included in the annual budget proposal for approval by the National Assembly;

AND WHEREAS the Minister with Responsibility for Finance recommends lump sum subventions for each

Constitutional Agency for the financial year 2024 as summarised in the attached Schedule 2;

AND WHEREAS the Natural Resource Fund Act 2021 provides that the amount that the Minister with Responsibility for Finance shall request the National Assembly to approve, and the amount that the National Assembly shall approve, as the withdrawal from the Fund for the next ensuing fiscal year shall be included in the annual budget proposal and shall not exceed for that year, the ceiling calculated in accordance with the said Act:

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly approves the Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2024, of a total sum of one trillion, eighty billion, five hundred and eight million, and six hundred and thirty-seven thousand, two hundred and nine dollars (\$1,080,508,637,209), excluding sixty five billion, three hundred and fifty-four million, one hundred and twenty-seven thousand and sixty-five dollars (\$65,354,127,065) which is chargeable by law, as detailed therein and summarised in Schedule 1, and agree that it is expedient to amend the law and make further provision in respect of finance:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That the National Assembly approves the recommended lumpsum subvention for each Constitutional Agency for the financial year 2024 as stated in Schedule 2, amounting to a total sum of thirteen billion, three hundred and sixty eight million, five hundred and seventy-five thousand and eighty-three dollars (\$13,368,575,083) which is charged upon the Consolidated Fund by the Constitution and for the sums voted for the Constitutional Agencies to form part of the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditures of Guyana for the financial year 2024.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly approves the sum of \$240,059,490,286 equivalent to US\$1,154,250,087 to be withdrawn from the Natural Resource Fund for the financial year 2024 in accordance with the Natural Resource Fund Act 2021.

[Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance]

Assembly resumed budget debate.

Mr. Speaker: Our first speaker for today is the Hon. Mr. Khemraj Ramjattan.

Mr. Ramjattan: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, let me do the protocols and of course thank Minister Ashni Singh for doing the presentation of this Budget. I know that in the context of a paradigm shift of our economy into the 'bigger times', as I would call it, is especially important that he gets it right, although I will come to discuss how he did not get it right. I would also like to congratulate his staff for doing as best as they could, knowing the instructions from the Vice President and, of course, the Minister himself.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to open by saying that Government's spending is the core function of what a government must do during the course of the year, and of course, the budgetary process starts with the tabling of the estimates and the presentation of the speech. I must indicate that, in view of the tremendous windfall of wealth that we have as a result of that signing of the agreement in 2016 with ExxonMobil, my hopes were dashed consequent upon seeing what has happened here in the spending, and the priorities put for the spending, in this Budget. It is no doubt at a time in Guyana when we have so much of money that could be doing so many things, but a nation must invest in ending poverty and its working poor must get a better deal. This is my opinion: I feel that that has not happened with a budget. [Mr. McCoy: Did you check with Aubrey? Be very careful.] Could we not be interrupted? It is important then that we feel this money should have been more spread across rather than being given largely to what I regard as 'a 1,000 contractor crony capitalists' who will benefit from that \$662 billion, which is the capital expenditure. Dr. Ashni Singh must appreciate that at this macro level we are having, basically, a very lopsided treatment of the moneys. Dr. Ashni Singh, and of course I am certain at the instructions of Mr. Bharrat Jagdeo, another doctor, must have known, like the editorial of *Stabroek News* yesterday indicated in relation to a woman named Lilowtie Hardiall, that indeed times are hard in the 10th richest country in the world per capita.

10.24 a.m.

Rather than spending so much money on roads and all the construction, we ought to have at least put \$100 billion more into that and subtract it from the Capital Expenditure. That is what we should have done. A couple of years ago, I was in this National Assembly indicating that there is massive mismanagement of funds when capital works are given big spaces. As it is known, I quoted them from an extremely important Economist who have done studies in these matters. These matters were dealt with in a book called *The Bottom Billion*. The important thing here is what he said at page 138

and I will quote it. It has the word corruption, but it is a quote from a textbook.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, we have a rule about reputation.

Mr. Ramjattan: What reputation? It was 10 years ago, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Not only 10 years ago; I think I have heard this over my past decade and a half, from your own mouth, and we can get the record. Please, expunge that part and say beep.

Mr. Ramjattan: Alright. By contrast, the 'mismanagement of funds' in the construction sector has been a dirty secret. Transparency International decided to bring it to greater prominence by devoting its *Global Report 2005* to the sector. Construction has all the ingredients conducive to 'mismanagement of funds'. I used that in the alternative. Each project is a one-time only thing, and so cannot readily be priced. There are so many uncertainties and execution that it is not possible to draw what the economist referred to as a "complete contract." As a result, it is easy to evade the discipline that would otherwise be imposed by competitive tendering. A crooked construction company colludes with a public official to win the contract with artificially low bid, but then recontracts on points of detail that crop up during construction... There are now credible studies for some countries that estimate of how much 'mismanagement of funds' in the construction sector is raising the cost of infrastructure and thereby reducing growth and these effects are large. Of course, he goes on to say that this is an attribute generally of what you called "natural resource" economies such as Guyana in view of the oil. What we have in this Budget is a spending of \$662 billion in infrastructure of all varieties. What we have as wages and salaries and pension is a \$121 billion. When we go back to the practical realities of what it is that the construction contractors will make, it is generally in the vicinity of about 20% profit for each contract. Twenty percent of profits for each contract will make \$133 billion, which will then go to some companies and some private contractors; and that is about a thousand of them. It is roughly a thousand of them who have won contracts over the years in the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) Government and so the \$133 billion is going towards this 1,000.

For emoluments, the public servants which includes police, soldiers, public servants administration and all of that is about \$54,000. What do you have as pensioners? There is about 40,000... Well, I see inside of this Budget Speech, the Hon Member, Dr. Ashni Singh indicated that it is 76,000.

Now, if a person is to add 76,000 to 54,000 public servants and they are getting \$121 billion as against \$133 billion for about a 1,000, we are going to create a caste system in this country. That is not unparliamentary, Sir. Caste system: whereby the inequalities are going to be so vast to the extent whereby they are literally going to control this economy. Everyone would go and purchase friendships literally with Members of the Government as again as *The Bottom Billion* states. It is an important aspect of the matter to appreciate because how could you spend so much on infrastructure knowing that you have the Lilowties, Gurdials/Hardayals saying all those things.

By the way, in the *Stabroek News* that was the 52nd Edition of the cost of livings interviews. There have been so many people stating – but we do have some of them in the Government now stating that – ‘look a lot of people have been praising the Budget, a lot of people have been praising Budget’. Well, let us be balanced. How many people have been indicating that this thing is hard and life is so difficult all across the country? It is indeed a toxic combination too that we have... when you are going to have a set of oligarchs in this country; a set of oligarchs in combination with a set of control freaks, because everything they want to control. They want to control the press. They want to control what people think and a whole lot of things. That is why this Budget, that combination is going to be disastrous for this country. It will be called the ‘*control oligarchs*’. It is a sickening situation. We are not seeing that poverty is being confronted. As I have said on other occasions, I am quoting from, I think, President Roosevelt: “Necessitous men are not free men”.

People who cannot afford two square meals, in Guyana, are not going to be free. All flourishing is mutual because poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere. It is fundamental then that we do not make a portion of our country, one that is embarrassing because poverty and being poor induces a lot of shame. It induces embarrassment. It is a diminishment of life. It is a feeling that a person's Government is against him/her, as some have told us. I have gone to the estate areas and they have indicated that although we voted for this Government... they said the Government seems to be against us. There is the constant fear that it will get worse. That is what people think. It will create this caste system, as I said, and second-class citizens. We must advocate the building of consensus. A lot of PPP/C's people have been calling on me and pleading for us to have more consensus and be conscientious that indeed we have a paradigm shift now that necessitates what is called a shared prosperity. I do not know if we are going to have that

because, as a matter of fact, we feel that these people ‘*control-li-garchs*’ –that is the word – do not want to be persuaded by any argument that comes from the other side. We need, in relation to this matter, a leadership which cultivates an ethic of genuine care, compassion and concern for every human being.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say that we did lots more in relation to what they are now doing with this big set of money, which was brilliantly exposted by Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes and, of course, the speakers of yesterday as to what we are doing and what we did in that five-year period. With less money we did a lot more for workers; we did lots more for public servants; we did lots more for the working poor. When we built the roads with the small amount of money that we had you ran to them and said: *abbi guh eat road?* You got \$202 billion now on the roads and there are people such as Lilowtie Hardyall stating that she cannot get more than one meal a day. What is that? It is an atrocity and a monstrosity. I want to indicate that also amongst this thousand or so we see that the Government is being extraordinarily friendly with them. They are tax dodgers to a large extent, this class and as stated in Mr. Christopher Rams' focus and analysis, he has indicated that a lot of these self-employed and contractor class do not, with all the big moneys they make, pay their taxes to the extent of what it is supposed to be. The right taxes. What we had done – in 2015 to 2020 – was to create a withholding tax so that at least we could have some amount of money from the big profits they make. For everybody, taxes and the payments of taxes are the first duty of citizenship in my opinion. It is... [Mr. McCoy: Do you pay?] Of course, I do. The withholding... [Interruption]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member Mr. McCoy, please. I have been cautioning people about unparliamentary language and I heard you quite distinctly just now. Please, control yourself.

Mr. Ramjattan: Yes, please. This withholding tax is an important aspect to ensure that at least some income comes into the Budget or at least the Consolidated Fund for the purposes of ensuring that they pay their due amount. But it was repealed as soon as this Government came in. This is why, as I have said some 10 years ago that this Government is extremely close with that class of people, the crony-capitalist contractor class to the detriment of the working class. It is an amazing thing that these are the people... They still have it in the Constitution and in their Party that they are the Vanguard of the working class. [Mr. Mustapha and Mr. McCoy: We are.] You can state that but, at the

concrete level, you are a cement and sand government and that is what it is. You are not working class at all and so you could go and take that. There must be a balanced approach that should have gone into the distribution of the spendings here. We have not seen that. This rebalancing is necessary because, sometimes, one can overheat an economy by spending so much money on infrastructure when one does not have the capacity and the capabilities. It was mentioned yesterday of what one has to do in relation to stalling the projects and some of the projects being stalled there is absolutely no disciplining of those contractors - even giving addition and fuel that indeed there is a bias for that class. One has to start taking away the contracts. Hon. Minister, Bishop Edghill, you have to start ensuring that they do not do this indiscipline thing. We are going to have nothing of the sort. Do you know why? It is because you go back to *The Bottom Billion*. Why countries are poor? How countries fall apart? It is because of this elite nexus with them that their treasury chests are going to be filled, let us say, 2025 elections.

10.39 a.m.

It is annoying what is transpiring with the sort of money. We had wanted the oil moneys to be harnessed in such a way that everybody will share in the pie but, no, we have an exclusive set of people dealing with it. It is not going to help this country. As I have said somewhere else, it is going to create disenchantment and resentment at the bottom there, when people see that some sets are getting; especially, if the majority of that set comes from a certain demographic. It is going to create problems for this country. The cohesion that we want and the One Guyana that we want will not come when the Government pours \$668 million towards them with a 20% arrangement and, of course, there are even other things flowing from that as against \$121 billion. I want to say that my fundamental critique here is, indeed, there was not a proper priority set so that everybody could distribute the shared prosperity we wanted out of a budget. That was why we signed the agreement, an agreement which they chastised. As you know, Mr. Speaker, it was a rotten agreement. We are going to renegotiate it as soon as we go into power. They cannot renegotiate it now. The sanctity of contract is there; the mantra as it were.

It is going to be an extraordinarily difficult year, in my opinion, based on this Budget for the simple reason that the Government is going to get the cost of living going further up. As mentioned – I do not want to go over the statistics although I have gotten some of the statistics too – in the local industries such as fishing; agriculture; gold production;

and everything else as was stated so brilliantly by Ms. Juretha Fernandes yesterday and articulately, every one of those were doing better in the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) time as against what we have now. When you rebase it and you rebase the base amount – and you could talk about the 28% increase that what was mentioned by Ms. Juretha Fernandes – the amount of earnings we were bringing in from fisheries, forestry and all of those – the statistics are there – were far superior.

That is going to cause a tremendous amount of what you call ‘the resource curse’ as it were, because indeed our local industries are now diminishing. That diminishment will see the cost of even items that we produce in Guyana going upwards. Even the *bhagee*, the bora and the *bhaigan*, we are going to have all those prices going up. Of course, I suppose, they are going to run to that \$7 billion relief package. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? They will distribute to their friends and families. It is happening now, as I speak. They have this arrangement whereby the People’s Progressive Party/Civics’ (PPP/C) activists are distributing moneys. They are bypassing Coalition supporters. I have heard of arrangements whereby some of the PPP/C supporters are begging the activists to please ensure that you give that man something and not because he is a known Opposition person’. They have the money in their haversacks, and they are distributing it. Is that how you run a country? Why is it that you do not have an accountable system that states who is doing the distribution and also who collected, say like, the young entrepreneurs or small businesses \$250,000? We have been asking all the time.

Look, it is not a burden that is shifted to us in the Opposition. It is a burden that is on you to prove who and who you have given the money to, but you do not want to give us. Since the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) relief we asked, the flood relief we asked and the fishermen’s relief we asked but you never provided it. Then, you said, show me the proof and show me the evidence. That is not how you operate a country accountably. Mr. Speaker, you must understand too that these persons do not understand that democracy has certain pillars. They emphasised an important pillar – and I agree with them – free and fair elections. It has good governance; it has the rule of law; and it has accountability, as the three other equal important pillars. We are not getting the accountability pillar here at all, apart from the rule of law that was mentioned by our shadow Attorney General (AG), Mr. Roysdale Forde, yesterday. It is important that we get these figures. I have

been asking. Take for example, what was given to some Members after the flood relief. They were told by the Minister of Agriculture that 'we do not have any information to give'. How could you do? There is the fishermen relief also.

It is important to understand that if we want to get into the promise land, now that we have gotten the money that could take us there, we need to have accountability and transparency. We need to have the rule of law and not only jump on this thing about elections because, ultimately, you won it, you are there and you are in Government. For now, the institutions; accountability; how moneys are spent and all of that, we do not know. Take for example, before I go on to public security, just before the ink was drying on the Budget presentation, we heard that we are going to get some helicopters and all of that. I went into the Budget and looked at capital expenditures in *Volume 3* looking for where we are going to get the helicopters money from but there was nothing. They are very stealthy and they are secretive. They are not indicating that there is furniture and equipment. Well, we could understand that one but helicopters and aviation equipment or whatever, I do not know but I will be asking the questions. The Vice-President has indicated that, yes, we are dealing with a firm, Bell Trexton Incorporated, and all of that to the extent of four helicopters. That is not good enough. I wish to make a concluding remark on this that we must not borrow so much.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Indar, indicated that we wanted tax, tax, tax. Does he understand that when the government borrows in the four years, US\$1.3 billion, that is a tax on our future generations? It is worse because we do not know if the oil prices are going to be stabilised with all the volatilities in the world and the vulnerabilities. Yet, you come here and you curse us down for some minor taxes and increases. We had and we have been asking you to provide us with the 200 names and you could not. From 2020 to 2024, you have \$1.3 billion in borrowings. As Agar Ally would say 'to *billahwaay* the money'. We must get all the facts from the various remarks and legends on this Budget as to where it is that the money is going so that we could keep scrutiny. A good Opposition could only scrutinise when there is information that ought to be provided. Mr. Speaker, you and I, go back a long time. You used to make that remark when you were an Opposition parliamentarian.

I come now to the public security sector. I have to begin by saying that it would appear my Colleague, Mr. Benn, has been coming up with some otherwise outrageous policy statements and one of which is '*alyuh out there that got*

illegal guns, tek am and throw am at the Police station and bring um in. That is the top-class security policy. It is in that context, I wish to say, that this aspect of security of ensuring there is quality analysis, as to what a policy should be, must come from this Government. Because there is no shortage of funds now to get the expertise necessary if you are not an expert. It was inexpert of the Minister to say what the Hon. Member said. I think he intended to make laughter more than anything, but you must not play like that with the security sector. In view of what we did in the APNU/AFC Coalition to ensure that there was an amnesty in which we know who and who have all the firearms and then they bring it in – that is the necessary way of doing it. Today, we have seen, even the Minister admitted – I think I wrote it down here – on road deaths 76% increase and fires increased by 182%. This is only for last year and there are a number of other things such as murders and all of that. I am glad that the Minister is indicating that indeed these statistics have been at least given to him by the police force and he is bringing them to our attention. In this sphere of activity, it is vitally necessary that we continue what the APNU/AFC have done.

We had two major projects – one was the British funded Security Sector Reform Project (SSRP), and the other, the Citizens Security Strengthening Programme (CSSP). These were important Reports that made a set of recommendations. In those set of recommendations, you have to now implement them. We had indicated to them that we wanted the moneys from the British Funded Security Sector Reform Project but we also want the brains behind it. The brains behind it was a man called Mr. Russel Coombe. He knew the network of experts that one could go and talk about how to enhance one's maritime capabilities, how to enhance police strategic unit, how to improve the human resource within the police force and all of that. All of these reports came out in and around a period of study... I think they came out around 2019. These Reports are important for the development. We must not surrender those Reports or shelve them because there is a change in government. We must continue. I am not seeing that happening. I even created a change board to ensure that happens.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, before you go to that board, you will need an extension.

Mr. Ramjattan: This is very quick man.

Mr. Speaker: Actually, you got two minutes more.

Mr. Ramjattan: Thank you very much, for that, Mr. Speaker. Could I have two minutes with the five?

Opposition Chief Whip [Mr. Jones]: Cde. Speaker, I do move that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to conclude his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Opposition Chief Whip. Hon. Member, you may continue to conclude.

Mr. Ramjattan: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for that extension. I want to say in the five minutes that I have, there was accountability in the public security sector under the APNU/AFC. Yesterday, Mr. Jones, the Hon. Member, stated how we have a Parliamentary Oversight Committee on the Security Sector of the Parliament that was created under the robust constitutional reform process. All the Members of that Committee, during the course of the APNU Coalition Government, were in every way dealing with all the questions that they want answered. Mr. Gill and I think the Hon. Member, Mr. Benn, were Members of that Committee. They were asking me, after we convened the first meeting, we would like to hear what the Commissioner has to say as his projections. We would like to see Mr. Gentle to hear what he has to say – Mr. Vernon Gentle I think his name is, the Fire Chief – and Mr. Samuels', the Head of the Prison. They cross examined these people for hours in that Committee. Since we got the Committee, as you said yesterday, Mr. Jones, there was not one meeting for 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. For four years there was not a meeting. On the last occasion, I asked Mr. Benn, why do you not convene the meeting so that we can ask questions on everything; scrutinise right up to the firearms license and everything.

10.54 a.m.

No. They do not want that. Mr. Ramjattan, as a public security member opened it up so that you could ask all the questions from any department because under the Constitution the power of the Parliamentary Oversight Committee on the Security Sector of Parliament is to ensure all administration matters and policy matters are questioned in that Committee. Where is it? They do not want scrutiny and this is what I am saying about accountability. They will go and get people such as this fellow here who is talking stupidity about all sorts of things.

I also want to say, unlike a lot of other Presidents, Brigadier (Ret'd) Granger indicated that every Minister must have a quinquennial report for the five years served in Government. Brigadier (Ret'd) Granger wanted accountability. The

Ministry of Public Security quinquennial report 2015 to 2020 was left in the Ministry. I think it was left by all Ministers for the Ministers who would come in. [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] Well, whatever it is, I left mine there. I have even given the Press the thing. Every item concerning how many police stations we built and remodelled, what we did in relation to activation of the 911 Emergency Response Centre, the donation from China of so many vehicles that we had and the United States of America (USA) Embassy donations for strategic planning, citizens security strengthening. In almost 40 pages, they are documented. People cannot come and say that it is not there. [Mr. McCoy: *(Inaudible)*] Of course, he has it. The Permanent Secretary (PS) had it. What the Minister did with the PS? The Hon. Member put the PS somewhere else and went to deal with somebody called 'Thomas'. We know what happened there.

Today, we also see that the strategic management of the Fire Department was disbanded and look at what we are having now. We then have a report from Mahdia about a certain person. That person, by the way, had his life extended because he was 55 years in 2022. It is important that so many things that are happening in the police, in the fire and in the prison is consequent upon not the continuation of these experts' advice coming wrong. There is lots to be done in the public security sector. I am here willing and would love to have a consensus and also collaboration with the Hon. Minister to ensure that our security, the country's security, is provided for. Thank you very much. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much Hon. Member. Now for the Hon. Member, Mr. Brindley Horatio Benn.

Minister of Home Affairs [Mr. Benn]: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and Hon. Members. Again, I would like to congratulate the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, Dr. Singh, in respect of preparing and presenting to this House a massive trillion dollars Budget, which sets a new bar for the provisioning of moneys for the continuous development of Guyana. This Budget and the opportunities it present were one which could have been led on... [Interruption]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, I need to caution the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul. You can go ahead. If you want to deal with the Hon. Minister, please, you could go outside.

Mr. Benn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Go ahead.

Mr. Benn: The reason that Dr. Singh presented a budget on behalf of the PPP/C's Government, back again in power, is because the APNU/AFC were dismissed by the people of Guyana. The people of Guyana dispatched ...

[Mr. Speaker hits the gavel.]

Mr. Speaker: Go ahead.

Mr. Benn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The PPP/C is back here – in Government – because of the trust of the Guyanese people; the Guyanese people rejected their attempts to take away our democracy; rejected their attempts to take away their votes; the votes undermined and damaged our Constitution; and had in full view of the international media online, the naked attempts to take away the votes and democracy of the Guyanese people. Here it is, again, the descent into perhaps madness, which I had complained about before in this House, when we skirmished on questions of the development of the country. One of the criticisms I had noted from the other side on the question on the Budget, even just now by the former Minister of Public Security who is now my Shadow, with a hope perhaps of getting back into the position in which I sit at the current time, is that too much money is being spent on capital investment and not enough money is being spent on issues related to people directly. Just now Mr. Ramjattan spoke, again, something about a corrupt contractor class and a new caste being created in the country as a result of how money is being spent.

Coming from where we are and where we were, at the time we came back into power, there were decrepit infrastructures all over Guyana – physical infrastructure, energy infrastructure, infrastructure related to health and education. Everything was decrepit and also in relation to issues of public security that the Hon. Member by, convention of the House, spoke of. It is true and it would be simplism. It is a simple thing that even if you give a person money and that person cannot get to the hospital or cannot get to the school, there is no energy or there is no way that you can take the country forward. The investment in infrastructure is *sine qua non* for our country's development here and now. In roads and bridges, and in energy infrastructure, it is a *sine qua non* that these are the priority. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan... By convention of the House, I do not want to use the word "obnoxious" but perhaps it is more appropriate. He is a Lawyer and lawyers are supposed to say anything without a conscience perhaps. ... spoke about people not

being given money or enough to do things. It was the Hon. Member, as part of the conjoined twin of the APNU/AFC, who stuck off and closed down the sugar estates; who fired 7,000 sugar workers in this country, a sugar producing country; and who paid no attention to the 28,000 dependents these sugar workers had. The Hon. Member comes here and talks about us being the vanguard of the working class.

The Hon. Member talked about a contractor corrupt class or something or the other but, apparently, these contractors take the money, put 20% profit and for the rest of money nobody works, nobody maintains the machines, work to dig the roads, do the surveying, do all of the things which needs to be done to develop the economy; they do not count. They do not pay taxes. That is what is implicit in what the Hon. Member said. Those fuelling those matters. Those who make the machines, repair the roads, fix the roads, those who provide the services in relation to all of those issues, what is implicit in what the Hon. Member said is that they do not matter. The significant part of the conjoined twin of the APNU/AFC and one cannot perhaps cut them off because they might both die. The Hon. Member sat there, in complicit with the APNU/AFC, and allowed workers in the bauxite industry, being made to block the river at Kwakwani; closing down the RUSAL investment; losing more than 1,000 workers and another 300 down the river in the transshipment at New Amsterdam; and over 1,200 people lost their jobs and their dependents. They made the workers, some of them, complicit in their own misery and downfall. Those people have no work today and the Hon. Member comes here to expound and espouses about vanguarding the working class and so on. The man is now my Shadow. I do not know why the Hon. Member thinks that he perhaps will come back into the position. I do not know why we should have the travesty.

Edgar Mittelholzer wrote an historical novel titled: *Shadows Move Among Them*. It is about the Berbice River, where a man is going there to set up a commune and trying to get away from authoritarian leadership. They are all shadows moving amongst them. You must read Mittelholzer again, Dr. Anthony and a lady, honourable too, in this House. Mr. McCoy has a particular word in relation to her. The Hon. Member is complicit in the removal of funds relating to Guyana Telephone Telegraph Company (GTT). The Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) and the Special Organised Crime Unit (SOCU) have work to do in respect of that. They come here without any feelings on the matter – millions of dollars. They come here and plant themselves down, create distress, create disruption and then walk out. I do not want to

deal too much with the issues of all the lies, fraud, falsification, plagiarism and political depravity which all of this shows here in this House. Even in the absence of the APNU/AFC, I will not go down the road of taking advantage of their absence too much, except for a few of them.

11.09 p.m.

The Hon. Member, on the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) side, who first led off on the debate, Mr. Roysdale Forde, said that the budget was uninspiring. No thought about the voluminous money to be placed to develop our country which is there to critique and criticise. Perhaps, when he says that it is uninspiring, it looks as if he is looking at himself in the mirror as a lawyer too. The questions we have, the issues we have, and the questions and the critique, perhaps, which were raised just now on the question of the meeting of the Parliamentary Oversight Committee on the Security Sector...

I am going to take a few steps back. I remember when there were attempts being made to steal the votes of the Guyanese people. Whichever way it went, there was a Minister of Public Security then, the first and only one we had. His name is on the board there, Honourable by convention of the House, Khemraj Ramjattan. There were calls being made when there were disruptions, and bricks and bottles were being thrown outside the Guyana Elections Commission's (GECOM's) headquarters, I was then a Commissioner of GECOM. I spoke with the police, leading persons in the Police Force – police Inspectors and Superintendents. People were assaulted, bricks were thrown at them. I went out to get it to stop. Of course, those people were the PPP/C supporters and they came to me terrified for me to get the police to give them support to take them to a place of safety. So, I went to the police chiefs on the road then, pointed out the situation, which they knew of, but they turned their backs on it. Do you know what they told me? 'You are on your own.' The brick bats, bottles and bricks kept going and we had to find ways to get ordinary Guyanese people to safety. Mr. Ramjattan, the Hon. Member – and I was never a member of the committee which he was speaking of before – expects me, in all that we experienced, to rush to have meetings with him on these issues.

On the southeastern ramp of this building here, I had a physical struggle with the police who were trying to remove me, and remove other comrades who were sitting here in this House. I was injured, still have niggling things. They tried to physically remove me and bump me down. They lifted me up and fetch me away as a Commissioner of the Guyana

Elections Commission. It was only because I was sitting there to avoid them from going into those boxes, those containers, that evening, which they planned to do. I had to hold onto their legs and on to the rails. I called the General Secretary of the Party and, in a moment, Dr. Frank Anthony and Ms. Manickchand came to my rescue and support. [Mr. Nandlall: I was there.] Yeah, you were, later on.

When they have undermined the police force, when they have confused the question of their loyalty, whether it is to the Constitution, country and people or to a political party, he wants me to not pay attention to bringing us back from that malaise, that inattention, that corruption, that lack of integrity which those forces have had in their minutes over the years of their misrule. Should we really be speaking to them on these matters in the Parliament, in a committee, or should they not be in the courts facing the judiciary on these issues in relation to the attempted theft... Sorry, take away, purloining, of our democracy? Coming here, sanctimoniously, speaking to the public, to Guyanese young people, about their wonderful exploits here in this House and in service as ministers in this country. They had practically destroyed, subsumed, and corrupted the Disciplined Services. It was only when the Commander of the army then, Brigadier Godfrey Bess, who deserves our commendation in this matter, when challenged on the issue, said that he will uphold the Constitution of Guyana. The police could not be relied on; the rest could not be relied on. Many of them, if you look at their social media posts, even today, you would be shocked. No consideration for country, people, Constitution and democracy, and the [inaudible]. Anyway, Mr. Ramjattan, the Hon. Member, is gone. I had advised him before that if he was going to make a contribution outside, either by taking a hit or going to the washroom, he should not flush because he might disappear.

Mr. Speaker and Hon. Members, one day, the full and complete record of the disgrace that the APNU/AFC has brought this country and its Constitution to, will be clearly written. It will be helped along much by what is done in the courts and, if not properly done, in the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ). I do not think we have to go to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for this.

Mr. Speaker, I want to speak somehow on the challenges we have in our security sector. The total framing around the Guyana Police Force, the Guyana Prison Service, the Guyana Fire Service, the Ministries' agencies and the challenge we have, as we say, of increasing the peace in Guyana. Increasing the peace in Guyana – we cannot increase in Guyana with that group because they are not a

reliable partner. They do not understand or want to understand constitutional democracy. They are, in other words, insurrectionists. Perhaps, more the Trumpian kind. They had the Tactical Services Unit (TSU) chasing us out from the centre in town there, [Mr. Mustapha: The Ashmin's Building.] In the Ashmin's Building. The TSU came with their guns and their things and chased us out. Now they are suddenly a reliable partner. [Mr. McCoy: Yes, and they love people and everything.] Now they love people. We will get to the point, somehow, when they change some of the people they have. We will get to the point, somehow, if they get a reset in respect of their way of thinking. We will get to the point, somehow, when they actually respect all the Guyanese people.

Mr. Speaker, I want to go first to the questions of the Guyana Fire Service because it has some public interest at the moment. While we speak overall of respect of crime, for three years running, for the first time in decades, we reduced crime by 20% - serious crimes - in 2022, same in 2021 before that, and in 2023 by 17% - in Guyana, in spite of all the bad things you see happening. It is true that murders increased; it is true that we have an increase in domestic murders; it is true that we have disorderly murders, which are creating a great burden on the police force and the communities which they secure but, overall, crime continues to drop to decline under the PPP/C in Government. In our manifesto, we talked about less crime and safer communities. In respect of the Guyana Fire Service and coming out of the total issues of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), we have had great challenges. The great challenges relate to a larger number of fire calls. In 2022, we had 1,480 calls; in 2023, 4,181 calls - a 182% increase in calls relating to responses to fire.

We have had, along with the complete damage of buildings, businesses, motorcars, Government properties and so on, the great sorrow of the tragic event at Mahdia, where we lost 24 young people. Those young people came mainly from the most stressed part of polity, of our Guyanese people, our Indigenous community. In review of the matter, His Excellency the President, Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, established a commission of inquiry (CoI), a Presidential commission of inquiry, into the 20th May, 2021, 23, fire. There were reports made in respect of the responsibilities of the various agencies that revolved around some responsibility in relation to the question of the fire. It is true that when the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, was the Minister of Public Security, he did receive a report which stated that the issues in relation to the dormitories in the

interior had to be resolved. That Minister of Public Security who is now not here.

Later on, there were reports, through the Ministry of Education, commissioned by the Hon. Priya Manickchand, in relation to the responses, in relation to investing in safer school buildings and investing in better dormitories. I am sorry, Mr. Ramjattan, is not here because he was one of those who was cutting the budget when we were in the previous Government, to cut down investments in health, education, public security. That same fellow, but he knows when to escape. I want to say, not simply in defence of the Guyana Fire Service... [Dr. Anthony: Cut and run.] Cut and run. The Guyana Fire Service, under the protocols established, have not given the reports in respect of doing improvements in relation to the fire service. Fire safety does not have the responsibility or did not have the responsibility to do those things themselves.

11.24 p.m.

It is incumbent on the homeowner of the building, or whichever is the agency that owns the building to put those things in place for follow-up inspections by the Guyana Fire Service. It is true that there were inadequacies in relation to a fire call which was a delayed fire call. The building was well alight by the time the fire service got there. Also, there was the question about them being able to break into the building, even when they arrived. There were questions about how best to treat with children when they rescued them from the building. I want to say that, in spite of all of that happening, the Guyana Fire Service personnel rescued children from the building. The event at Mahdia was, for me personally, one of the most difficult things. I landed in Mahdia at 3.30, I think in the morning. I went immediately to the hospital, then to the scene of the fire, then to the mortuary and saw the children. I had work done to have them properly placed and set up so that it would not bring greater distress to ourselves.

What we have done so far, the Guyana Fire Service itself, on request from the Ministry, has gone to each and every dorm and school building in the interior, particularly, to put in smoke alarms, extinguishers, fireballs, sand buckets and all other means to prevent issues relating to fire. It has also, again, done reviews and practices in relation to enhancing knowledge in relation fires and the risk that they posed. One of the problems at Mahdia, and I have said somewhere else that, at the time, perhaps to some extent even now, the environment is toxic, and we need to do more work to calm down some of these communities where people coming out

with money, gold and diamond and being a long way from their homes, do not have the best behaviours. They prey on young girls in the communities.

I wish to say, shortly, in relation to the question of fire that, we have to continue to carry the message of greater fire awareness. We have to advise that, once a fire starts in the building, given the nature of the materials of the building, if it is an old house now and there are a lot of blinds and sponge materials in the house, within five to seven minutes, maximum, the house is lost. If one cannot get out within that period of time, one might be severely injured or may die. The overall question of fire safety is particularly an important one for us. We are investing more and more in relation to fire protection. We are buying new vehicles and water carriers. We are buying a new fire boat in relation to the amount of work and the response thereto being done on the harbour in Demerara and for other places. We are looking at putting in place new fire stations. We have just completed one at Wales. We anticipate looking at more fire stations emplacements throughout the country. There is rehabilitation work going on at the fire station in West Ruimveldt. There is work going on in relation to acquiring new fire units. We bought a new crash tender for the Ogle Fire Station, and we also made a new building for that fire station. We are working with Angloco Limited of the United Kingdom (UK) in relation to getting a completely new set of fire trucks along with the requisite spares because maintenance is indeed a problem.

I remember while we talked about that, Minister Manickchand and I went to a fire just after we came into the Government – the Multilateral school. The fire service then brought out five mobile pumps, none of which worked – not one of them worked. [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] That is what we inherited from Mr. Ramjattan. We had the fire around the corner from us, near the courts where it was obvious that the firemen could not engage and go into the building to fight the fire because they did not have breathing apparatus to prevent themselves from collapsing, so they stayed far away from the fires. It is apt to note that the feeling you had at the beginning was, to use the Guyanese parlance, that they were frightened. They were not well protected, and their own awareness of their safety was very low.

We will reconstruct the Leonora Fire Station. We will reconstruct the Diamond Fire Station. We are making improvements to the fire station at Bartica, in terms of the way to get out of that area. Particularly, we want to applaud the work of the Ministry of Health with the emergency

medical technicians (EMTs). People are not aware and, perhaps, they do not pay enough attention, but every day we get several calls for medical services – the ambulance services – and that service is doing a sterling job in relation to getting to persons who may have problems. In fact, they have delivered a number of babies, I think 14 or more last year. On our Public Relations (PR) side, we have to speak more about these things and the fact that they bring people to proper medical care, after giving emergency medical care on site.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, you will need an extension of time to conclude.

Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Government and Government Chief Whip [Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask that the Hon. Member be given five more minutes to conclude his very good presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you. Minister, you have five minutes to conclude.

Mr. Benn: Mr. Speaker, it is amazing how time flies at this podium. I have a lot that I could say on the Guyana Police Force (GPF), the Custom Anti Narcotic Unit (CANU), our immigration services, the Guyana Register Office (GRO) and all of the prison services. All of those are giving sterling service to Guyana. All of those units now are on the road to better improvement, better work ethics, better professionalism, better standards of delivery, and better consciousness in relation to the work that they do.

In relation to the issues of fire, maybe a more emotive issue is that I want to propose that we have, in remembrance, on the day of the Mahdia fire, at all fire stations and the Ministry, a fire victims' awareness day, where we have the pictures of the young people who died and, also, place flowers at the site of that tragic incident.

I want to applaud the work of the Guyana Police Force. There is so much that we can do. It is unfortunate that the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, is not here. He took over the Citizen Security Strengthening Programme (CSSP). The Community Security Initiative was established under the former PPP/C Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Clement Rohee. Here, again, he comes brazening, broad-facedly taking something as his own which he did not start.

I want to pay some attention to the Guyana Prison Service on one particular issue or two issues. Firstly, an escape that

occurred last year, a run-through the jungle by persons who were involved in the killing of men, women and children at Lusignan and Bartica and where, somehow, they anticipated that we would have allow for their escape, along with those who were supporting the escape. Some of those who helped the escape were prison officers who are facing the law now. We brought the run-through of the jungle to an end. I want to call on the prison service publicly, again, to have maximum vigilance. We have put in cameras. We are making new prison buildings, new prison schools, a new women prison, a new vocational school and a new school for training prisoners. We have talked about a fresh start programme, where we will train prisoners to be useful when they leave the prison environment, where we give them the tools for a trade going forward. We can only increase the peace if we reduce recidivism and when we avoid those persons going back out and having to revert to crime and having no way to reintegrate with their families or to support themselves. We see that as a great problem. The prison system has the obligation, going forward, to provide for itself 50% of the greens, vegetables and fruits they produce. We intend to help pay the prisoners for the efforts they put into raising those things, along with the chickens, eggs and so on, which we want them to have and eat.

For extreme vigilance, the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, escaped the area when we.... He was talking about firearms and a question was thrown at me recently in relation to firearms and amnesty. If we look at the question in the papers today of what happened to the firearm of the young man who shot the girl dead and escaped to Suriname, one will see where the firearm went along the way. If one has an illegal firearm, we will find him/her. We will increase fines in relation to that. We will increase fines in relation to road deaths, in relation to issues relating to bad traffic work. We believe if one has a firearm, turn it in. Do not set us up to pay for you to get money in relation to handing in a firearm and then we do not know necessarily the lineage of what was done with it, and we will give you money for it. Amnesty is for another time in relation to firearms. Read today's paper in relation to the question of illegal firearms.

I was prepared to talk a lot and specifics but, as usual, the heckling presentation from the other side had to be responded to. Their responses are *a priori* in relation to our understanding of how we move to the position of increasing the peace and achieving the 'One Guyana' that our President Irfaan Ali so much desires. Thank you, very much. [Applause]

11.39 a.m.

Mr. Henry: On behalf of the Guyana Action Party (GAP), and as a Member of the Coalition, I rise to make my contribution on the 2024 Budget Debate that has as its slogan: 'Keeping the course', *et cetera*.

Mr. Speaker, sometimes, when you come to Parliament you have to use your skills as a teacher or whatever you were before, to teach some people. Unlike a lot, the Hon. Minister Benn knows that the Hon. Mr. Ramjattan merely said that contractors made 20% profit. What does that mean? It means that you take out all of the expenses and what is left is the profit. Where are you going, Hon. Benn? I wish to lecture to you a little. Indeed the People's Progressive Party/Civic is keeping the course according to their slogan for this budget, and that course is by bypassing the majority of Guyanese in this and previous budgets, whose incomes relegate them to scraping survival on a daily basis. [An Hon. Member: Gotta stay the course.] The course. The policy of fattening the rich and hoping that the fat would trickle down, has certainly become an abject failure and has widened the gap between the few who have and the majority who do not have.

Before I delve further into the 2024 Budget, please allow me to express on behalf of the peoples of the hinterland, who, by and large, are on the frontline of our borders, sincere thanks to the leaders of our country and the people of Guyana for standing in unity in saying to Venezuela and the world that Essequibo is ours. I remember the words of Mr. Aubrey Norton, Leader of the Opposition, when he said that we have to first have a country to first ensure that our sovereignty and territorial integrity are intact before we can struggle for political power. The world heard our unified voice. However, as for the *modus operandi* of the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government, who kept saying that we are unified against Venezuela, but by their actions deliberately continued to sideline the Opposition, since this event, there have been only a few sittings of the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on Foreign Relations. Further, the Leader of the Opposition was also not included in the negotiations leading to the Argyle meeting.

Quite recently, President Nicholas Maduro stated that he has a plan to control Essequibo. The threat is far from over. [An Hon. Member: Misrepresenting from the truth.] Let me go back to my teaching skills again. I never said that he was not invited. Put on your ears and listen. I did not say that. I said that we were not involved in any sort of discussions or meetings before that happened. That is what I said. I want to repeat, quite recently, President Nicholas Maduro stated that he has a plan to get control of Essequibo.

The threat is far from over. We the Indigenous peoples of Guyana demand that any threat against our sovereignty and territorial integrity be met by a unified stance by our leaders. We request that the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on Foreign Relations meet on a monthly statutory date to be decided on and, most importantly, be inclusive of the Opposition's representatives and experts. You do not have all the experts, we have a lot, involve them. This is Guyana, this is not PPP/C – this is Guyana.

We also take note that moneys allocated in our budget for the defence of our sovereignty and territorial integrity, at a glance, seems very inadequate. We request that the Guyana Defence Force's (GDF's) active and reserve components be prepared for any eventualities. We request that the community policing groups be given adequate training and support. We were told that the community policing members are working without being paid monthly stipends or salaries. This must be corrected. Among others, we request that the National Service and the People's Militia be reactivated. With the current oil boom, we request that our service men, women and their families be well catered for, socio-economically, by the State. We cannot have Mr. Benn or us at the border defending the whole nation and not be treated properly. They are in the front line. How many of us would want to join the People's Militia? How many of us would want to join the army? I was in the People's Militia, I was a Cadet Officer at school. I was also in the Guyana National Service. How many of you could say the same thing?

One of the hallmarks of great leaders is their strength, courage and resilience in times of crisis and threats. If we were to take a roll call on the 3rd December, 2023, when Venezuela held its referendum, we would have seen those who used various excuses to flee Guyana. What is more important than standing with your people who are facing an existential threat? I know that the rule prevents us from calling names, but we know the men, you know the men, *all ah we* know the men. I see that the Hon. Kwame McCoy has left because they left him back. They did not take him away. That is how they will treat you in times of crisis, Mr. McCoy.

Mr. Speaker, if you listen to the Hon. Dr. Ashni Singh... Before I come to that, let me mention that the last time, I think it was early November, we had an extraordinary meeting of our Parliament to come as a united front against whatever threats were there, I want the nation to know, I want the Indigenous people of Guyana to know that, after I spoke at that meeting, I guess it was because I spoke the truth about a certain *de facto* leader of Guyana, I was

accosted afterwards and threatened by the Hon. Kwame McCoy. I want him and the world to know that all of us have to die but some die before others. When you threaten an Indigenous person, especially a representative in Parliament, you are threatening the Indigenous peoples of Guyana. I will leave it there for now.

Mr. Speaker, if you listen to the Hon. Dr. Ashni Singh, who is still to be recognised as being capable enough to warrant or be given an independent Ministry with an independent title of Senior Minister of Finance and leaving out all of these whatever, spending considerable time attacking his perceived critics by lifting up his petty coat periodically during his presentation of the budget and treating Guyanese to what is commonly known as a session of busing, maybe he was trying to outdo the legendary *Satira Gal*, one wonders if the Hon. Ashni Singh thought that even his Colleagues were bored and really were not excited by this budget presentation. The Hon. Dr. Ashni Singh who allows himself to be lectured by a *de facto* President of Guyana even went further to debase this honourable House by referring to another Member of Parliament (MP) by a call name and he was on the seat. The Hon. Ashni Singh was not cautioned by the Speaker, so I take it that it is now acceptable to use call names in this honourable House and in different ways. In the Wapishana language, there is a name called *chi bu bu*, this is a fitting description of the Hon. Ashni Singh. It is not debasing nor disrespectful. It is my hope that those who cannot take their nostril out of the gutter, do make an effort to do so.

We heard the Hon. Ashni Singh parroting the fiction that the APNU/AFC fired some 2,000 Community Service Officers (CSOs) in 2015 on their ascension to Government. I did not start that call name. He who started it will have to say he started it and ask for forgiveness. I have also heard the PPP/C at various forums and occasions... Let me repeat this, Mr. Speaker, we heard the Hon. Singh parroting the fiction that the APNU/AFC fired some 2,000 CSOs in 2015 on their ascension to the Government. I have also heard the PPP/C at various forums and occasions repeating this untruth with impunity. I wish to once again correct this fallacy. In 2015, on the APNU/AFC ascension to Government, it found a cancelled cheque that was prepared and processed to pay some 2,000 CSOs at that time. I repeat, the cheque was cancelled. On inquiry, it was found that it was the People's Progressive Party/Civic Cabinet that issued the instruction for the then Permanent Secretary (ag) to cancel the cheque or to fire the CSOs. The Cabinet Secretary who issued the directive to cancel the cheque is none other than the Hon.

Gail Teixeira, who is here with us today. It was the People's Progressive Party/Civic that fired the 2,000 CSOs...

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, may I have the floor?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, the Hon. Minister is on a Point of Order.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order No. 41, I never signed any such instruction nor gave any such instruction in writing or verbally. I wish for that to be retracted from the Hon. Member's presentation.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Hon. Member, unless you could produce that document, you will have to withdraw it. If you produce that document, I will be able to reinstate your words.

Mr. Henry: Mr. Speaker, at this moment I cannot do that, so I will withdraw it. Mr. Speaker, what kind of person... *Oh*, let me not continue with that. Mr. Speaker, we also listened to the Hon. Dr Ashni Singh, who said that the sum of \$2.7 billion from the sale of carbon credits will be granted to Indigenous peoples in this 2024 Budget. It must be noted that, in the 2023 Budget, the Indigenous people received some \$4.7 billion from the sale of carbon credits. Using an actual example, in a certain Indigenous community with 180 families in 2023, each family received a project for an average of \$180,000 or a bit more for a sustainable project. It means that under this 2024 Budget, the families in this village would be entitled to a much smaller amount. For the Indigenous people to access this pittance from the sale of their carbon credits, they had to jump through a lot of loops and over a lot of hurdles while condescendingly being told how to spend the moneys.

11.54 a.m.

This is in contrast to the distribution of grants from the national coffers by the PPP/C's activists who wear red shirts and give grants to friends, families, and supporters. All of this was done without acceptable financial accountability. So, the Indigenous people must have accountability. There is nothing wrong with that, but it must happen to everybody. When you are sharing grants, let us have accountability. It must not have one family who is supposed to get \$200,000 getting two sets of \$200,000. It must not be somebody looking at a young, Amerindian child in a village and saying that he or she is looking nice and so he or she is getting \$200,000. All sorts of things happened. So, let us have some financial accountability. The moneys from the sale of the Indigenous peoples' carbon credits are under the Amerindian Development Fund (ADF). According to the Report of the

Auditor General for 2014, some \$1.2 billion was paid into the ADF by the Ministry of Natural Resources, in keeping with Section 51:3 of the Amerindian Act of 2006. It states:

“The Guyana Geology and Mines Commission shall transfer twenty per cent of the royalties from the mining activities to a fund designated by the Minister for the benefit of Amerindian Villages.”

To date, this amount cannot be accounted for. Guess who the Minister was who presided over this calamity? We do appreciate that our carbon credits were sold, but we do not appreciate that the Minister of Amerindian Affairs and, by extension, the Government of Guyana has complete control over the concept and the process of implementation. Just imagine if I go to someone's farm and reap and sell his watermelons without free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). Then, I give him 15% of the total sales. Further, I insist that he spends the money in a certain way. What kind of phrase would the average Guyanese use to describe this eye pass? I cannot say it in the National Assembly but there is a phrase. Further, there are reports of some staff from the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs abusing their positions of trust. In one village, I was informed that carbon credit money was available, and a formula was decided for each household to get an amount for a sustainable project. On arrival at the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, the Toshao was ordered to disregard his people's wishes and purchase a second-hand bus. To make this story short, the village rejected the bus and returned it to the supplier. A Community Development Officer (CDO) in another area purchased second-hand vehicles for several communities. These vehicles were found to be in poor condition and of poor quality. The CDO now sports a well-reconditioned vehicle for his personal use. Wow.

The above examples are just a minuscule number of the actual situations that currently exist. It is difficult to remedy the situation because good governance, fair play, and justice are super deficient in the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and, by extension, the Government of Guyana. Indigenous villages, Toshaos, and persons are routinely discriminated against if they are perceived to be non-supporters of the PPP/C. Any fictitious or contrived complaint made against perceived non-supporters of the PPP/C sees these persons getting the full powers of the Amerindian Act and the laws thrown at them. On the contrary, there are many cases in which persons aligned to the PPP/C are accused of serious illegalities, and they are allowed to walk free and continue to flout laws with impunity. **[An Hon. Member: (Inaudible).]** We will call that name later.

Further, we note that the People's Progressive Party/Civic is visibly seeking to control or stymie the activities of our constitutional bodies such as the Indigenous Peoples' Commission (IPC). Currently, the PPP/C is attempting to place a Toshao, who was accused of misappropriation of village assets by his villagers, as a member of the Indigenous Peoples' Commission. Further, the PPP/C and its Ministry of Amerindian Affairs have tried their utmost to derail the Amerindian Peoples' Association (APA) because of this organisation's advocacy for the rights of Indigenous peoples. The Ministry of Amerindian Affairs attempted to derail the Upper Mazaruni District Council (UMDC) and that was another blatant attempt to prevent the Indigenous peoples of Guyana from organising themselves, as encouraged and recognised by the United Nations (UN).

It must be noted that it was the APNU/AFC Coalition that broke barriers by supporting South Rupununi to form the South Rupununi District Council (SRDC). Today, this organisation is recognised and is an example of good governance and positive representation for its peoples. The Hon. Dr. Singh mentioned that, accumulatively, the Indigenous peoples will get \$9 billion out of the \$1 trillion budget. This amount can best be described as condescending in comparison to what is doled out to the failing sugar industry. Actions speak louder than words. One cannot help but notice that the failing sugar industry continues to enjoy massive financial inputs. In this year's budget, the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) will receive a whopping \$6 billion. To add to this story, we are hearing that, in Region 9, periodically, agricultural products are trucked in large quantities from Brazil to be repacked as being produced in Guyana. Is sugar being trucked from Brazil to beef up the GuySuCo's statistics? The story goes further. The large trucks are given special considerations while in-transit from Lethem to the coast of Guyana. The only component missing is a set of outriders with sirens.

We welcome the building of the secondary school and its facilities in Karasabai. It must be noted that it was under the APNU/AFC that steps were put in place to start and support secondary school classes in Karasabai. Secondary school classes also began in Maruranau, Nappi and elsewhere. While considering the budgetary allocations for secondary education last year, I raised the issue of providing a hot meal for all secondary school students in the hinterland. The then Minister of Local Government and Regional Development stated in his answer that all secondary school students were entitled to a hot meal whenever they attended school. I was going to say that, to date, this has not come to fruition, but this morning somebody from Region 9 texted me to say that

the secondary school received a little bit of food yesterday. At least you are listening to us. Continue to listen so that we can be able to make things better for our Indigenous children and the children of Guyana. Only the students who reside in the dormitories are benefitting from three meals a day plus a so-called snack of a banana without juice. As an example, which applies to St. Ignatius and Annai Secondary Schools in Region 9, the students attend the secondary schools from miles away. They will leave home early in the morning and return home late. If the student has no money, then he has to starve. In this oil-rich country, this is totally unacceptable.

We heard a senior PPP/C official boasting that some \$10 billion will be spent on hinterland roads. However, years have come and gone, and we have noted that the roads built by the PPP/C are mainly of biscuit texture. One example of this is the Lethem to South Rupununi Road. At this moment, the road is being renovated at an extremely high cost. Drivers and commuters will enjoy the biscuit roads until the rains arrive. Then, it will be back to roads that will make a moderately sick person very sick before he or she can get to the hospital. During the consideration of the budgetary appropriations last year, I suggested to the Government that hinterland roads to be built should include innovations that exist and allow for better hinterland growth. However, this suggestion seems to have *fallen on the deaf ears* of the PPP/C. I can only surmise that it is better for the PPP/C to have biscuit roads built so that they can continue to dole out large contracts, with their attendant kickbacks, to their friends, families, and favourites.

Then, there is the fallacy propagated by the PPP/C that it is the creation of the concept of transformational projects. In most cases, the really transformational projects being done were conceptualised with preparatory works done by the APNU/AFC. The Linden to Lethem Road is an example of a transformational project that was conceptualised with preparatory works done by the APNU/AFC. It must be noted that had there not been a no confidence motion orchestrated by the PPP/C, the first phase from Linden to Mabura would have already been a reality. It must be noted further that the PPP/C made efforts to prevent this project from becoming a reality. Luckily, the funders applied pressure and forced them to utilise the funding that was negotiated by the APNU/AFC for this project. Further, we are now hearing that the most vital bridge connection between Kurupukari and Fairview has been shelved. Here again, we see the reluctance of the PPP/C to serve the people by completing wholesome, transformational projects or their inability to *see farther than their nostrils*. Talking about bridges, is it true that there is a newly constructed bridge on the Linden to

Lethem Road that is built on a hill? One wonders if the PPP/C is trying to defy the forces of gravity. What about the Pirara bridge? This bridge is vital for Lethem, South Rupununi, and Brazil to connect by road to North Rupununi and the coast of Guyana. Work is at a standstill. If it is not completed before the rains, which will be here shortly, there will be untold suffering experienced by all. This is a case of more for friends, families, and favourites at the expense and suffering of the people of Guyana.

Then, there is the road and bridge connection between Lethem and St. Ignatius village in Region 9. The PPP/C did some basic repairs to this bridge and the size of the road and then proudly announced that it had done a transformational project. This bridge and road link is a crucial project because periodically the floods inundate this vital link that connects the South Rupununi to Lethem. Secondary school children also travel to and from school on this link. There are reports of boats capsizing and near-drowning experiences by students. A truly transformational project would be to build a bridge and road connection that would be high enough to allow commuters to travel this connection all year round, even when there is a high flood.

Now, we have a major problem of most Guyanese finding it difficult to live good lives because of the high cost of living being experienced. The few friends, families and favourites of the PPP/C have no idea about the daily suffering experienced by many to make ends meet. During the days when the APNU/AFC was in Government, the average family of four spent an acceptable portion of their income on food and essentials. Today, under this PPP/C, the majority of Guyanese are finding it hard to get three decent meals daily. According to *Kaieteur News* dated 20th January, 2023, 43% of Guyanese cannot afford a healthy diet and around 5% of our population is malnourished. This is according to the report of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. With all of the above, the PPP/C's 2024 Budget insults our pensioners with a \$100 increase per day. What can \$100 per day do to improve the lives of our senior population? The budget allocates \$108 per day or \$40,000 per year as a 'Because We Care' cash grant to school children. What is \$108 per day? That is because they do not care. The Toshias of Guyana get an amount of \$80 a day as their stipend whilst working for 24 hours a day. What a disgrace. I hope I could say the word disgrace. What a disgrace it is that our Indigenous leaders are being treated in this way.

Our public servants received a measly 6.5% increase in their income while the Gas-to-Shore Project, which is the

brainchild of some of those who have a penchant for the advocacy of failed projects, gets a huge slice of the pie. The GuySuCo continues to *suck our economy like a leech*. I can only say that this budget is indeed staying the course, and that course is a big curse for Guyana. Budget after budget, we see moneys being allocated for land titling and the revision of the Amerindian Act. When will it be done? To cut a long story short, when will it be done? I guess it will be us as the next Government who will have to do that.

12.09 p.m.

The Hon. Ashni Singh mentioned that some villages were given titles by this Government, the PPP/C. The Hon. Minister forgot to mention that some of those villages that he mentioned were previously granted titles by the APNU/AFC. One example is the Yupukari extension, which the APNU/AFC granted previously, among others. I could call the Toshias of Yupukari now, if I get the chance, to come here and tell you that was what happened, although you are saying no.

Mr. Speaker, indeed, 'staying the course' is ongoing for the PPP/C. However, the course is one to weaken the rights of Indigenous peoples. The People's Progressive Party/Civic uses its position as the Government of Guyana to take over aspects of the control of Marudi mines from Indigenous people and small miners of the South Rupununi. Today, there is a People's Progressive Party/Civic group controlling the riches being gained from the area that was allocated by the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC). This is 'staying the course' to make the PPP/C friends, families and favorites hog the patrimony of Guyana.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, to stay the course, you will have to get five minutes to conclude.

Mr. Jones: Cde. Speaker, I do move that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to conclude his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five minutes to conclude.

Mr. Henry: The Indigenous village of Chinese Landing has been struggling for many years to regain control of Tassawini – a mineral-rich area of their titled land that has been mined by a certain miner without their consent. The Chinese Landing village appealed to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) and the Commission agreed that there were some issues and many of the rights of the Indigenous peoples were being affected and

ordered corrective actions be taken. The PPP/C Government has since ordered a cease order on all mining activities in the whole of Chinese Landing, although the village had only requested that cease order for mining operations be done in Tassawini. It must be noted that Indigenous peoples are allowed by law to do artisanal mining on their titled lands. The move by the PPP/C's Government to stop mining in the entire Chinese Landing is seen as a move to punish the Carib people of Chinese Landing for standing up for their rights. Also, the PPP/C Government is now asking the IACHR to withdraw precautionary measures granted with regard to Chinese Landing. This Government has no regard for the Indigenous people. You make sure that they cannot get moneys from their own to survive lands and now you are asking the IACHR to step away from their defense. They must be left alone to take the bashing that you want to give them.

To continue with the rights of the Indigenous people, I wish to bring to the nation and all that the Petroleum Activities Bill, which was recently passed by the PPP/C's slim majority in the National Assembly, gives the Minister of Natural Resources and, by extension, the PPP/C supreme powers to identify areas of petroleum exploration, negotiate and allow such exploration and production in any part of Guyana. This Act disregards any free, prior and informed consent by the affected communities. This Act strikes against the fundamental rights of the Indigenous peoples. On behalf of the Indigenous peoples of Guyana, I ask that this Act be repealed. There are some issues affecting Indigenous people, and I will try to go through them in this short period of time. One is the Amerindian Hostel in Georgetown. The patients have to find their own transportation to go to the hospital. Just imagine, patients at the Amerindian Hostel have to find their own transportation to go to the hospital and the Minister is just *a stone's throw away*. Meals are often in short supply. This is an oil-rich country, and this is how we are treating our Indigenous people. There is a need for a residential doctor to be on site.

In Region 9, there continues to be a shortage of cassava in the Rupununi. Cassava is the main staple in the Rupununi. There were some interventions by the Government, I must say that, but they were not enough. In 1999, when I was the Regional Vice Chairman, with the support of even the boss man in the House, we had lots and lots of cassava coming from Manoa in Brazil. At that time, we asked for help from the PPP/C Government, and they refused to give us help but we got help. The stems were distributed according to the needs of the farmers. This was done to counteract the effects of the harsh *El Nino* season. After that, the people of Region

9 got back into the production of cassava. I want to use the opportunity to thank the people of Manoa in Brazil who gave us those high-yielding cassava stems free of charge. I will talk about that at another time. I now call on the current Government to place some emphasis on the cassava crops in Brazil. Other crops are important but at this moment, cassava is most important for food security and the battle against hunger and destitution. We have had cases in Guyana where our children have been placed in situations where they had no way of defending themselves and one of those ways was when a young Indigenous child was raped and sodomised. What we saw was the alleged perpetrator being given State protection and was allowed to walk free. By this episode, one could clearly see...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I will give you one minute to wrap up. You are already a couple of minutes over the five minutes.

Mr. Henry: Justice for Indigenous people. The Mahdia disaster: what we noticed was that, at the end of it all, in a nutshell, everyone else was blamed except the Government of Guyana. The people who were directly involved were not blamed. The Regional Executive Officer (REO) was not blamed. The Minister of Local Government and Regional Development was not blamed. The Minister of Education was not blamed. The Minister of Labour was not blamed. These were the people to be blamed for what happened there. Apparently, it was felt that Indigenous lives do not matter. The compensation that was given, I would call it 'jokey compensation'. Lives of indigenous children or any child is not \$5 million. You are cheapening our lives. That is why at one time I had said that the PPP/C must take their feet off of the necks of the Indigenous people.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, with that, I will have to ask you to wrap up totally.

Mr. Henry: Thank you very much. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Now, for the Hon. Member, Ms. Pearson-Fredericks.

Ms. Pearson-Fredericks: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give my contribution to *Budget 2024* under the caption, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. As I listened to the many presenters before me, particularly those on the Opposition side, and heard the description of the budget...the Hon. Member, Mr. Roysdale Forde, said the budget is built on sinking sand – suck sand or whatever that can be washed away, I imagine. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, also said the budget was built with cement and

sand. He added some cement to the budget. I would like to say that *Budget 2024* is built with rock hard cement and with sand – a good mixture – and the builders are the People's Progressive Party/Civic. I would like to say thank you to the Hon. Minister, Dr. Ashni Singh, his staff and all those who contributed to putting *Budget 2024* together. *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. All, Mr. Speaker. *Budget 2024*.

I wish to remind those on the Opposition side that when we returned to Office after severe struggle, in our 2020 Budget, we said *Our Plan for Prosperity*. In 2021, we said *A Path to Recovery*. Why did we say recovery? We said that because things were severely damaged. There was destruction in this country. We know it. The people out there know it. So, we said *A Path to Recovery*. In 2022, we said *Steadfast Against all Challenges*. Yes, we are steadfast against all challenges that come before us because we are strong. We are the People's Progressive Party/Civic, and we are strong together. We are preaching *One Guyana* and the Opposition fails to understand that and they fail to accept what we are doing. In 2023, it was *Improving Lives Today, Building Prosperity for Tomorrow*. In 2024, it is *staying the course* because we have already laid the foundation that they attempted to destroy. This foundation is of solid rock, rock hard cement, and not sinking sand, no way.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to make some corrections. I listened to the Hon. Member, Mr. Vincent Henry, and even Mr. Roysdale Forde. Now, everyone has awakened from the slumber and they now realise that Indigenous peoples are so badly off, 32% under poverty and whatever. Mr. Speaker, I would like to know how they measure poverty. How did they measure poverty and what did they do when they were there to address poverty of the Indigenous peoples? Tell us that. Now, they have awakened from a long slumber, and they realise. I do agree with the Hon. Members, Mr. Cox and Mr. Vincent Henry, who said we are the frontline. Yes, the Indigenous peoples are in the frontline, and we will operate as though we are in the frontline. We are not holding back benches anymore. We are in the frontline. We have a voice. People listen to us, but we must come with facts and the truth.

Mr. Henry talked about carbon sales, the money and what has been done. I would like to say to the Hon. Member, sir, spend your time educating our Toshias. I would like to say that all of the Toshias were here in this very Dome when we knew our allocation from the carbon sales and when we were advised how to spend it. This morning, I was shocked when I heard the Hon. Member say that families received whatever.

We were advised that this money should be invested into economic opportunities which would create jobs for our people in our various villages which will address food security. What has happened? If there is a breakdown, you blame the Government for everything when we as Toshias... I am speaking as a Toshias here too. I am a Toshias of my village. I am a farmer; I am an ordinary person in my village, but I have the opportunity to speak at this forum. I want to thank the People's Progressive Party/Civic for giving me the opportunity so that I can know what is happening at the grassroot level and I can know what is happening at the national level.

12.24 p.m.

We have a voice, Hon. Member, and we must use our voice. So, the point about families receiving \$100,000 or \$200,000, I am shocked, and I am disappointed. We are supposed to have a development plan in all of our villages, and we should be using funds from the carbon sales to enhance further development in our villages. Sir, the Amerindian Act, if you should read Part III under Governance, it gives us the right to manage, to govern our villages. So, again, here I urge you, sir, to educate yourself on the Amerindian Act and then try to educate our Toshias so that they would know their responsibilities as leaders of villages. Please, sir, do that. I would also like to correct you, sir, and I would like you to go and do some homework. You said that Toshias only receive \$40,000 per month. Please go and do your homework, sir, and correct that figure. Thank you. I would also like to say that I do not support name calling but if you are going to call me a name in a different language, please explain in English what it means. So, when you say, 'she buck', I think I would also like to know what it means because I myself can say a word in my language and then no one would know what I am calling them. So, I do not support that.

I would like to say that *Budget 2024, Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*...As I said before, thanks to the Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh. I wish to remind...and in 2021 I said it. The ordinary people, the Guyanese people, as I moved around, I heard all sorts of things, but I heard many people say that Ashni was back, and he was the man for the job. I am saying it again: Dr. Ashni Singh is back; he is the man for the job, and the Opposition cannot take it. I wish to further make some corrections. Yesterday, the Hon. Member, Mr. Ronald Cox, in his presentation, spoke about the Hinterland School Feeding Programme. What he failed to say was that what he reported was the report submitted. I wish to present, I wish to read and I wish to quote the

Executive Summary of the Report of the Auditor General on the Hinterland School Feeding Programme. Here is what it states:

“Studies conducted by the World Food Programme show every day, countless children turn up for school on an empty stomach, which makes it hard to focus in class. Having food at school daily can mean not only better nutrition and health but also increased access to education. Annually, millions of dollars were spent on the Hinterland School Feeding Programme. Therefore, it was important to determine whether expenditures of the Programme were properly planned and used for the purpose intended and whether every child who was eligible for a nutritious meal actually received one. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2018 to 30 June 2022.”

Now, from January, 2018, who was there? They found that the school feeding programme had expanded, they found that students were not catered for due to poor planning and meals were not monitored for compliance with nutritional standard. So, these are some of the things that happened under the APNU/AFC. So, Mr. Cox should have stated the period of reporting. I also wish to say that the Hon. Member also reported on the receipt, storage and distribution of textbooks to schools. Once again, the Hon. Member failed to state the reporting period and this reporting period was January, 2017 to December, 2019. When we come to the House, we must come with facts, and I am not reading from something that was written by me or any one of my colleagues. I am reading the Auditor General’s report, Sir, and therefore it must be corrected that the time period is wrong; 2018, 2017, 2019. I think this was a wilful act, maliciously done just to look make us look bad. But, Mr. Cox, we are not going to look bad because things have changed. Things have changed for the better because *Budget 2023* stated improving lives today, building prosperity for tomorrow, and when we say something, we mean it. When we make promises, we deliver on our promises. We do not fluff and bluff, and we know that a lot of fluff and bluff took place from 2015 to 2020.

Before I move on, I still would like to go back to the Hon. Member, Mr. Vincent Henry, on the issue of land titling. Sir, I could produce for this House when the former Minister of Amerindian Affairs said in May, 2018 – I think if I remember correctly, it was 30th May, 2018 – when he said to the media that he had not been able to title one village. When Hon. Members come with this, they should come with the fact. I can say these things because I was part of the land

titling project and most of the villages that the APNU/AFC claimed that they titled, we had already done the work before we left Office. Sir, I can produce those evidence and I can say because I was there.

Mr. Speaker: Before you say more Hon. Member, you will need an extension.

Ms. Texeira: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask that the Hon. Member be given an additional five minutes to conclude your presentation, a very good presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister Texeira. Go ahead, Hon. Member.

Ms. Pearson: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, let me move on to some of our success stories and stop rebutting the Opposition. I would like to talk about agriculture. Guyana was once the food basket of the Caribbean. We will get there again under the stewardship of the People’s Progressive Party/Civic and more so our Hon. Minister, Minister Mustapha, who is going out there and meeting with the people. Hon. Minister, I would only like to speak on Region 2 and what is happening in our Amerindian villages. As I speak here now, there is drainage and irrigation in the Pomeroun area, which would allow the people of Saint Monica, Kabakaburi and Siriki to extend in the field of agriculture and address the issue of flooding. In the coastal area, as I speak now, 80 acres of land have already been cleared and cultivated in the village area. We are already discussing with *Topco*, the juice company, to supply them thousands of pounds of passion fruit. Tell me, if that is not development...and this is not building now. The foundation was set already. We are building on that foundation. [An. Hon. Member: (inaudible) passion fruit.] And citrus, too; not only passion fruit. As I speak now, we have already harvested thousands of pounds of pumpkin and other cash crops. This is what you call development in the field of agriculture. Never before. Our Amerindian villages have moved from subsistence farming. Now, we are in commercial agriculture, thanks to the People’s Progressive Party/Civic and, more so, our Hon. Minister.

I would like to talk about the new shade house projects. It is the first time we are looking at high value crops in my village and other villages. We are now experimenting with cauliflower, broccoli and carrot with support from the National Agriculture Research and Extension Institute, (NAREI). They are working very closely. This is what is

happening. Let me talk about the new project, the fish project. Cage fishing is now established in our villages; we are part of it. Young people are being trained to be part of this project. They are managing the project. This is what we call development. This is what we are saying about staying on course. *Budget 2024* would help us to build on the foundation. We will stay on course.

Mr. Speaker, let me tell you about training. There is the Board of Industrial Training (BIT) under the Ministry of Labor. I want to say thanks to the Hon. Minister, Mr. Joseph Hamilton, who travel the length and breadth of this country. Previously, there was no licensed heavy-duty operator in our villages. Today, as I stand here, I must let it be known that these training programmes are taken to the villages. So, now what is happening is that the people are at home, and they come out to classes during the time when they can afford. We set the time, so even if one has to go to his or her farm, when he or she is home, he or she could come and learn. Mr. Speaker, as I stand here, 11 persons graduated from Mainstay/Whyaka where I had no licensed tractor driver. Eleven persons graduated, earned their driver's licences and I will proudly say that seven of those persons are young women. I wish to mention an outstanding young woman, who is just 19 years of age, Keshaua Fernandes. She operates a tractor/trailer, and she can even operate an excavator. Thanks to the Government of Guyana and, more so, Hon. Minister, Mr. Hamilton.

In Pomeroun, there is the boat building project under the BIT programme. Young women are involved in building boats. This is what you call development. *Budget 2024* will help us to stay on course. Prosperity for all and not some. Gone are the days, Hon. Member, Mr. Vincent Henry, when Indigenous peoples were left behind. So, do not come and cry here, sir. I would encourage you to go out there and talk to your villagers. Talk to your leaders. Get on board.

12.39 p.m.

Think straight, and stop sharing messages that are not true. We are the frontline. Let us take our rightful position in the frontline. Education and health: There has been tremendous improvement in the area of health. Our health posts and our health centres have adequate supply of drugs, unlike what happened under the APNU/AFC. I remember I went to Cozier Canal and we could not even get a Panadol, nowhere. Today, we have adequate supply of drugs... [Ms.

Philadelphia: Expired drugs.] Not *no* expired drugs. No. Drugs and medical supplies are there. Mr. Speaker, allow me to mention the distribution...

Mr. Speaker: Unfortunately, you are way over that five minutes. I would not be able to allow you. You can say thank you.

Ms. Pearson-Fredericks: All right. We all have solar panels in our village through the Government of Guyana. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We do not study with lamp anymore. Thank you very much. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Hon. Members, this is a good time to take the suspension. We will get back at 10 minutes to 2.00 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.40 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 2.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, please be seated. At 2.01 p.m. and 15 seconds, let me invite the Hon. Member, Ms. Amanza Walton-Desir, to take the floor.

Ms. Walton-Desir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From the outset, I want to condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the verbal abuse that continues to be meted out to female Members of this House by Members of the other side. The disrespect of our women in politics must stop. We have to be determined to develop a better culture in this National Assembly. Calling a female colleague of mine a stripper is unacceptable, and it must be condemned. I am deeply disappointed at my female colleagues on the other side who did not see it fit to upbraid their colleague whilst he abused a female Member of the Opposition. But I want them to know that we are not going anywhere; we are here to stay. It does not matter what you say, it does not matter what you call us, you are not going to shut us up, and we will continue to be here to represent the people of Guyana.

Guyana's foreign policy, whilst always important, has assumed the place of paramountcy over the last year. One could not, however, tell this based on the delivery by my colleague across the floor yesterday, who spent 25 of his 30 minutes on everything else except foreign affairs. The world over is changing. A new order is emerging, and in this dynamic landscape of a changing global order, a state's foreign relations stand at the forefront of its strategic directions. As a small country with a small population and a newfound prominence on the world stage as a petrostate, and with a threat to our territorial integrity ever looming, Guyana needs now more than ever a sober, steady, and studied approach to our foreign policy. Amidst this evolving geopolitical current, it is imperative for us as a nation to steadfastly adhere to our bedrock principles while deftly navigating the complexities of this new global order.

This delicate balance demands astute diplomacy and a keen awareness of shifting allegiances and challenges. Let us be clear, this newfound interest in Guyana is not because of anything we have done; it is because of what we have, that light, sweet, crude that is being pumped 120 miles offshore even as we speak. We must remember that this resource is a finite one and when it is gone, it is gone. Cognizant of this reality, we must soberly and vigilantly navigate these troubling times so that our children and future generations of Guyanese are able to inherit a Guyana great and free. To achieve this objective, Mr. Speaker, I propose five urgent priorities that must be addressed in the immediate term: one – identifying and effectively articulating Guyana’s Foreign Policy, particularly in the context of the protection of our sovereignty and territorial integrity; two –reshaping and enhancing our relationship with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries; three – employing astute diplomacy; four – education, training and development of our diplomatic core; and five – monitoring international migration into Guyana with particular emphasis on the Federative Republic of Venezuela’s (Venezuela’s) migration crisis.

Identifying and effectively articulating our foreign policy: The aim of foreign policy is to promote the national interest of the State. The maintenance and preservation of Guyana’s sovereignty and territorial integrity is the foremost national interest and must be the number one objective of our foreign policy. I am not convinced, however, that this Government is persuaded of this fact because, if they were, concurrently with the proceedings before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), there would have been a sustained effort to keep the matter of Venezuela’s spurious claim on the forefront of all of our endeavours. It would permeate every speech that we gave, it would permeate every presentation that we make internationally, and we would be actively building alliances with groupings and states that could lend support to us. This just-in-time and for-the-moment approach has to stop. It must end. The protection of our territorial integrity requires eternal vigilance. Guyanese are well aware of that photograph of a Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leader standing with a map of Venezuela which included our Essequibo. This matter caused serious outrage, and understandably so. What is even more worrisome for me is that this photograph, along with an accompanying article written by one, Mr. Enio Melean, was published on the website of Venezuela’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 21st December, 2022.

These questions necessarily arise therefore, who is monitoring the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ website and communications on our behalf? Did they not see

this photograph? If they did, did they bring it to the attention of Takuba Lodge? If Takuba Lodge was made aware, why was not there a diplomatic protest to that particular CARICOM leader? If they were aware, as well, why did they not consider this sufficient cause for pause in agreeing to that said CARICOM leader being an interlocutor in this Guyana/Venezuela controversy? These are legitimate questions and Guyanese deserve answers. It is time that the Government proffer to this nation a well-thought-out and well-articulated foreign policy which will provide the roadmap for our engagement with the world, one that aligns our national interests, values, and goals, and offers a coherent and strategic approach to navigating the complexities of this new international order. To this end, we would propose the establishment of a foreign relations council. Such a council would comprise our best minds across academia, foreign service professionals, civil society, and other professions, and would have the mandate to continuously review Guyana’s foreign policy. In this manner, we would ensure that our foreign policy positions are well-thought-out, well-articulated, as would be the case in any properly functioning democracy. It must not be at the whims and fancies of individuals who are bent on furthering partisan interests.

Reshaping and enhancing our relationship with CARICOM countries: The events of the last few months have indicated the clear need for us to engage with CARICOM in a more sustained manner. It is to be recalled that it was Guyana, under the visionary leadership of Linden Forbes Sampson, Burnham, who had the foresight to understand that as a region we either integrated or we would perish, and thus we became a founding member of CARICOM and a driving force behind regional integration. It has to be recalled, as well, that it was in response to Guyana’s strength and stature in CARICOM, that Venezuela established a foreign policy position to disrupt Guyana’s influence and relationships within CARICOM, and these resulted in initiatives, such as the PetroCaribe. We strongly recommend that without delay we have envoys actively working in the capitals of CARICOM member states, representing our interests, and providing regular feedback to Takuba Lodge. Guyana must never have to urge unequivocal statements of support from CARICOM leaders. It is regrettable that the High Commission in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (Trinidad), established under the David Granger-led Administration in 2017, has now been downgraded to a consulate. The stated objective of establishing this High Commission was explained by then Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Carl Greenidge. It was:

“...the strengthening and deepening of our bilateral relations with Trinidad and Tobago as well as furthering our bilateral ties with the other island states of the Caribbean Community.”

I urge this Government not to *throw the baby out with the bath water* but appreciate the strategic importance of a High Commission in Trinidad and Tobago and forthwith re-establish same. I am strongly of the view that the deficient Argyle Declaration is the reflection of our failure to continuously engage with CARICOM. Whilst Guyana welcomes the undertaking by Venezuela not to use force against Guyana, it must be noted that as we speak Venezuela is proceeding with the passage of their organic law for the defence of what they call the ‘Guayana Esequiba’, in direct violation of the Argyle Agreement. Where is the outrage? Venezuela continues to distribute maps with our Essequibo included in it and there is deafening silence.

His Excellency the President has assumed the chairmanship of CARICOM and I note that regional food security is high on the agenda. We agree that Guyana does have the ability to lead the way in this regard and can truly become the breadbasket of the Caribbean. But I want to submit to us here today, that Guyana must first become the breadbasket for Guyanese. At the moment, it is not. According to the Caribbean Food Security and Livelihoods Survey, which was published in January, 2023, it is estimated that 56% of Guyanese are moderately or severely food insecure, which is higher than the regional average. I ask this Government then, how are Guyanese to play a meaningful role in the development of this country when they have to worry, day in and day out, about what they will eat? Guyanese have to worry, day in and day out, about what they will eat – 56% of Guyanese. The people of Guyana are our most precious resource, and they must be the centre of any developmental strategy. When the Vice President accuses us of only wanting to feed the people of Guyana, we proudly say, guilty as charged.

2.14 p.m.

The people-centered approach to the development of Guyana that the APNU/AFC continues to adumbrate, will see Guyanese being able to feed, clothe, and house themselves, and will culminate in the ‘good life’ that every son and daughter of this land is entitled to, and which is only possible with this APNU/AFC Coalition.

Employing astute diplomacy: Diplomacy is the vehicle through which a state advances its foreign policy. And while diplomacy is this broad concept that encompasses the

general practice of international relations, we now must necessarily go one step further. We must employ astute diplomacy. Astute diplomacy involves a higher level of skill, strategic thinking, and adaptability, and will allow us as a nation to navigate the complexities of the global stage with a more nuanced and effective approach. It goes beyond routine interactions to include an insightful and strategic decision-making in pursuit of our national interest. To this end, we urgently need to examine our representation at foreign capitals. It is inconceivable that, four years into this new Government, we have not yet appointed an ambassador to the Federative Republic of Brazil (Brazil) – Brazil, our strongest continental ally and a member of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. (BRICS). We have not yet appointed an ambassador to Brazil. The sloth in this regard is completely unacceptable and it must be remedied forthwith. It is also unacceptable that we have no missions in Africa, save and except the Republic of South Africa (South Africa), and this is but a consulate. Meanwhile, Venezuela continues to court African states individually and collectively.

Since the disastrous departure of the High Commissioner from New Delhi, we have yet to appoint a new High Commissioner and we have no high-level representation in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, the Russian Federation (Russia), the Swiss Federation (Switzerland), the Kingdom of Belgium (Belgium), the State of Kuwait (Kuwait) the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Republic of Suriname (Suriname). We also need to examine our approach to international economic cooperation. The European Union has been Guyana’s major development partner since 1975 under successive African, Pacific and Caribbean Group of States-European Union (ACP-EU) Lome and Cotonou partnership Agreements. In November, 2023, in Samoa, the member states of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), a collection of 79 states and the European Union signed the Samoa Partnership Agreement. This Agreement would govern relations between the two groups for the next 20 years in the first instance. The provisional application of this Agreement commenced on 1st January, 2024.

Mr Speaker, despite Guyana in the person of Mr. Carl Greenidge playing a leading role in the negotiation of this new Agreement, Guyana was neither represented at the signing of the Agreement and, to date, it has not signed the Agreement. Our not signing on to this Agreement means that we will be severely limited in the scope for cooperation with the EU. It also robs us of a very important forum – 79 states; a very important forum for us to canvass our support against Venezuela’s illegal claim. Astute diplomacy demands that

we seize every opportunity to maximise membership of these international arrangements and further the interests of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana.

Education and training and development of our diplomatic corps: A corps of knowledgeable and committed diplomats is an indispensable prerequisite for executing the astute diplomacy that I described above. When the APNU/AFC re-established the Foreign Service Institute in February, 2020, it was with this vision in mind. It is unfortunate that this Government has allocated only an approximately \$11 million for training in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. What this essentially means, the Foreign Service Institute will continue to operate as a clearing house for opportunities provided by other governments for the training of our foreign service personnel, which in many instances are not tailored to our specific needs. It does not have to be this way. Under an APNU/AFC-led administration, the Foreign Service Institute will be a well-funded, well-resourced entity, capable of offering a culturally responsive, world-class, post-graduate education to our foreign service personnel.

Monitoring international migration into Guyana with particular emphasis on the impact of Venezuelan migration crisis: Guyana continues to grapple with a burgeoning migration crisis, particularly as it relates to migrants from Venezuela. It is settled that migrant overflow can lead to economic and social crisis, negatively impacting the actual citizens of the country. It is being felt here in Guyana, it is being felt in overcrowded classrooms and hospitals. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Guyana Needs Assessment report, published in 2021, in 2020 there was an estimated 22,000 Venezuelan migrants in Guyana, with only about 11,000 of that number being in regular migration status, that is, properly documented and accounted for. We know, for a fact, in 2024 that number is at least four times that amount. It therefore means that if the trend holds, we are safe in assuming that there are tens of thousands of undocumented Venezuelan migrants here in Guyana.

Mr. Speaker, we are in a crisis. Instead of understanding the long-term implications of this unchecked migration into Guyana, the long-term implications for Guyana's territorial integrity, the PPP/C Government continues to adopt a myopic approach, preferring to use this crisis instead for its own narrow political gain. Instead of getting down to the real work of crafting a sound migration policy for Guyana, this PPP/C Government prefers to spend its time painting the APNU/AFC Coalition as anti-Venezuelan-migrants. Let me

be clear that, unlike the PPP/C Government that continues to discriminate against our Haitian brothers and sisters in clear breach of our obligations under the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas, we are not anti-Venezuelan or any other migrant, we are pro law and order. I want to be very clear because I have said it before and I will say it again, no migrant who comes into Guyana in keeping with the laws of our land and, whilst here, continues to abide by the laws of Guyana, will have anything to fear from an APNU/AFC government.

It is apparent that this Government does not see the crafting of a migration policy for Guyana as urgent or important. In February, 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation launched the project to develop a migration profile for Guyana. This project, which will provide critical data for the formulation of a migration policy, was slated to be concluded at the end of 2022. We are now in 2024 and this critical project is languishing. We, on this side of the House, understand that the PPP/C Administration has a deep and abiding resentment for studies and data-driven decision making. The next APNU/AFC government will craft a sound migration policy for Guyana, one that is comprehensive but flexible, addressing the economic, social, environmental, and cultural aspects, to promote sustainable development and enhance the well-being of both our citizens and newcomers. But we must be clear about something, the APNU/AFC government will be unapologetic about putting Guyanese first. The wealth of this land first belongs to Guyanese, every Guyanese man, woman, and child. We will take care of them first and we will be happy to share the bounty from the overflow with the rest of the world. Having identified these five urgent priorities that we must address to right our badly-listing foreign policy ship, I will use my remaining time to make a few observations about this trillion-dollar Budget. But first I wish to make one observation on international trade.

International trade: A major lifeblood of our economy is international trade. As a country that relies heavily on foreign trade, we must be concerned as to what the changes in our economy mean for the acquisition and distribution of foreign currency. The new concentration of our economy reveals that two industries, oil and gold, generated 94% of our foreign currency earnings in 2023. According to the existing data, one can envisage oil exceeding the 90% share of foreign earnings, that it was responsible for in 2023, in the not-too-distant future. While this Government basks as a country in the financial glow of the oil industry, one has to wonder what the current policy on the management and use of foreign-generated earnings might be playing in

determining access to foreign currency for our business community and the wider society. Shortage of foreign currency should not abound in a country where export revenues have grown over 700% in less than four years and its trade balance to a surplus of over \$6.5 billion in 2023. It should not happen.

Our public servants: The public servants of Guyana play a vital role in fostering the well-being and development of our society by dedicating their expertise and energies to delivering essential services, to upholding justice, and to ensuring the efficient functioning of our government institutions. They keep the wheels of this country turning. Sadly, our hardworking public servants in this oil-rich country will get the benefit of approximately 1.88% of the money this country will earn, and this is after accounting, of course, for the projected inflation of 2.5%. This indicates a decline in real income for public servants, contrasting starkly with the progressive yearly rise that they enjoyed from 2015 to 2019 under the APNU/AFC Government. Every year from 2021, the real income of our workers has gone down.

Mr. Speaker, I want us to examine the transfers that Guyanese, including public servants, will receive under the various handout packages announced by this Government. In 2024, the Government plans to give Guyanese 1.44% of the country's oil wealth to supplement their income. These are the moneys that will go directly to schoolchildren, to teachers, to youths, to pensioners, and to those depending on public assistance, as well as those business ventures. This will be done either through cash, vouchers, or other forms of transfer. When public servants' incomes are combined – and I want you to hear this Mr. Speaker – with the supposed generosity of the Government, they would have gained access to a mere 3% of the 2024 income for this country. It is therefore very understandable why the people of this country place more emphasis on remittances, which at 5% of the 2024 Gross Domestic Product (GDP), will exceed the entire earnings and grants public servants will receive from the PPP/C Government. In other words, what I am saying is, despite this trillion-dollar Budget, Guyanese are surviving because of the moneys being sent to them by their relatives overseas. What an embarrassment.

2.29 p.m.

I want to turn our minds to the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP). Year after year we continue to point out that the local capacity does not exist to execute the ever-increasing Public Sector Investment Programme and it continues to get worse. Execution capacity within the public

sector has not experienced any intervention for improvement over the last three years. In fact, the brain drain continues unabated. What this means essentially is that because there has been no sustained effort, or no effort at all, to improve our efficiency, it means that as the budget grows wastage also grows. Three years ago we showed in this House how, with the smallest of adjustments, the PPP/C Government could give to public servants, among other things, a 10% increase and free education for the thousands of university students who are enrolled in the University of Guyana today. The position as we stand here today remains the same, that with the minutest of adjustments in the Public Sector Investment Programme, public servants could enjoy a 10% salary increase. We could afford free university education right now; we could incentivise our nurses and our doctors to remain here instead of coming to this house to boast, 'let them go, we will bring in other nurses.' This Government simply does not care about the people of Guyana.

The reality, however, is that no matter how much we stand here and deliver the facts and dissect this Budget and show how with just such little effort we can make the lives of Guyanese better, it does not matter how much the international organisations speak, this Government will not listen because they are stiff-necked. And because they are stiff-necked, I will not spend the rest of this budget presentation speaking to them. Instead, I will speak to the people of Guyana because it is the people of Guyana who hold the ultimate power. So I say, fellow Guyanese, the reality is that you have two visions before you for our country. One vision consists of raiding the Natural Resource Fund, racking up a mountain of debt which our children will have to repay, spending a record 58% of the budget on physical infrastructure without even attempting to close the horrific efficiency gap, which means that 41% of the total capital expenditure, or \$273 billion, will be wasted. Imagine what \$273 billion could do in your pocket. This vision of this PPP/C Government is one that, despite knowing that the world economic forum has concluded that the cost-of-living crisis is the biggest global risk in the short term, would see the setting aside of a measly \$7 billion dollars to assist Guyanese with weathering these rough times.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member to weather the conclusion you need five minutes.

Mr. Jones: Cde. Speaker, I do move that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to conclude her presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you Mr. Jones. Hon. Member you have five minutes to conclude.

Ms. Walton-Desir: Thank you, Sir. Mr. Speaker, the vision of this PPP/C Government is to implement the largest wealth-transfer in Guyana's history, transferring trillions of dollars from the hardworking people to a handful of no more than 20 families. Their vision will see the continued undermining of our institutions, the dismantling of the guardrails of our democracy and the suppression of dissenting views. Their vision is to do all of this and then use their public relations (PR) machinery, funded by taxpayers' dollars, to gaslight the people of Guyana, telling us that down is up and left is right.

Mr. Speaker, there is another vision, the vision of the APNU/AFC. And our vision, with the people of Guyana at its centre, sees a Guyana where the Guyanese spirit is strengthened, and national unity is fostered, and patriotism perpetually promoted. Our vision sees a Guyana where no Guyanese man, woman, or child, will ever go hungry because we will implement a needs-based food voucher programme for low income and no income Guyanese. Our vision sees a Guyana where parents will not have to worry about affording transportation for their children to attend school because we will implement a needs-based transportation voucher system for our children. Our vision sees a Guyana with free education from nursery to university for all Guyanese and will see the University of Guyana receiving adequate funding to increase its talent pool, to enhance its talent, to increase research and drive innovation. In our vision, no public servant will earn less than \$150,000 per month and we will work with the private sector to close the minimum wage gap between the public and private sectors. In our Guyana, capital expenditure will only occur after a professional examination of the needs and an examination of our capacity to effectively implement these projects.

In an APNU/AFC-led Guyana, health-care delivery will be revolutionized because we will focus on the delivery of primary health care and on preventative health care instead of allowing our populations to fall sick and then building hospitals to hospitalise them. We will focus on retaining our doctors and our nurses. Our vision will make Guyana the breadbasket for Guyanese and for the Caribbean because we will invest in agriculture, and we will champion the growth of the non-oil sector. Our vision for Guyana will reverse the dreaded oil curse. Our vision for Guyana will see professional government with professional government agencies and interventions necessary to improve efficiency.

This will include the re-establishment of a public service training institute.

In this Guyana we envision that Guyanese will know that agencies such as the Guyana Police Force (GPF) are actually there to protect and serve them, and not to serve the dictates of the political classes and the elite. I want to break it down for us so that it will consistently and forever be broke, the PPP/C is bad for Guyana, they are bad for the people of Guyana, they are bad for business, they are good only for their elite friends and family. This PPP/C Government is constructing the early makings of a failed state, and they must be stopped. The APNU/AFC Coalition is better. We are better for Guyana, we are better for the people of Guyana, because we are committed to a strong democracy and we place the people of Guyana at the centre of our development strategy, not sand, not cement, not stone.

Mr. Speaker, for all of the foregoing reasons, and while I am deeply appreciative of the work done by our staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, I cannot support this 2024 Budget as it has been presented to this honourable House. Mr. Speaker, I thank you. [*Applause*]

Mr. Holder: Cde. Speaker, wow. That was a feral blast. The APNU/AFC is truly better, the APNU/AFC Coalition.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to make my contribution to the 2024 Budget, with an equal sense of frustration and disappointment like Hon. Ms. Amanza Walton-Desir and like so many other poor and working-class Guyanese. This Budget demonstrates clearly, once again, who the PPP/C are and what they really care about – friends, family and favourites.

Mr. Speaker, I want to turn your attention to the Ministry of Natural Resources, and gold and mining in particular, which does not escape the PPP/C's friend, family and favourite policy nor the accompanying mismanagement and discrimination. The gold industry remains a key contributor to the national economic performance and to the hinterland settlement and development. Gold still accounts for 6 to 8% of the non-oil GDP and 60 to 70% of non-oil exports. Over the last four years, however, the gold industry has experienced a 50% drop in declaration from our local small-to medium-scale miners. Additionally, in that time span, we have not seen the commencement of any new large-scale operations. From the large-scale gold subsector, production has actually dropped from around 160,000 ounces in 2019 to around 109,000 ounces in 2023, a decline of 70%. Several reasons have been offered for this dismal performance, despite the fact that gold prices on the world market have

remained relatively high, ranging from over US\$1,600 per ounce to over US\$2,300 per ounce over the last four years. In general, local small and medium-scale gold miners have pointed to their waning government enthusiasm in the industry since the advent of oil production. In fact, the new President of the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA) had cause to declare in his acceptance speech last year that:

“...gold mining is like the good wife, we must not be distracted by this new ‘girl’ called oil and gas.”

More specifically, however, the industry is plagued by increased illegal mining, increased raiding of the gold operations, increased illegal buying and selling of gold, and increased smuggling. What all this means is that the gap between actual production from local miners and gold declaration continues to widen. The illegal trade in gold is not only rampant in the mining districts, but also prevalent in our very capital city, Georgetown. The Government has failed to adequately respond to these issues. It requires more than just lip service, Cde. Minister, and half-hearted enforcement exercises to reverse these trends. It requires the mobilization of the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC), the Guyana Police Force (GPF), and the local communities. It requires a zero tolerance from the Government for corruption and cronyism. It requires that the Government pay attention and take action and not be overtly infatuated by the ‘new girl’ named oil and gas.

In addition to these problems, local gold mining has simply run out of living space, as most of the accessible work grounds have been worked and reworked to exhaustion, and then reworked again. The Government needs to urgently increase both the availability of and accessibility to new mining lands. This requires the Government to find new areas of gold mineralization and build new access roads. In doing so, the Government must ensure three things: one, that gold miners at all scales can have access to these opportunities, and not just the privileged; two, that the land rights of our Indigenous peoples are respected; and three, that our environment and biodiversity are protected.

2.44 p.m.

On another matter, in 2013, the PPP/C Government signed, with much fanfare, the Minamata Convention on Mercury, which aimed at phasing out the all-embracing use of mercury in small and medium-scale gold mining in Guyana. Of recent, apart from a few workshops, not much visible evidence exists that the current PPP/C Government is serious

about pursuing this goal. We, in the Opposition, call on the Government to treat this matter with greater urgency. We, on this side of the House, still recognise the importance of the local gold mining industry and intend to positively act on that recognition as the next government.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to turn your attention to another aspect of the mineral industry that I know is not on the government’s radar; that of making Guyana an investment destination for the exploration of so-called critical minerals. Critical minerals are those minerals that are important to industry and new technology but are of limited availability due to geology, economics, geo-politics or environmental barriers and are hard to substitute. Many are aware that such minerals include rare earth elements such as, lithium, cobalt, copper, nickel and titanium. Critical minerals are projected to remain in high demand and carry high prices. Guyana can benefit enormously from being a producer of any one of these minerals.

Guyana has the right geology for the existence of some of these minerals. To attract mineral investors, in a highly competitive global environment, requires the Government to be proactive in several ways, such as: one, the Government must conduct its own regional surveys across the entire Guyana land and near-shore marine environments to produce high quality geo-data, which it must package and make available to investors. This is a necessity because mineral investors are not attracted to countries where they must collect data from scratch. In this context, let us note that almost the whole of southern Guyana remains unexplored. The second point is, the Government needs to promote Guyana as a mineral investment destination. This may require more than mere participation in annual mining conventions. It requires the Government to employ trained Foreign Affairs Officers and private promoters. In this promotional effort, the Government must also recognise that much exploration internationally is conducted by junior companies on whom the majors depend heavily on for new and de-risked investment opportunities.

A brief word on bauxite – the Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility of Finance and the Public Service reported that 2023 saw a significant drop in bauxite exports. As we are aware, the bauxite industry has for decades presented many challenges, some seemingly insurmountable. Guyana, however, needs to better leverage its comparative advantage in that its bauxite deposits can produce probably the world’s widest range of bauxite products, such as: metallurgical grade, refractory grade, cement grade and chemical grade bauxites. That apart, the

gifting of some of the country's richest deposits by the previous PPP/C Government to an investor who sees a strategic value in keeping those deposits out of the world supply remains problematic. Later, I intend to ask the Minister of Natural Resources to inform this nation about the status of the royalty payments and other taxes from bauxite mining as well as from manganese mining in the North West District.

Sand and Quarry Stone – The increased mining of sand and quarry stone is to be expected, given the growth in construction, notwithstanding much of that construction is ill-planned. The Government now needs to urgently draft a comprehensive and forward-looking land management plan to strategically govern the competing use of the lands bordering the Linden to Soesdyke Highway from where sand and loam are extracted. Such a plan must map out and dedicate areas for such uses as sand and loam mining, housing development, tourism and recreation, industrial sites, farming, future transportation links, environmental protection and nature reserves. The disorderliness must now cease.

As regard to construction stone – rock sources for such materials are not as available nor accessible as our highway sand deposits. The Government, therefore, needs to increase the availability of good rock materials by conducting dedicated geological surveys, and to increase accessibility by building or improving road and river transportation routes.

Oil and Gas – Our oil and gas industry is constantly in a state of turmoil because the Government has demonstrated that it is unpatriotic and incompetent in equal measure. It is with utter disgust that I rise now to address an existential issue for our oil industry. The Government's refusal to provide proof of ExxonMobil's US\$2 billion parent company guarantee in the event of an oil spill, as first ordered by Justice Persaud, risks putting our entire country in jeopardy. While the case on full liability coverage is being decided, this parent company guarantee serves as one of Guyana's first defence in the event of an oil spill. More than that, however, what patriotic government would refuse to provide evidence that Guyana is in a safer position, especially, after the Court has ordered that this document be established? This demonstrates a lack of respect for the judicial process, and a woeful disregard for transparency and accountability. For the Vice-President, Dr. Jagdeo, to claim that he has no say in ensuring the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides this document and to take the position that there is no obligation to provide it, in the course of this court case, is equally troubling. He claims that his Government believes in

transparency and accountability but, at every turn, they demonstrate that their real loyalty is to secrecy.

We saw the Government join with ExxonMobil to appeal a decision handed down by Justice Sandil Kissoon that the operator provide full liability coverage including a parent company guarantee. We labelled that action – as what it was – unpatriotic. We reiterate now the importance of a parent company guarantee as well as oil spill insurance so that Guyana does not bear the brunt of an oil spill costs, if we are unfortunate enough to face one. The Government is rushing ahead, approving development after development, without safeguarding the interests of the Guyanese people. This practise must stop. We see the pernicious attitude that is reflected in Guyana's cost oil audits where we, the Opposition, had to fight along with civil society and the media to get the Government to even agree to audit. We had to fight to get the Government to also release audits. When the first audit finally came into the public domain, it had to come on the back of a 'leak to the press'. We say to the Government, 'shame on you'. We say to the Government 'that attitude is unpatriotic'. We say to the Government that 'this practice of wanton secrecy must come to an end'. Even worse, the first audit erupted into chaos as the Government claimed it was a junior functionary who agreed to the reduced amount in dispute from US\$214 million to only US\$3 million, potentially robbing Guyana of US\$100 million. We continue to believe he was not acting on his own and that this should be thoroughly investigated. This sum could have been used to train not only 610 youths, as the claim was made by Cde. Hamilton, but all of our young people.

Mr. Speaker, permit me a moment to dwell more on the issue of Guyana's cost oil audit and the arbitration process we must now undertake to recover in excess of US\$100 million from our first audit. After the laundry list of controversies, we witnessed with that audit, many Guyanese expected the Government to take this process more seriously and to immediately assemble an audit team of legal, accounting and arbitration experts to reclaim our funds. We have heard not one word on this issue and this Budget seems silent as well. If the Government wants to show the Guyanese people that they are committed to safeguard their rights, they must assemble an appropriate team, fund them and treat this issue with the same urgency that they spend those same hundreds of millions of US dollars. Even further, it is nonsensical to borrow millions of US dollars when one has moneys available to be retrieved. The Government must take this seriously. We will stand with every patriotic Guyanese to

hold their feet to the fire until the Government fulfil their duty.

Natural Gas – I turn now to the issue of natural gas, which has been dominated of late by the gas-to-energy project and its related pipeline. Why does the Government continue to hide the details of its agreement with ExxonMobil for this pipeline? We need to know the interest rates Guyana is being charged for this pipeline, as well as what insurance is in place in the event of a leak. The Government's love of secrecy is toxic. With that toxicity many worries will result in another disaster such as the Skeldon Sugar Factory. We call again for the Government to release this information, just as we have called for the Government to release the operator's quarterly oil field production and development reports. Guyanese have a right to know what is happening in their country and what it costs them. On the issue of natural gas production and use – we call on the Government to develop a comprehensive gas utilisation master plan. Their attempt to do so have thus far been feeble and half-hearted. Guyana is replete with opportunities to make use of natural gas resources to benefit our people and the industry. When in Government, this is a promise, we will commission an extensive study of Guyana's natural gas and its uses. We will craft a study that unlocks this industry and position Guyana in such a way that we benefit fully from those resources. This Government does not like studies. Mr. Speaker, from the sentiments over there, you know that they do not like studies. We believe that we cannot act wildly. When billions of dollars are on the line it is not a no brainer.

It would be remiss of me if I do not say a few words on Region 2's budget. Region 2 remains a key contributor to our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the growth and development of our country. I have lamented in the past the PPP/C's track record of doing nothing for Region 2 from 1992 to 2015.

[An Hon. Member (Government):
(Inaudible) You did nothing. The Government did nothing. It was the APNU/AFC – without oil – who ran on a meagre \$220 billion Budget, which began to fix that mess that PPP/C Government left.

2.59 p.m.

Before the PPP/C left Government, the rice farmers were protesting, lighting the roads a fire and cursing them – we fixed it. The dire blackout situation in the region, we fixed it. The dilapidated infrastructure such as the Supenaam Speedboat Stelling and the Anna Regina Police Station, we transformed them. With the return of the People's Progressive Party/Civic in 2020, so did the carefree attitude

and mismanagement of the region. The education sector in the region might be a good place to start. Through the Coalition's vision for this sector, plans and policies were developed and executed to address the critical issue such as ensuring that every child goes to school, school dropout rates, transportation for students in hinterland and far-flung communities, and pass rates for Mathematics and English to name a few.

The massive turnaround of the education sector under the Coalition Government is well known. Today, they boast about it as if they did anything. Now that PPP/C are back in power the sector seems to be going backwards in the region. Time would not allow for me to elaborate on the dilapidated and unserviceable condition of the school boats and buses; we saw them in the Pomeroon and we see them everywhere. The frequent absence of the hot meals instituted by the APNU/AFC to ensure that people's children no longer had to sit in a classroom on emptied stomachs. Then, there is the discrimination factor. The PPP/C removed from the new Abrams Zuil Secondary School through an illegal supernumerary appointment, the qualified Afro-Guyanese substantive head teacher. I do not want to get into the details but if you know it, it is discrimination.

They denied, without explanation, an application by another qualified Afro-Guyanese for the Deputy Principal position at the Essequibo Technical Institute (ETI). The acting head who is an Afro-Guyanese professional for the Teachers Training College was replaced by a lesser qualified supporter of the PPP/C. They moved to illegally suspend the Afro-Guyanese headmistress of the 8th May Primary School. It took protest action and me talking to the Minister right in this House by telling the Hon. Minister that it is illegal to reverse the erroneous act. They have much more money at their disposal now so it is quite easy to construct buildings. If the Government does not have proper management of the institutions and if treat the human resource – your teachers – in an undeserving and discriminatory manner, including denying them a liveable income, then the results will be as we are seeing now: increase school drops, lower attendance and lower matriculation rate. As admitted in your own Budget, the matriculation rate reversed from 43% in 2019 under APNU/AFC to 34% under this PPP/C Government. Mr. Speaker, you can check Appendix 1; check Table 1. They have admitted it.

Let us look at public works and agriculture – in the region. There is a fundamental flaw in which the PPP/C is attempting to sell their empty Budget. They try to tell persons that the allocations are bigger so that means that

persons are getting more – not true. I thank the Hon. Member, Ms. Coonjah, for highlighting the roads and bridges done by the Government but what she did not tell you, Mr. Speaker, was that many of the roads and bridges mentioned were requested and some even budgeted for since 2020. I have spoken with so many farmers who decried the state of their farms' access road. The La Belle Alliance access road is an example. Representation has been made by APNU/AFC, in every budget cycle, since the PPP/C came into power. Yet, they ignored the plight of those farmers. The Mashabo access road started since 2021, 600 meters yet to be completed; streets in Dartmouth were requested and even spoken of by the Minister in this House since 2021, yet to be completed. They give people the impression that they are doing so many roads, yet if people are to check the records, they will find that with Budgets between \$200 billion and \$300 billion the APNU/AFC were able to do just as many roads, at around one third of the cost and of a better quality in many instances. Go check the record, we have done the analysis.

Health and energy production – The state of our health facilities in the region remains a critical issue to most Essequibians. The physical condition of the facilities, the absence of drugs and medical supplies and equipment, and the absence of the required human resources leaves much to be desired. Just last week I interacted with a sick patient – I will call him Patient X. He required a full body scan to diagnose what really was wrong with him. Unfortunately, he died before acquiring the finance to do so. Days later, I received a call from another patient – Patient Y –... They like to discriminate so I cannot call people's name. ...who had to undergo a surgery. He ended up facing the indignity of urinating himself hours after requesting assistance. I give these examples to demonstrate to the Government the deep flaws in their policy with respect to the sector and the region. The Government is boasting about building a new hospital in Coffee Grove. Yet, neighbours confirmed that the entire foundation or sections of it was poorly constructed and had to be ripped out. Who is standing the bill for that? Apart from that, building new hospitals cannot solve the problem if what already exists is not fixed. To this end, human resources are critical to the quality of healthcare you will deliver as a government.

I will speak a little on energy. Prior to 2015, Region 2 suffered immensely from the blackout plague. The APNU/AFC invested almost \$2 billion dollars on a new 5.4-megawatt (MW) power plant with a life span of 20 years. Five years have not past as yet and two of the three already

failed and are out of service. Go visit the powerplant, I went there just days ago. Now they are renting about seven smaller backup sets from Machinery Corporation of Guyana Ltd. (MACORP) to the tune of tens of millions of dollars per month. It just does not make sense. Somebody's pocket has to be receiving tonnes of cash. How else do you explain it, Cde. Speaker? As it relates to the two solar farms at St. Monica and Kabakaburi in the Pomeroon, none are currently providing power for any of the homes in the communities. I cannot expand on the reasons but their incompetence; that is all I would say.

In conclusion, there are lots of issues. I did not get to hear from Cde. Pearson-Fredricks and others. I do not have the time to rebut them, but I will pass some of my notes to the Hon. Member, Mr. Vinceroy Jordan, in the area of agriculture to tell you about their mismanagement and all that is happening in this sector.

In closing, *Budget 2024* is a colossal failure and does not address the immediate needs of our people. The APNU/AFC joint Opposition were not consulted on the Budget and made a number of recommendations in lying with our people-centered approach. In keeping with our request, I ask that the Government immediately amend their proposed Budget to include the following: one – raise the non-taxable income threshold to \$150,000; two – include a cost-of-living allowance for all workers; three – reduce value-added tax (VAT) to eight per cent and remove it completely from all locally produced goods; four – raise the minimum public servant salary by 50%; five – remove personal income tax for low wage workers; six guarantee all household a liveable wage; and seven introduce free education for all students including those at the University of Guyana (UG). This is what a trillion-dollar Coalition budget would look like. If these requests are met, be assured that you will have the Coalition's support. The Coalition was able to transform this country and offer a better package without a shadow of a doubt to the citizens of this country with a smaller budget and without the proceeds of oil. It is because of this track record, we are confident that after the next general and regional elections, when the next Coalition Government is formed, we will have the resources necessary to deliver a better quality of life for all Guyanese. I thank you. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Now for the Hon. Minister of Natural Resources, Mr. Vickram Bharrat. Hon. Minister, you have the floor.

Minister of Natural Resources [Mr. Bharrat]: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, permit to join with you in wishing my Colleague the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Mr. Charles Ramson, a happy birthday as well as our Vice-President the Hon. Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo. I also wish to commend the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, and his staff at the Ministry of Finance for the commendable job in putting together *Budget 2024*. I also wish to further commend my own staff from the Ministry of Natural Resources and our agencies. I am a bit confused with regard to who is shadowing who because, for the last three years, we have had several shadow ministers of natural resources. Nevertheless, I want to congratulate the shadows. It means that you are preparing for a long haul and a long haul you will get in Opposition.

Budget 2024 is a continuation of our programme, our policies and our projects to build out a new modern Guyana that all of us want to see and to pass on to future generations to come.

Budget 2024 is building on the foundation that was started in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. We have heard many descriptions for *Budget 2024*. We have heard that it is an oil and gas budget. We have heard that it is a private sector budget. We have heard that it is an infrastructure budget, sand and stone or a cement and stone budget. We have heard that it is friends, families and favourites budget. We have also heard that *Budget 2024* has nothing for the ordinary people.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to crave your indulgence. Over 20,000 scholarships have been issued to Guyanese, is that not benefits to the ordinary people in our country? 50,000 house lots, is that not benefits to the ordinary people? Over 1,000 community roads stretching all 10 regions, is that not a benefit to the ordinary people? The creation of over 50,000 jobs, is that not a benefit to the ordinary people? As a matter of fact, I heard one Honourable Member said we are not doing anything to address unemployment in Guyana. It is obvious that Member is divorced from the reality of what is happening in our country. As a matter of fact, today, we have a shortage of labour, that is one of our biggest issues in most of the sectors including mining and the forestry sector. Yet, an Hon. Member will come and say, we are doing nothing to address unemployment. If we are spending billions on infrastructure, is that not creating employment? Is that not creating benefits for the ordinary people?

The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, spoke about infrastructure this morning, but the Hon. Member only highlighted the contractors. What about the people who will be employed by the contractors? What about the people who will provide the goods and services? What about the people who will do the surveys? What about the people who will give the services— the Engineers, the jobs men?

3.14 p.m.

It has trickle-down effects. These are all benefits for the ordinary Guyanese. There are 12 new hospitals across all the regions in Guyana. Is that not beneficial to the ordinary people? All the new highways are being built to alleviate traffic congestion because of the number of vehicles being registered in our country every day. That by itself speaks to the development that is taking place across our country and the confidence that people have in the economy, country, and Government. At one time, we were struggling to register 9,999 vehicles in a year. Now, we are registering over 30,000 vehicles in one year. That is development; that is development. An ordinary person can afford to purchase a motor car not only for themselves but for their children attending university. Today, that is possible under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government.

The new Demerara Harbour Bridge, the bridge to the Republic of Suriname and the Linden Highway, would these not benefit the ordinary people? Are we so divorced from reality that we do not see development taking place across the country where every Guyanese is included in the developmental agenda of our Government? We should not come to the National Assembly only to gain cheap political points by misleading people – by misleading people. Our sports ground and the new stadium being built, would that not benefit ordinary Guyanese? The Guyana Technical Training College Incorporated (GTTTCI) being built at Port Mourant will specialise in oil and gas training and hospitality. Would that not benefit the ordinary people? The 20,000 Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarships, would these not benefit the ordinary people? The many training that is being done by the Board of Industrial Training (BIT), is that not benefiting the ordinary Guyanese?

Our students' cash grant – we have our students here. The Hon. Member, Mr. Henry, broke it down. I do not know how it was that he did his Mathematics but, as usual, there is always an issue with Mathematics. He broke it down that the Government is only giving X amount to the students of this country every day but, what did your Government do to the

children of this country? You took back the cash grant. You took back the cash grant. You took back the cash grant from the children of this country. We made a promise that we are going to reinstate the cash grant. We are not only reinstating it, but we are going to double it by the end of our first term in Government. We are well on our way to achieving that target. In 2024, every schoolchild, whether in private or public school, will receive \$45,000. Are they not ordinary Guyanese? Are their parents not ordinary Guyanese? How is it that we can come here and say that *Budget 2024* will not benefit the ordinary people of this country?

For the Community Service Officer (CSO) programme, we heard the Hon. Member, Mr. Henry, speaking on it. If I was in the Hon. Member's position, I would stay away from certain topics and sectors. It is your Government who sent home almost 2000 young Amerindian CSOs in the hinterland regions. Your Government did that. Today, we have re-employed over 2,500 CSOs who assist with community development across the hinterland communities in this country.

Guyana is probably one of the few countries in the world where there is no tax on fuel. There is absolutely no tax on fuel for about two years now. We heard Minister Dr. Singh saying that it will remain that way. Is that not a measure to curb the cost of living? Is that not a measure that will incentivise the mining sector, the agriculture sector, the forestry sector and the transportation sector? That single incentive or measure will boost the economic activities in almost every sector in our country.

There is the reinstatement of the Joint Services' bonus. You love to speak so much about the Joint Services, but you took away the bonus from it. We reinstated that; we reinstated that. Over 15,000 ordinary Guyanese, mostly women have been employed under the pathway programme – the part-time workers. Are they not ordinary Guyanese? Are they not ordinary Guyanese?

There is the removal of VAT on mining equipment, forestry equipment, agriculture equipment, sports equipment, medical supplies, water, electricity and educational supplies. Is that not an incentive to benefit the ordinary people? There is an increase in the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) payment from \$35,000 to \$43,000. Would that not benefit the ordinary person? When we come here and say that *Budget 2024* will not benefit ordinary persons, we should think twice. We should definitely think twice.

There is an increase in Old Age Pension. We heard from the Opposition that it is a measly \$3,000 that we are giving our Pensioners. If I can take you back to 2016 when the APNU/AFC was in Government, the Old Age Pension increased from \$17,000 to \$18,200, which is an increase of \$1,200. It was not finished there. In 2017, the Old Age Pension increased from \$18,000 to \$19,000. This was an increase of \$1,000. We are not done there. In 2018, the Old Age Pension increased from \$19,000 to \$19,500. This was a \$500 increase. This was a \$500 increase. This was a \$500 increase. Today, you come here to the National Assembly and condemn the increase given by the PPP/C Government when you were giving Pensioners a \$500 increase and you speak about oil money. If I can remind the Hon. Member, Mr. Holder, – the Hon. Member said if they had the same amount of money, they would have done wonders – that in their term in Office from 2015 to 2020, they spent over \$1 trillion. What did you do? Where are the results? Point us to a project so that we can go and say – yes, this is how Guyanese benefitted. Tell us what you did so that we can say – yes, \$1 trillion was well spent. What I can reassure you of is – when we come back here a year from now, we will point you in the direction of where we spent the \$1 trillion and show how Guyanese benefitted from it. I can assure you of that.

The income tax threshold has been increased to \$100,000. It simply means that 13,000 ordinary Guyanese will no longer be paying pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) tax. That is what it simply means. It means more disposable income in the pockets of ordinary Guyanese. Added to that, is the 6.5% increase which was retroactive in 2023. The Opposition has only brought forward one recommendation to assist workers and that is to increase salaries. It is not only about increasing salaries because we are doing that. We have put measures into the Budget to ensure that people save and have more disposable income in their pockets. Also, we are working on projects that will cut the cost of living by reducing the cost of power generation in the country. When they speak of benefits not being trickled down to the ordinary Guyanese, they are politicking.

We heard some glorious words about 2015 to 2020 and the vision from the last two speakers from the Opposition. We heard about the APNU/AFC's vision. I would like to inform the Opposition that the very APNU/AFC vision had them humiliated in 2016; they got humiliated in 2018; they lost the seats of Government in 2020; and, worst yet they were trashed in the 2023 Local Government Elections (LGE). It is time that you rethink that vision because people cannot be

fooled again. They are not buying your vision. That is only talks; we need to see action. That is what the people of this country want to see; they want to see action.

It was also mentioned that we are raiding the Natural Resource Fund (NRF); we are raiding the Sovereign Wealth Fund. The Hon. Member, Mr. Forde, spoke yesterday morning and said that we took out the safeguards from the Natural Resources Fund Act so that we can squander oil money. I want to say that the Natural Resource Fund Act of December, 2021, actually strengthened the transparency and accountability in the way we manage the oil and gas revenues in this country. Previously, it was left to the whims and fancies of the Minister of Finance to decide how much money should flow into the Consolidated Fund. We changed that so the Minister will not sit and decide on how much money. There is a formula to determine every year how much money will flow into the national budget. We have an Investment Committee in place now. We have a Board of Directors to manage and advise the policymakers. Further, there are only two ways money can flow out or be spent from the Natural Resources Fund into the budget. Those two ways are by the national budget and... It is by way of the national budget. Any funds appropriated to the national budget must be examined and approved right here. That is what we are doing right now. We are debating this week and next week you will have the opportunity to ask all the questions that you want, and we will answer them. We will answer them to show you how the money will be spent. Added to that, you have the sitting Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Chairman who will scrutinise that in the Committee.

We have safeguards to ensure that there is transparency and accountability – pure transparency and accountability – in the sector. ...the other way money can flow from the Natural Resources Fund is if there is a national disaster or emergency. If money is taken out for a national disaster or emergency, it must be approved by the National Assembly. In other words, to the people of this country, there is no way anyone can use money from the Natural Resource Fund without the approval of the National Assembly. That is how we strengthened the Natural Resources Fund Act. Oil and gas can be a curse or a blessing; we all know that. Look around us at our neighbouring countries and you will see that. It is the prudent management of the sector, ensuring there is proper accountability and transparency, and ensuring that the benefits reach every Guyanese, which will bring us opportunities from the oil and gas sector.

3.29 p.m.

The previous speaker spoke glowingly about the respect for democracy. Really? This is the very Opposition that held this country hostage from 2nd March to 2nd April. We endured 33 days of recount in this very House because this very Opposition could not respect democracy. But, today, they come to this National Assembly and preach about democracy. Mr. Speaker, five months. [*Interruption*]

Let me turn my attention to Forestry. A lot has been said about the Forestry Sector, but every single Guyanese in this country knows that, in 2020, when we took over the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC), the Commission was bankrupt. A country that holds the second highest forest coverage in the world, after Suriname, with over 1000 different species was bankrupt. The Guyana Forestry Commission was bankrupt. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramsaroop, came to the National Assembly and said that they took over a bankrupt Commission in 2015 and used a report of the Auditor General to quote or to substantiate his claims. Mr. Speaker I have a document here which states that the Guyana Forestry Commission must transfer \$100 million from the accounts of the Guyana Forestry Commission to the Ministry of Finance in September of 2015. Yet, the Hon. Member came to the Commission and said that, in 2015, the Commission was bankrupt. What the Hon. Member did not do was to read that report properly. He read one account. There are seven accounts. Indeed, one of the accounts was in an overdraft, but the other account had over \$100 million, and the other two accounts had \$151 million. The Member did not report that to the National Assembly. He did not report that, but he came here and said they took over a bankrupt Commission. We should not come to the National Assembly and mislead the House and the people of this country. Even if for argument's sake, you took over a bankrupt Forestry Commission in 2015, which is not true, what did you do? This is because, in 2020, it was still bankrupt. So, it means that you simply did nothing in five years. You took it over bankrupt and you hand it over bankrupt. You did nothing, absolutely nothing – for the sake of argument. In less than three years, we have turned this sector around.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, came and said that exports had declined from 2019-2023. Yes, exports have declined, but is it that is the main objective of the forestry sector? Should we keep exporting our logs? No. No is the answer. One of the reasons we still remain a developing country today, even though we have so many natural resources and resources, it is because we have always exported our primary products. From all that we are hearing, it seems as though the Opposition is stuck in that mode. They just want to export everything. The local demand has

grown so much that the Guyana Forestry Commission is supplying the local demand. Should we neglect the local demand and export because we want to come here and report that our export figures are glorious? Should we do that? By doing that, we are suffering our own people. This is because when they go to a sawmill or lumber yard it is either that it is not available, or the price is so high that they cannot pay for it. It is simple. Should we continue exporting primary products? The answer is no. We do not have to come here and boast that the exports are declined. The exports did decline, but the production increased. It tells you something about what is happening in our country. It tells you about the development that is taking place in our country. That is what it says, that is what it speaks to – the development taking place.

The Hon. Member, Shurwayne Holder, spoke about gold decline, bauxite decline. When he reached to sand and aggregates... [Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] ...hold on, just now, have patience. When he reached to stones and sand, he said it was because of the increased demand. The increase demand did not happen just like that, Mr. Speaker. Do you think the increase demand happened by magic? How come it did not happen during 2015-2020? But it is happening now. It is because of the prudent management of the economy and our ability to bring in investors in almost every single sector across the country. That is why the demand has increased. It is because of the confidence of people in the economy and in the Government that they are investing in this country. One person complained about the high prices of land, but for many ordinary Guyanese that is a positive for them. This is because the value of their property has increased. Ten years ago, it was probably worth \$1 million. Today, you can get \$10 million. That is what we did for the ordinary people in this country. [Mr. Mahipaul: Drink some water.] No, I do not need to take a break.

Coming back to the Forestry Sector. As I mentioned, we should be proud of our country. As patriots, whether we are in Opposition or Government, we should go about praising the Guyana Forestry Sector. Let us forget about politics. Guyana boasts the second highest forest coverage in the world. That is absolute gold in the context of climate change and what is happening around the world. Eighty-six per cent of our country is covered in forest, second to Suriname only. We boast one of the lowest deforestation rates in the world. All of us should be proud of that and not criticize that the exports for logs have decreased. We boast one of the lowest deforestation rates in the world among forested country.

In the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) 2030, our commitment is 0.07% deforestation. Today, our deforestation rate is 0.036% and we are working to bring that deforestation down even further by adding value to products and not export round wood or logs. We are adding value to our products through the Housing Project, through the Coals Project, through the utilisation of wood waste and the numerous sawmill projects that are being opened now throughout the entire country.

We are the first country in the world to have signed two agreements with the European Union (EU) – the Voluntary Partnership Agreement which is the roadmap to ensure that Guyana will probably be the third country to receive a Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) licence. The third country in the world among forested countries and the Forest Partnership Agreement. We are the only country in the world to sign those two agreements with the European Union. That is our commitment to fighting climate change and keeping our forest intact. We are the first country in the world to have our entire forest at a jurisdictional level, certified and signed, the landmark deal of a minimum of US\$750 million for 30% of our carbon credits. Yesterday, I heard one Member mentioned all of our forests. That is the misinformation that is going out there, that the Government sold the forest. We never sold any forests. We sold carbon credits, meaning the ability of our forests to trap carbon dioxide so that it does not go up in the atmosphere and damage the ozone layer and heat-up the world. That is what we sold. We did not sell the forest.

The Hon. Member is right, we signed on to the Minamata Convention and we did so because we care about the environment. We did so knowing that we are a mining country, that we are involved in mining, and we have a vibrant mining sector. Yet, we sign on to the Minamata Convention. Further to that, we have made commitments that we will have 30% of our landmass or we expand our protected areas by 30% by 2030 and restore our biodiversity by 30% by 2030. We have heard a lot about the 15% from the carbon credits deal that goes to the Amerindian communities. I would like to put on record, contrary to what was mentioned by the Hon. Member, Vincent Henry, that we determine or dictate how the money is spent in the communities. In one year, we disbursed \$4.7 billion to 242 communities – over 500 projects. The Hon. Member very well knows that they would have to meet as a community, have their minutes and decide on their project. They control the moneys because the moneys are already in their bank accounts. It is already in their bank accounts. For accountability and transparency and to lend advice and

guidance, the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs has that role to look over the projects, not to determine what they are doing.

Mr. Speaker, I turn my attention to gold. I know the Hon. Member, Mr. Duncan, is happy to hear about gold...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, before you can put some lustre on the gold, you will need five minutes to conclude.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to conclude his very excellent presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much, Minister Teixeira. Hon. Minister, you may continue. You may conclude in five minutes.

Mr. Bharrat: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am not here to mislead the National Assembly. Indeed, there is a decline in gold. Those of you who are following the sector, this decline started in 2017 and it has continued. Check the figures and you will see. The decline started in 2017 and it has continued. The peak production that we had was in 2016, mainly because of the investment of Troy Resources Limited and Aurora Gold Mine brought by the PPP/C Administration. Mainly, because of their contribution to our production, we peaked in 2016 and since then we have been in the decline. Mr. Speaker, besides Troy Resources closing, there is a severe shortage of labour in the mining sector. Most persons' preference is to work on the coast where they are earning almost the same salary that they once received in the 'gold bush', as it is commonly called.

The weather condition has not been too kind either. In 2021 and 2022, there was severe flooding. In 2023, we had severe drought. We are all Guyanese, and we know that. Resources that were once accessible have now been depleted. It cannot remain there forever. It simply means that the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC) has to look at new measures, has to look at new ways in which we can help miners, to incentivise and to grow, especially the small and medium scale operations. Because of that, I want to thank Minister Singh for the \$400 million that is in *Budget 2024* to start the mineral inventory process in our mining districts. We were unable to do so because of the costs. It is very costly to do the survey in all the mining districts. This budget is a start to do that mineral survey. Now, we can allocate blocks and claims in a more informed manner, the same way in which we can do it in forestry because of the National Forest Inventory. Today, we are starting the Mineral Inventory so that we can allocate blocks in a more

informed way, thereby protecting our forest and keeping our deforestation rate low.

One of our large-scale gold companies operating for the first year will start producing through its underground mine. It is the very first one in the history of our country. It is also important that, as an agency, we open new areas, we make them accessible, we make lands accessible as we have done in the Troy Resources area, thereby giving 82 small Guyanese miners claims in that area, most of whom have already started their operations.

3.44 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, it is also in the cards, and I am sure the Hon. Member would be happy to hear that we have to work with the Amerindian communities to regularise mining activities in Indigenous communities. That is definitely a priority for us. But I am not worried because we have extensive exploration activities occurring in the Omai areas, in the Marudi area, in Oko West, in Eagle Mountain in Region 8, in Toroparu. These are all explorations ongoing right now. These are foreign investors that hold exploration licenses and they have already discovered significant deposits of gold. This is because we have to continue as a country, it does not stop with us.

Bauxite – it was mentioned that the decline of bauxite started under our Government and that the exports have reduced significantly from 2019 to 2023. Well, the APNU/AFC Government contributed to that. You chased the Russian Aluminium (RUSAL) out. You managed the industrial action between RUSAL and the workers wrongfully and woefully. Twelve hundred persons lost their jobs. In my final minutes, I want to say that, in 2024 too, we will be focusing a lot on critical minerals, especially minerals like lithium, that is needed for the transition to renewable energy.

In closing, I want to say that the year 2024 will see an increase of 45.7% in production in the oil and gas sector, especially with our third Floating Production Storage and Offloading (FPSO) Prosperity moving towards full production in maybe a month or two from today. We will have three FPSOs producing at maximum capacity, giving us almost 650,000 barrels of oil per day. We are also in the process of approving the sixth project, the Whiptail Project, which will take us to almost 850,000-900,000 barrels by 2025/2026. So, the future for us looks bright and I want to say, to all Guyanese, that Budget 2024 is continuing the foundation that is laid for a new, modern, prosperous Guyana for every single citizen of our beautiful country.
[Applause]

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: Good afternoon, all. I must say to the Member that went before me that I did not agree with everything you said, but I think you did an excellent job, and I must commend you on your presentation. You focused primarily on your portfolio, and you were able to get the people to understand what is happening in your portfolio and where it is that you intend to go in this year. So, kudos to you.

Mr. Speaker, as I rise to make my submission to *Budget 2024* allow me to first acknowledge and thank the hard-working public servants who spent countless hours in their various ministries preparing their individual budgets and, specifically, the public servants of the Ministry of Finance, who, year after year, go beyond the regular call of duty to make sure that we are furnished with well put together budget documents. I want to assure those hardworking public servants that, under an APNU/AFC Government, we will ensure that the appreciation of your hard work is significantly reflected in the budget allocations and not in photo ops posted to social media. This is because to us you are valuable and worth far more than publicity on a Minister's *Facebook* page.

Before I turn my attention squarely to the \$1.1 trillion budget, it will be remiss of me not to respond to the folly that often escapes the mouths of some of the Hon. Members on the other side. Based on the responses yesterday and thus far today, from the Ministers of Government and Members of Parliament on the other side of the House, I must say that I really did not expect better, as it is difficult to defend such an asinine budget and thus one has to resort to everything else instead of spending the time to defend a budget that indicates that 'staying the course' is the best course of action. You see, Mr. Speaker, it would appear as though, or should I say it is quite obvious that the PPP/C has a broken budget preparation strategy. For example, one can always expect the Hon. Member Hamilton to open with a flurry of baseless personal attacks, paying little attention to the works of his Ministry and justification of its budget allocation. Then the other Hon. Members on his side would have followed suit, rehashing some of the propaganda talking points while they too spend little time justifying their budget allocations. Then we can expect their propaganda outlets to run with the same headlines rehashing the same stories, year after year, since they were installed. One would believe, Mr. Speaker, that with a trillion-dollar budget, they would at least take the time to stand in this House and articulate to the people of Guyana how their lives and livelihoods would improve after the perfect heist of over a trillion dollars.

One of the propaganda points that they keep regurgitating is that of scholarships being awarded to Members on this side of the House. Let me set the record straight. I started my master's programme while I was a lecturer at the University of Guyana. I commenced payments for my master's programme out of my pocket. I later applied for and was granted a part scholarship by the Government of Guyana for the balance of my programme while I was a lecturer at the University of Guyana. Here is a flip side of the scholarship awarding issue which exposes the real culprits, and it is my hope that the State media will run with these as headlines. Mr. Speaker, we have a sitting Minister of Government whose daughter was awarded a scholarship by the PPP/C of approximately \$30 million. That is not all. We had to pay US\$7000 of taxpayers' money for her rent of a luxury four-bedroom apartment. It must be noted that the current Minister of Government, just after the famous no confidence motion, wrote to the Department of the Public Service requesting that his daughter be released from serving the country or repaying the money spent on her. Upon investigating the matter, we found a video on the university social media platform which showed the young woman walking across the stage accepting her certificate as a graduate of the said university and whom I believe is now working in the private sector making full use of the knowledge gain from taxpayers' dollars.

There are many more similar occurrences, like the two Nigerian hairdressers for the former Minister Westford who were given scholarships and then disappeared without a trace, breaching all commitments to Government. Then there are other PPP/C Ministers' nieces and nephews who never returned to serve the nation after finishing their scholarships overseas. Hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars squandered. So, you see, you must know the startling difference with the awarding of scholarships. On the one hand, we have the children of former Minister Broomes, who were mentioned yesterday with no retraction nor no request of retraction from you, and who were awarded scholarships based on their 4.0 and above Grade Point Average (GPA), which meant they started their programmes before attaining a scholarship. After completing their scholarships, they came back to Guyana and serve the nation, one at the University of Guyana and another at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). On the other hand, the children, nieces, nephews and hairdressers from the other side never even served this nation. This is because they have planned all along to convert taxpayers' dollars to their own use. That is the choir of deprave sopranos that we have to stand on this floor and acknowledge as Hon. Members. There is nothing honourable

about converting State resources to your own use and for your personal benefit. That, Mr. Speaker, is unlawful and the people of Guyana need to see these Hon. Members for who they really are.

On that note Mr. Speaker, I wonder whether the Hon. Minister of Education can say whether any loans from the Student Loan Agency at the University of Guyana were written off during her time in Government. I am also wondering whether the Hon. Minister of Education is aware of any other person who had their loans retired or terminated from the Student Loan Agency under the pretext of services rendered. I further wonder whether any of the Hon. Members on the other side are aware of any instance where a former Senior Member of their party took moneys from the Student Loan Agency to fund their child's education in Trinidad when the funds from that loan agency were only to be used for students attending UG. It is easy to throw stones but remember you live in glass houses.

Imagine Ministers of Government with a \$1 trillion budget spent no time telling the population what they intend to do with all the money their Ministries have been allocated but found it important enough to regurgitate the same tired lines from the 2023, 2022, 2021 and 2020 budget speeches. Let me spend some time on the poor Hon. Member Joseph Hamilton who seemed slighted by the fact that in his old age he has no certificate of substance to hang on his wall, that he needs to berate the idea that there are some people who prefer to be properly educated so that they can serve and represent the people of this country to the best of their abilities. Imagine, the Ministers are somehow upset that Members on this side of the House did not take their position as Ministers and Government workers lightly and thought it best to seek higher education to perform better. But I understand, with the abysmal state we found education in 2015 and the mediocre attempt by the current Minister of Education, in fact the entire Government, to properly tackle the myriad of problems in the education sector, along with their seemingly contempt for the University of Guyana and their penchants for making up universities such as University of Uitvlugt and paying persons to write their dissertation or as *Papa Jagapat* loves to do, run around happily to receive honorary doctorates, to pretend to be a doctor, they really cannot understand the necessity of leaders and persons in leadership, recognising the need to be better informed and better educated so that they can serve their nation properly. As coined so eloquently by my Colleague that what we have is a group of one-subject Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) frowning upon persons choosing to get a better education. I cannot blame them because how exactly can you

expect anything of substance, as *empty vessels always make the loudest noises*.

While it may appear funny, we are really in a sad place as a country, and we must demand more from those who seek to lead us. A trillion-dollar budget and not one of the Ministers, not the Minister of Labour, not the Minister in the Ministry of Public Works, not the Minister within the Ministry of Local Government, not the Minister of Education, not the Minister of Foreign Affairs, spent more than 10 minutes of the 35 minutes allotted time speaking to their portfolios. This must be seen as a travesty, and we must demand more. But then, how can we get substance from a group who seem intent on wallowing in the gutter, intent on bringing their lack of home training on full display for the world to see?

As I pivot to my response to *Budget 2024*, Mr. Speaker, I would like to say to our public servants who work in every county, in every region, in every town, in every Neighbourhood Democratic Council (NDC) and Indigenous village that we, on this side of the House, are paying attention. We hear your concerns; we understand your plight. From those, Mr. Speaker, who are forced to compromise themselves just to ensure they do not lose their jobs and meagre salaries, to those who are forced to participate in activities outside of their job description so that the Government could pretend that people are interested in their activities and events, to those public servants who have to work in an environment subjected to ridicule and belittling by persons in charge, and to those public servants who have chosen to leave our shores with all of their skills because they had to choose between being able to better take care of their families over love of country, we want them to know that we see them. We commiserate with them, and we understand their struggle. As one of our most prominent lawyers would say, 'better must come'. Better will come when we get rid of this blight upon our nation.

3.59 p.m.

Imagine the Government chose to blame a British journalist because our professional public servants are choosing to leave their poor working conditions, poor salaries, and poor allowance and benefits and very little room for redress for better paying jobs, better paying salaries and working conditions in other parts of the world. The journalist simply stated:

"We've heard a lot from the people of Guyana that we've been speaking to the last few days is that you know this is a country with the fastest growing

economy in the world and yet a lot of them say they're yet to notice it. What do you say to..." that.

An open-ended question that would allow anyone to properly respond citing their vision and work programme. Instead, what we saw was what we have now become accustomed to by this Administration, total arrogance and lacking anything of substance. The response was:

"Right now, you're taking our nurses, you're taking our medical workers, you're taking our teachers. Why are you taking them? Why you don't train your own?... If our nurses are so good, you should pay us for training them for you."

I have three major issues with this statement. One, it assumes that our professional public servants who chose to leave did not have a say in their departure, but, that somehow England and other countries came here and took our citizens. It belittles and dehumanises our professionals in the most condescending manner as though they have no agency.

Secondly, it suggests that this Government is not culpable, at all, for our trained public servants leaving. They have absolved themselves of any responsibility to the fact that hundreds of our teachers, nurses, doctors, police officers and other public servants are either leaving the country or are choosing to leave the public service to find better employment in the private sector. To suggest that England should pay the Government for training Guyanese workers again speaks to the thinking of the Administration. Instead of sitting down and having discussions with the various unions and representatives of public servants to determine a way forward that would see our limited professionals remain, the myopic nature of this Administration only allows them to pivot to focus on how much money they can get from another country because our citizens are choosing to go there.

The reality that people are leaving is because the PPP/C Government is not treating them as human beings who deserve to be able to look after their families and themselves from liveable salaries. They are leaving because the PPP/C Government does not think they deserve a liveable wage, adequate allowances and benefits. When a foreign country can decide to take a professional and their entire family in because the professional has the skill that they need and also choose to provide training to the spouse of the professional so they too can find suitable employment, it should cost this Government or any Government to concede that your choosing not to adequately compensate and treat your

professionals with the dignity they deserve is to your own detriment, as this has led to you training for exportation. It has led to you allowing the reduction of your professional capacity in all sectors and it has led to you having no proper policies and plans to ensure that your human capital stays in the country.

Somehow the Administration has decided to *push its head in the sand* and ignore the fact that it does not matter how many schools, hospitals and government buildings it builds, if it does not have adequate human resources then it is all for naught. The Administration has decided to *push its head in the sand* and ignore that its governance and ideological model is negatively affecting the majority of persons in the country that you are attempting to lead. It is an abysmal look for, specifically the Ministry of Public Service, the Ministry of Health and, in fact, the entire Government that they can sit and be comfortable with the fact that so many public servants are leaving. If we are to effectively and efficiently develop as a country, we need to build capacity and retain our professionals both in the public and private sectors. It makes no sense to boast about how many people are coming into your country, as the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service was doing last Monday, when those same planes are taking hundreds of your citizens out of our country to greener pastures. People are fleeing due to the PPP/C's Government inability to lead properly, their inability to ensure that we retain our professionals and put the most vulnerable and the most needy first. However, there may be another reason. On 30th September, 2023, a *Stabroek News* editorial titled:

"Why not privatise everything"

It began by saying the following:

"The signs have been clear since the first days of this administration: the privatisation of public services is a policy.

It is a path Guyana has been heading down for several decades as part of a *laissez faire* approach to governance, a reverence for free market capitalism and a tacit acknowledgment that successive administrations are plain incompetent at actually running stuff. Now it is being actively encouraged and we are seeing the full side effects of this approach in our everyday lives."

The article continues:

“The President seems perfectly happy to use taxpayers’ money – a rather quaint term in this petrocracy...”

Mr. Speaker: You have to withdraw that reference.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley:

“...to pay private hospitals...”

Mr. Speaker: Please do, please do.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: So, guided.

“...to clear the backlog of 5000 echocardiograms and ultrasounds... rather than fixing the capacity of the public system. Kidney dialysis is already being outsourced to private facilities. It is clear what is going on here, the creation of a for profit American-style healthcare system with all the greed, corruption, cronyism and inequities that come along with it. We need no more evidence that this government is going in this direction than just as with education that one of its first actions when coming into office was to remove all corporate taxes from private hospitals. And while the President laments how nurses are being lured away by developed countries he is utterly silent on how many have gone to the private sector along with doctors and technicians.”

You see, Mr. Speaker, just maybe, the issue we have is that the ideology and philosophy that underpins the plans and policies of this Government is one that is far from people centred. It is in fact, anti-working class and anti-nationalist. Laissez-faire economics includes negative externality, income inequality and monopoly. I believe this is where we find ourselves today. I want to make it clear that we on this side of the House intend to use the gains we have made due to our current abundance to ensure that all Guyanese have the life they deserve. There is simply no logical reason that can be made as to why all Guyanese people are not positively impacted in a tangible way by the resources that God has given to us. Alleviating poverty, alleviating conditions such as the working poor and alleviating any forms of labour discrimination would be our main priority. We believe in workers’ rights; we believe that labour unions have the right to speak on the behalf of and represent the interest of workers; and we believe that there is no reason, whether in the public service or in the private sector, employees should in 2024 not be able to feed their families and live comfortably.

Imagine Members of the nursing fraternity chose to show their discontent by staging industrial actions and, somehow, the collective wisdom of the Minister of Labour, the Minister of Legal Affairs and the Vice President interpreted those actions as worthy of disciplinary action *vis-à-vis* taking away their salaries. The response by the Minister of Labour and others who advised him on the best way to respond to nurses would send a signal to the entire nursing fraternity that they must condone and tolerate sexual harassment and disrespect by their supervisors in the workplace with no redress. How can any Minister of Labour and Attorney General sit and determine that industrial action is unlawful and unlawful enough to go to court to defend it and then state after the court ruled that the deductions from the salaries of the employees of the Ministry of Health were unlawful that they will repeal the decision? It is no wonder our nurses are choosing to leave.

In my previous budgets I spoke at length about what is required to professionalise the public service. In 2022, I highlighted the obvious that the then Minister of Public Service had no clue what was expected of her and what she should be doing as the Minister of Public Service was to better the lives of public servants. This is now evident in the fact that she has quickly chosen to leave the Ministry to head another. It is my hope that she fares better at this new Ministry. I again call on the new Minister, who has responsibility for the public service, to initiate actions to promote and enforce a depoliticise, meritocratic, efficient and citizen-oriented service through public service regulations and code of conduct, performance management and rationalised pay structures associated with written job descriptions. I must note that they have begun to do the latter.

As I turn to labour, it must be reported that, in Guyana, there are about 275,000 individuals in the working age population, but the actual labour force is considerably smaller. We, as a country recorded the second lowest labour force participation rate in the region, standing at approximately 60.4% in 2020. It is thus imperative for the Government to guarantee that the Guyanese workforce receives substantial training for those lacking skills, retraining for individuals whose skills may not align with economic demands and upscaling for those with skills but facing challenges in an increasingly competitive environment. I heard the Minister of Labour wax lyrical about the training programme at the Board of Industrial Training (BIT). While it is quite commendable that they are attempting to train all citizens, the question I have been asking since the conceptualisation of GOAL and now Get Ready for Opportunities to Work

(GROW) and, also, what is happening at BIT is, what data is being utilised to determine the areas in which persons should be trained and what mechanisms are in place to ensure it is as close as possible to 100% retention?

I was surprised that even the Minister of Foreign Affairs found time to speak glowingly about the GOAL programme. This programme, just like the BIT programme and most other programmes, conceptualised by the PPP/C, go without a most important component – monitoring and evaluation. I am convinced that no one in the PPP/C likes to hear those words because monitoring and evaluation of projects would give you more information than the PPP/C requires or desires. They are anti-education, anti-feasibility studies and anti-monitoring and evaluation. No Government interested in proper planning and proper use of our country's resources would shy away from any mechanism that would ensure the outcomes expected are actually achieved. Is there any data that shows the retention rate of persons in the BIT programme and the GOAL programme? Is there any data that shows the completion rate of the students in their programme? Is there any data that shows how many persons have been able to gain employment with their new learned skill or knowledge?

On 13th July, 2023, I submitted a number of questions to the House for the Minister of Labour to determine what data was being used to make certain that decisions being made in relation to growing, training and adequately repairing our labour force are being made using sound data. The questions I asked included the following: 'Could the Hon. Minister inform the House whether the Ministry of Labour has conducted a skills gap analysis of the local market at any time between 2020 and 16th June, 2023?' As I attempted to ask this specific question: 'Could the Hon. Minister further state why the Ministry of Labour has established and implemented the labour market information system?' It appeared that for some reason the Speaker forgot the cap he was supposed to be wearing and decided he needed to be a part of the question and answering segment by stating the following: 'I made a comment on two interventions about arming ourselves with the facts.' The Speaker of this House further stated: 'This is not an insinuation. This is a matter of fact. Labour market information systems have existed for decades in this country by law and annually it is done. I am speaking as an authority having served in this ministry.'

However, during the budget debate, the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance stated: 'Government will develop an integrated labour market information system that is user friendly and easily

accessible. This is intended to ameliorate the mismatch between available jobs and persons seeking employment.' Further to that, the 2022 Audit Report highlighted that \$1.9 million was budgeted in 2022 for the labour market information system commission but the labour market information system commission was not functioning during that period so the subvention could not be released. I would leave you to deduce whether the basis for my question was valid. You see I am disappointed in a particular former Minister of Labour who one would expect to have authority on the matter but apparently seems to have no clue on what he spoke about on 19th December, 2023, when he attempted to question my preparation before asking said questions.

4.14 p.m.

However, I am convinced that the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service got his information on the purpose of the Labour Market Information System from the Minister of Labour, who obviously knows little. May I inform this House that the Labour Market Information System is much more than this, as the Labour Market Information System also provides an essential basis for employment and labour policies and informs the design implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies that are better focused and targeted. While I am not certain of the scope of the work of the Labour Market Commission, it is my hope that the work of the Commission would be to do research, analyses and forecast, as an agency such as that would have the principal responsibility of analysing the labour market, forecasting trends, understanding labour market gaps, collaborating with agencies such as the Guyana National Bureau of Statistics (GNBS), involving the Central Recruitment and Manpower Agency (CRMA) and advising the government on policies.

According to an International Organization for Migration (IOM) report on Guyana, there is an urgent need to conduct a demand and supply analysis of the labour market in Guyana. This is necessary to understand the current pool of labour Guyana currently has and the skills required by the market. The opportunity ought to be used to understand the demand for skills in the medium term from employers. This will enable recruiters and the Government to advertise jobs and promote Guyana. This will ensure that Guyana does not have the unintended consequence of attracting migrant workers where the skills they possess may be an oversupply. While it is laudable to speak about training of our people, decisions and policies made at the level of Government need to be based on something more than just the gut feeling of those who purport to lead us. It is ludicrous to stand and

boast about the largest budget ever, when a large section of the population is left to suffer due to your poor attempt at governance, your incompetence, your mediocre attempt at policy formation and your inability to create and sell to the Guyanese a vision that we can all agree to and work towards.

While the Members of Parliament (MPs) come here and boast about the largest budget ever, the Guyanese people still have to endure inflation and high cost of living. Those are the challenges and, frankly speaking, they are all man-made challenges created by a group of people who are not allowed to think for themselves, but who follow the instruction of one man whose scope is limited to corruption, nepotism, racism, bullyism and narcissism.

Mr. Speaker: You have to withdraw all of those. After you do that, someone has to get you five minutes.

Mr. Jones: Thank you. Cde. Speaker, I do move that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to conclude her presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Mr. Jones. Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley, please, you have been doing really good. Why do you want to spoil it at this time?

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: So guided, Sir. I am not spoiling anything. I am so guided.

Mr. Speaker: Withdraw and let us go.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: So guided.

Mr. Speaker: You will start now with your five minutes.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: What may surprise you, Mr. Speaker – I can read, and I love reading, thank you very much – is that I just read a section of my 2022 Budget. What is obviously not surprising is that nothing has changed in 2024 and thus the title of the budget, *Staying the Course*, would only be seen by the majority of Guyanese as a commitment to mediocracy, unscrupulousness, ambiguity, dishonesty and exclusion.

A cursory look at the Editorials written by the *Stabroek News* newspaper over the last year would paint a picture of the issues and concerns that this country and its people have had to contend with during 2023. Who could forget the shame that Mr. Charrandass Persaud – I probably should not have said his name. Sorry, I withdraw that – brought to the citizens of this country as we became aware that, despite his

violent condescending remarks to an Indian woman on the continent, he was still permitted to host a farewell gathering for himself and try to explain his despicable behaviour by saying:

“...well if you are in a fight and you pick a fight with a man he should say ‘no you are a woman I am not going to fight you? You want equality let’s go to the fight and see what happens”.

This is how the PPP/C intends to ‘stay the course’. On 14th January, 2023, the *Stabroek News* newspaper started its article with the stark increase in prices of vegetables, provisions, chicken and eggs from the markets, stating in its first line that it was not clear how genuinely concerned the Administration was towards the plight of poor people and the daily stress they are under over the current cost of living crisis. We all know that the crisis has further increased since then. According to the Hon. Member, Dr. Singh, and the PPP/C, they are intent on ‘staying the course’. On 16th January, 2023, another *Stabroek News* newspaper Editorial started by stating:

“As much as the police use statistics to spin the narrative that crime is under control their efforts are undermined by the bloody reprisals that characterise the underworld where ‘hit men’ operate with impunity.”

But somehow, we are supposed to ‘stay the course’. On 6th October, 2023, another Editorial began that the President.... My goodness, I should not have said. The man who holds the Office in this country is not a man to be inconvenienced by legal niceties. There he was on Monday, in defiance of the Constitution, the Trades Union Recognition Act and a number of International Labour Organizations’ conventions, meeting the teachers over the head of their union. Apparently, the purpose of the gathering was to discuss all matters which concerned teachers, not excluding salaries and allowances, even though that is a subject in which the Government has been engaged in negotiations with the union. Lastly, on 19th September, another Editorial began:

“One of the primary reasons (though not the only one) why we now confronted by numerous longstanding law and order-related anomalies is almost certainly linked to the seeming elevation of the Guyana Police Force (GPF) above official criticism or vigorous reprimand and the serious pursuit of corrective action. One can think of no other reason why forms of police behaviour that pass

for law-enforcement, but which are themselves blatant acts of lawlessness, are allowed to persist without the slightest hint of corrective intervention”.

But somehow, we are supposed to remain on course. This is a reality that we face as a nation. We can stand and speak about \$1.1 trillion but the reality is that we are failing our citizens. Most of the social ills in our society are increasing. The four horsemen sat around the coffee table and thought that ‘staying the course’ was the best was to go. I will end with *Proverbs 3: 27-30*:

“Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in your power of thine hand to it.

Say not unto thy neighbour, Go and come again and to morrow I will give thee; when thou has it by thee.

Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee.

Strive not with a man without cause, if he has done thee no harm”.

The people of this country are crying out and the PPP/C has decided to ‘stay the course’. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Now for the Hon. Minister of Local Government and Regional Development, the Hon. Ms. Parag.

Minister of Local Government and Regional Development [Ms. Parag]: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank His Excellency the President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana for making another move to promote gender equality, by promoting the first female Minister in the history of this country to the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

I am proud to stand here in defense of yet another bold, people-centred budget. Of course, I cannot stand here without commending my colleague, the Hon. Member, Dr. Singh, Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, as well. Congratulations to you, sir, and your team, for once again, presenting such an incredible financial plan, one that supports and maintains our standing as the world’s fastest growing economy. It is truly a road map to prosperity, and it comes as absolutely no surprise to most Guyanese that Members of the APNU/AFC are incapable of comprehending what a budget like this means and how much it will propel this nation and impact the lives of all Guyanese

in the most meaningful way. From the presentations that preceded me earlier today as well as yesterday, it is clear that the Hon. Members did not take the time to even read much less assess these allocations and the benefits they will bring to our people. Even before I get into the allocations and the specific sectors, I want to refer to certain comments and statements that were made by several Members of the Opposition in their speeches, and I will start with the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipal.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, in true fashion and true-like nature, came to the podium, not to make a meaningful contribution to this country in relation to the budget, but to personally attack, as he always does, Members of the Government on this side of the House. However, I would like to say to the Hon. Member that I am most privileged and honoured to be working with the Hon. Mr. Anand Persaud in the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. It is this Hon. Member who continuously comes into this House and talks about friends, families and cronies. [**Mr. Mahipaul:** And favourites.] And favourites and whatever else you call it; whatever other “f” you want to call it. You stood there and you made those statements. In the not-so-distant past, the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, was placed on leave for an internal audit to be done for funds that were taken without authorisation from the University of Guyana Students Society (UGSS) fund. Several articles in the newspapers carried that he admitted to it. I can see why the Opposition will take the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, and place him on the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). It is because he would know what to look for on the PAC. He has been there and done that.

That is not all. I want to tell this honourable House and the nation, probably for the first time...After five months of holding up this entire country, digging their fingernails into the threads of power, trying to hold on, while the people suffered out there, His Excellency was sworn in on 2nd August, 2020. Lo and behold, the Ministers were not yet sworn into government. So, the Ministers of Housing and Water were not yet sworn into government. The administration was still being controlled by the previous Government. On that morning of 3rd August, 2020, the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, was hurriedly given an allocation letter for a house lot.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, I have the Hon. Member, Ms. Ferguson, who has risen.

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I stand on a Point of Clarification – Standing Order 41. With regard to the comments ...

Mr. Speaker: On a Point of Clarification...

Ms. Ferguson: It is on a point of order, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Yes. It is a Point of Order/Clarification. The second section would be clarification. I have to get the person on the floor to yield to you. I have to ask her if she will yield to you on this point of clarification.

Ms. Parag: Mr. Speaker, that is a rhetorical question for me. Obviously not.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Ferguson, you will have to take your seat. Hon. Minister, go ahead.

4.29 p.m.

Ms. Parag: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Let us get this into perspective. You were holding on to power but as soon as His Excellency was sworn in, having realised that you were one of the friends, families and cronies that had to benefit from the previous administration, you ran in there on 3rd August and were allocated a letter, while there were 72,000 ordinary Guyanese applications languishing in the Ministry of Housing and Water on that date. That is for the record.

Mr. Jones: Cde. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Chief Whip of the Opposition.

Mr. Jones: Cde. Speaker, I stand on Standing Order 23(4). The Hon. Member is imputing improper motive on the part of the Hon. Member.

Mr. Speaker: I do not see this as imputing. She is establishing a fact.

Ms. Parag: It is a fact.

Mr. Jones: She is giving the impression that it was improper.

Mr. Speaker: If the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, says that he never did that and he never had a letter, then I will ask her to produce the letter.

Ms. Parag: I do not think he can say that, Sir.

Mr. Jones: It was not improper, Sir; it was not illegal.

Mr. Speaker: We have a difference of opinion. You share the view that it is improper. I share the view that this is a statement of fact that the Minister is making, and I will ask her to produce that document.

Mr. Mahipaul: Cde. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul.

Mr. Mahipaul: Thank you, Sir. I believe it is imputing on the basis that I followed the process. So, I want you to guide me. I followed the process.

Mr. Speaker: I am guiding you. I refer you to the statement I made with respect to the Hon. Chief Whip for the Opposition. Hon. Minister, you will get back your time.

Ms. Parag: Thank you very much, Sir. I believe that when the Hon. Member comes here and *beats his chest* and stands up in a pseudo-righteous manner and wants to preach to this honourable House as to his honourable nature, he was probably the friends, families and cronies that he was talking about who benefitted. Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, was not the only one to benefit from a house lot in a very short space of time while there were still 72,000 applications sitting in the Ministry of Housing and Water because of the lack of a proper structure and strategy for a housing drive in this country.

The previous speaker, the Hon. Member Ms. Sarabo-Halley, who is now walking out of the Dome, spoke earlier about if she did not do this and she took a scholarship and whatever not, was also one of those persons to benefit within a month of applying for a house lot. And they come to this honourable House and push their hands as if they are going to beat you because you want to state a fact. Mr. Speaker, given the way that Guyanese people stood up against the *riggers* of this country after 2nd March, 2020 Elections, I know Guyanese are resilient and they will not take the nonsense that they had taken before.

Ms. Ferguson: Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 41(3) – Content of Speeches. Standing Order 41(3) states:

“It shall be out of order to attempt to reconsider any specific question...”

Sorry. It is Standing Order 41(2), Sir. This is what it states:

“Reference shall not be made to any matter which is *sub judice*, in such a way as might, in the opinion of the Chair, prejudice the interests of parties thereto.”

Mr. Speaker, throughout this debate, I have been hearing Hon. Members...

Mr. Speaker: You are dealing with a particular issue, a matter that is *sub judice*, and you have risen on a point of order.

Ms. Ferguson: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: I just want to ask which matter is *sub judice* that the Hon. Minister just mentioned.

Ms. Ferguson: Mr. Speaker, it has to do with any matter concerning the rigging of elections.

Mr. Speaker: Apparently, we may have been sitting in two different chambers. I have, again, to rule you... I do not want to use the word but, please, I ask that you give way to the Hon. Minister. We have been doing well since a discussion with the two Chief Whips. Thank you. Hon. Minister, please. Hon. Minister within the Ministry of Housing and Water.

[*Interruption*]

[*Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.*]

Hon. Minister, you are going to get back all of your time. If we have to wait until tomorrow morning, you will get back the time. Hon. Members, I just want to say that at the lunch break, the two Chief Whips and I had a good, frank discussion about the behaviour in the House and the unparliamentary words, and it was going good for the first hour after. Now, we are hearing all of the words that we are not supposed to use such as the word lies. The Hon. Member, Mr. Duncan, had to be cautioned over and over again by his own Chief Whip. So, please, allow our good Minister to make her presentation, as previous speakers did just after lunch. Hon. Minister, you can go ahead.

Ms. Parag: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will move on now to the Hon. Member's presentation in which he stated that there is very little or nothing in the budget for human capital development. For the purpose of understanding what human capital development is, because it is always such a challenge with comprehension over there, human capital development is akin to human resource development, which comes under the Ministry of Public Service. A lovely sum has always been placed in there from

2020 to 2024 to accommodate that, as well as in the Ministry of Education for our children to be able to move from nursery to primary to secondary to tertiary.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, this morning stated...I do not know if it was an oversight, a lack of sight, a lack of paying attention or just a mistake, but he said that a meagre sum of \$121 billion is placed in the budget for wages, pensions and public assistance. I do not think...and I have said this before. The Hon. Members are clearly not looking at this budget. They are clearly not taking the time to assess the allocations or understand what they are there for. The \$121 billion is for the wage bill alone. Some \$49 billion is there for public assistance and pension, which is targeted towards the vulnerable, making this budget a people-centred budget. It is something that you never had from 2015 to 2020 and so you cannot understand the concept.

Then, we had the Hon. Member, Mr. Holder, who gives himself the responsibility of speaking on behalf of the citizens of Region 2. He came here and he talked about how no roads are being done and how roads were placed in the budget for four years and now they are being done. For the benefit of the House and the people of this nation to understand, let me give the statistics of the community roads that were done in Region 2 over the years. From 2020 to 2023, 225 community roads were built under this Government. With those who have PhDs in how to fail, Minister of Finance and Minister of Public Works, I want you to guess how many roads were done from 2015 to 2019 in Region 2. It was 25 community roads, a mere fraction of what has been done by this Government in three years in Office in Region 2. That tells where your intentions were in relation to this country and who exactly you wanted to exclude in this country. [An. Hon. Member: 25?] Twenty-five roads in five years; 225 under this Government in three years; and they come and stand here as if they are telling the truth to this nation.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, I think that is imputing. Please.

Ms. Parag: Okay. They come to this honourable House and spew untruths to the nation. I will turn my attention now to the Ministry of Public Service. A whole lot of nothing was said in the previous presentation because the Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley, sat in that office and...Every year, I pick up the APNU/AFC 2015 manifesto to look through to see what was done and so on. As I get to page two, I have to put it down while laughing because it is so much comic relief, but it is great. It is the only thing we have seen; we have not

seen the plan or anything else. It said that they would professionalise the public service in their term. It also said that in their first year, they would give 20% salary increases to the law enforcement agencies. Now, the Minister of Finance, from being in that office, is aware of the breakdown of the salary increases given from 2015 to 2019, and it was never an across-the-board salary increase. This is what they did. They talk about caring about public servants. This Government has consistently given a salary increase across the board to all public servants, this year giving benefits to over 54,000 public servants across the board. But in 2015 and the successive years up to 2019, they gave salary increases in different percentages. The persons who were at the managerial level and tasked with leading the agencies were stifled. That is where you had your feet on the necks of the public servants because those were the people who had to actually carry out the functions of the public service to make it professional and make it efficient, and you did not do that. In addition to that, what you also did was tax the very same money you claimed that you gave them, this huge salary increase, which we are yet to question because we know your mathematics. In addition to that, you also taxed everything. So, you gave with one hand and snatched with the other. On top of that, there was never a holistic plan for the welfare of public servants. All you come here and talk about is salary increases. You have done nothing for the public service.

Last year, in her presentation, the Hon. Member said that she got a scholarship and that under the PPP/C, she would have never gotten a scholarship. So, she took a scholarship because she would never have gotten one. She was proud to say she got a scholarship. Do you know what? The Guyanese people who were not put before her, the ordinary Guyanese man, are not proud of that fact. What is more is that the Hon. Member talks about her excelling in the Ministry of Public Service, for some delusional reason, but when she went into that office, the Hon. Member immediately fired three public servants. The then Minister of State, Mr. Joseph Harmon, said that it was unlawful, but that he was not going to take any action against her.

Mr. Speaker: Minister, you are *(Inaudible)*...

Ms. Parag: I will lay over the article, please, Sir. There is an article about it. What is more is that they talk about how the PPP/C has treated public servants. This was an Hon. Member who transitioned from a public service job to a Minister's job and then applied for salary in lieu of leave after the then Minister of State said that if they did not use it, they would lose it.

4.44 p.m.

So, basically, they were abolishing the salary in lieu of leave. When we got into Office, the Hon. Member, Mr. Roysdale Forde, sued the Government of Guyana and got the salary in lieu of leave when other public servants did not and could not benefit under you.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley, you have the floor.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am standing on Standing Order 41(6). The Hon. Member is imputing improper motive. I am not sure what is it that I am supposed to do if I have a contract that states I am entitled to something, and I do not get it. If I have a contract that states I am entitled to something, and I ask for it, then the contract states that I am supposed to get it. If there is something different... [An. Hon. Member: How is that improper motive?] She is suggesting that I was not entitled to something, and I was trying to get it without being entitled to it, which is imputing, Sir. I would not go back to how she was imputing the fact that I got a house lot and I have no house lot from the Government, but that is a whole different matter, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I thought I was hearing a different issue about priority before other people, but Hon. Minister, the Hon. Member is saying that she never got a house lot. If you could...

Ms. Parag: That is not true.

Mr. Speaker: If you said she has a house lot, unless you could provide the proof, I would have to ask you to withdraw.

Ms. Parag: We will provide the evidence because unlike the other side, when we speak, we have evidence to back it up. I will support it.

Mr. Speaker: Until you do that, please withdraw that.

Ms. Parag: I will withdraw until then.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you.

Ms. Parag: When other public servants applied for salary in lieu of leave and they were denied because of the policy that was in place, the now Government, the People's Progressive Part/Civic (PPP/C), after being taken to court for that, did

pay the Hon. Member salary in lieu of leave, while other public servants did not get theirs.

Before I move to scholarship issues, I would like to put on record that the Ministry of Public Service has made strides from 2020 to now. We have relaunched what is called the Personnel Workshop, which was abolished under the previous Administration. Personnel from different agencies would come together for two days and hash out how they could solve the bottlenecks in the public service to make it more efficient and professional. It was abolished during the previous Administration. We brought it back to ensure that we will deliver on our manifesto promise, too. In the Training Division, and this is where I will use the statistics, under the five years of the previous Administration, 4,931 public servants were trained, as it is mandated by the public service to train, retrain and upskill public servants. In three years of the PPP/C Administration, we have trained in the Training Division 4,997 public servants in key areas.

I move to scholarships. I believe here is where we may have some problems. The overall budget for the Ministry of Public Service was \$715,043,000 in 2015. In 2016, it was \$1,165,000,852. In 2017... [Ms. Ferguson: (*Inaudible*) without oil (*inaudible*)] ...this was the overall budget. Listen and you will learn. In 2017, it was \$1,276,000,899. In 2018, it was \$1,654,000,307. In 2019, it was \$1,965,154,000, [Ms. Ferguson: What is your point?] Listen to the point. Just for scholarships, under line item 6302, in 2020 – \$958,734,000; 2021 – \$2,596,319,000; 2022 – \$3,884,967,000; and 2023 – \$3,870,917,000, amounting to over \$10 billion expended by this Government for human resource development in three years. Again, for the benefit of the Hon. Mahipaul, it is human capital development in this country. That is what you call progress and not backwardness.

We were able to grant 21,442 ordinary Guyanese ... I have heard so much negativity this year from the Opposition Members in relation to the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) project, the GOAL initiative. I am not sure that you know that two of your Members sitting over there found the GOAL programme attractive and appealing enough that they are on the programme; sitting in this House; granted by this Government. That is what you call inclusion and that is what you call non-communication and fractured behaviour over there. Are they our friends, families and cronies? They can be if they want to. There was so much talk about how the GOAL initiative is overriding the University of Guyana (UG). We have always placed emphasis on the University of Guyana as our national

university. In addition to the budgetary allocations, last year for the University of Guyana, the Ministry of Public Service, under its Public Sector Scholarship Programme, granted \$918 million in scholarships to the University of Guyana. That was separate and apart from the allocation given. When you come here, you have to come standing on two very strong feet, otherwise do not come and mislead this nation.

Mr. Speaker: You cannot accuse the Opposition or any other Member of misleading. You have to withdraw that.

Ms. Parag: Okay. It is providing misinformation to the public. There was so much talk as well about the Indigenous community being left behind. This Government is the Government with a track record of taking care of our first people – the Indigenous people in this country. The scholarship is just one aspect of that. I want, for your benefit, for you to listen very carefully. Do not talk; just listen. For the GOAL scholarship, in 2021, Region 1– 238 persons; Region 1 in 2022 – 155 persons; 2023 – 246 persons; Region 2 – 531, 540 and 885 in 2023; and Region 3 – 375, 2022 – 1,399; 2023 – 1,111. Then, there are Regions 4, 5 and 6. Let us get to Regions 7, 8 and 9 and I will tell you why. Under the GOAL initiative, in Region 7 – 240 in 2021; 174 in 2022; and 284 in 2023; Region 8 – 97 in 2021; 37 in 2022; and 381 in 2023; Region 9 – 230 in 2021; 134 in 2022; and 162 in 2023. Now, please, ask the previous Minister of the Public Service how many scholarships were granted in Region 8 and 9 in 2018 and 2019. Of course, I have the records. It was zero. That is how much you love the people. You talk about how much salary increases and how many scholarships you gave and what we are doing with the scholarship programme but you gave yourself a scholarship which, by the way, you still have to complete. Some £10,800 pounds or £10,400 pounds and it has not been completed.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Ms. Sarabo-Halley, you have the floor.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Minister is imputing and inconsistently doing so. I have completed and sent my certificate to the Ministry. If she has not received it, that is not my problem. So, she needs to withdraw that.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Member. Hon. Minister, you heard what the Hon. Member said. She has completed and has submitted her certificate and so you have to withdraw that for me.

Ms. Parag: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The Hon. Member also spoke about previous Ministers' children getting 4.0 and whatever not, but expended on those were US\$225,000 for one person, amounting to approximately \$45 million. If there is a budget that is allocated to a ministry of eight hundred and something million dollars for the entire scholarship for the whole of Guyana, and one takes out \$45 million, that is a good chunk of money he/she is taking out for one person. On top of that, you want to accuse the Hon. Frank Anthony of his daughter being on a scholarship or a minister daughter, but do you know what? His daughter was a scholar. She was a Guyana scholar and deserving of that scholarship; very deserving of that scholarship.

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: Mr. Speaker, I am just stating that I did not state the name of the Minister nor who the individual was. I just said a Member of this House. It is the current speaker on the floor who stated who the person was that I spoke about. Please let that be known. I did not call the name.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley, I think the Hon. Minister is a lawyer and she can cite the principle in law where, if you know the Minister, you know that he has a child on scholarship, it is easy to draw the conclusion. Hon. Minister, I would not uphold that objection. Go ahead.

Ms. Parag: Grateful, Sir. This year, the Ministry of Public Service will be getting over \$6 billion, something it has never seen before, to ensure that it is able to develop its human resource capacity in this country to serve the public sector as well as under the GOAL project to serve the national human capital development which is so necessary for the transformation.

4.59 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, you have given us a very lively contribution so far, you will need five minutes to conclude it.

Ms. Parag: Cde. Gail.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I was sort of surprised because I thought you are giving back my colleague all the time that has been held up by all these interventions and interruptions. I am rather shocked.

Mr. Speaker: I did; I added seven minutes onto the contribution.

Ms. Teixeira: In addition to the five?

Mr. Speaker: I added seven minutes to the original. At 4.52 p.m. she should have ended, and now, according to my time, it is five o'clock.

Ms. Teixeira: I would hope that you would have given her more with all the interruptions but, anyway, please allow my colleague to have five minutes more to conclude her excellent presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister. You have five minutes from now to conclude.

Mr. Parag: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, as I said, the Ministry of Public Service will be allocated over \$6 billion to ensure the efficient functioning of the public sector in terms of human capital development as well as the turning of the wheels of Government. And I am very certain that the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance, Dr. Ashni Singh, with his high standards of professionalism, will excel in that Ministry over the next year.

Turning my attention to the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development is crucial in promoting democracy in this country, a word that I have heard the Hon. Opposition Members repeat over and over in their speeches, although some of those Honourable Members participated fully from the 2nd March, 2020 to the 2nd August 2020 in trying to collapse our democracy and holding our people hostage and suffering an entire nation for five months, which I am certain they will never, ever forget. I do not believe that Members who will participate in something like that... and I will take this line from my honourable colleague Minister Indar's speech before, 'does not deserve even to be in Opposition' to be representing any portion of the Guyanese people after you have so callously and so cruelly held our country up in the air and put our entire country to shame, globally.

Mr. Speaker, in the allocations of over \$103 billion, spanning not only the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development but also the regions, from Regions 1 to 10. We will ensure that the local democratic organs, such as the Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) and the municipalities, are properly allocated their subventions to ensure that democracy continues in the communities of this country. The speaker who will come after me, I know, will want to say certain things in relation to friends, families, and cronies too but, being the representative for this Government

in the Mocha Arcadia community, I know that the NDC in 2017 issued that Member's husband contracts to develop the community and that is also where friends, families, and cronies come in for the previous administration. I will provide the proof if I have to.

Mr. Jones: Cde. Speaker, Standing Order 41(6), the Hon. Member is imputing improper motive on the part of the Member's husband.

Ms. Parag: I am stating a fact.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, I will apply the same principle that we did. Withdraw that and let us move on.

Ms. Parag: Yes, Mr. Speaker. In addition to that we are not leaving the hinterland communities out as well with the particular allocations given to the regions; and we plan to do so much in all of the regions to develop drainage, irrigation, and to ensure that the daily life of our people is made easier and there is relief brought to the communities, as we have been doing from 2020 to now. I will happily come back next year and report to this honourable House exactly how we were able to use the moneys allocated in the local government for the benefit of all Guyanese.

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, I wish to reiterate my support for *Budget 2024*; it is comprehensive, again people-centred, and thoughtful. Although we have heard and will continue to hear over the upcoming days, the APNU/AFC or the Opposition criticise the budget, I wish to caution Guyanese against falling for the untruths being spewed and to examine the contents of the budget, and I am most certain that they will all feel the impact, not only hear the figure but feel the impact of the programmes and policies that will come from this Budget. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Minister. Hon. Members, with that very lively presentation it is a good time that we cool off with a half an hour break.

Sitting suspended at 5.05 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 5.55 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Honourable Members, please be seated. It is 5.55 p.m.; we can invite the Hon. Member Ms. Nima Flue-Bess to take the floor.

Ms. Flue-Bess: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I commence my official presentation, I would like to respond to the Hon. Minister that spoke before me. She spoke about roads that were done by the Government; I am not sure about the type of road she is talking about, if it is those concrete

strips that have been made to fit just one vehicle as we go along, or it is the roads where the shoulders are not complete, and they are collapsing in the drains. I am not sure which one she is speaking of.

Added to roads, in my presentation I plan to bring this issue on the four-lane highway. And since the Minister spoke about roads, I will take the opportunity to highlight that we really need to have stop lights at the intersection on the four-lane highway on the East Bank of Demerara. It is important because you will see that since the road was opened, we have had quite a number of accidents. We have had drivers driving into the light pole on the highway and I have also seen the danger of our police officers trying to control the traffic and not being able to do so fully, especially when drivers are not heeding to the instructions of stopping. It is something that must be addressed because the four-lane highway, the inner lane, when the big trucks stop there, it is causing a blind spot for drivers who are crossing. I would ask that this be attended to urgently. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Today, I come before this honourable House to make my contribution to this debate. I do want to reflect on past budget themes under the previous PPP/C administration. This year's theme, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*, mirrors the theme of 2023, 'Confronting the Challenges, Staying the Course for a Prosperous Guyana'. This is not surprising since it is the same old PPP/C Government, and their same old practices that the people of Guyana have to deal with. Their practices of victimization, marginalization and dictatorship are in full swing while many Guyanese continue to struggle with the high cost of living and blatant acts of discrimination daily. Sadly, it is these said principles on which the PPP/C Government functions that they are unable to deliver effective and valuable services to the Guyanese populace. Take for example the decentralization of services at the Passport Office, that has stopped and returned to people lining up for long hours to be served. Why lands already allocated under the Coalition to people, they are taken back although payments have been completed? Why is the local democracy being stifled and local authorities have little or nothing to say in what is being done in their respective communities?

One specific issue that warrants attention is the condescending way a particular minister addresses the public when distributing cash grants. This money, which amounts to a mere US\$125, is portrayed as a favour from the Government, creating the impression that the people should be grateful. This is a misrepresentation. Such funds belong to

the people of Guyana and should be distributed responsibly, since the money belongs to the people of Guyana. All of this and the many more deliberate acts of humiliation speak to the PPP/C Government's incompetence and lack of people-centred vision.

The Budget of 2024 continues down the same path as the theme suggested. However, it is staying the course, building poverty for those who are not friends, family, favourites, and *faithfuls* that are aligned to the PPP/C in Guyana. The public servants, what will they really benefit from? I heard the Hon. Minister before me speak about salary increases and all of what she went on – they only deserve 6.5% in the last increase. Now the Hon. Member spoke about training. When I did the calculation and percentage, it is only 8.2% of the work force which the Minister spoke about. The Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance stated in his presentation that the year was challenging with tragedies and only highlighted two that his Government saw as noteworthy. I would like to remind this House that the first tragedy of 2023 in our nation started on the 5th January when the homes of families at Cane View were bulldozed by the PPP/C Government. This resulted in 20 children being homeless with their parents, the depletion of their economic strength and the destruction of a community culture. If that was not enough the same man-made tragedy occurred in the month of May at Hillfoot on the Linden, Soesdyke Highway leaving 43 children homeless with their parents.

Let me now turn my attention to youths, sports and culture. I am extremely proud to be a Physical Education (PE) teacher who teaches history and development of sports, human anatomy and physiology, fitness and performance, sports management, coaching, and all that goes with sports; and I have been doing it for over 20 years. It is something that I do. I will take this presentation this afternoon to talk about a social issue that is highlighted in the syllabus when we do Physical Education, that is politics and sports.

6.02 p.m.

These areas of human endeavours can be the most impactful, socio-economic strength of a country. Youths are the ones who continue to bring about change and who will be the future leaders. Sports provide opportunities for personal development, healthy living, and economic gains. Culture is our way of life, our beliefs, our collective identities, our language, our rules, our arts, *et cetera*. I am proud to say that I am a Sociologist too. I teach Sociology too; so, it is not PE alone. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the Government

to ensure that budgetary allocations and implementation of plans are done in a manner to provide opportunities to impact the development of these areas. When I examined the Ministry, the policy direction leaves much to be desired. The budgetary allocation of \$8,895,468,000 this year compared to the previous year's allocation saw a significant number of incomplete projects and poorly done completed works, which tell a story about the importance of these areas to the Government. Abraham Lincoln said:

“I never had a policy; I have just tried to do my very best each and every day.”

I am sure the staff will say they have done their best with the resources at their disposal. Hence, we need to examine closely, the methods of implementation. On culture and arts, in paragraph 4.145 of the budget speech the following statement is made:

“...our culture and heritage reflect values, beliefs, and aspirations which are at the core of our national identity as a people.”

It spoke about the belief of the Government in harnessing the energies of our people. These are such flowery words, while the actions of the said Government reflect differently. How are you harnessing people's energies? In this year's budget under Culture we have \$2,688,808,000 allocated, which is 2% of the allotted sum for this Ministry. I note that under Subsidies and Contributions to Local Organisations, a total of four organisations are listed. Where is the money for the E.R. Burrowes School of Arts? Will it receive the much-needed materials to run successful programmes? What about the music schools? What about the National Dance Company? What about the newly refurbished floors at the National Dance Company which needs to be fixed with the right material and set the recommended way so dancing can contribute, make its impact on our society? What about the copyright legislation and protection for artistes and those in the creative arts, which will provide the much-needed protection to harness our artistes? [An Hon. Member:

(Inaudible)] We have several artistes. I am just going to call names randomly. There is Mr. Jumo Primo, Ms. Poonam Singh, Mr. Vicadi Singh, and Ms. Letitia Wright whom we brought here the other day. There is Mr. Keith Agard and many other persons whom we can name from the arts and entertainment. If Ms. Wright was exposed to what we have now, would she have been able to realise her fullest potential? Therefore, if we want to acknowledge and harness – I am using your words – the talents and skills of our

people, then we have to provide the right platform for that to take place.

The last-minute rush – after almost one year of the previous budget – to run, patch, fix, or paint, does not negate the fact that the organisations went the entire year without needs being met. Such actions do not support in any way, the stated objective for Culture which reads:

“To ensure that Guyanese are provided with opportunities to learn and actively participate in the visual and performing arts and to preserve and conserve our national heritage.”

Mr. Speaker, I want to pull up a few articles. I am reading a headline here –

“Double pay for Cricket ... Carnival artistes - Pres. Ali announces”.

This is from *NewsRoom* on the 21st November, 2022. When I went through this article, \$6.9 million was used for that event and 89 local artistes performed. It states:

“...keen focus on developing the arts in Guyana.”

So, I was looking at the budgetary allocation to see what is being placed here to develop them.

“Guyanese musicians to benefit from gov’t-sponsored studio time”

What is happening in our music industry? This was on 4th June, 2022. It reads:

“-\$9M will be invested to secure this arrangement for 12 months

–construction of state-owned studios on the cards...”

I am not seeing that in the cards in the budget for 2024, to be exact. Again, in the said article, it states:

“Dr. Ali related that the plan is to cover studio time costs for the next 12 months at three local studios, allowing musicians to record their music at no charge to themselves.

He said that this is a direct investment that will afford local musicians the space to explore their craft in a more magnified way.”

I wonder how many musicians actually benefitted from this particular project, if they are able to continue to do their music, or if this was just for the one year and that was it.

Again, I examined the Budget and I see no allocations here for any projects of such kind. I must bring to your attention, also, two other articles that I find very interesting.

“Guyana goes big with CPL...”

In this article from *Newsday*, Sunday, 17th September, 2023, out of Trinidad and Tobago, here is what one of the paragraphs states:

“With its global status growing alongside its coffers, Guyana not only flexed its financial muscle by agreeing to host the CPL for three consecutive years, but is doing it bigger and better.”

Where is the money that will make our musicians and our artiste bigger and better in *Budget 2024*? Even as I looked at another article:

“Accreditation of creative arts institute, hosting of literary arts festival on the card this year”

This was done on the 2nd February, 2023. It spoke about the competitions and all that has happened. I hope the Hon. Minister in his presentation will tell us if the accreditation was finished for this particular area. Finally, on this article:

“Graduates show skill as Institute of Creative Arts hosts successful eighth convocation”

In this article I take note:

“...group of developing artists, dancers, dramatists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, creative craft workers and designers by the Institute of Creative Arts (ICA)...”

were on show at this event. It states:

“The collegiate relationship...”

that occurred. Here is what it states in reference:

“Cultural Training Centre in Jamaica... the old Jamaica School of Art and Jamaica School of Music... newer Jamaica School of Drama and Jamaica School of Dance.”

When are we going to be able to really talk about our skills and talents being developed and given the opportunity to be created and developed in Guyana. They had to have had a collaboration to get this. I hope, when we read the next article, we will talk about these particular areas being developed in Guyana so that our local artistes will be able to perform.

For the use of this allocated sum in this area, the details are sketchy for the expected projects. Let me outline them. Where will this new art gallery and museum and other facilities be located? I *ent* find it in the budget book. There is the outfitting of community spaces for cultural performances. Which community spaces are being referenced? They talked about cultural camps. Where will these cultural camps be held. I know last year this was at a lot of schools. Since \$1,250,000,000 will be spent on these projects from the allocated sum, I believe this meagre sum and the absence of details for projects contributed to the many states of incompleteness. It appears that people come up with suggestions, write them down and then, after the moneys are approved, they start looking for the actual plans. The only detail that is clear about this allocated sum is that for the people of African descent groups, not even listed as local organisations, which the PPP/C Government shall determine, will share a \$100 million, that is a mere 2.7% of this allocated sum. This funding was removed from International Decade for People of African Descent Assembly-Guyana (IDPADA-G) which used the funds to empower the small businesses of people of African descent. This is a clear disregard for the Africans in Guyana. No other ethnic group is being treated with such disdain.

During the previous year's examination of the Budget Estimates of Expenditure, on Tuesday, 31st January, 2023, the Minister was asked about a number of events in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sectors by the Hon. Mr. Jones. The Minister's response only gave the One Guyana Prize for Literature Festival, Mashramani activities, which is usual, the Regatta at Blue Lake in Linden, and at the literacy festival, the poetry slam, storytelling symposium, *et cetera*, that would take place. When we are planning events, if we want to highlight Mashramani, we do not want to crowd the literacy festival with other things that will not be able to really showcase and highlight it. We have 12 months in the year and many things could happen.

Mr. Speaker, even as I reflected on the speech last year, I pulled up the Mashramani Calendar for 2024 from the Ministry's Facebook page. I noted from all the events listed there is the Children's Mashramani Competition, Calypso Monarch, Children's Costume Parade, Soca Monarch, Dancehall Monarch, Chutney Monarch, Splasramani, Flag Raising Ceremony, Costume and Float Parade, Masharama, Panorama, literacy festival, and they listed the Buxton/Foulis Mash. Under this particular post – I do not know who monitors the page – but somebody asked:

“...since when dancehall is Mashramani eh? That had nothing to do with Mashramani.”

I hope that there is someone actually monitoring the page so that they can give feedback to Guyanese who are very much culturally awake to what are some of things we expect in our country. All these new activities – all – apparently replaced the Drama Festival that many looked forward to. The Drama Festival provided the perfect opportunity for students writing the Caribbean Examinations Council's (CSEC) examination (exam) to write their plays and bring them alive. This is part of the requirement of the subject of Theatre Arts. In 2019, the Uitvlugt Secondary School won the local competition. Now students writing this subject have to do their *lil* thing quietly at school and not be afforded the opportunity to bring their skills alive, whether it be at the National Cultural Centre or the Theatre Guild. Why was this programme removed? Dance, another form of the arts, requires much more investment to keep it alive. Christmas Fantasia used to be a free show for seniors and children in the homes. I recall the experiences of accompanying seniors from my community to this free show.

6.17 p.m.

Enchanted Caribbean used to be held in July for the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Guess what? The dates are never available at the National Cultural Centre. This was critical for CSEC exams, again, which also requires students to critique a dance show. That was created to provide an opportunity for our students who are in Theatre Arts to be able to critique and bring these shows alive. Why was it stopped? The only shows that remain are Dance Season in October and the church show at the Brickdam Cathedral at Easter. These dance programmes provided opportunities for the children, youths, and adults in classes to show their learnt skills and passion. The non return of these purposeful programmes, which enhanced our culture and provided opportunities for the youths, clearly shows a path of destruction to our cultural heritage and the implantation of new ones. Again, these shows can generate income to help the said organisations move forward. Culture ought to be preserved and new ones can be added. Amazingly, the Government's meagre allocation and no mention in these areas give the story. The sum of \$250 million allocated for national and other events in culture begs one to question, how will this money be disaggregated between the national holidays and all the events that we have in the country?

Mr. Speaker, I now turn my attention to youths. Again, the use of catchy language but differing actions are blatantly clear. Paragraph 4.151 of the Budget:

“The youths of our nation are its backbone and its future... emphasis on training and capacity building...”

and stuff.

The highlight of last year’s programme in the budget says that it will be completed in the first quarter of 2024. It says a lot about goal setting and not achieving them. Of this budgeted sum, \$150 million will be spent to upgrade and equip training centres. What happened to the night schools that afforded youths, who were school dropouts, the opportunity to attend CSEC classes and rewrite exams. Are these individuals not important? How are you harnessing the energies of our people? In this year’s Budget, \$2,700,000 was allocated as subsidies to local organisations. A total of eight organisations are listed. What is particularly interesting in this area is that there was no increase given for none of the eight organisations. Hence, they will continue with the issues/challenges of the last year, and they will face the new ones this year. I note that this Ministry has been advertising vacancies which asked for specific qualifications. I liked that when I saw it on the page. I will ask, does the training run by this Ministry cater for the skills needed for the oil and gas sector? Does the accreditation of programmes cater for our youths to be marketable in and out of Guyana or meet the needs of the labour shortages in Guyana? Examine it because I have checked it.

Mr. Speaker, imagine doing a course and collecting just a piece of cardboard with something written on it and you have to take it. There is no seal, no stamp, or anything, to say that this is happening. Please pay attention to that. When we do our programme, if the institution conducting the training does not have the relevant accreditation, then, do it through somewhere that is already accredited. For example the cooking class, one will get accreditation through the Carnegie School of Home Economics. These are things that can be collaborative and worked on if we are talking about empowering our youths. I read the objectives of youths and I asked. We want to empower them through interactive programmes and enhance their skills to create a cadre of entrepreneurs to make meaningful contribution to national development. Am I to think or is the nation to think that it is all about creating these entrepreneurs? What about the other areas that our young people could be very effective in? What about the Presidential Youth Advisory Council (PYAC)? In

2022, I saw an article about it being established and that is it. What about the President’s Youth Award, Republic of Guyana (PYARG)? What is going on there? Are our youths really benefitting from these programmes? I am quite sure that more can be accomplished from our youths once they have a ‘say’ in the things that are being done. If you engage our youths, they will give you more ideas of programmes that you can do to help them.

Mr. Speaker, sports: 25th January, 2023, *Guyana Chronicle* headline:

“National Sports Policy to be completed in 2023”

Mr. Speaker, \$4.3 billion, apart from infrastructural works... An examination of the budget by the Minister during that time, he said that there were to be three policies that he intended to bring to this House. The Minister said the policies he was going to bring to the House were the sports policy and cultural policy. After sitting in this House for almost one year, not hearing or seeing anything being done on the most attended area by the Government, I saw the following *Newsroom* headline, 13th January, 2024,

“National Sports Policy to be published in first half of 2024”.

Eh eh! What happened to last year? There was no mention of the cultural policy. Maybe that will be the headline for the next quarter of this new year when it was touted since 2023. May I remind this House that a sports policy sets clear guidelines for how sports can contribute to society. I trust, whenever this policy is presented, it will cater for the several deficiencies and incompleteness by this Ministry. While it is highlighted in paragraph 4.14 that last year’s project will be completed in 2024, it reflects a state of incompleteness. So, I need to go through this quickly.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, yes, quickly, but you have to do that with an extension.

Ms. Flue-Bess: What?

Mr. Jones: Cde. Speaker, I do move that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to conclude her presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much. Hon. Member, you have five minutes to conclude.

Ms. Flue-Bess: Mr. Speaker, incomplete projects: Palmyra was not completed; Corentyne was not completed; for the multipurpose facilities in the hinterland, on their *Facebook* page I saw that lands were now being identified;

incompleteness at the Albion ground which was locked up for the last five months and no work going on; we have the Bel Air ground – I saw the Minister talking about this area and how he was walking through but when I went there, the bridge was in a deplorable condition – if a child runs over there, they will fall in the trench.

Upgrades to ground: There are several grounds that were slated to be upgraded but they are not in a condition that children can play on them. When you have the grounds done, people should be able to use them. The extension of squash court at Racquet Centre, there is incomplete work; construction of stand and grass mound at Region 2, incomplete work. One of the things that I must bring to the attention of this House is the Minister touted that the National Gymnasium was completed after many months; this project that was completed in August. When I visited the National Gymnasium the gate of the Gymnasium was hung up with wire and rope. The washroom was locked up and cracks on the wall; it cannot be used. The materials used to build the Tennis Court... it is bent where the net is. When you check here there is a rotten gate.

[*The Hon. Member displayed a picture.*]

Again, the material used is not good enough for it; they are all substandard. These are things that we must pay attention to. I want to remind this House that when the D'Urban Park was constructed, it was a completed project, not incomplete, and you did not maintain it.

One of the many roles of government is to provide safe facilities and recreational spaces for its citizens. The most distressing experience when attending local competitions is the poorly kept and non-functioning washrooms at these venues. At the recently concluded National Championship at the Lenora National Stadium, the washrooms were in a deplorable condition and had serious issues. I noted on the *Facebook* page of the Ministry, the Ministry's entire promotion of displays of stadium designs which I pulled up. Why should our athletes endure sitting on hard board, lying on concrete, spinning in different positions, or holding umbrellas to be protected from the rain or sun? They had to endure this agony for at least nine hours. Should the Government not be looking at different designs that can bring more comfort and relief for athletes and spectators alike in comparison to hosting international events where the Government ensures all the facilities are fixed, washrooms are functioning and well stocked with toilet paper and hand sanitisers? We need to use the land space in a manner that will bring comfort to our people. Consider the economic

windfall in sports, youth and culture, highlighted by a head of state in a recent newspaper article attributing over US\$85 million to Guyana's economy due to the Caribbean Premier League (CPL) Cricket of 2022. Look at the financial benefits. Why are we not seeing the reflection of that in *Budget 2024*?

Mr. Speaker, briefly, I must turn my attention to Region 4 quickly. It is total madness to have a budget presented for the region when the elected officials work, put the projects, and then it is taken out and only specific areas that support the Government gets the project. That needs to be stopped. There are several issues on the East Bank with water. This is the condition of the water coming in the Mocha-Arcadia community and several communities on the East Bank that needs to be fixed. It is something that is urgent, and we have to think about the health of our people.

[*The Hon. Member displayed a picture.*]

In closing, I want to urge this Government to ensure that when we are spending and doing allocation for our people, that they indeed take into consideration the needs of the people by paying attention and listening keenly to the people. Many of the incomplete projects under the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports can be completed if the Minister and his team would take the time and prioritise and get them to finish one by one. I trust that in 2025 all projects will be completed under this Ministry. I thank you. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Now for the Hon. Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, the Hon. Charles Ramson, on his birthday.

Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports [Mr. Ramson]: Mr. Speaker, it is a great privilege to stand here to support the largest budget in our country's history and the first trillion-dollar budget in our country's history. I am not going to be unkind to the previous speaker. I will chalk it down to her first attempt at shadowing this Ministry. Her presentation was emblematic of all of the presentations that I have heard in the last day and a half, which is that it reminds me of the Essequibo River, wide at the mouth and narrow at the source. If the Hon. Member was really interested in culture, she would note and read on the very same flyer that she was referring to, that it was a 'literary festival' and not a "literacy festival." I will leave that to one side; and she is a teacher, she is a teacher...

6.32 p.m.

As I said, it is the largest Budget in our country's history, our first trillion-dollar Budget. I remember in 2009, the Minister, Dr. Singh, when I had the privilege of witnessing the first budget presentation in my life, the Budget was \$128 billion – \$128 billion. How far have we come just in that period of time? Many times, when we have the dialogue about the development of our country, the questions would always be asked about why it is that our country is not developed and is not as developed as other countries. That \$128 billion, coming from a period of where we were the poorest country in the western hemisphere, could only mean if one converted it to US\$600 million. The road to Lethem alone is going to cost us over \$600 million. The bridge that is being built right now in Demerara is US\$270 million. The gas-to-energy project is over \$1.5 billion. The point that I am making is, even in the absence, in all of the payment for recurrent expenditure, *et cetera*, Guyana just did not have the money to rapidly grow. This is the first trillion-dollar Budget and it is a remarkable achievement. It is a momentous occasion that this country must forever remember. It is a privilege to stand here and support it. It is an exciting time for Guyanese and for the country. As I said in the last presentation, this will be the greatest transfer of wealth to the ordinary man in any five-year period and it will also be the greatest transformation in our country's history in any 20-year period under the People's Progressive Party/Civic's Government. To do this, we need big budgets.

At the heart of larger budgets, it means that governments can do more. It can bring more development and do more for people. It is hard to argue against larger budgets, only how the money is going to be spent. Here are some important economic facts that must be stated about the economic health of our country : our non-oil growth is 11.7%, which makes us, if one takes out the oil growth and just leave it as our non-oil growth, the second fastest growing economy in the world; and our debt-to-GDP ratio is one of the lowest in this part of the world. I heard the Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, spoke about debt and how we are being burdened with debt. The debt-to-GDP ratio in the United States of America it is 122%. What is that in terms of the debt burden that the Hon. Member referred to? On the 325 million people in the United States of America, it is US\$100,000, which is \$20 million. In Brazil it is 85%; in Canada it is 68%; in Mexico it is 50% in Barbados it is over 100%; in Jamaica it is 72%; in the Republic of Republic of Trinidad and Tobago it is 53%; and In Guyana it is 27%. Our current account balance is in a surplus. We had an extraordinary year of achievements. This is despite facing the greatest threat to our territory that we have ever seen in our country's history. His Excellency, the

President, Dr. Ali, led Guyana, led our team, led our Government and led this nation to resolve that issue so that we can breathe comfortably now. It was the greatest threat on our territory. Just before the President left to go to Argyle in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the Opposition and the Members who are connected to the Opposition; the Mr. Asking-for-Your-Friend, who does not know the difference between 33 and 32, kept saying that we should not go. His Excellency had the courage to go. He led our country there and resolved the issue. We also obtained our seat – the largest vote in the United Nation (UN) for the United Nation Security Council. We had many, many foreign secretaries visit, including that of the Secretary of State for the United States of America, the Emir of Qatar came here too, India, *et cetera*.

We have 12 branded hotels under construction where many of them are Guyanese-owned. The sum of 7,000 scholarships awarded last year – 21,000 in total. There were over 10,000 house lots being allocated – 30,000 in total. There are schools under construction and more teachers in training – the highest grades that we have ever had. We have 12 hospitals under construction and six will be completed before or by 2025. There are amazing results in our telemedicine. We have five oil and gas projects already approved. The Ministry of Public Works completed 2,600 projects in just last year alone and 4,000 since 2020. The Amerindian villages received \$4.6 billion directly to the villages themselves. All of them received it from the sale of our carbon credits, which was a world-class achievement for us. There is no other country in the world that was able to secure that, which was led by Minister, Mr. Vickram Bharrat, and the Vice-President. A new cell phone operator has entered the market after the People's Progressive Party/Civic liberalised the telecommunications sector, which APNU/AFC failed to do despite promising that they would do that. There are over 10,000 cars being registered every five months in this country by the ordinary man. In this country, tens of thousands of homes are either being built or renovated. Again, the ordinary man. Interest rates are the lowest that they have ever been in this country's history, and they are now comparable to the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and all of the developed world, right here, because of the macroeconomic management in this country.

Despite the misgivings and the misunderstandings, that is not what caused the financial crisis in 2008. It was things such as financial instruments, credit default swaps and collateralised debt obligations, where those were securitised financial instruments that were packaged as Triple A

products and then sold on to the rest of the world, which caused the entire world to go into first a credit crunch and then into a global financial crisis. The person who is shadowing Minister, Dr. Singh as the Minister within the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service - 10 versions of them cannot shadow Minister Singh – 10 versions combined cannot manage. I do not know what the debate is about shadows. These are jumbies. These are not shadows; these are jumbies. They are talking a lot of voodoo economics here. There are ordinary Guyanese who are traveling in and out of the country. Guyanese are now...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, we have the Hon. Chief Whip for the Opposition.

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 41 (2), insulting or using derogatory names to describe Members of the House. The Hon. Member has just described the Opposition Members as 'jumbies'.

Mr. Ramson: No. I said it is not shadows. I did not say they were...

Mr. Jones: You said they were not shadows they were jumbies.

Mr. Ramson: What is the problem?

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Chief Whip. Hon. Minister, please, let us refrain from any imputation. Please, continue.

Mr. Jones: Thank you.

Mr. Ramson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying, Guyanese are traveling in and out of the country. Ordinary Guyanese are traveling in and out of the country like never before. There are Guyanese now sending their families overseas money, with the exception of, maybe, the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Aubrey Norton. I have an article published in *Stabroek News* which states:

“Aubrey Norton blocked by MoneyGram for receiving US\$500 - likely as a result of anti-money laundering law.”

I mean, I could not help but notice and I will lay this over. What is interesting in relation to that, when the Hon. Member was blocked by MoneyGram, the Hon. Member issued a statement on his page. Do you know what the Hon. Member issued on his statement? This is a true story. The Leader of the Opposition called for a boycott of MoneyGram – US\$500.

It has been a stellar year, Mr. Speaker, for the Government of Guyana. The Cabinet will know that even when Tony Blair came here, he was impressed by the work that was happening here. He said that he has been around the world and he has seen so many things happening. He has never seen this pace of development happening anywhere in the world. Oppositions will always argue against budgets. I have been around Budgets for 15 Budgets now. Last year, we had them argue against infrastructure spending. They lost that argument in here and they lost that argument out there. Now, they are trying to argue that we should not have this scale of infrastructure development. If that is the argument – the scale of infrastructure development – now they are going to have to tell us and the public what projects they are against. That is what I want them to tell us. What projects they are against? Which schools, which hospitals, which roads, which bridges, which highways, which housing developments, which stadiums, which indoor facilities, which community grounds, what gas-to-power project, which communities, are they against the development? They have to answer that question because all of those projects, when we did our consultation were the requests of the residents of the communities and the people of the country.

This is what I know about them on the other side, We are doing more even for their constituencies because we are doing it for the entire country. Even if we were to give them everything that they wanted and we do more than they ever did, they will still not support this Budget. They will still find a problem with our Budget, because they are not the ones who are making the decision, because they do not get to hold the offices and use their offices to *fat fowl* themselves. Here is what I can say, I do not know why they keep telling people that they will win the next election. They just had a rally at Burnham Court and they could not even full-up a basketball court with people. The same man, the Vice-President, Mr. Jagdeo, who you have an obsession with maybe if you learn something from him, you can actually win an election. This is a man who has already won three elections and, one of those elections, he put you out of Office. Ray Lewis taught me; you can never become the master unless you learn from the master.

6.47 p.m.

Here is what I want people to know about oil and gas development... It is wrong for, Ms. Tabitha Sarabo-Halley, to say that we do not speak on our sector. We had given a two-hour press conference on our sector. I saw the media making comments about this. We have been producing oil in this country for four years. That is true, but we have only

spent two years in our economy. We have only spent oil money for two years in our economy and we have seen how rapid the expansion has been on the economic activity. It is wrong that they are quoting and context is extremely important. It took Dubai 40 years to develop to the sort of country that everybody is excited about and the scale of investment is much larger. One hotel alone in Dubai is over US\$1 billion and an airport in Dubai is over US\$80 billion. It took Norway 40 years to develop and 25 years of spending oil money in its economy. Now, it has a trillion dollars in its sovereign wealth fund.

I want to share an experience I had while in Aberdeen on a Chevening Scholarship and it is not a scholarship of \$76 million for one family. Never was it the case; this was on a Chevening Scholarship. I want you to know what I experienced, I want the Members of Parliament (MPs) to know and I want the country to know. When I went there, I got the immediate impression that something was missing. When I dug a bit deeper, I found out that something was indeed missing; a third of the labour force was missing. That was because oil economies go through booms and bust all the time.

For the Opposition, their view is to spend on recurrent expenditure. You cannot spend on recurrent expenditure such as salary increases immediately, despite the fact that we have been giving an incremental increase. Prices slump and it will slump in the future sometimes. You are unable to rely on oil revenue and then you have to borrow to pay wages. Many countries, especially natural resource rich countries, have suffered because of that. It depends on how long they take to recover, then you will have to fire people. You do not have to go too far. Just go back a couple years ago, oil prices went negative. What is also important about oil production is that it does not stay static but it also goes down. One has to manage this carefully and plan for the future. I want to state clearly here that our sovereign wealth fund has an automatic savings for the future. It has an automatic savings for the future. That is the formula. It is one of the best formulas that I have ever seen.

I want to say this about the gas-to-power project. One of the key developments has always been unlocking energy. Just read the book by Vaclav Smil called *Energy and Civilisation: A History*. He is one of the best authors that I know on energy. Throughout, there is a connection between development and unlocking energy for humans, which allows us to do high value work. The high price of electricity functions as a drag on the economy. Imagine a person is the only one trying to run a race with 100 pounds and all of the

competitors are running without weights, that is what it means to have a high cost of energy in our country. For the decades of development and period that we have been trying to develop, this high cost of energy, has been dragging us and dragging us. This is the first time where we will get an opportunity to unleash our economy and unleash the value of this economy. All of the things that you heard the Leader of the Opposition talk about, are just figments to him. Those are just terms – agro-processing and all of that sort of stuff to make the Hon. Member sounds as though he knows what he is talking about. If the businesspeople made the investment and made money, they would have done those things a long time ago because they would have been in their interest to do so. The fact is, we are uncompetitive, from an energy standpoint. That is why it is important for us to get lower cost of energy in our economy.

I want to turn to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport. When I started here, our Ministry had \$2.4 billion. Right now, we are getting \$8.8 billion. I want to start with the community grounds because this is the area that has been the closest to my heart. I want to thank all of the communities that have been working with us to build our community ground. I also want to take the opportunity to thank our Ministry, the National Sports Commission (NSC), the National Trust of Guyana and everyone who is working as part of our team to execute our programme. I want to thank all of the residents who have welcomed us and worked with us in every community.

When I came in 2020, I did an assessment. It was far worse than I had ever seen on community grounds. I could not figure out why, until I looked carefully at the numbers. The People's Progressive Party/Civic use to spend, between the period of 2011 to 2014, \$300 million on the ground enhancement programme. The APNU/AFC spent \$100 million a year on the community ground enhancement programme. They cut their expenditure by almost two thirds on the community enhancement programme. That was one of the reasons the community grounds were in such bad condition. Also, the closure of the sugar estates destroyed the maintenance impact of those community grounds. We are currently doing 150 grounds. If you include the hinterland, it is 100 additional grounds, support from our ministry and another 100 additional grounds coming out from the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs. Currently, 350 community grounds across this country are getting support and it will continue. This year, it will be \$1 billion we are allocating towards community grounds. I know why because it has been so important for bringing this country together to

develop our talent, to help, to improve our health and wellbeing, and to improve even our mental wellbeing. Even though the big projects will feature prominently, the community ground development programme has been the one that is closest to my heart.

Under our sport programme, after securing the Caribbean Premier League (CPL) finals and semifinals for the first time ever, the Guyana Amazon Warriors won for the first time ever and we got that *monkey off of our backs*. We had the largest medal allocation in this country's history. I want everyone to know that facilities have always been our biggest problem. Even though the APNU/AFC did nothing but the D'Urban Park in their five years, where they spent \$1.4 billion and \$600 million is unaccounted for and cannot be found... That is what they consider complete; that is not complete; that is complete of fraud. We are currently building five stadiums and six indoor facilities. These are multi-year projects.

[Mr. Speaker left the Chair.]

[Mdm. Deputy Speaker assumed the Chair.]

I have spoken about the number of projects such as the gymnasium, the racket centre and the squash court building that we completed. Although that doubles court is being installed, as we speak, the folks have already come into the country. That court will allow us to host in the region, the only country that will allow us other than one other location to host international squash. We completed the installation of the track in Linden and that is what the APNU/AFC failed to do in their period misled this country. They did not even purchase the synthetic material. We completed the installation of that track. We resurfaced the track at Leonora. We completed the installation of international standard lights at Anna Regina, New Amsterdam, Uitvlugt, Mackenzie/Linden and Bayrock will soon get. We completed the international fast drying multi-purpose grounds in Anna Regina, Linden and Albion. Also, at the National Stadium, we installed for the first time ever our multi-screen electronic score board. We commenced the construction of a new stand at the Guyana National Stadium. We also started doing stands at the synthetic tracks and those will be added. There are new stands being constructed now. We commenced the multi-purpose halls in Region 1, Region 3, Region 7, Region 8 and Region 9 and for the first time ever, indoor facilities in other regions other than in Region 4. First time ever. A synthetic...

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, thank you. In order to continue, you require five more minutes if somebody would...

Minister of Education [Ms. Manickchand]: If it pleases you, Mdm. Speaker, we are asking for the Hon. Member to be given five minutes to complete his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Deputy Speaker: Go ahead, Minister.

Ms. Manickchand: Thank you.

Mr. Ramson: Thank you. We commenced also the construction of the players pavilion, the stands and the grass mounds in Linden and Anna Regina. Those are multiyear projects. They will be completed in 2024. I am also very happy that we were able to pull down the Mackenzie Sports Pavilion because that was a relic of the past. In fact, it was – what I call – the incubus of colonialism. That used to be a location where non-whites could go when they could not go to the whites only locations. That is west of Watooka. That is what that building represented. We were able to pull down that building and a spanking new three-storey building will be built there by this Government and built by the Guyanese people and not relics and incubus of the past. The word is spelt 'i-n-c-u-b-u-s'. It means evil spirit. We also completed our draft for the sports policy. We completed the audited financial statements for the National Sports Commission. We also completed the draft for the horse racing legislation. We did about 14 meetings just to complete that draft.

7.02 p.m.

Under culture, this has been the greatest year of achievements for us too. We have surpassed every target set that we set for ourselves in our budget. We aimed at 30 events and we did 46 events at our ... I would not list them all because we are running out of time, but I do want to list a few. After returning Mashramani, we had Independence in Region 9 for the first time ever. We did the Literary Festival. We have a Drama Support Programme for plays. We put on the plays of *Sauda*, *Makantali* and *Last of the Red Men*. Several initiatives also, we initiated to commemorate the 200 Anniversary of the 1823 Revolt. After establishing a committee, we had the Remembrance Event, a cultural festival and an exhibition. We also initiated a creation of a commemorative coin which will be produced this year, a stamp and a documentary which we are about to release. We commenced the process of getting digital access to our archival documents which have been stored overseas and

which other countries took form us. Guyana will now get access. We also had, for the first time ever, our Caribbean Premiere League (CPL) Half Time Show, our One Guyana Mega Concert. We had the Night of Patriotic Reflection, at a time when we needed it in this country when our sovereignty was under severe threat. We expanded the Youth Culture Camp to take it to every region, where 420 young people benefitted from this all across this country.

Currently, in the ICA... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] I heard the Hon. Member say we do not have money for the drama school, the dance school and the arts school, *et cetera*. It is unfortunate that you do not know how to read the Budget properly, but I will forgive you because you are new at this. All of that money is contained, as part of the Department of Culture, under the Institute of Creative Arts that the Minister. Dr. Frank Anthony started and they did nothing to do... I want to announce here that we had our assessment, we had our preliminary assessment with the National Accreditation Council and we have satisfied more than what is required for us to be accredited. From the moment that we institute our Board, which Cabinet will approve, we will now get accredited. I want to turn quickly to our youth programme.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, I am sorry, your time is up.

Mr. Ramson: Give me one minute to conclude, Mdm. Deputy Speaker, because I want to ...

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: I will give you 30 seconds.

Mr. Ramson: Okay, 30 seconds. ...show to the public what we were able to get our Institute, for the first time, accredited. All these years, they were giving young people certificates. I want to give credit to our Youth Department and the Director of Youth. We worked extremely hard to make sure that we got that Institute accredited so those young people can get accredited certificates. I want to conclude by saying I heard Mr. Mahipaul speak about “*dem* coming back into power”. I want to refer to a post that he made. In June, 2023, a day or two days before the Local Government Election. He said:

“Oh the love at Mabaruma is real. Beautiful people indeed, who are simply fed up of the PPP/C and will be voting solidly for APNU.”

When the results came out for Mabaruma it was 12 seats to 1 seat – 12:2.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister.

Mr. Ramson: When we hear from Members of the Opposition that they are coming back into power, they are coming back into Opposition for more than 30 years. Thank you very much, Mdm. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: I now call on the Hon. Member, Ms. Philadelphia.

Ms. Philadelphia: Thank you, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. I rise to add my contribution to the *Budget 2024* debate but, before I do, I must first commend the hard-working public servants at the Ministry of Finance and other ministries who continue to work in this regard. Thank you.

Let me share a few before I get into my presentation. As a mother, an educator and a dedicated public servant, I took umbrage to the echo of the Hon. Member, Mr. Hamilton, a father and grandfather who believes it was honourable to condemn persons for giving their children an education. Even more worrying, the People’s Progressive Party/Civic’s Government in 23 years had supported themselves and children with taxpayers’ money. We are not going to go into the gutters by calling names. Frankly speaking, they have what it takes to be given a scholarship rightfully so they must have it, but they must serve the country or pay the money back. With this note, I say a special good night to frank. [Mr. Hamilton: One family...] Sir, families are sacred. I invite frank, it is a frank discussion, it is a frank statement. I made a frank statement.

This Budget was presented under the theme: “*Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*”. At the onset, I beg the question, when we say the word ‘all’, who do we refer to? Like the 2023 Budget, concrete and mortar, the same is for 2024 with infrastructure receiving 58.1% of this beyond a trillion-dollar budget. Nothing is there to cushion the effects of the high rise of cost of living for those who continue to face the horror of economic uncertainties and deprivation. Price for goods and services keep skyrocketing and this uncaring PPP/C Government continue to enrich their friends, family, favourites and favoured few. Even in this, we continue to see the disparity and the widening gap between what is perceived to be green and red communities, while the working-class struggle to live from pay cheque to pay cheque.

‘Staying the Course’ for the PPP/C is simply maintaining the same policy of structural discrimination against minority and marginalised groups, with scant regard for the sacrifices of

public servants. Let me share a sad experience with you, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. I met Corporal Ward at the wash bay, as we waited to get our vehicles washed. I still feel his pain. Corporal Ward was deployed to the border and felt a sense of accomplishment of reward for service when it was announced – the allocation of house lots for those serving at the borders. Corporal Ward said reality knocked hard. Corporal Ward said I will not be able to pay for that land if allocated, since I am paying for my vehicle through the bank and my present salary will not allow same at this time. And that is the hard fact, ...*[Interruption]*

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, please. There is a difference between heckling and shouting. I cannot even hear the speaker. Please, continue.

Ms. Philadelphia: Mdm., that is the hard fact. In every public service sector, it is the same cry different day. They cannot afford a good life under this uncaring PPP/C Government. I now shift my attention to my area of responsibility. The residents of Victoria West Sideline Dam have to endure these deplorable situations daily and now that the rains are upon us, this situation is further compounded. The taxi drivers refuse to ply that area and they are citing how bad the road is. **[An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)]** I have everything here and you can have it. This is the condition of the roads.

[The Hon. Member displayed pictures.]

We met little Tamara and her two siblings as they navigated the rivers on the road on their way home from school. This is the plight of many. Our children are ploughing through streets to get to school, so that they can get an education for themselves. Moravian Street is no better and Victoria East Side Line Dam is as bad as the West. The electric poles along the East Sideline Dam are like a crisscross puzzle. They are a disaster waiting to happen. As a matter of fact, on 22nd August, 2022, during a walk in the area, I called and reported the matter and even shared images. There has been nothing done to correct the situation 17 months ago and 17 months after. I had to be a good samaritan as I assisted a resident to cross the bridge at Dublin Street, Victoria. This is the bridge that connects Dublin Street to the East Sideline Dam. All of the roads in Nabaclis are atrocious. Again, I have the facts here to present to you. I spoke of these areas last year and I recognised works being done to Nabaclis East Sideline Dam but, what is worrying is, only 100 rod of that road is being done, which extend from the road to the line. Am I to understand human beings do not live beyond that

area? Let me correct myself. It is a shortage of the five 'fs' – friends, families, favourites and favoured few.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I referred to these two villages and their state of affairs to point out to you what it means to Stay the Course: 'Staying the course' - a reflection of continuing with the five 'fs'. The village of Cove and John is bound by these two villages and all the streets there are done. It is like little Dubai. A point to note, one street was done in Cove and John three times in 18 months and nothing for Victoria and Nabaclis. Each community must benefit from the oil wealth of this country, regardless of demographics or political affiliation. I saw a publication – the Minister said it just now – that roads were completed in Block 20 Haslington but that is just a sprinkle in the ocean. Eighty-five per cent of the road network there need urgent attention. I dare say, all the streets in Foulis – another little Dubai. Again, in my presentation, I spoke about the condition of roads in Buxton, Paradise, Plaisance and other villages along the East Coast and recognised some attempts to correct same but when two roads are done in these areas all the roads in places such as Enmore, Lusignan and Enterprise are properly done – that is the hard fact. Is this how you are building prosperity for all? The answer is a resounding no. Eighty per cent of the roads in Mahaica have been rehabilitated but this Administration continues to pay little attention to the local authority areas such as Buxton/Foulis and Haslington/Grove.

To improve the condition of the dilapidated infrastructure, it must be noted, in PPP/C support areas \$2,432,168,341 was spent and 90 roads were completed. **[An Hon. Member: In 2022?]** That is in 2022. In the APNU/AFC support area, \$408,207,406 was spent and only six roads were completed. This is the practice. Progress for all, the question remains, who are we talking to about?

7.17 p.m.

The Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport said he built 150 facilities and supported 250. Sir, facilities in communities like Victoria and Paradise are still to get assistance from this Ministry. The management of these facilities have to seek alternative means to improve the deplorable condition of those facilities and we continue to see friends, families and favourites of the PPP/C given illustrious contracts above their competencies and infrastructures are crumbling even as they are building them. All housing areas – lands were allocated for recreation, but these spaces are now safe havens for grazing pastures for cattle. They need attention.

The health sector – healthcare services in the region are a colossal failure. With \$90.2 million expended in 2023, we continue to experience a shortage of basic drugs while the vulnerable citizens find it difficult to purchase same. The deplorable condition of the Dr. CC. Nicholson Hospital is a testament to what it means by ‘staying the course’, and, of course, this is only for the five Fs. This institution continues to be deprived of the basic services for the citizens. Visits made to there and other facilities such as Melanie, Beterverwagting, Buxton and Laluni revealed a severe shortage of drugs and basic services. Ms. Elsie George, a pensioner of Haslington Village, is at her wits end to find the finances to purchase medication for her son who is hospitalised with a heart condition. That prescription has to be refilled monthly and it must be noted, Marlon is the sole breadwinner for his extended family. He is the father of three minor motherless children. I can say to you this situation is widely replicated. I hope that, with this \$129.8 billion budget in 2024, their woes will be a thing of the past.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, in 2023, under education \$105 billion was expended to implement the sector's various initiatives, but we continue to see dilapidated structures and eroding behavioural patterns perpetuated by our students and lack of mechanisms, thereof, to combat the scourge of these. Added to that Mdm. Deputy Speaker, we witnessed the rise of teachers being assaulted by students and their parents. This must be fixed and be fixed now. Further, while the Hon. Minister's presentation gave \$135.2 billion for education in 2024, we are yet to see the measures in place to improve the quality of output in 75% of our schools. I beg, let us not to be carried away by the figures but let the evidence of the spending be reflected in our human resources. The Hon. Minister boasts of 99% trained teachers and the world is aware of the hard truth. Teachers who dropped out of college after the first semester graduated; teachers graduated and final grades for exams have not been presented, just to name a few. So, when we boast of such, the quality and competencies are highly questionable. Woe to the nation. [Ms. Manickchand: You should be happy that you retired.] And, I am happy that I did, I am happy that I did. It is too much.

Social services – the delivery of services in this region continue to be a burden to the poor and vulnerable. Ms. Thomas, a mother of three, has a special needs son whom she is desperately trying to get assistance for. In her words, ‘Teacher Maureen, I fed up. Them people behaving like if this money *ah* them own and me *ga fuh* beg them *fuh am*. Look imagine one year done since I apply and do interview and every time I ask question them *ah* tell me *ah* got to wait,

and strong strong people who nothing *nah* wrong with them *ah* get money. Look, me *nah* able. *Mo me ga do wuh* me can do’. Of course, names were called of those persons who were receiving stuff. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, this is the plight of the poor and vulnerable. It must be addressed and addressed now. I say to this House that the Regional Democratic Council (RDC) of Region 4, the biggest region, after consultation with the residents, requested \$14 billion to improve the lives and services for...

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, 15 minutes is up. To continue...

Mr. Jones: Thank you Mdm. Deputy Speaker. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I do move that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to conclude her presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Granted. You may conclude your presentation.

Ms. Philadelphia: Thank you. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I say to this House, the Regional Democratic Council of Region 4, the biggest region, after consultation with the residents, requested \$14 billion to improve the lives and services for its residents but received \$12,365,104,000. In comparison, Region 3 - \$11,336,050,000, Region 5 - \$6,326,565,000... [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] I to know, you to find out. And Region 6, \$13,867,020,000. Make this make sense PPP/C. This is the discriminatory practice that we continue to see. Guyana belongs to all Guyanese. The time has come for the PPP/C Government to stop playing politics with the livelihoods of our precious citizens. I say, Hon. Member Sonia Parag, it is not okay; Hon. Member Priya Manickchand, it is not okay; Hon. Member Vindhya Persaud, it is not okay; and certainly Hon. Member Ashni Kumar Singh, it is not okay. Let all Guyanese benefit equally from our oil resources, then we can truly say Guyana is on the cusp for greatness, this great land of ours.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, this budget fails to satisfy the basic needs of our ordinary citizens, as a consequence, my conscience will not allow me to support this budget. I Thank you. [Applause]

Ms. Manickchand: Now, excuse me, Mdm. Deputy Speaker, earlier during the Hon. Member's speech she made a comment that encompassed all of the graduate teachers just now, where she said that teachers were unqualified for graduation and let into the system. I am asking the Hon. Member, as a responsible member of this honourable House, to provide the names of the teachers she said dropped out

and graduated or that the comment be expunged from the record and that an apology be issued to the graduating batch of 2023.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, are you able to provide a list of the teachers?

Ms. Manickchand: The Hon. Member has committed to giving us that list and I am very grateful for that. The nation is waiting on it.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, very much. I now call upon the Hon. Seepaul Narine.

Mr. Narine: Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I join the Hon. Members on this side of the House in expressing my wholehearted support for *Budget 2024*. As I consider the budget, I recall His Excellency the President, Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, saying in his New Year's Day address that:

“My government pledged to improve the lives of our people. We are honouring that promise. The fruits of our collective efforts are beginning to ripen. The future of Guyana is bright and promising. We have set Guyana on a course of sustained growth and prosperity.”

As I reflected on what the President said and on what the Hon. Minister, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, has proposed, it is clear as day that the PPP/Civic is committed to honouring their promises to our people. This budget, like all the budgets of the present and past PPP/Civic Administrations, demonstrates sincerity in fulfilling the party's promises to the electorate. It is a marked departure from the actions of the former Coalition Government and its ‘good life for all’ mantra. Really, the ‘good life’ that they spoke about was meant for themselves, whereas the masses lived in misery and confronted pauperisation. *Budget 2024* has broken all records, it anticipates spending in the interest of our people \$1,146,000,000 billion. By any yardstick, it is a massive investment in our people. Many have told me that they never expected such resources would be available for our people and our nation's development in their lifetime. Today, Guyanese are assured that the PPP/Civic, as a party and a government, is focused on the all-round development of all our people, including my Comrades on the other side of this honourable House – all our people. The budget's theme: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All* highlights the thinking that influences the PPP/Civic as it works towards the betterment of all Guyanese.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, given my background as a legitimate trade unionist, I am very interested in the specific measures

which safeguard, in advance, the lot of working people and their families. Their hopes for a better future revolve around an adequate life with good health, proper education for their children and grandchildren, affordable housing, comfort, safety and security. That is why I am heartened to recognise that *Budget 2024* aims to address those questions meaningfully. Indeed, the working people and their families were not let down. The budget speaks for itself and, therefore, I will amplify just a few of its manifold interventions. By allocating \$135.2 billion to the education sector, every Guyanese can acquire the skill and knowledge that will enable them to be gainfully employed and achieve tremendous success in life. One of the most significant developments in this sphere is the first step taken towards providing free university education. Thousands of Guyanese will now realise their dreams of a university education and doors will be opened, especially for those from lower-earning households.

The significant investments to construct new hospitals and other medical facilities across the country is a development well received by our working people, recognising that it will significantly improve access to health services. Moreover, the interventions aimed at expanding the range of services available have been impressive, with some previously only accessible overseas now being offered locally. Additionally, there have been concerted efforts to improve the skills of health care professionals which is expected to bolster the sector's effectiveness. The measures aimed at screening for cervical cancer among women and psychological disorders among school-aged children and the elderly must be commended.

7.32 p.m.

Many hardworking people have finally realised their dreams of home ownership after years of waiting. The budget highlights a significant achievement of over 30,000 house lots being allocated in a very short time. This is a monumental achievement, especially considering that the housing programme halted during the Coalition's term.

I know many workers paid careful attention to the budget and were not disappointed. Increasing the income tax threshold to \$100,000 monthly is a significant gain. This intervention alone will put some \$5 billion in the pockets of our workers. Additionally, our working people will benefit further from improving their tax allowances for life and medical insurance deductions.

[Mr. Speaker assumed the Chair.]

Actions speak louder than words, and the records provide deafening testimony. Old Age Pensions, public assistance and National Insurance Scheme (NIS) minimum pensions have all increased. That apart, there is an allocation of \$121.4 billion for wages and salaries. The Hon. Minister said very clearly, pay increases will be announced later. Despite all of this, some of the Hon. Members across the House claim *Budget 2024* has nothing for the ordinary people. They must come out of their sleep. It is time for them to wake up and pee. Our workers' children will continue to benefit from the 'Because We Care' grant, which has been improved by almost 15%. For those with short memories, that grant was heartlessly taken away by the Coalition. Today, together with the uniform allowance, Guyanese children will receive a whopping \$10 billion through this initiative alone. The Government, in the interest of reducing the cost of living, is not levying any taxes on fuel, foregoing a massive \$40 billion in revenues which will go back into people's pockets. Furthermore, the reduction in freight charges for imports significantly contributes to mitigating the rising cost of living while financial support to both the Guyana Power and Light Incorporated (GPL) and Guyana Water Incorporated (GWI) to maintain electricity and water tariffs, respectively, also represents a substantial saving to the working class. Despite the various measures taken to improve the situation, some Hon. Members of the former Coalition have been making reckless and unfounded statements about the budget. It appears they want Guyanese to forget that under the APNU/AFC, the population paid taxes on water, electricity, and even education. It is this Government that showed its commitment to the welfare of the citizens by removing those taxes and ensuring that hard working people can take home more.

Budget 2024 highlighted many bright spots. The sugar industry is one such area. It is heartening to say that since 2020, the industry has risen back to life. It is a far cry from where it was when the APNU/AFC exited Office. To put it bluntly and clearly, the sugar industry was hanging by a thread. The situation had become so terrible that the industry was on the verge of shutting down. What did our Hon. Comrades from Coalition do? Absolutely nothing. They turned a blind eye, stuck their noses, and remained in their ivory towers. They seemed perfectly content with allowing thousands more to go on the breadline. It was clear that they wanted the sugar industry to go, and they were prepared, it seems, by any means necessary. Despite all the havoc they created, some Hon. Members of the Coalition now claim they care about sugar workers and love them. They cared so much that they decided to freeze sugar workers' pay for their

entire term in Office. Their affection was so undying that they sent 7,000 workers home and punished thousands more when they closed the Skeldon Sugar Estate, Rose Hall Sugar Estate, East Demerara Sugar Estate, and the Wales Sugar Estate. Their love was so pure that they decided to slash and remove the sugar workers' benefits. They were so compassionate that they decided to charge the jobless workers to fish in the closed estate canals when they tried to catch fish to help them eat.

The situation is like *day will follow night*. Since 2020, since we took Office, the industry has demonstrated its resilience. In 2023, production expanded, and the sugar target was surpassed. Additionally, I am advised that the industry is expanding the production of packaged, direct consumption sugars, and new lucrative markets are being obtained. Extensive field rehabilitation is also advancing, and more and more lands are being converted to facilitate mechanical operations to improve productivity and reduce costs. A significant feat was the resumption of sugar production at the Rose Hall Sugar Estate, which was devastated after its closure. Thousands of dismissed workers are now rehired and, certainly, under this PPP/Civic Government better days are ahead. *Budget 2024* anticipates that production will rise markedly and further efforts to consolidate the sector will be pursued. The future appears promising, and the attainments of the industry cannot be delinked from the consistent support of the Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali Government. I extend profound appreciation on behalf of the thousands of workers in the sugar belt.

Let me be clear, *Budget 2024* is a huge victory for the working class. It is a step towards a better future for all of us, and we should applaud the Government for its efforts. At the end of these debates, the eyes of all Guyanese will be open for them to judge who really cares for them. On that note, I urge all my fellow Parliamentarians, including those who are not pleased about what they heard and about the sugar industry coming back to life, to support wholeheartedly this budget. It is time we come together and work together towards a brighter future for the nation's people. Thank you, very much, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Ms. Veerasammy: First of all, I would like to congratulate my Colleague and Comrade, Dr. Ashni Singh, Senior Minister in the Office of the President with responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, for presenting *Budget 2024* under the theme: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. Sir, do you see this budget?

[*The Hon. Member displayed a document.*]

This budget is a document that provided us in this august House on 15th January with a comprehensive review of 2023, of our economy. It is a continuation of what we started in 2020 and what is going to continue long after 2025. Sir, *Budget 2024* is a masterpiece, which is the continuation of the People's Progressive Party manifesto, combined with the vision of 'One Guyana' by His Excellency the President, Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali. Gratitude is also extended to the staff of the Ministry of Finance and all governmental agencies for supporting the preparation of this masterpiece. Before I move to my presentation, I want to just touch on two things. One, the Hon. Member, Ms. Nima Flu-Bess, in her closing remarks challenged this PPP/Civic Government to complete projects by the end of 2025. Well, I want to enlighten my friends across there. We are going to plan plans and put mechanisms in place as I said to go longer than 2025. Let me touch on something. You are talking about the completion of projects. When we left this country in 2015, there were several projects on hand – the East Coast highway; the West Coast Demerara Road; there was the Sheriff Street Mandela Avenue Road; and the Ogle to Eccles Road. What did you do? The PPP/C had to come back into Government in 2020 to complete all those projects. You did nothing.

The 2024 Budget focuses on people, the development of our country's infrastructure, the diversification and strengthening of our economy, job creation, building an educated and healthier nation, and ensuring that individuals and families own their own homes and utilities provided to them for an improved standard of living. That is what prosperity is all about. Sir. Because of climate change and oil and gas, Guyana has become part of the global village. The world is watching us grow and develop, yet my Colleagues on the opposite side of this House claim that this budget has nothing for our people. The APNU/AFC is a stranger to the truth and no amount of their distortions of this budget could not change the facts. Our Guyanese sisters and brothers are intelligent people who read, listen and yes, they are social media savvy. The Opposition Members claim that *Budget 2024* was developed with family and friends of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. The Guyanese people are our families and friends. They voted you out of Office. They struggle with us for five months for the restoration of democracy in Guyana.

Sir, do you remember the more than 200 taxes that were imposed on our people? Do you remember the promises of a 'good life for all'? As promised, our PPP/Civic Government removed all those taxes and created conditions to facilitate investments, economic growth and prosperity for our people.

The Opposition has fork tongues. One time it lamented that Guyanese contractors were not allowed to partake in the infrastructural development of this country and now they are saying this budget is for the contracting class. Come on, *y'all mek up y'all minds wa ya'll* want to tell *dis* nation. If *yuh* got nothing good to say, just vote yes for the budget and let us move on with the Government's business. Sir, do you remember the East Coast highway that I mentioned? What do you think happened with these projects? They not only did not complete them, but they increased the cost of each one of these projects, including the Cheddi Jagan International Airport (CJIA). You changed the dimensions and increased the cost. The Opposition must not come to this House and criticise our Government for revolutionising our infrastructure to fit the 21st Century. Between 1964 and 1992, the People's Nation Congress's (PNC's) and APNU's economic track record was an abysmal failure. They destroyed the infrastructure; they destroyed the business class, the education and health facilities; and they bankrupted this economy through their poor management and incompetence.

7.47 p.m.

Sir, since they are a stranger to the truth, please allow me to highlight a few of the measures that were stated in the 2024 Budget. This budget – and this is what I love about it – it focuses on women, it focuses on children, it focuses on the elderly, people living with disability, students, workers, farmers, young people, and, of course, our Indigenous sisters and brothers. This budget is going to put billions of dollars back into the hands of our people in disposable income and this money will be used to stimulate the village economy. I am not versed on oil and gas, but what I know is that fuel is used to generate electricity, which impacts on production and household needs. Our Government removed all excise tax from fuel and brought it down to zero and, again, this is going to put money back into the hands of our people.

The Because We Care school grant – and my memory is not that bad – I remember watching the television and I saw one of the APNU/AFC leaders sitting there talking to this nation, saying the Because We Care programme is not what one calls equal. Why did this person say that? This person said that because, for them, it is a crime for one woman to have five children and one have one child. Well, it is a choice if one person wants to have five children or one child, but that does not determine the reason for them to snatch that grant away from our children. In 2024, 205,000 children will receive a cash grant of \$40,000, plus \$5,000 for school uniform. This will plug \$1 billion into the economy as

disposable income. A further \$1 billion will be allocated to the 205,000 children and 76,000 old age pensioners will get \$3,000 for an eye test and \$15,000 to assist them if they need spectacles. We can have a very long discussion on the plights of our elders in this country, but that will take away all my time.

In 2015, APNU took away the subsidy for water and electricity. Divide that amount by the numbers of pensioners and guess what? They added less than \$1,000 to that figure and paid pensioners \$17,500. You came here, in 2015 to 2020, raise the pension actually by \$4,000 and you are criticising \$36,000 per month, which is a 175% increase between this short span of time. Come on, *yall* get *yall* act together. [An. Hon. Member (Opposition): *Inaudible*]
In 1992, *yall* were paying less than \$200 to people in pension. Do not come and lecture me. I have what you call historical memory.

Social assistance for the vulnerable – in the last three years, a register was created and guess what? Every person who is considered suffering from disability is put on a permanent establishment, so that they do not have to go through the review and they are receiving \$19,000 now. Those very persons were getting \$9,000 in 2020. This is 111% increase over this period of time. We have been experiencing major problems with the National Insurance Scheme. I am not going to talk about the amount of money but what I am going to say is that I am extremely proud of my party and Government for considering the needs of the people and for rectifying the problems with NIS. You had five years and you did not do it.

Women – in this budget I am focusing on the women of this country. I learnt that when you give a woman a fish, she feeds her family. Women between the ages of 21 to 65 will receive \$8,000 to get tested for cervical cancer at any medical facility of their choice. If they are tested positive, then further treatment will be provided. Not only that, in 2022, the Hon. Minister, Dr. Frank Anthony, had made an announcement that the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines would be provided to women up to the age of 45.

The maternal and paediatric hospital at Ogle – over the decades we have always experienced maternal and paediatric deaths. That is soon going to be a thing of the past because specialised care is going to be provided not too far from here, about two miles away, at the Ogle state-of-the-art hospital that is being constructed.

Consecutive PPP/Civic Governments, since 1992, made bold decisions when it came to women's development and

empowerment and positioning them in the decision-making processes of our country at all levels. In 1996, the National Commission on Women (NCW) was established to provide policy guidance to the Minister responsible for women affairs. This commission gave way to the Constitutional Commission on Women and Gender Equality which reports to this very august House. A national policy was developed to guide Government on the socio-economic and political status of women in this country. Between 2003 to 2008, women across Guyana were trained by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) under the theme, *Women's political participation in governance*. This is seen as an upsurge in women's role in grassroot politics at the NDC and village council levels and so on. This training was continued by the Guyana Women's Leadership Institute (GWLI) from 2008 to 2014. The institute took the training programme to every corner in this country and to every single region. Between 2015 to 2020, the Guyana Women's Leadership Institute almost disappeared. Guess what, Sir? When the PPPP/Civic took Government in 2020, the Hon. Dr. Vindhya Persaud re-energised this institution under a theme called, *Women Innovation and Investment Network (WIIN)*, and this institution has trained thousands of women and girls with various skills to allow them to either get a job or to start a small business.

The Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarship seems to be the biggest thing in this House. I will only mention one thing of it. We promised 20,000 scholarships, we surpassed that and it is now 21,442. Guess what, Sir? Fifteen thousand three hundred and sixty-six of those beneficiaries are women. Do you know where this Government policy is going to take women in another decade or so? We are getting right where the vision of the PPP/C wants us, to be part of decisions that will affect our lives, affect the lives of our families, affecting the lives of our villages. A sum of \$4 billion is allocated to continue this programme.

Loan write-off – students across this country are rejoicing. They are rejoicing that this first phase will be implemented this year and, in 2025, education at the University of Guyana will become free. I heard when you said 'Oh is *yall* put money, *yall* started charging students money' you have to examine this in context Mr. Speaker. In 1992...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, in the context of time, you will need an extension.

Ms. Teixeira: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask for five minutes more for my Colleague to conclude her very good presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister Teixeira. Hon. Member, you may continue.

Ms. Veerasammy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 1992, the University of Guyana was a rundown premiere tertiary educational facility – very rundown. A fee had to be charged to boost it up. This was because you know what? The [Inaudible] of this country was so bankrupt that not even the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or World bank was willing to give us any money. That is the stage you left this economy in. [An Hon. Member (Opposition): That is not true.] Is it not true? Go and read your history, young man. Do not lecture me on history. The only person in this room who could lecture me on history is this woman sitting right here, the Hon. Gail Teixeira. Only her I will listen to. She will lecture me and Ms. Pauline together.

In the period that APNU was in Office for five years, you only gave the University of Guyana \$10.1 billion and you come here and is criticising. In the three years, we have given the University of Guyana \$17.4 billion. Public servants' salaries are not just salaries, you give 6%, 7% and 8%, it is a package. When you remove 14% VAT on all these 200 items, you put money back into the hands of families. When you give the cash grant at the end of the year, you put money into the hands of the public servants. When you give an increase at the end of the year that is retroactive to January, you put a lump some money into the hands of the workers. So, do not come here and mislead the public servants into believing that we are doing nothing for them because we are doing a lot more than you have done. What you did? You increased the salary and took it away back like thieves in the night, stealing from the people, the same money that you gave them in 14% VAT.

Mr. Speaker: You cannot associate the Hon... Please withdraw.

Ms. Veerasammy: I withdraw, Sir.

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

Ms. Veerasammy: Part time workers – this is one of the most revolutionary steps that the People's Progressive Party has taken. Women who do not have much of an education or never had an opportunity to complete secondary school can find themselves in the WIIN Programme, learn to use the

computer, learn to do something, find themselves in a job, earn money when the month is up and still spend time with their families. This is what I refer to, a mind-blowing masterpiece of a budget. Sir, do you know what these programmes are doing for the women of this country? Let me remind you. It is allowing women to reclaim their power through financial independence. Fifteen thousand persons were benefitting from this programme last year at the cost of \$6 billion. In 2024, \$10 billion has been allocated for this programme.

Sir, I cannot end my presentation by not commending the Government for continuous support to the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo). I said in this august House already, sugar brought me up and it is dear to my heart. When you callously fired 7,000 workers from the sugar industry, you imposed 200 taxes on them, you also robbed about 30,000 other families that were indirectly benefitting through the markets and other places – the fish vendors and the people who sell clothing and all manner of things. Opening of the Rose Hall Estate is a manifesto promise kept. Sir, 8,100 workers have been re-employed so far by GuySuCo. Sir, because we are anticipating the labour shortage due to the number of things that are happening in the country all over, GuySuCo is moving towards mechanisation. Sir, could you remember the story of rice being private sector business? Well, Sir, it is no longer private sector business; it is Government business, and we will continue to invest heavily in the rice industry to make it viable again. One more point I would like to make and that is, I look forward with great anticipation to the magnificent infrastructural changes that are unfolding before our eyes. I want to see them. I want to live it and I want to enjoy it.

8.02 p.m.

I look forward to the improved conditions of the standard of living for everyone across Guyana. I look forward to today with the same conviction that I had in 1992 when my party in government removed 80% of people from abject poverty to a place where a small margin of people is living in poverty. I believe in the vision of the PPP/C and the energy of this team. I believe we will continue to 'stay the course' and build a prosperous Guyana for all of us to live. Thank you so very much, Sir. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Hon. Members, this is a good time for us to adjourn this evening. Hon. Member, Ms. Teixeira, you have the floor.

ADJOURNMENT**BE IT RESOLVED:**

“That the Assembly is adjourned to 10:00 a.m. on 24th January, 2024.”

[Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance and Government Chief Whip]

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 10, I would like to adjourn to tomorrow at 10.00 a.m. to continue the debate on *Budget 2024*. Tomorrow will be day three of our debate. Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Members. The Assembly stands adjourned to 10.00 a.m. tomorrow.

Adjourned accordingly at 8.03 p.m.