



**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

76TH Sitting

Friday, 26TH January, 2024

**PARLIAMENT OFFICE
HANSARD DIVISION**

The Assembly convened at 10.20 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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(i) MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S PROGRESSIVE PARTY/CIVIC (PPP/C) (38)

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

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+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Speaker**

Senior Ministers (16)

+ Hon. Gail Teixeira, M.P.,
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Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance,
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+ Hon. Dr. Frank C. S. Anthony, M.P.,
Minister of Health,
Ministry of Health,
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+ Hon. Priya D. Manickchand, M.P.,
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+ Hon. Joseph L.F. Hamilton, M.P.,
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Ministry of Labour,
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Hon. Anand Persaud, M.P.,
Minister within the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development,
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Ms. Hermina Gilgeours,
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Parliament Office,
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ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE SPEAKER

Visit by students of the Dolphin Secondary School

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, this morning we have the students of Dolphin Secondary School, located at Broad and Smythe Streets, visiting with us. To you and to the students, it would be remiss of me if I do not give a little history of Dolphin Secondary School. There are at least two Members in this House – students – who went to Dolphin Government School at the same location. Those are the Hon. Member, Dr. Jennifer Westford, and yours truly, in the Chair, Manzoor Nadir.

Opposition Chief Whip [Mr. Jones]: And yours truly, Cmd. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much. Hon. Member and Chief Whip of the Opposition, Mr. Christopher Jones, students. Please indulge me – a little history. Dolphin Government School has been around a long time. Persons like the late former Commissioner Henry Green won a scholarship from Dolphin to go to Queens College (QC). The Bulkans, former Minister, Mr. Ronald Bulkan, went too, and his two brothers before him. We all went to Dolphin Government School together. We have come a really long way. At the time, Dolphin Government School was the catchment for Charlestown, some parts of South Georgetown and Albouystown. At that time, you only went to school if you did not have money to go to a secondary school – your parents paying for that, or QC or Bishops High School – you left school after second form.

In 1965, Charlestown Government Secondary School was opened in October, 1965, to provide students from Carmel Roman Catholic Secondary School, Saint Stephen's Government School and Dolphin Government School with a secondary education. Yours truly did the transition from Dolphin Government School to Secondary and later on. So, please children, cherish these opportunities that you have and make the best use of it. Thank you.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND REPORTS

The following Reports were laid:

Annual Reports of the Law Reform Commission for the years 2021, 2022 and 2023.

[Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs]

Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs [Mr. Nandlall]: Sir, permit me to say for the record that these

reports were late, not because of the fault of the Law Reform Commission. They were sent to me, and I inadvertently omitted to bring them in a timely manner to this Assembly. Thank you, very much, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Attorney General (AG). The humanness in all of us.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

The following Bill was introduced and read the first time:

Fiscal Enactments (Amendment) Bill 2024 – Bill No.2/2024

A Bill intituled:

“An Act to amend the Income Tax Act, the Value-Added Tax Act, the Customs Act, the Natural Resource Fund Act, the External Loans Act and the Public Loan Act.”

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

PUBLIC BUSINESS

GOVERNMENT'S BUSINESS

MOTION

BUDGET SPEECH 2024 – MOTION FOR THE APPROVAL OF THE ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR 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 January 15, 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 and the Public Service]

Assembly resumed budget debate.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we now resume consideration of the Budget Speech 2024, with the presentations of Hon. Members. Today, leading off is the Hon. Deputy Speaker, Dr. Asha Kissoon.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker [Dr. Kissoon]: Thank you. Mr. Speaker. Hon. Speaker, Members of Parliament (MPs), distinguished guests, students, and members of the media, thank you for coming today. Thank you for participating in our budget debate. First of all, I must acknowledge the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and his team for their dedication and the hard work put into this budget. We thank all the public servants and the Ministers' teams. With a profound sense of duty, I stand here today to address this esteemed Assembly on this significant occasion of reviewing Guyana's budget for the fiscal year 2024.

It is both an honour and a responsibility to stand before you as a representative of the people, entrusted with the crucial task of critiquing the financial road map that will shape the destiny of our beloved nation, in the coming year, for the betterment of the people of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana. In this honourable House of democracy, we recognise that a budget is not merely an economic blueprint, it is a social contract that binds us to the aspirations and welfare of our citizens. It is a testament of our commitment to fostering inclusive growth, addressing the needs of the most vulnerable and ensuring a brighter future for all Guyanese. As we embark on this critical discussion, let us reflect on the progress made, acknowledge the challenges ahead and collectively commit ourselves to the principles of transparency, accountability and responsible governance. The budget is not just a compilation of numbers, it is a reflection of our values, priorities and dedication to building a stronger and more resilient Guyana.

Over the last four days, I have sat in this honourable House paying keen attention to all the presentations and

contributions made by my honourable Colleagues. One thing that has stood out to me and to the Guyanese people is that discussions have not been aimed at demonstrating the positives that are being done for the Guyanese people. Instead, what we have been seeing is a show and shows downplay the significance of what has happened here. This is an opportunity for both Government and Opposition to stand up and speak about what will be done for our people for this fiscal year 2024. As a young person here, I am deeply disappointed. I am deeply disappointed at continuously hearing about who has rigged an election. I am deeply disappointed at continuously hearing that the Government does nothing good for the people of Guyana. I am disappointed that the policies are not displayed, and much time is wasted discussing what has happened within inter-party politics, instead of the budget in hand. It is said that a true friend is one who always tells the truth even when it is hard to hear, so allow me to be a friend today to my Colleagues.

10.32 a.m.

First of all, I would like to acknowledge some basic truths that are found in this budget. I will start with the Ministry of Housing and Water. I stand here, honestly and sincerely, saying that I am proud of Minister Rodrigues and Minister Croal for what they have done and demonstrated for the people of Guyana. Thousands of persons have homes and thousands of persons have access to financing for housing. It is a basic need that is met for the people of Guyana – shelter, water and potable water. The tremendous work that is being done at the Guyana Water Incorporation (GWI), it must be acknowledged and politics put aside.

I move to the Ministry of Agriculture. I would like to acknowledge the Minister of Agriculture. Guyana is now the breadbasket of the Caribbean. We as a people are proud. The work has started from the very beginning, and it is being continued. Let us acknowledge that this is a plus for Guyana and for the people of Guyana.

I move on to the income tax threshold. The sum of \$100,000 is the threshold now, benefiting 13,000 Guyanese to more disposable income. These 13,000 persons are grateful. We, as the Guyanese people, acknowledge that this step will benefit these persons. Let me bring it to attention that, in the public system, we have approximately 54,000 public servants. The 13,000 are benefiting from this new threshold, while the difference is 41,000 people who are still subjected to 40% income tax, Pay As You Earn (PAYE). While everybody benefits, this is still one of the highest thresholds

in the Caribbean. I do believe, as a young person standing here, that there is room for improvement. There is room for improvement because, as Guyana progresses, 40% is still very high for us.

I will move on to our pensioners. By definition, a pensioner is an elderly person retired from the workplace. Sixty-five years old in Guyana is our old age pension; the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) at 60; and Government pension at 55. How do we thank our elders? We give them concessions for their water bill, their electricity, and systems are put in place so that they get additional benefits, apart from the pension itself. Under the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Government, the pension was at \$17,000. By a show of hands, can you indicate if this was enough? Anybody? Nobody will raise their hands. Right now, it is at \$36,000. By a show of hands, is this enough for our elderly? Nobody raised their hand still. While there has been an improvement, there is still more room for improvement for our elderly. These are people who have worked their entire lives, and we must thank them. We must acknowledge also that not all pensioners have been government workers. Not all of them will benefit from the NIS pension or Government pension. Most of them only collect the old age pension.

Over the last three years, 21,442 Guyanese were granted scholarships. This is a tremendous positive for Guyana. We must continue to foster academic growth. We must continue to support young people and everybody in the system who wants an education. Right now, \$4 billion has been allocated for the Guyana Online School of Learning (GOAL) scholarships and this gives me profound pride. I sincerely love the fact that more is being invested into education; more is being done for young women; and more is being done for the Guyanese people. Now the question comes, with these scholarships in education being offered, who is the backbone behind it? Our teachers. There are more people to be taught. Our teachers have been compensated with the senior teachers getting duty free concessions, allowances and salary scale increases, but we must acknowledge that the majority of teachers in the system are junior teachers. That is the largest percentage of our educators, who, on average, take home \$90,000 per month. While I appreciate everything that is being done for our teachers, I am suggesting to our Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service that this be revised and our teachers be given more consideration, especially the junior teachers.

I am moving to the health sector. I am a medical doctor in the public health system. I speak not as somebody criticising the Government or the Opposition, but right now, I speak as somebody who is in the system having first-hand experience. The sum of \$129.8 billion has been injected to boost Guyana's health sector. This is a tremendous positive. We see new hospitals being constructed, a tremendous positive; health tourism will improve; cervical cancer screening being done; and school screening being done. The health sector is always one of the most important sectors in this country but let us not be ignorant of the fact that most of our medical professionals are leaving – our nurses and our doctors. I say this from first-hand experience as a doctor with Colleagues who have left. It is not simply because there is better opportunity outside. Most of the times, it is because, when they make a plea for the minimum to be done for them, it is met with deaf ears. I will bring awareness to a small issue. Doctors in the healthcare system work 16-hour shifts, 24-hour shifts, and 26-hour shifts. Could this honourable House even fathom that a doctor is paid \$4,000 for working 16, 24 or 26 hours, which is taxed? Overtime is not paid. I am a doctor in this system. There is no overtime that is paid and that is the rate.

In the public health system, our salaries are not competitive on a level of the Caribbean. The doctors have made continuous pleas for this to be met. We acknowledge that there is much to be done. We say that the health sector's budget is very good, and it will benefit the people, but consideration should be made for the points that I have raised. If there is any question of the validity of what I am saying, any doctor can be contacted, and they would tell you the truth. There is a document submitted from all of the doctors to the Ministry of Health that outlines all of these issues.

Minister of Health [Dr. Anthony]: Mr. Speaker, if I may?

Dr. Kissoon: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, Minister of Health...

Dr. Anthony: Mr. Speaker, I rise under Standing Order 41. I would like to ask the Hon. Member who is speaking if she can layover the evidence... [Interruption]

Dr. Kissoon: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Anthony: ...of all the...

Mr. Speaker: Unfortunately, Minister, standing on a Point of Order to layover does not qualify as a Point of Order. We hear you and we will speak with her.

Dr. Kissoon: Mr. Speaker, standing on truth, I will submit that document from the doctors. I will submit it because I would not stand and lie to this honourable House. I am bringing awareness on what is happening. This is not with an intention to bash the Government. This is not with the intention to bring down what has been done, but this is to bring awareness to what is happening with my colleagues. As I continue, I would like to say that I am truly feeling positive about the 2024 Budget. It is well put together, it is comprehensive, and it does cover all the crucial sectors. Is there room for improvement, Mr. Speaker? Yes, and together perfection is achievable. As we stood united against Venezuela in our border controversy, I believe that we can stand united again in ensuring that all the Guyanese people needs are met with this 2024 Budget.

I cannot reject the 2024 Budget because the truth is, it does benefit the Guyanese people. I will not stand here and reject it, but I do ask for kind consideration that the points I have raised be taken under observance and considered because there is room for improvement. What we are here to do in this honourable House is to bring improvement for the Guyanese people. It is not about bringing fame to my party, to the Opposition, to the Government, to bashing anybody for saying whose party did it better and who rigged an election. It is not about that. It is simply about the Guyanese people, so my voice is giving to them. I support the 2024 Budget and I welcome the improvements that I have suggested. Thank you very much. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Mdm. Deputy. Thank you very much for your contribution. The next person is the Hon. Member, Ms. Catherine Hughes.

Ms. Hughes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good morning all Colleagues in this honourable House, staff of the Government ministries, especially those in the Ministry of Finance who have worked tirelessly to produce these national budgets. Thank you all for your commitment to work and to Guyana.

Citizens of Guyana, here we are once again, another budget. Actually, before I continue, I do want to salute the students who are visiting with us today and those who were here during the last couple of days. I want to give them my utmost regrets. You would not have seen us in this House at

our best and for that I say, sorry. I want to get all that we in this House should be ashamed of out of the way.

10.47 a.m.

On Tuesday of this week, the usual noises that emanated the room when I am speaking, ensured that they hurled the vilest of derogatory remarks at my colleague and friend, Member of Parliament (MP), Ms. Fernandes – a strong Indigenous Guyanese woman who was willing to answer the call to serve her country. Four days later, we had no public apology extended to Ms. Fernandes. I want all Guyana and the world to know that this is now the norm for some Members in this House. This is confirmation of exactly what I am talking about. You know that the *empty vessel makes the most noise* and we must avoid loud and aggressive people. Four days later, as I was saying, we had no public apology extended to Ms. Fernandes. I want all Guyana and the world to know that this is now the norm for some Members in this House. I want to ask this People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) Government, especially the women MPs sitting on that side of the House, did you hear the abuses extended to the Hon. Ms. Fernandes? You are consistent in your silence, and as individuals, you have failed to stand up when it counts and when it comes to speaking out against gender abuse and gender violence in this National Assembly.

This honourable House, at the highest level, has not said no to this. It has not said to all Guyanese women and to the world that this is not what we stand for. The silence from men who have daughters and who should know better has been deafening. But let us keep waiting for the apology. All of this has shaped the deplorable tone in this House which we are seeing in the current performance. This honourable House and, by extension, this nation, has been fed a diet of falsehoods regarding who is to be blamed for the underdevelopment and where we stand in this country. Let us look at the facts. Thirty-two years have passed since 1992 and the so-called return to democracy. Of those 32 years, the current Opposition was in office for only five years. Only three years had elapsed before the no confidence motion of 2018. The Opposition therefore was in office for a mere 16% of the last 31 years and was allowed to govern ostensibly for only three years, 10 % in a society which has always been ethnically divided. Let it be known and let us remind the people of Guyana that for 84% of the last 31 years, the PPP/C has been in Government exclusively and *exclusionarily*.

Let us be honest. This Government has consistently and persistently refused to entertain any discussion involving the

Opposition in the future planning and development of the country. It has effectively closed the door to the involvement and participation of 50% of the country in the governance of the country. The preparation of this budget and all the budgets between 1992 and 2015, and since 2020, have faced this challenge, a dangerous road for any racially divided country to tread. After 26 years out of 31 or 32 years of being in Government, the PPP/C Members on this side of the House still want to blame the Opposition for the lack of progress, the garbage on the streets and the poor Math and English results. It is a fact that not one hinterland school could have gotten a grade 1 in 2020, as posted on the Ministry of Education's website. Now, let us look at those hinterland results. Grade 1 passes for hinterland and riverain communities by year – In 2016, only 2 %, 2017 - 1%, 2018 - 1%, 2019 - 0%, 2020 - 2%, 2021 - 1% and 2022 – 0%.

After 25 years in government and 25 years of responsibility for education in the hinterland, 0% of hinterland students in Guyana and the riverain areas could muster a grade 1 pass, while their compatriots on the coast were boasting 21 and 22 grade ones. If this is not apartheid in education, I do not know what is. My concern is that this budget does nothing to directly impact that challenge. I had hoped that this year, in this budget, there would be a buzz permeating this dear land of Guyana. The excitement of being, as they say, the fastest growing economy in the world, but as I passed the corner of Camp and Church Streets, the two old ladies bent over in pain begging were still on the road – right opposite our premier investment office – Guyana Office for Investment (GO-Invest). Somehow, I thought they would have received support from the previous budgets that would have taken them off of the streets, but here they were. Again, this budget does not help them. The question is, who in Guyana sees them? Continuing along Camp Street, I passed with pride the spanking new St. Rose's High School. Congratulations to the Minister of Education on that and the other schools. I recall the challenging early stages of its development. But as you cast your eyes opposite, any time of the day or night, right opposite the St. Rose's High School, you will see the filth-ridden pieces of cardboard and thinning broken bodies of fellow Guyanese lying, sitting and crying amongst flakes of burnt-out charcoal and pieces of wood strewn together as they create a fire and a pot to eat. Yes, Mr. Speaker, in the new Dubai of Guyana, that Guyana is supposed to be today, who in the PPP/C Government sees them?

On my way home, eight hours later, after the howling and screaming which constituted a budget debate, as we are

hearing now, I lament my weary eyes and damaged ears at the ever-increasing despair. I glanced to the left – the opposite side of La Penitence market – and saw the sea of hopelessness. Those forced to make the concrete pavement a home burst into sight. The nakedness and despair are there for us all to see. I ask the most Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, is this the best that this budget can do for them? Do you see them? Is this how we stay the course and build prosperity for all? It is unfortunate to recall that, yesterday, the Minister of Human Services and Social Security was lamenting that only 35 persons were at the Night Shelter when they entered Government in 2020. Since when is 100% increase in the occupants at the Night Shelter something to celebrate? Only in Guyana under the PPP/C would we celebrate an increase in homelessness that drives our citizens to a night shelter.

The crux of the matter, as they would say, and my concerns regarding *Budget 2024* are all of these things. It is not the infantile allegations that we on this side of the House do not want development, do not want process, do not want schools with good teachers for our precious children or do not want nurses when we go to the hospital. Why would that be? We live here. This is our country too. This is our home too. The issue is balance. It is about inclusivity. It is about ensuring that everyone – the long established private sector business, the fledgling small business woman, the poor, those that Guyana have failed to educate decades ago, the youth teeming with excitement and a zest for life, the University of Guyana (UG) student, those unfortunately living with a chronic, physical or mental disability... This budget is about all of them, about all of us and about everyone being guaranteed a piece in this fastest growing economy Dubai-style pie that we profess to be baking. The allocations in this budget do not address these grave concerns and that is the problem. This 2024 Budget is best described as increasing poverty. It is a shameless and disgraceful allocation of Guyana's ...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. MP, I allowed the first one to pass.

Ms. Hughes: My apologies, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: But you have given me a double here. *Bom Bom.*

Ms. Hughes: My apologies, Mr. Speaker. I withdraw. It is an unfortunate allocation of Guyana's patrimony to the kith and kin of the PPP/C elite, primarily to contractors that support the PPP/C. In this sand and stone budget, as

mentioned by my colleague, Mr. Ramjattan, it is clear... I say sand and stone because there is no care, there is no feeling and there is no consideration, and it has a particular bias against the poor and working class. Let me turn to the flawed, convoluted and lopsided budget. There are multiple areas that stun rational reasoning. Here are a few of them. These are the things that terrorise the minds of the poor, the working class, and the elderly.

A budget of \$1.15 trillion with \$2.7 billion allocated for 76,000 pensioners that includes a paltry \$3,000 increase for each pensioner. The 76,000 pensioners make up approximately 10.5% of Guyana's population. The 2024 Budget is a 46.6% increase over the 2023 Budget and Real GDP growth is projected at 34.3% in 2024. Yet, this Administration brazenly allocated a 9% increase or \$3,000. The increase in the income tax threshold from \$85,000 to \$100,000, which is supposed to benefit 13,000 workers, certainly does not benefit the tens of thousands of Guyanese who work for less than \$85,000 per month. There is \$666 billion in infrastructure allocation or \$85,000 of the \$1.15 trillion budget is the most direct form of wealth transfer to the high-income supporters of the PPP/C Administration.

While PPP/C Ministers get increases of over \$200,000 per month, Guyanese earning \$100,000 per month get a \$6,500 increase. It is a repressive, regressive and a repulsive situation, where standard percentage increases are used to expand the wealth gap. The 2024 pro-poverty voucher budget allocates \$3,000 eye care vouchers for schoolchildren, \$15,000 spectacle voucher for the general public and \$8,000 voucher for cervical cancer. These measures are good. The \$662 billion infrastructure construction transfer is now supplemented with billions for private hospitals primarily owned by friends of the PPP/C. It is of concern that women over 65 years of age are not eligible for the cervical cancer voucher. It seems as if the intellectual scientists in the PPP/C have discovered that women over 65 cannot be diagnosed with cervical cancer. Children who are poor, too poor to go to school, are seemingly ineligible for the eye care voucher.

11.02 a.m.

According to Hon. Minister Indar, \$204 billion has been set aside for roads and bridges for every community, with over 4,000 community roads – all of them, all the highways, byways and bridges we are building. Suffice to say, these are statements with tragic comedic elements. Included in the boil and fry budget, Hon. Mr. Singh removed Value Added Taxes (VAT) and duties from fire extinguishers, smoke

alarms and sports equipment and then went on to downgrade and twist the meaning of technology as cell phone accessories such as chargers, charging cables and headphones along with components for repairs. This is the full extent of his VAT reduction policy. Value-added tax is the most suffocating tax on the poor, which was introduced by the PPP/C, and not surprisingly, little is done by the PPP/C Administration to deal with VAT in this pro-poverty budget.

The public assistance increased from \$16,000 to \$19,000 does not provide information on the approximate recipients of the minuscule \$3,000 increase. Whenever the PPP/C Administration is thinking of providing for the poor, they seem to think that \$3,000 or US\$14 per month is more than enough for those who are impoverished.

This is a different time for Guyana and that is why this budget is so sad. After all of our trials and tribulations as a nation and as a country, we finally have the financial resources to do better. The question is, will we? My beef with this 2024 Budget is that given it is \$1.41 trillion, too little, the accountant said just over 1%, is directly reaching the pockets of most of our population. For too many Guyanese, life is still a struggle to put food on the table and to find shelter for their children. Who chooses to squat on land? Who chooses to sleep on the streets? When we bulldoze their homes and shacks, where do they go? These are the real issues for which *Budget 2024* provides no real, transformational solutions. These are the real issues that this Government and this budget, at this time, must address. How to decide on the right balance between investments in infrastructure and more in people's pockets? It is tough decisions on what to put in and what to leave out, and with all due respect to this Government, this cannot be achieved when you publicly state your government's policy is not to include the Opposition and key civil society groups in the decision-making process.

The photograph of the four male musketeers huddled around discussing our future just does not cut it. Some of us may be more qualified, some may be just as qualified and some may be less qualified, but the inclusive democracy, which our Constitution in article 13 demands that we establish, must involve all – government, opposition, private and public sector, civil society, youths, the pensioners, and all Guyanese – if we want to develop a strong, secure foundation. This country belongs to us all. A few days ago, several of the Ministers ranted about the constitutional violations that plague our society. I, too, want to raise the grave omissions in this area, which I had hoped would

receive allocations in this budget. The *Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana*, article 154A, entitles every citizen to the human rights enshrined in the international treaties:

“...such rights shall be respected and upheld by the executive, legislature, judiciary and all organs and agencies of Government...”

We Guyanese can access these rights and protections internationally, as enshrined under the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women, to which Guyana is the signatory. Unfortunately, these rights can only be enforced in Guyana if our Human Rights Commission is established, as required under our Constitution. This Government, although lauding and upholding all the tenets of our Constitution, has consistently and conveniently refused to establish the Human Rights Commission. For the purposes of sharing information on this Convention, I quote Article 1:

“...violence against women shall be understood as any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or the private sphere.”

The incidence of gender-based violence that plagues Guyanese society, and worse, what took place most recently, just a few days ago, right here in this honourable House, is testimony to the urgency to correct this omission. I have recently instituted legal proceedings to try and help to force the establishment of the Human Rights Commission and to raise consciousness about this grave omission. That is not all, Mr. Speaker. [*Interruption*] I am happy that I have gotten this strong, positive outburst and reaction. This is just one example of the budget's failure to fund key national institutions, mandated by a constitution that will safeguard and protect the rights of all citizens. My colleague, Hon. Mr. Jones, provided us with a comprehensive list of similar failures and omissions. So, unfortunately, we see no funds for the Petroleum Commission. Please correct me, Mr. Attorney General or anyone, if I am incorrect in that. I am happy that we do see a \$238 million allocation that hopefully will bring into being the tribunal that governs the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) so it can be more effective.

Here is the PPP/C saying it is committed to the principles of transparency and accountability, but yet, four years later, you have failed to breathe life into these key institutions. Let us face the facts. If the Petroleum Commission was established,

we would not have had the nightmare in which one man could take the decision to deprive the citizens of Guyana by moving ExxonMobil Guyana's indebtedness from US\$214 million to US\$3 million under the recent audit fiasco. This is precisely why all of these outstanding institutions must be established. If we had a full-level audit department and a fully staffed, highly technical accounting department as part of a Petroleum Commission, this would not have happened. With institutional checks and balances, one man would not have been in the position to make this mistake.

Energy and gas-to-shore project: Yes, we need cheap energy, but how can you wake up one day and say you need a gas-to-energy project with no report from any of your national institutions to the Opposition MPs saying this is the feasibility study, these are the pros and cons, and this is the cost? How do we have a rational debate in the country, when the country does not have the capacity to research and assess most of the costs associated with our oil and gas industry? Mr. Speaker, ExxonMobil Guyana has stated that they will spend US\$1 billion on onshore and offshore pipelines, while the government has contracted a US-based company to build out a facility at Wales for US\$759 million, a cost of US\$1.8 billion, all without a secure source of financing and no study or plan. Talk about burdening future generations of Guyanese, while the threat of devouring our national resource funds remain a real possibility if the sourcing for finances for this project falls through or cannot be found. What makes this worse is that the gas to shore is now more expensive than hydropower in the long run, and this is where the requisite studies would have highlighted this. Here, we are not talking about Amaila Falls, which has a non-expandable catchment area, hence no possibility of increased capacity, but the potential of the Upper Mazaruni, which starts at 750 megawatts scalable to 1.2 gigawatts. Comparative feasibility studies must be the most prudent approach to determine our energy supply for the future.

National development: Of primary concern with any budget, much less a trillion-dollar budget, must be the attention it pays to strategic planning and meeting our national development needs. This is where we hoped we would have seen greater matchmaking and policies and plans reflected in the budget. We in the APNU/AFC have articulated this concern and it is sad that this Government has assumed that our concerns are solely of a political nature. This is best seen in the allocation of \$4.1 billion to the University of Guyana and \$4 billion to the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) programme.

Mr. Speaker, let me explain carefully why I say this and actually say that I support education, I support and congratulate everyone who is participating and undergoing training under the GOAL programme and also at the University of Guyana. Here is what I want you to consider. The University of Guyana is faced with real costs – building infrastructure, maintenance, wages, salaries for lecturers, administrative staff, research and development and other key expenditures. Contrast this with \$4 billion for the GOAL programme, which is primarily based on information in the public domain, a virtually based online programme without the heavy burden of massive physical infrastructure and focused on inter-general international courses. [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] And yes, that is the other point. We, at this stage in our development, should be promoting funding for training that directly impacts our country.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, at this stage of your presentation, we will have to get an extension for you to conclude.

Ms. Hughes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Speaker: You do move or are you asking?

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Opposition Chief Whip. Hon. MP, you may start from now.

Ms. Hughes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Matching our human resource needs that are required to drive the oil and gas industry must be our priority and therefore the more that we can encourage training and development in areas that impact us.... Research and development, for example. We are unique. We are below sea level. Departments that deal with drainage and irrigation must be well financed so that when we are building roads and sea defences, we must know how it is going to impact on our unique peculiarities. What seems to have been lacking in the last few years is the national development plan, in which this and previous budgets sit, or the articulation of the development plan, if it does exist. Not the manifesto of a political party. I am talking about a real national development plan that everyone in the country can follow and support.

Mr. Speaker, I am proud and happy about the developments in the tourism industry, and I compliment the private sector, I compliment previous Ministers of Government, and I compliment the current Minister of Tourism, Industry and Commerce on some of the key developments that have taken place.

11.17 a.m.

Guyana, over the last two decades, has worked together to ensure we have a good tourism product. I, however, find it unacceptable that the Minister, after close to two years, has not been able to institute the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) board as yet. We hear a lot of bantering about British Airways (BA). I just want to say that in 2015, we went to the World Travel Market with an aviation expert who was contracted by the APNU/AFC Government. We met with BA, as it should be. All of us are a part of the process. One may start the race, but it is up for the country to make sure that somebody completes it. I know I am out of time, but I certainly want to mention to the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service that there are some key criticisms affecting the tourism industry that are still outstanding. The concession for 4x4 and Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) duty-free vehicles are actually now a requirement, not a luxury, to transport visitors in our hinterland areas.

I have received reports that there is a challenge with persons who have to apply for a visa if they are not in an area where there is a foreign affairs representative. Believe it or not, to apply for a visa to visit Guyana, they also have to have a medical and they have to respond and send a phone call to a government office to a number that is often not answered. I know of individuals who have not been able to get their licences in time. [An. Hon. Member: *(inaudible)*] I think you need to check, and you will realise that for tourism there are some specific requirements.

As I conclude, these are some of the recommendations. I am happy that the Hon. Prime Minister and his Ministry are continuing with some of the positive things in the telecommunication sector, including the development of... I want to mention that we are part of that process. I was very proud to facilitate the subsea cable to ExxonMobil Guyana and also to E-Networks. When I heard about the celebration with regard to Mr. Shamar Joseph on display last week in Australia and when I read...in the backwaters of Baracara, I was happy and proud that the first time Baracara got internet access was in 2018 under our Information and Communications Technology (ICT) access programme. It is

time to wrap up. This budget process is testimony, unfortunately, to our failings. For the many long hours and valid recommendations, we no longer possess the capacity to sit around a table and ensure that all views, all hopes, and all aspirations of all Guyanese are reflected in the future that we must build collectively. It is my hope that better will come. Thank you. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Like you, let us all recognise the efforts of the young man, Mr. Shamar Joseph. The Hon. Attorney General (AG) and Minister of Legal Affairs is our next presenter. I now invite the Hon. Mohabir Anil Nandlall to make his contribution.

Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs [Mr. Nandlall]: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to begin by welcoming the students who have joined us this morning. The occasion is now mine to offer my contributions to this debate. I want to begin, like so many of those who preceded me, by commending and complimenting astute and erudite, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh and his competent staff at the Ministry of Finance and, indeed, the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government for preparing and presenting the largest budget in our country's history – \$1.146 trillion.

Most importantly, it has been said before, but it is worth repeating, this budget is financed without a single dollar of increase in any taxes and without the imposition of a single new tax. It will be the largest singular injection of money in the economy of this country in our country's history. The trickle-down impact from top to bottom in one financial year will be phenomenal. This is only Government spending. Just imagine when you add inflows from foreign and local investments and the local private sector. The impact will be unprecedented. This singular budget is as large as the combined five budgets passed by the APNU/AFC from 2015 to 2018. Those five budgets, however, imposed an aggregate of over 200 new taxes and fees on the backs of the Guyanese people. Worse yet, after five budgets exceeding an aggregate of over \$1.3 trillion, there is simply nothing of worth that one can point to show for it. This simple and simplistic comparison demonstrates the difference in the philosophy and track records of the two governments.

I could stand here and actually point to projects that are being financed by this budget that the people of Guyana can see and feel. I could stand here and point to a new Demerara Harbour Bridge under construction. I could point to a gas to shore project under construction. I could point to the Cheddi Jagan International Airport (CJIA) under construction. I

could point to the Albion Sugar Estate which was converted from a scrap yard to a grinding factory. I could point to 12 hospitals under construction. I could point to a dozen schools under construction. I could point to a new technical institute at Port Mourant under construction. I could point to dozens of housing schemes under construction. I could point to several courthouses under construction. I could point to several water treatment plants across the country under construction. I could point to dozens of major highways and thousands of community roads under construction. I could point to multimillion-dollar complexes, which will accommodate our police officers, under construction. I could point to new buildings, which will house our elderly and victims of domestic violence, under construction. I could point to several stadia under construction. I could point to hundreds of sports grounds under rehabilitation and construction. I could point to tens of thousands of acres of land under new cultivation with new crops now taking place. I could point to 21,000 Guyanese who have been enrolled in GOAL scholarship programmes. I could point to 205,000 children who will receive a \$40,000 cash grant and a \$5,000 uniform voucher.

I could point to 76,000 pensioners who will receive a \$3,000 per month increase. I could point to 205,000 school children and 76,000 pensioners who are eligible for subsidies to get their eyes examined and \$15,000 to get spectacles purchased. I could point to thousands of pensioners who will get an increase in their National Insurance Scheme (NIS) pension of \$8,000. I could point to \$40 billion that will go towards subsidising fuel so that people's light bills will not go up and they will get cheaper fuel at the gas stations. I could point to \$6 billion that will subsidise the cost of freight charges for imported goods. I could point to tens of thousands of persons who will benefit from an income tax threshold. I could point to thousands of young business persons who will be able to open their businesses and get loans at 3% per annum. I could point to nearly 20,000 women and unemployed persons who will get part-time jobs and earn \$40,000 a month. I could point to several hundred persons who will receive \$600,000 towards the payment for dialysis treatment. I could speak here from now until thy kingdom listing those benefits that will touch and improve the lives of every single Guyanese. Yet, you on that side say nothing is right about the budget. That is what we are doing with \$1.146 trillion.

What did you do with \$1.3 trillion in five years? Let us review a couple of the projects. One is D'Urban Park. I checked it this morning. It accommodates 12 donkeys, 10

horses and 13 vagrants. You spent over \$2 billion to build it and \$600 million cannot be accounted for. I went to the roundabout at Vlissingen Road, a massive project and transformational project. It is a concrete circle at the head of Vlissingen Road. I could point to three pedestrian overpasses on the East Bank Demerara (EBD), none of which is working.

[**Dr. Singh:** The elevators never worked.] Never worked. That is on the capital side.

[**An Hon. Member (Government):** (*Inaudible*)] They did not build the arch. It was ANSA McAL that built the arch. I was going to give them the arch and I took it back. It was ANSA McAL that built the arch for them. Let us go to the current side. I could point to the several ministers who gifted themselves scholarships. It is a statement of fact. I do not know why you get upset. A total of \$50 million in scholarships you gave yourselves. Then, I could point to millions of dollars paid for motion scales that were never delivered. I could point to \$12 million which was being paid to a crony as monthly rent for a house in Albouystown to store drugs. When we went there, only condoms and lubricants were there.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. AG, I had to refer to a particular legal principle in relation to when we are identifying these so-called unnamed people. So, please, I am just cautioning.

Mr. Nandlall: Yes, Sir. I could point to hundreds of transactions where prime waterfront and commercial properties were gifted to friends and cronies without a public process, and in many instances, where a dollar was not even paid. Many of these transactions were done after you had lost a no-confidence motion and had lost the government. I could point to a parking meter contract for which the Government of Guyana is being sued for US\$100 million. I could point to a minister who gifted herself contracts from her own ministry but came here this morning to lecture us sanctimoniously. I could point to several ministers whose applications for house lots leapfrogged over thousands of ordinary Guyanese who were waiting in line. The Hon. Mahipaul got a house lot without a government being in place. He got a house lot on 3rd August. Only the President and three ministers were sworn in. There was no Minister of Housing and he got a house lot on 3rd August. These are facts. I could point to nearly \$200 million being paid for a feasibility study to be done in relation to the new Demerara Harbour Bridge. It is \$200 million.

11.32 a.m.

This contract was gifted, by the sitting Minister, to a foreign company, with no reference to the public procurement

process; Cabinet was not even involved, only *ex post facto* it came to the attention of Cabinet.

The Hon. Member Mr. Roysdale Forde drew my attention to the Law Reform Commission (LRC), and I want to thank him because the Law Reform Commission Act was passed in 2016 and in 2017 they rented an office at 59 Robb Street, Bourda, for \$850,000 per month. An entire secretariat was hired including lawyers, clerks, typist, office assistant, a cleaner and a driver totalling \$2 million in salaries alone per month. They left office in 2020; they chalked up \$100 million in expenses and rent leaving out furnishings, leaving out electricity, leaving out internet, leaving out telephone; they have chalked up \$100 million by 2020 and they never appointed a Law Reform Commission. A Law Reform Commission was appointed by us in 2021. I could go on. These are selected... [Mr. Ramson: What about SARA?] Do not even let me touch the State Assets Recovery Agency (SARA), it would take me all my time.

Mr. Speaker, for this Budget debate I come at the lower end, and I come from a particular vantage point. Having listened to nearly 60 speakers presenting, 30 from this side and 30 from the other side, this Budget debate, perhaps more than anything else, establishes and illustrates the great divide between a Government and a misplaced Opposition, a difference in leadership, a difference in depth, a difference in vision, a difference in competence and a difference in track record. There is simply no comparison whatsoever. I do not want to leave our schoolchildren in doubt when I make those statements. So, like a lawyer, I will give my evidence to support. We on this side are speaking about universal secondary education for our children. We have said to this Parliament that 7,000 of our hinterland students, in particular those whom we are told cannot pass the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC)... They do not know why 7,000 of them do not have seats in a secondary school. In this Budget, we are building the secondary schools for our children, but the Hon. Ms. Coretta McDonald says we are building too many schools. Do you see the difference? Do you see the vision? We are building and modernising the infrastructure across our country; we are building a modern Guyana, but the Hon. Mr. Khemraj Ramjattan complains about how much money contractors will make, and he argues that we are creating a new caste system. Do you see the difference? Do you see how visionary people think and do you see how they are being pulled down by the other side?

I will continue. We are speaking about building a world-class healthcare system and building 12 hospitals across the

country but the Hon. Mr. Vinceroy Jordan complains that the hospital that is being built at Bath Settlement in Region 5 is actually being built at Fort Wellington. He is not concerned that Region 5 is getting a brand-new hospital and that the people will benefit, he is worried that they have up the wrong sign board – the signboard states Bath Settlement but the construction is actually at Fort Wellington. That is the difference between us and those on the other side. [Mr.

Ramson: (Inaudible)] I am coming to the Hon. Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports. The Hon. Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports stood here and told us of building five stadia across the country and refurbishing 350 sports grounds and the Hon. Ms. Flue Bess stood there and expressed deep worry that a dancing class at the Cultural Centre was cancelled. Check the *Hansard* and you will see that I am correct.

The entire world is impressed with our oil and gas sector. The international indicators have ruled that we have the 10th fastest growing economy largely because of that sector. The young Mr. Shurwayne Holder stood there and he said the oil and gas sector in this country is in turmoil and moved on. The gentlemen made that profound pronouncement and moved on to Region 2. That is the level of this debate; that is the difference. While we are modernising the entire judiciary and building court houses across the country, and we have recognisably the most active legislative agenda in the entire Caribbean, the Hon. Mr. Roysdale Forde is worried that he has not heard anything from the Law Reform Commission. He is worried about that, and I will continue. We have distributed 30,000 house lots from August, 2020, to now, and in this year we will deliver 10,000 more. At La Bonne Intention (LBI), we are doing 1,000 house lots with 450 houses for young professionals, but the Hon. Annette Ferguson complains to us bitterly that the east side is moving quicker than the west side at LBI. The east side of the housing scheme is building quicker than the west side, and she brings two pictures to show us.

My colleague, the Hon. Minister of Agriculture, is working hard with the rest of the Government and we are preparing Guyana to be a regional food hub. We are preparing this country for regional and global food security; that is our vision. The Hon. Mr. Vinceroy Jordan complains, lambasting the Minister that one black belly sheep barren and two black giant fowls *nah* lay; that is the level of presentation that they have brought to this House. I can go on. I am not making up these things. You know you can stop me if anything is a lie. I am not going to... but let us continue, Mr. Speaker. I hope that I have demonstrated

vividly to the people of the country that those on that side are completely unfit and unqualified to come anywhere close to a government. Apart from the substandard quality of the presentation from the other side, a lot of misinformation has been peddled which must not be left on the record without a response and, in some cases, a repudiation.

The Hon. Ms. Coretta McDonald, speaking about the Mahdia dormitory (dorm) fire, invoked the Westminster convention of ministerial responsibility calling for the resignation of the subject minister. An independent Commission of Inquiry was commissioned by His Excellency the President, and that Commission absolved the Minister from blame, and that is the national, formal record of this country. But that is not the point I want to make. I want to make the point that in a country like ours, though we inherited our legal system from England, our written Constitution has replaced British conventions. Those conventions are therefore not applicable to countries with a written constitution, and our Constitution is our supreme law and it must be obeyed. Article 106 of our Constitution provides in very clear and unequivocal language that when a Government is defeated by a no-confidence motion the president, including the cabinet, must resign and hold elections within three months. The Coalition Government, you on that side were defeated by a no-confidence motion on the 22nd December, 2018, but squatted in office, even after you lost an election, until the 2nd August, 2020. Do not bother with British conventions, just obey our Constitution. Do not try a veneer of sophistication, obey the laws of the land. Rather than resign within three months, in compliance with the Constitution, they ran to the court and presented the most clumsy argument ever heard to the British Commonwealth of Nations (Commonwealth) that 33 is not a majority of 65. The students from Dolphin Secondary School I am sure are doing fractions and percentages and they must know that 33 is a majority, one of the several majorities, of a total sum of 65. Those on that side did not know that.

We had the Hon. Mr. Roysdale Forde and the Hon. Mr. Christopher Jones and the Hon. Mr. Sherod Duncan delivering to us sermons on democracy, the rule of law, and constitutionality. Mr. Jones quoted adeptly from a United Nations document on democracy, but he obviously omitted to share with us the part of the document that must have said that when you lose an election you have to demit office. He omitted to share that part with us. When they lost the 2020 Elections, they tried repeatedly to rig it in the Ashmin's building and they failed. They then tried to rig it at the Elections Commission's (GECOM's) headquarters and they

failed; then they tried to rig it in this very Conference Centre and failed; then they tried in the court and they failed; for five long months they tried and tried, and they failed and they failed; and in the end, the ballots of the people prevailed. Even when they left Office, they went with two petitions to the court and they tried and tried, and they failed and they failed, and the rule of law prevailed.

Mr. Speaker, they are lecturing us on constitutionality. The Hon. Ms. Catherine Hughes seems to think that Article 154 that provides for the establishment of a Human Rights Commission is a new invention. She does not know that provision was there since 2000, and they were in Government from 2015 to 2020. Why did you not install it or implement it? Why? That is the double standard for which the Guyanese people will judge them harshly. She stood there and the Hon. Member spoke about inclusivity in budgets. They passed, in four years, five budgets. They want to be consulted. You were in Government, you passed five budgets, had you ever invited us to a single budget consultation? I was here, we were never invited to a single budget consultation. They want to speak about constitutionality. How can the people of Guyana forget when the judiciary declared that President Granger violated the Constitution when he directed the Public Service Commission and the Police Service Commission (PSC) to halt the promotion of public servants and police officers? How can the people of Guyana forget when the judiciary declared that President Granger violated the Constitution when he revoked 50 leases for rice farmers in Region 5? How can the people of Guyana forget when the judiciary declared that President Granger violated the Constitution when he terminated the lease of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre.

11.47 a.m.

How can the people of Guyana forget when the judiciary declared that President Granger violated the Constitution by rejecting 18 nominees of the Leader of the Opposition and unilaterally appointed Mr. James Patterson as the Chairman of GECOM? You come here to lecture us on unconstitutionality. In that lecture mode, we heard about parliamentary conduct. We heard they have now become the standard bearers of parliamentary morality and decorum in the National Assembly. Who can forget the night of the 29th December, 2021, when we were debating that Natural Resource Fund Bill? The Hon. Members on that side – the moral police, as they want to be now – ignored every one of your admonitions repeatedly, when you told them to take their seats, and they descended into the rotunda of the

National Assembly, and they wined, and they danced, and they gyrated, and they blew whistles, and they sang, and they did it for the world to see. [Mr. Ramson: And stole the Mace.] Not being satisfied with that kind of riotous conduct, they then charged towards the Mace, broke it and ran away with it dragging a staff of this Parliament along the floor and calling him a House slave. That is on national television. If that was not enough, they then rushed to the court to seek a probation, an imprimatur. The court dismissed their case, chased them out of the court and fined them costs in several thousands of dollars. Guyanese across the globe and Guyanese across the country have seen that. They have seen those performances, and do you know what they have said? Shame, shame, never the APNU/AFC again.

Mr. Speaker: You have been doing extremely good.

Ms. Ferguson: You cannot use the word, shame.

Mr. Nandlall: *Oh, yuh* cannot use, shame.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. Nandlall: Terrible, terrible. The rule of law and an independent, competent judiciary are the foundations upon which modern society rests. No nation has economically progressed, and no people have socially advanced without these prerequisites. Our Government is acutely aware of this reality, and we are assiduously working to create a modern legislative framework and strong legal institutions and systems, in order to ensure the achievements of these imperatives. Most of the transformational policies and projects that we are embarking upon require a modern legislative framework to cradle, embrace, and regulate them. Therefore, we are compelled to pursue a most robust legislative agenda to support these initiatives.

Our Constitution is the most paramount and fundamental of our legal instruments. It establishes the philosophical ideals, the economic basis, and the political framework through which we function and by which we are governed. We promised in our Manifesto that we would reform this Constitution. We promised to do so through an established mechanism, that mechanism has been established and it is currently being activated. We have already passed the Constitution Reform Commission Act and we have dispatched letters inviting persons who are listed in that Act to send nominees. We have invited them to do so. Very shortly, His Excellency the President will appoint that Commission. Before the first quarter of this year, we will conclude the revision of the laws of Guyana. We were

supposed to do so by the end of last year, but the volume of the work was huge, and the contractors asked for an extension of time. Within the first quarter of this year, we will publish the new laws of Guyana. Also, before the first quarter of this year, we will publish the Guyana Law Reports for the years 2008 to 2020.

We are building a new building for the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) at Onderneeming, Region 2. That is to be completed and commissioned later this year. That building will constitute an office complex and residential quarters for our officers from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions when they go to prosecute cases on the Essequibo Coast. At Suddie, we are building a new edifice that will house the Deeds and Commercial Registries Authority in Region 2. Approximately \$800 million has been budgeted in 2024 for a new Deeds and Commercial Registries Authority building to be constructed at Esplanade in New Amsterdam. Currently, the operations of the Deeds and Commercial Registries are at a cramped location, sharing with the staff of the High Court Registry in Berbice. These are very unsanitary and inconvenient arrangements. We are going to change that. This year, the Land Registry will be removed from its current location and will go to a different location that will be more spacious and comfortable to discharge its function. This year also, the year 2025, we will conclude arrangements for the construction of a new headquarters for the Deeds and Commercial Registries in Georgetown.

This year, also, the Government of Guyana will donate a portion of land that will accommodate a building for the Guyana Legal Aid Clinic. That plot of land is at Providence on the East Bank of Demerara. This year, we already commissioned the new Hope and Justice Centre at Lusignan, and one will be constructed at Vergenoegen on the East Bank of Essequibo. This is a joint effort – as you would have heard before – between the Ministry of Legal Affairs and the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. It will provide a unique combination of services never provided in this country before. You will have social and counselling services. You will have legal services. You will have medical services. You will have police protection. You will have restorative justice services, and you will have accommodations. The persons we are providing all these services for are the victims of domestic violence, the victims of trafficking, the victims of sexual violence and the victims of child labour – the most vulnerable part of our society. We do not come here to speak about who is living on cardboard and who is not. We are building facilities to accommodate

them. In particular, if there is one bias that we have in this Government, it is towards the vulnerable in our society.

The Judicial Service Commission has been appointed. This year, appointments are going to be made. Six Justices of Appeal will be appointed; nine puisne Judges will be appointed to the High Court; two Commissioners of Title will be appointed; and 10 Magistrates will be appointed. This brings the total number of Magistrates to 29. New posts have also been created to accommodate the large intake of cases.

On the 16th August, 2023 a \$263 million Magistrates' Court was commissioned at Vigilance on the East Coast of Demerara. On the 18th August, 2023, the sod was turned for the construction of a \$303.9 million Magistrates' Court at Timehri on the East Bank of Demerara. For the first time in the history of our country, a court will be constructed at Timehri on the East Bank of Demerara. On the 21st August, 2023, the sod was turned for the construction of a new \$388.8 million Magistrates' Court at Friendship on the East Bank of Demerara. Again, for the first time in the history of our country, a court is being established at Friendship on the East Bank of Demerara. On the 2nd October, 2023, the sod was turned for the construction of \$178.2 million Magistrates' Court at Anna Regina, Region 2. We have established, also, a Drug Treatment Court (DTC) in this country for the first time. On the 6th December, 2023, a pilot case management system was launched for the Magistrates' Court system. Once that pilot works, then we will have electronic- (e-)filing and e-case management across the Magistrates' Courts of our country. That will bring speed, modernity, and a revolution to that sector.

We are reviewing and strengthening our criminal justice system. We are working on a number of important initiatives. Sentencing guidelines – you would have heard a lot of public commentary about the type and varying sentences handed down by our legal tribunals. These sentencing guidelines are expected to bring uniformity and consistency in that regard. We will review the Sexual Offences Act. We will have new legislation that will provide for the trial of certain criminal matters by a judge only, without a jury. We are drafting a completely new Evidence Act. Our Evidence Act is an 1898 legislation. With all the transformation taking place, that Act simply cannot govern the evidential tapestry of our jurisprudence anymore.

This year, we will unfold the Restorative Justice Project in a real way. I held discussions with my distinguished colleague, my sister, the Hon. Dr. Vindya Persaud, and we are going to

twin the Restorative Justice Project with the Probation and Social Services Department. Probation and Social Services Departments are already located across every magisterial district in the country. They have their own facilities, they have their own edifices, and they also have an integrated and harmonious systematic relationship with the judiciary. If we can take advantage of that established infrastructure and just add the Restorative Justice Officers to it, then we will kick start a Restorative Justice Project in a real way. There are so many other important things that I have to speak about. We have performed well in our assessment in relation to Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT). We have dozens of new bills that we are working on. We have to improve and modernise our corporate structure. We have to build the legal capability to provide that crucial role as the breadbasket of the Caribbean. We are working on legislation to improve our agriculture sector and our capacity to export food.

I want to conclude by saying to this National Assembly that this Budget of 2024 is yet another instalment of our plan to create a modern Guyana and to make the Guyanese citizens first-class citizens of this world. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs. Hon. Members, a teacher at the Dolphin Secondary School... A bird whispered to me that a particular young lady was the May Queen of Dolphin Government School. At this very moment, she is performing the duties of President of Guyana. You really have a lot to live up to. The Hon. Ms. Teixeira, performing the duties, was the May Queen of Dolphin Government School. Thank you, Hon. Members.

12.02 p.m.

Hon. Members, this is a good time to take the suspension to about 1.15 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.02 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 1.49 p.m.

Hon. Members, please be seated. Thank you, Hon. Members. My apologies for this long break. I first had a visit by former Speaker, Mr. Raphael Trotman. I want to bring your attention to his latest book, *Parliament in the Republic of Guyana, Second Edition*. It is going to be in our library from Monday. I have not had the opportunity of seeing what it covers but I know it is going to be excellent reading. Mr. Trotman also walked with another very good friend of mine,

Justice Donald Trotman, with whom I go back over 40 years, including fighting for human rights in the Republic of Nicaragua in the 1980s. This afternoon, we welcome the 6th Formers of the Marian Academy and their teachers. We start this afternoon with our long-standing Member of Parliament (MP), former Minister, Hon. Member Ms. Volda Lawrence.

An Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Speaker: There seems to be an after-lunch issue since yesterday. Turn on and turn off again. Your time starts at 1.52 p.m.

Ms. Lawrence: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good afternoon to the House. With the vicious attacks against our women in this honourable House, I am sure the spirits of Ms. Jane Phillips-Gay, Ms. Janet Jagan and Ms. Jessie Burnham – the three J’s – are having a very hard time in recognising this as the National Assembly where, in 1953, they stood with pride and dignity alongside the men. Mr. Speaker, as the chief custodian, I ask that you do not allow this crassness to continue. I suggest that there be some forum where all the women MPs could meet to exhale and find a common ground to exist while in this House.

I have had the privilege to be in this noble House for a long time, and as such, have had the opportunity, overtime, to listen to a number of budget speeches delivered by a range of Ministers of Finance, including the incumbent whose long title, Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, does not negate the fact that he is performing the functions of a substantive Minister of Finance. I have heard some lively, inspiring, pointed, upbeat, boring and jaded budget presentations. Alas, I make bold to say that the 2024 Budget presentation fell into the last two categories – boring and jaded. Why? It was below expectations, underwhelming. As the Government’s blueprint development plan for 2024, it left us befuddled. Sir, it left us feeling cheated that this country’s first trillion-dollar budget envisaged and with anticipation was more of the same, done in a vacuum and designed for a few, leaving little for the suffering Guyanese families on whom the Minister anchored this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, which Guyanese families is the Minister referring to? Is it the average working-class Guyanese families? I think not. Where is the vision? Where is the hope for families, for people tethering on the brink of a cost-of-living precipice, wondering whether a little of the largesse being fed to friends, families, the contractor-class, and favourites of the Administration would trickle down to

them? It is a three-card trick, indeed. Here is how it goes. The Government anchors the budget on the Guyanese family as principal beneficiaries by presenting big, big, big numbers, but when examined and analysed carefully, one realises the benefits are earmarked, not for the average working-class family but for the group referred to earlier. The Guyanese family cannot survive and does not deserve trickles in an economy slushed with lots of cash. The Ministers should certainly be ashamed to do this at the expense of Guyanese families. Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Beep. I am checking on one of the beep words.

Ms. Lawrence: [**An Hon. Member:** Ashamed.] Ashamed; I withdraw that and I will proffer the words, should think twice to do so. I have heard constant talk of Guyana becoming a little Dubai, and the Dubai of the Caribbean, but imagine my reaction when I received my copy of the 2024 trillion-dollar budget speech. I was flabbergasted, taken aback by the cover of the 2024 Budget depicting a darkness not unfamiliar to our power company ‘GP-Hell’. Is this what our future prosperity looks like, dismal darkness, except for what looks like a landing strip for small, light aircrafts? [**An Hon. Member:**

(*Inaudible*)] Yes. I am aware of the admonition, *do not judge a book by its cover*. However, I must say, one does not get a second chance to make a first impression. Small wonder that the lines at the passport offices and embassies have grown longer as more of our citizens, or to use the Minister’s term, Guyanese families, try to exit in search of a better life elsewhere. [**An Hon. Member:** (*Inaudible*)] *Oh*, yes. Hon. Benn, you have those figures.

The Budget theme, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*, appears as nothing more than sloganeering, an attempt to hoodwink and mask the reality for most Guyanese. It is also a recycled theme, microwaved and served as a fresh dish to an unsuspecting population. In the 2008 Budget, it was *Staying the Course: Advancing the Transformation Agenda*, while 2012 was *Remaining on Course*... Mr. Speaker, the words “staying” and “remaining” connote a sense of inertia. While unintended by the Minister, one cannot help but feel we are marking time, staying and remaining in the same place as money is wasted on a hodgepodge of projects, skilfully being marketed as beneficial to the Guyanese family. I iterate, which Guyanese family? I recall former United States of America (USA) President, George Bush’s cheeky comment on his own administration’s budget saying, and I quote:

“It’s clearly a budget. It’s got a lot of numbers in it.”

And so was the Hon. Minister’s 2024 Budget speech. It had lots of numbers, and I may add, a plethora of pros, but nothing of substance for the Guyanese family, unless the Government is convinced that a budget that does not reduce income inequalities nor contract award inequalities, a budget that does not reduce poverty, is a Guyanese family-friendly budget, a lot about growth, but no development. We have learnt that real growth, last year, was recorded at a whopping 33% bringing the average growth rate for the period 2020 through 2023, to an impressive 40%. No other country in the world has grown at this average annual rate over the same period that was marked by the Coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the Russian/Ukraine war. That we have been so blessed is due principally to the impact that oil has had on the economy. First discovered in 2015, with first oil production recorded in December, 2019, oil has, within the past four years, virtually dominated performance of the economy in every metric or statistic considered. For example, oil accounted for 70% of gross domestic product (GDP) last year from a negligible 2% in 2019. In terms of export earnings, oil accounted for 88% of merchandise exports. Contrary to all the talk about the resilience of the economy, these two matrices prove otherwise. They expose the vulnerability of our economy to the vagaries of the finicky oil market. These matrices show that we have an oil economy and not an oil sector. So, we are vulnerable. In spite of the Government’s rhetoric, in spite of the growth in the size of the budgets, the returns of the non-oil sector appear not to justify the expenditure.

There is no transitional development in this sector. It is still transactional, meaning import based and not export-manufactured based. For example, notwithstanding the huge investment made in the sector over the past three years, and similar investments budgeted this year, the share of the agriculture sector has declined from 25% in 2019 to 8% in 2023. This calls into serious question issues such as the productivity of expenditure, the quality of expenditure, and the roles being played by policy-making graft, and misappropriation. It is estimated that Guyana loses about 40% of the expenditure on the Public Sector Investment Programme – PSIP. In simple terms, 40 cents of every dollar expended under PSIP is lost due to unproductive, unbeneficial activities. This is too high a price for the citizens, the Guyanese family, to pay. Redressing this will require a commitment by the Government to robust institutions, manned by properly trained and motivated staff who are armed with the requisite tools for their effective

functioning. But then again, this Government is famous for weakening institutions of government transparency and governance. May I remind the honourable House of the savage attack by this Government on the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) legislation enacted by the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Government by removing transparency and accountability guardrails. Of course, we cannot forget the death of the State Asset Recovery Agency (SARA) or its slow strangulation – another APNU/AFC agency designed to track and recover stolen assets.

2.04 p.m.

Review of investments – it cannot be said that the Government is not developing policies. The fact is that many of the policies are either ill-suited or lack coherence. Citing a specific example within the agriculture sector, I read that we are in partnership with Barbados to build the so-called regional food terminal to be cited in Barbados. There are no details available to the Guyanese citizenry. For example, Minister, the rationale, the cost, the ownership structure, nor how will it be operated and maintained. Meanwhile, another food terminal is to be located on the Linden Soesdyke Highway, with a huge sum earmarked for in this 2024 Budget. We do not know whether a study was done to justify the purpose; intent; location; and further, the relationship between the regional and Guyana’s food terminals.

Oops! I forgot that a senior government politician in this August Chamber has an aversion to the conduct of studies to justify the feasibility of projects, especially those involved in huge financial outlays, such as the Cheddi Jagan International Airport, the Gas-to-Energy Project and we must not forget the Skeldon Modernisation Project. There are so much money being wasted chasing some politicians dream that ultimately results in the nation’s nightmare. It is the taxpayers’ money that are involved. It is loans that we will have to repay that are involved. It is our hard-earned money in the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) that is involved. Given these various levels of involvement and financial sources, I can only urge that greater attention be paid to get an increasingly higher returns for our projects. Then again, how can the nation receive higher returns from badly planned and executed projects? I see frowns on the faces of my Colleagues on the other side. Well, the recently named Heroes Highway is bulging and bumpy from poor construction and increasingly dangerous to drive on. There are no traffic signs – absolutely none – and that is only one. I am sure my Hon. Friend, Bishop Juan Edghill can name

many more. Here again, we can hear the frightening echo of development.

Debt – this part of my presentation allows me to transition into major area of concern of the Minister’s Budget Speech. To the Government’s intent to raise the domestic and foreign borrowing ceilings to change the withdrawal rules of the NRF, meddling with this fund again to make it even worse. I cannot believe that after changing the ceilings for domestic and foreign borrowings twice between 2021 through 2023, the Government now proposes to raise the ceilings once again. This signals the Government’s continued reliance on debt financing. as evidence by the projected stock of public and publicly guaranteed debt rising by 49% between 2023 to 2024 or from \$4.509 billion in 2023 to \$6.725 billion in 2024. The Government’s persistent tampering of the borrowing ceilings, over the last three years, is indicative of the absence of a medium-term plan and debt strategy for which several international institutions have been pressing. Why does the Government’s Chief Economist not follow known economic best practices? Either it is an issue of incompetence, which I doubt, or deliberate bypass to create opportunities for misappropriation and non-transparency. It is of no comfort to us, the taxpayers, the Guyanese family that such borrowings are supposedly prudent and sustainable.

Financial legislation – Given the fallouts surrounding the passage of the NRF, I never contemplated that the first amendments to the fund would have entailed changes to the withdrawal rules. Indeed, given the present discussions of the NRF being overstated, to the extent of the unpaid taxes of the oil companies, a position which I am in agreement, I had hoped, however, that suitable amendments would have been forthcoming for the transparent accounting of the taxes to be paid by the Government on behalf of the oil companies. Instead, what we are witnessing is the Government’s further reaching fund for the little intergenerational savings destined for the Guyanese family that this Budget talks so much about. At this rate, we may well end up with an empty NRF. It will be recalled that the Government has so far extracted approximately US\$1.7 billion. The use of which has been hidden under an undefined “national development priorities.” Given the existing formula, the Government anticipates withdrawing another US\$1.1 billion to finance this 2024 Budget. All of these amounts are based on previous year inflows into the fund. I believe we, on this side of the House, will resist any change to the withdrawal rules that would lessen the amount for intergenerational savings. As a matter of fact, among the

changes we would like to see our moneys are being set aside as a buffer to counter oil price volatility and detailed definition of the use and accounting for moneys withdrawn from the NRF. In addition, this House must now consider a minimum percentage value in the NRF that must remain as intergenerational savings. This must be protected by a two-thirds majority of this House. That is one of many constitutional reform matters for this House.

Improving the lives of Guyanese –The literature tells us that development is:

“the process of improving the quality of all human lives and capabilities by raising people’s levels of living, self-esteem, and freedom.”

The Governments Budget for the years 2020-2023 have focused heavily on infrastructure, roads, bridges, buildings among others. The 2024 Budget continues this trend. Imagine, this is what this Government calls development. In the main, people have become the casualty. In his imitable style, *Kaiteur News*, columnist GHK Lall, my favourite columnist, is in his column of 15th January, 2024, captures the situation thus:

“...the people have lost that battle for first consideration every time. Cement and steel have resoundingly whipped callaloo and squash. For every dollar given to the people, another ten or thereabouts were cleared for the products that have handsome returns for ruling politicians, their circles and cabals, and the contractor class.”

This is an accurate portrayal of the plight of the bulk of the people of all races in Guyana. They continue to be buffeted by high prices, spiralling cost of living and declining living standards; whereas development is underpinned and identified by reduced inequalities, increased income distribution, political and social polarisation, reduce poverty and increase equality. The opposite to the development is true in super rich Guyana as we witness rising inequalities, rising income inequalities, rising poverty and increased political stratification. Can the poor man access masses, attractive array of goods? Sadly, the no entry sign is boldly displayed at Bourda Market, deemed his heaven, he is at his wits end to stump up a minimal meal. In the same breath, how can the Government talk about development? Yet, in the public sector, limit the Guyanese family to a voucher system, solely for accessing cervical cancer tests as part of the healthcare delivery plan. What about the other cancers which are prevalent in our country? According to the World

Health Organization (WHO) Report, 2020 on Guyana's cancer country profile, three types of cancers are listed in double digits, namely breast cancer, 22.6%; cervix 16.5%; and prostate 15.6%. The latter cancer is heaping havoc on our men folks resulting in death. The family structure is losing an important element at a fast rate. I, therefore, call on the Government who speaks so much about the Guyanese family to extend this vulture decision to cater to test all three cancers instead. Can you do it? Yes, you can.

Mr. Speaker, the matter of public sector wages was aggressively addressed in this side of the House but, allow me to say, the Government is making a grave mistake by not recognising that the public sector, including defence, security and parastatals are productive entities. It is simply a question of a different measuring matrix. The wheels of national development are driven by public servants and not the private sector. It is the public sector that ensures the Government can govern and develop the nation. To treat it as a stepchild, devoid of any respect is political foolishness and disdainful.

Finally, on this point, the notion that increases in wages and salaries are locked into lump sum to be delivered retroactively at the convenience of the Government robs the public servants of the true value of any increase in their income. The Government no longer have to await performance reports on the economy in the third and fourth quarters to ascertain availability of moneys to pay public servants in this oil economy. Yet, the Government calls this development. No, this is political vindictiveness.

2.19 p.m.

Budget 2024 tells us that inflation was two per cent last year and is projected to rise to 2.5% this year. Just by way of comparison, the Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean 2023 (ECLAC) puts inflation in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) at 4.4% and 6.8%, respectively, in 2023. It projects that it will be 2.8% and three per cent respectively in 2024. Guyana can record a two per cent inflation rate given the open nature of its economy and given the high rates of inflation recorded by its main trading partners which is a remarkable foot if that number was to be believed. Mr. Speaker, ask the Guyanese family and ask the consumer or whether the average or the highfalutin and he or she would scoff at a two per cent inflation rate for last year, because he or she feels it. Not when pumpkin comes to the market in a Brioni suit like that of the Hon. Minister, Dr. Ashni Singh, at \$1,000 a cut with his friends and family bora, ochro, corilla, cabbage, *et cetera*

and not when the prices of so many other basic food and essential items continue to spiral in 2023. Let us work with the official two per cent for 2023 and the projected 2.5% for 2024. This would mean that the average inflation rate for the period 2021 through 2024 is 4.35% as compared to the average of one per cent for the period 2015 through 2020, under the APNU/AFC Government – one per cent.

This simple comparison indicates that people's incomes are being systematically eroded and consequently worsening income inequalities and poverty. The situation is worse for those on fixed incomes, such as pensioners, especially the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) pensioners. These pensioners' last increase was in 2020 when the pension was increased to \$35,000, exactly half of the then minimum wage of \$70,000. However, while the ministers were enjoying a 23% in their already hefty salaries between 2021 to 2023, NIS pensioners, such as myself suffered severely as our pensions remained static during that same period. It took a little...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, revealing with percentages, you have used up 100% of your first allocation. I am going to ask the Hon. Member, Mr. Jones, to give you a 25% addition to complete.

Mr. Jones: Thank you very much, Cde. Speaker. I do move that the Hon. Member be given 25% more to complete her presentation.

Ms. Lawrence: Thank you.

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Ms. Lawrence: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It took a letter to the *Stabroek News* editor by my Colleague, the Hon. Member, Ms. Ferguson, who outlined the plight of these pensioners to prick the conscience of the Government. This led to the enforcement of half the minimum wage of \$86,150 and the grand announcement that the minimum pension of NIS pensioners would be increased to \$43,075. The Government have not favoured these pensioners. It was a right that they were denied for three years. I am urging the Government to pay the pensioners for lost income for 2021, 2022 and 2023 arising from the Government's failure to implement the requirement equally. The Government must announce adjustments to the pensions of those who are above the minimum pension, since those pensioners have not had an increase since 2020 and none was announced in the

Budget for 2024. Moreover, the time has more than passed for this noble House to pass a legislation to have pensioners and salaries indexed in order to always maintain a current value. That is a positive development matrix and not the negative ones outlined in this Budget.

May I ask both the Hon. Ministers of Health and in the Office of the President with Responsibility of Finance to address the grave mistake committed on the senior nurses of the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation (GPHC) in 2022. They are receiving the same salary as the junior nurses and technicians. You promised over one year ago to fix it, please do so; I beg of you.

A number of measures have been announced in the Budget. As desperate and incoherent as they are, we cannot be thankful for the morsel that has been thrown out our way. We are not satisfied, and we will never be satisfied that in a growing economy flushed with cash, we must be content with scraps. We will not be satisfied that in a trillion-dollar budget, we, the people are relegated to the bottom of the cement and steel pile. We love our families and friends in the diaspora, but we cannot continue to rely on them in the manner that we have done. It is shameful that in the midst of plenty there is so much poverty, not pockets of poverty as adverted to by the Hon. Member, Vice-President, Dr. Jagdeo, at one of his press conferences. According to Food For The Poor, the poverty rate that is the share of the population living below the United States of America is equivalent of US\$5.50 a day is above 38.8%, and among the highest in the Caribbean and Latin America. Another startling statistic is the intensity of deprivations in Guyana, which according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is 30.3%. We are witnessing growth but no development, essential features of an economy tanking towards resource curse.

I would like to end on this note and call on the Government to develop more people centred opportunities for the Guyanese family and to really empower them not with vain promises as in your 2020 Manifesto. You have some 32 of them here, so let me just give you a few. You promised more jobs and less crime; you promised to reduce cost of living; you promised free education in five years; you promised to promote an agri-energy industry producing bioethanol through sugarcane, palm oil, cassava and corn; – I am reminding you – you promised to establish an arm's length sovereign wealth fund insulated from political interference; you promised to establish a regulatory framework, which is independent of politicians; you promised to criminalise

nondisclosure of receipt of funds from oil revenues; and, lastly, you promised 50,000 new jobs.

All I ask is that the Government be realistic – be realistic. Why should Guyana be a rich country with poor people? This paradox can be successfully resolved with ingenuity, creativity and a willingness to meaningfully involve all stakeholders. Can we do it? Certainly, we can. God bless us all. God bless Guyana. Thank you. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Before I call on the Hon. Prime Minister, just let me recognise our youth parliamentarians from last year. Many of them are from the ancient county. They are at the top left of my hand. Just as a reminder, the Minister, Ms. Parag, submitted her documents yesterday and they are left for the Hon. Member, Ms. Philadelphia, to send in her list which was at lunch time. If the Hon. Member does not, we still have a couple of speeches left, so we will extend that time and then we will make our pronouncements. Now, for our Hon. Prime Minister, Brigadier (Ret'd) Mark Phillips. The floor is yours, Hon. Prime Minister.

Prime Minister [Brigadier (Ret'd) Phillips]: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I must start by saying how thankful I am for this opportunity as the people's Prime Minister returning from representing Guyana in Africa and I have been given the opportunity to join the debate at this late stage. The President, as you know, is in Africa and I have utilised my privilege to delay being sworn in as acting President so that I can deliver an address to the people of Guyana.

As the Leader of the House, I am duty bound to be part of this debate. It is with immense honour and pride that I stand here today to support this National Budget that was presented by our Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, the Hon. Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh. One year ago, we implemented *Budget 2023* with a focus on: *Improving Lives Today, Building Prosperity for Tomorrow*. Now, we continue with our strategic and holistic vision for Guyana and for our people by: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity For All* with the groundbreaking, historic and again transformational *Budget 2024*, which totals \$1.146 trillion. This is a figure entering the trillion-dollar budget era that has sent shivers throughout the Opposition – shivers. They are still shivering. There will be no turning back. This is just the first of many trillion-dollar budgets to come.

2.34 p.m.

As the biggest budget ever in our country's history and the first to exceed a trillion-dollar, the allocations in this Budget all form... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] You will hear shortly....part of the necessary and imperative plans of our Government, to continue to usher in a prosperous and positive future for all Guyana and all Guyanese.

Mr. Speaker, as we are all well aware and as you should have heard from my Colleagues on this side of the House who presented earlier throughout the week, the state of affairs of Guyana was dire when our Government assumed Office in August, 2020. We have returned our country and our people to a state of hope. The people of Guyana, yes, we have raised their expectations. That is natural and through our budgets – 2020 to 2024 – we have continued to manage those expectations and deliver to the people, as promised in our Manifesto. Before August, 2020, our nation was grappling with numerous challenges: crumbling infrastructure, lagging standards and quality of services across every sector, total neglect with zero opportunities for economic growth and improvement of the lives of our people, and not to mention the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic in Guyana. Our Government knew that we had our work cut out for us to turn them all around, so that our country and people can begin to benefit as they truly deserve from a Government who not only talk the talk but can walk the walk.

Our Government's commitment remains steadfast, which is to transform the country into a model of progress and prosperity for the rest of the world to see. With this Budget, we will continue to do just that. Our efforts from August, 2020, to date have fast tracked Guyana towards that goal. Therefore, this trillion-dollar Budget is more than just about distributing wealth. Somebody, a previous speaker, referred to it as a sand and stone budget. Our budget is a strategic investment in our country's foundation for the future. As is evident, the majority, which is allocated to infrastructure development, is pivotal in creating a robust framework for sustainable growth throughout Guyana. The roads, bridges and energy projects are not just constructions. They are lifelines that connect our people and drive economic vitality. Our people, both the PPP/C and the APNU/AFC supporters, have embraced our Government's infrastructural and other projects. The Members of the Opposition like to talk about boots on the ground, but in addition to having your boots on the ground, have your ears to the ground and listen to the people.

We have moved Guyana to a stage where the citizens are participating in the development of their country and their

communities. Go and speak to the people, go to the communities; they are thanking us for all the interventions, the new roads, the development and repairs to existing roads. Go and speak to them. Everybody loves to talk about the Heroes Highway. Go to Diamond, Grove and Craig and talk to the people. They can tell you how it is easier now to get into Georgetown and to get back home after work in the afternoons. Go and speak to the people; Go and speak to the people. They can spend longer times with their families and still reach to work on time. They can leave work, pick up a few things from the market, get home to help their children with homework and have family life as it should be here in Guyana. This is not a sand and stone budget. The 2024 Budget consists of concrete plans that are part of our Government's comprehensive vision for our holistic development. Beyond infrastructure, there are significant allocations directed generously to all sectors to ensure that through our country's rapid development every citizen will benefit from our new-found wealth – every citizen.

I wish to highlight as well that the past four years have seen a consistent increase in our Budget. This trajectory reflects our Government's dedication to address the pressing needs of our citizens. Education and healthcare have seen substantial boost, lifting our people out of poverty and empowering them with the tools to thrive in a rapidly evolving world. We have made substantial investments in agriculture and energy, bolstering the capability to better utilise the strength of our country's natural resources towards the sustainable future. This is all part of a holistic vision of growth. Our responsibility is to manage the oil revenues wisely and ensure that every sector thrives. As we continue to reiterate, we will not throw back and depend on oil and gas to move our country forward and achieve our vision of a prosperous future for our people and our country. We have repeatedly said that the oil and gas revenues must be carefully managed and used to enable the other sectors to expand so that Guyanese from all walks of life can reap the benefits. This Budget is a testament to our commitment to building a nation that benefits from its natural resources and use them strategically for sustainable growth. Therefore, against this backdrop, I am ordered to make my presentation on the four programmatic areas that fall under the auspices of the Prime Minister. As you know, Mr. Speaker, this is not a Prime Minister without a portfolio. This is a real Prime Minister – the people's Prime Minister. I am proud to be overworked on behalf of the people as the Prime Minister of this country.

With regard to power generation – the allocation and utilisation of our resources in this domain result from the recognition that power generation is the lifeblood of our development, impacting every facet of our daily lives and the prosperity of generations to come.

The gas-to-energy project – Mr. Speaker, I begin my presentation by bringing your attention to the monumental strides made by the Gas to Energy Taskforce in shaping the future of Guyana through the transformative Gas-to-Energy power generation project. This project is significant for all Guyanese because of the positive impacts it will have. It allows cheaper and more affordable electricity at approximately 50% less the cost when it is completed. Every Guyanese will be paying 50% less than they are paying for electricity now. I must add that there has not been an increase in the charge for electricity since pre-COVID-19 on what they were paying. This is the Government – the people-centred, people-caring Government who provided billions of dollars to ensure that every Guyanese continue to pay this same rate for electricity that they have been paying prior to our assumption to Office. Just imagine if the PPP/C was not in government.

[**An Hon. Member:** I do not want to imagine.] I know you do not want to imagine. Even those on the other side do not want to imagine that because they are benefitting from the same measures. They are happy that we are in Government. They are happy that we are bursting our brains. It is the same four men around a small table with plenty papers, to ensure that the negative impact, as to what is happening throughout the world, is not passed on to the people of Guyana. At least you can say, thank you, Sirs.

The gas-to-energy task force has made substantial progress in the integrated power plant and Natural Gas Liquid (NGL) facilities, with 6.8% of Balance of Plant (BOP) site preparation already completed. Significant progress has also been made in the engineering and fabrication of gas turbines, steam turbines and Generator Step-up (GSU) transformers. Transmission lines and sub-station projects are progressing nicely, including the completion of the land clearing and geo-technical works at sub-station locations and the schedule white sand filling of Goedverwagting that was completed in December. In 2024, the gas-to-energy task force is poised to maintain its steadfast commitment to the seamless execution of activities across its supervised projects. Our Government's focus on monetising gas reserves is evident through the drafted and submitted discussion paper, seeking input from citizens to shape the national gas strategy.

The incorporation of citizens' feedback will play a pivotal role in finalising the strategy. Building on the progress made in the previous year, the gas-to-energy project is on track for startup, supported by advancements in onshore and offshore pipeline installations. The continuity of installation campaigns and development initiatives in 2024 underscore the sustained effort to bring this transformative project to fruition before the next election in Guyana, which is due by the end of 2025. That itself is sending shivers again in the Opposition. The fact that the gas-to-energy project will become completed and will be delivering electricity at 50% on what we are paying for, all Guyanese are paying forever, that itself is sending shivers. It is very cold in here, but it is sending shivers. That is sending shivers.

In relation to the works of our energy agency that is continuing to advance the implementation of our clean energy and renewable energy programme, we have seen tremendous progress over the reporting period.

2.49 p.m.

Between 2020 and 2023, our Government significantly expanded its investments in solar photovoltaic (PV) technology, witnessing a remarkable 173% increase in installed solar PV capacity from 5.3 megawatts to 14.6 megawatts throughout Guyana. The growth was achieved from strategic additions each year, including the Mabaruma solar PV farm, solar PV systems at Government buildings, and solar mini grids at various locations. In 2023 alone, a substantial increase of 6.6 megawatts occurred, driven by projects like the Bartica Solar PV farm, completion of solar mini-grids and widespread distribution of solar home systems. *Budget 2024* continues the momentum with plans for solar farms to be completed this year in Mahdia and Wakenaam. Additional solar home systems will be distributed and the development of solar mini-grids and rooftop solar for Government buildings projects will be continued.

I wish to report to this House that 19 communities, spanning Regions 1, 2, 7, 8, 9 and 10, have benefited from the installation of solar PV-powered mini-grids. As Prime Minister, I proudly visited those communities and handed over those solar PV mini-grid systems to the communities. One can only feel humbled by the response of the people in those communities to this our Government, a Government that is caring. The people remain thankful to our Government. The people have seen the light – they have literally seen the light because many of them were in darkness. Here we have mini-grids being handed over to

communities free of cost, provided by the Government, the people-centred caring Government. These are projects that we will continue to deliver to the people. Over 28,000 household solar systems were already delivered to over 120,000 people throughout Guyana benefiting from them. More will be delivered in 2024 because the \$1.146 trillion budget caters for the continuation of these projects.

The PV systems will serve the essential social, healthcare, and educational facilities, including schools, health centres, village offices, multi-purpose buildings, meeting halls, public living quarters and households. This has transformed the lives of people throughout our hinterland and riverine areas. Just go and speak to the people, boots on the ground and ears to the ground, and the people are saying there is more they can do now with the light that is available. More hours of production for them; more hours of studies for their children to write their exams. We will continue to deliver to the people and there are so many projects I can keep going on and on about this area.

The 1.5 hydropower project – Kumu and the 0.7 megawatt – Moco Moco projects will come on stream in just over a year from now. That will satisfy all the electrical needs in addition to the generators and the solar farm at Lethem. That is to satisfy all the electrical needs for that area, making it conducive for investment, investment from the people who live there, investment from Georgetown and investment from across our frontiers. We will continue to invest in renewable energy and greater use of renewable energy. We will continue in the sense that we have also found the time, money and efforts to invest in the installation of electric vehicle (EV) charging stations in Regions 3, 4 and 6, and that project will continue in 2024 and onwards. We have just about 120 electrical vehicles in Guyana and by installing these EV charging stations, that itself, along with other measures, income tax relief, and excise tax relief – will encourage more and more Guyanese to purchase and import EVs to Guyana.

In 2024 the budget allocations will allow us to construct an additional five solar mini grids throughout Region 9 at Katoka, Maruranau, Yupukari, Nappi, and Awarewaunau, benefiting an additional 4,700 of our people. This project, with an additional \$150 million that is designated for renewable energy intervention in over 42 locations, will continue in Regions 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9. Not to mention, another important project, the 3 megawatts solar PV installation at Cheddi Jagan International Airport (CJIA), which will be operationalised this year.

The Guyana Power and Light Incorporated (GPL) has ramped up its gross generation capacity from 1,030,288 megawatt hours (MWh) in 2022 to an estimated 1,179,000 MWh in 2023. We will continue to invest in GPL to improve, in the short term, its continued supply of stable electricity, which will get better with every day, to the people of Guyana and to bring into service areas that are underserved and unserved through 2024. In 2024, we plan to continue along the trajectory of successful power generation by utilising the budgeted allocations for strategic and transformative projects. Might I remind the honourable House that when the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) took Office in August, 2020, we inherited a bankrupt GPL due to gross mismanagement of the company, because, of course, a visionless bunch of elites, who were too occupied and unbothered about the plights of our people, all their work consisted of was what they could grab for themselves during their tenure, which included a blatant attempt to rig the elections in front of the entire world.

With regards to the Hinterland Electrification Company Inc., in 2020, upon taking Office, significant intervention was required as critical generators in Matthews Ridge, Mahdia, Port Kaituma, and Lethem required major overhaul. Additional generators were procured for Matthews Ridge, Lethem, Port Kaituma, and Mabaruma to meet growing needs. Between 2021 and 2023, projects were implemented to provide electricity access to over 700 additional households in unserved communities near Mabaruma, Mahdia, Port Kaituma, Matthews Ridge and Kwakwani. Key achievements included the procurement again of new generators for Port Kaituma, Mabaruma, and Lethem, improving reliability for numerous households and benefits. In 2023, notable achievements were accomplished in the energy infrastructure projects. The upgrade of the 2.3 kilovolt (kV) network to 13.8 kV at Linden, and I repeat, at Linden, involved successful material supply and execution of upgraded construction works. Upgrade of the Linden substation, at Linden, saw the completion of the construction of the substation building and the supply and installation of switchgear. Other achievements included the construction of a distribution network to Four Mile, Port Kaituma, procurement of the main power transformer for Mahdia and the procurement of line hardware for network extension for Port Kaituma.

Annual electricity subsidies to residents of Region 10, a predominantly African Guyanese community that is known as the support base of the Opposition, have been offset by the current Government at an annual input of \$4 billion.

Total subsidies amount to over \$100 billion since its inception, and it must be noted that this is the only geographic and administrative region benefiting from such a subsidy. The same region has received \$7 billion in the local budget for 2024, an increase of 100% since 2020.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister to power you to a conclusion, we will need an extension.

Minister of Local Government and Regional Development and Government Chief Whip (ag) [Ms. Parag]: Mr. Speaker, may the Hon. Prime Minister be given time to conclude his presentation?

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister, you may continue.

Brigadier Ret'd Phillips: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the extension. There are so many success stories that occurred starting with August, 2020, assumption of Office by our Administration, the PPP/C Government. I have noted that I have not bored anyone so far by stating all the progress that we would have made.

Telecommunications – it is very important that I mention the liberalisation of the Telecommunications Sector and the tremendous benefit that has been accrued to the people of Guyana. Private sector investment in the sector increased by 40% between 2020 and 2023, from \$10.5 billion to \$14.6 billion. Mobile subscription grew by 11% between 2020 and 2022, from \$665,000 to \$746,000. Broadband subscription overall grew by 15% over the period. Fixed broadband subscription grew by some 36% from \$91,000 to \$124,000. These developments demonstrate the benefits accruing to Guyana from the Government's execution of this policy as operators step up their capacity and offerings to give the best value for the consumer's dollar. In 2021 and 2022, we accelerated rollouts of high-speed Long-Term Evolution (LTE) networks as we released premium spectrum in the 700 megawatts to operators. I had the privilege of witnessing and symbolically participating in the landing of Guyana's latest submarine fibre optic cable at the of back the Marriott Hotel in Kingston. The latest landing brings to three the number of submarine fibre cables connecting Guyana to the internet, and the investor expects the cable to become operational this year. The benefits expected include a reduction in data prices as operators further compete with each other that will benefit the people of Guyana.

3.04 p.m.

Increased resilience since operators now have the opportunity to use each other's facilities as backup routes should their own cables become unavailable. This newest offering will add a minimum of 13 terabytes of capacity to our international internet capacity. Something that we would not be able to utilise fully based on current growth over the next 25 years.

With regards to the Government's owned National Data Management Programme, we continue to build out the National Data Management infrastructure to benefit the wider Guyanese community. When we took Office in 2020, since the liberation of the 5th October, 2020, Telecommunication Sector Act, there has been a significant positive impact here. Bandwidth has seen a remarkable reduction of over 90% in 2023, highlighting the benefits of breaking the monopoly. The National Data Management Authority network uptime in 2020 was at 97%. This continuous investment over the years has improved to over 98% to the present. The upcoming investments in 2024 include restoring the secondary data centre, which experienced failure in 2022.

Hinterland connectivity has also witnessed significant improvement from 2020 to 2023. Bandwidth *via* the Government-owned satellite system has increased from one megabit per second, when we took Office, to 10 megabits per second, reaching as high as 15 megabits per second in some cases now. The unlimited and uncapped service provides residents in the hinterland and remote communities with access to basic messaging and online connectivity. There are so many more success stories, but I am conscious of the fact that my time is limited. The Industry and Innovations (I&I) Unit has continued to educate the Guyanese public as to the digital age. Building capacity is integral to developing a knowledge-based digital society and a country that can compete in a global economy. This is why significant resources are allocated to providing Information and Telecommunications Technology (ICT) training to communities across Guyana.

Our People's Progressive Party/Civic Government took Office in 2020, an insufficient number of persons were trained in ICT *via* coding camps and ICT training trainers in selected communities. From 2020, to date, over 3,200 persons have been trained in communities across Guyana through several ICT training programmes, including community-level basic ICT training, innovation camps, train the trainers, Guyanese Girls Code and training for persons who are blind. In 2024, the I&I Unit will be training a further 1500 persons in a variety of areas from basic to

advanced levels, covering topical areas such as, basic Information Technology (IT), animation, coding/programming, artificial intelligence (AI), and IT for persons with disabilities, to name a few. We will continue to invest in the I&I Unit as it continues to bring ICT knowledge to Guyanese throughout the length and breadth of Guyana.

With regards to the Department of Public Affairs and associated agencies, we will continue what we started in August, 2020, to provide opportunities for training, development and capitalisation in a strategically positioned manner to ensure that the Department of Public Affairs and associated agencies continue to build and improve in its operations for 2024, 2025 and beyond.

The Civil Defence Commission (CDC) has acquitted itself well in 2023. With continued budgetary support, we see this agency continuing to expand its operations to ensure that, at every regional administrative level, our officials that govern are better educated in disaster management related activities. As I said before, there are so many things and so many success stories that I could share, but I would like to note that this document is the most in-demand document from the people of Guyana now.

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

Mr. Speaker, they say *perception is reality*, but the beauty of being a human being is that two of us could look at the same picture and see something totally different... [Mr.

Mahipaul: Darkness.] I do not see darkness here. I see a well-lit highway recently constructed. In the background, I see a well-lit housing scheme still developing. What appears to be darkness is the reserves that are awaiting investments by the private sector. The same private sector that you claimed not to like. This is a photograph not of darkness, this is a photograph of development. This is a photograph of progress. This is a photograph of the hope that all Guyanese hope for.

I conclude my presentation and I wish to reiterate that the vision, which our PPP/C Government sets forth for *Budget 2024*, is more than just about numbers. It encompasses the very essence of progress and prosperity for Guyana. Guyana is on a historic journey and *Budget 2024* truly allows us to stay the course as we build prosperity for all Guyanese. The budget serves as our compass, guiding us towards a brighter and more resilient Guyana. It is important to reflect on and to really be able to understand what we inherited and appreciate how far we have come. I have clearly outlined in my presentation the neglect and lack of resources in every

sector under my purview when I became Prime Minister in August, 2020. I stand here proudly and confidently able to demonstrate what our Government has done to turn it all around in order to advance and transform every sector, every region, every community and every Guyanese. That is the PPP/C's track record and will continue to be how we push ahead and get things done.

Only a person with no vision or lacking the aptitude to understand what this budget, just like all other previous budgets from 2020 to 2023, will do to positively impact this country and our people. Thankfully, a larger percentage of our people are able to grasp the vision and share the same, while, of course, just a smaller percentage will never be able to wrap their heads around something this major. The figure is too big for them. I guess it is no fault of theirs that they simply lack the ability to see the bigger picture and comprehend in order to move past just the gimmicks and rhetoric for the sake of the development of our people and country. Guyana's history will enshrine this moment as the turning point when Guyana embraced its prosperous destiny with courage and conviction. The \$1.146 trillion budget is the manifestation of the PPP/C's vision for setting Guyana on the global stage. Today, Guyana prepares itself for a prosperous tomorrow, and I am confident that, under the leadership of our PPP/C Government and united as one people and One Guyana, we shall reap a harvest of unparalleled success for Guyana and every one of our citizens.

I call on my honourable Friends on the other side of this House to join us and support this budget for all of Guyana to move forward with a prosperous future ahead of every single Guyanese, with no one left behind. Get on board, my Friends. It is time for you to put politics aside and put our people first because we must be reminded that each and every one of us is privileged to sit in this honourable House because the people of this country have put their trust in us and elected us to serve, not ourselves, but to serve them. They depend on us to make the right decisions so let us use our power to do the right thing at all costs. Success and prosperity are inevitable and we in the PPP/C will ensure that we remain unwavering, encouraging consistently and engaging consistently with the people all across this country, at all levels, to push the agenda of the people forward because this is all about them, the people of Guyana.

Finally, let me thank the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, and his wonderful and hard-working staff for putting together this strategic

document that will propel and catapult Guyana way into the 21st century. Thank you, Mr. Speaker and may God Almighty continue to bless our nation. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much, Hon. Prime Minister. I understand that the Hon. Member, His Excellency, Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo, will not be speaking. Now, I would like to call on the Hon. Leader of the Opposition, the Hon. Member, Aubrey Norton, to make his presentation.

[Interruption]

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

Leader of the Opposition [Mr. Norton]: Mr. Speaker, thanks for this opportunity. I notice one of the Members of Parliament over there, he reminds me of a friend I went to school with by the name of Foo and if you add the ‘L’ you will get his name.

I want to say a special thank you to the Hon. Member, Dr. Kissoon. I think she came here and attempted to change the culture or to contribute to changing the culture in this National Assembly by critiquing the budget. Unfortunately, the Assembly, especially, on that side is not disposed to such a level of performance, but, again, I say thank you. Even though I will remind you that though you said we now have food security, it should be recalled that it was Mr. Forbes Burnham who led this country on the road to food security. I felt hurt when the Hon. Member, Mr. Hamilton, deteriorated to the point where he had to be mentioning the children of Ministers and Members of Parliament who obtained scholarships. I want to say this, once no law is violated, once the child has the ability and the capacity to absorb the education, then, like any child in this country, that child has the right to free education.

3.19 p.m.

I believe people end up going down that road when they did not prepare to defend the portfolio. It is in the same context I want to say that I heard about four speakers from the other side mentioning Hon. Mr. Ganesh Mahipaul's house lot, insinuating that a crime was committed. No crime was. Each and every one in this House is entitled to a house. Once again, if they violated no law and they can manage it, then they should be entitled to a house. There are a few things that I must say before I get into my actual presentation. One of the first things I want to say is that the great philosopher Aristotle once said that there was no comparison among non-equals. Therefore, it should not make sense, or it is unfair to compare 26 years against five years, between 2015 and

2020. Nobody on that side of the House... *[Interruption]* Ms. Sonia Parag, my dear, let me say this to you, I have no doubt that you could involve the 28 years, but you did not. Throughout the budget presentation, you were comparing 2015–2020 with the rest of the PPP/C's term.

Unfortunately, this budget and the people who spoke on its behalf appears to be judging progress based on what the wealthy gets. That is unfortunate. I want to make it very clear; we are not critical of the private sector; we are critical of crony capitalism that is developing in this society. And so, we want to make that very clear. Even if you were in a capitalist society, free enterprise, there would have been competition and the resources would have been allocated, based on competition. What is happening in Government today is, the Government is using the power at its disposal to distribute our resources in an unfair way. I must say to the Hon. Member, Ms. Rodrigues, I think it was who talked about ‘our people’. I hope you are convinced that ‘our people’ mean all Guyanese because all of those that spoke after you said, ‘our people’. I want to make it very clear to you, when I say, ‘our people’, I meant the people of Guyana. This is because I believe I have some facility in the English language. Had I wanted to speak about our, I would have said ourselves, but I said, ‘our people’. I want to thank all of my Colleagues on this side who used statistics to establish their case. I am aware that the Government has a disdain and fright for numbers, but we did, and I must congratulate them for laying the reality big. Mr. Speaker, Franklin D. Roosevelt stated:

“The test of The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

This budget has not provided for those who have too little. This aptly describes our arguments in this budget. We are not against the private sector; we are not against legitimate businesses receiving contracts; we are against the manipulation of the system to provide PPP/C crony contractors, who are ill equipped and incompetent with contracts that results in wanton waste and facilitating a slush fund for the PPP/C elite, friends, families and favourites – to the rich at the expense of those who have little and deserve more. In the extent situation, there is no progress for those who have little. Consequently, our society is not progressing – some are, at the expense of others. This is a budget of deceit. I repeat that, this a budget of deceit. It scores high on the art of deceit. It sets out to deceive the people of Guyana. It seeks to make the average Guyanese believe there is

something in it for them. There is nothing. It is presented as if there are successes in the non-oil sector, there is little or none for those not benefitting directly from the oil and gas sector. The budget identifies many projects, but the reality is, they cannot complete many of those projects.

I want to remind this House that, throughout the years, we were told 'oh, our projects are transformative'. Let me remind the Hon. Prime Minister, the Skeldon Sugar Factory and generating component were to light up Guyana, were to make energy cheaper. It never did. Let me remind this House that there was to be a fibre optic cable that will give these children cheap internet wherever they are. It did not. Let me remind this House that we were to have packaging factories packaging the most beautiful packages. I heard they changed the centre into some other building now. If we judge from the history of this Government, the gas to shore will experience the same faith – failure. And so, those projects are deceit again. This budget uses figures to paint a picture of progress, when there is little or no progress apart from the oil sector and its attendant services. It uses jargons to deceive the people. It speaks in percentage to deceive the people. The Hon. Minister sat here, trying to tell us about election and said, 'We increased our votes in Region 10, in Linden, by 100%'. Any child would know, if you had one and you increased to two, it is 100%. Who are you deceiving? You are deceiving yourself.

When you go to the actual figures, people are worst off under this PPP/C Administration. It sets out to make people feel they are being empowered when they are not. This budget deceives that Government has no plan for this nation. Last year I argued that the PPP/C has no plan for Guyana and our opponents on the other side, I prefer to say friends, at some time they behave as opponents, our friends on the other side were furious when I said that. I hope my Colleagues on the other side will accept the argument this year, since no better a person has stated that the Government does not have a plan than the Head of State of this country, who in an interview with Mr. José Enrique Arrijoja of the *America's Quarterly* World Political Review stated, in his 23rd January, 2024, article titled, *Can Guyana Beat the Resource Curse?* He stated that, 'when I asked President Ali if Government's present and future ambitions were consolidated in some plan, the President responded':

"I've been writing a plan as we go along, because we don't have the time to have a plan and then implement it."

Mr. Speaker, imagine...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, the references to His Excellency and... you know? Again, I do not want to quote the illegal principle but please... [*Inaudible*].

Mr. Norton: Mr. Speaker, is it not true that if I can lay over to you this article that I have committed no offence?

Mr. Speaker: No. It is not.

Mr. Norton: So, I cannot talk about the President at all in this place?

Mr. Speaker: No.

Mr. Norton: I have never seen that rule, but I will live with it for now.

Mr. Speaker: If you want, we could suspend, and you could check 41 (7) and (8). Thank you.

Mr. Norton: I will live with it for now. I promise you he would not be mentioned because... [*Interruption*] Every country that takes development very serious needs a plan. I want to make the point – Guyana's problem is no longer a shortage of financial resources. The resources now exist. The issue is, who can best allocate those resources to ensure that all Guyanese benefit in a way that improves the quality of life. In this regard, we in the Opposition offer ourselves to the people of Guyana as the ones who can do that with our people-centred development strategy and vision that put the interest of our people first. This budget does not serve the people of Guyana. This budget cannot reduce the cost of living. It cannot end poverty since it is designed to give those who have more and relegate the working poor to being dependent on handouts from the Government and to live a life of poverty. It is for this reason there is the need for our People Centred Development Strategy (PCDS). I know the Government well, as soon as you see they start using 'people centred' here and there, you know they are creeping in. They lack ideas so they must plunder.

I will opt to define clearly what we mean by our People Centred Development Strategy. Our People Centre Development Strategy puts people first and will utilise the resources of Guyana to achieve the ultimate goal of providing a high quality of life to the people of Guyana through the direct and indirect transfer of resources to the people of Guyana to educate them, support their mobilisation of resources to work, and for investment with the aim of alleviating and ultimately eradicating poverty, while simultaneously resulting in the sustainable development of all communities and sectors of the Guyanese society, as well

as the promotion of good governance and the creation of a just and prosperous society. The PCDS will ensure that the needs of the people, such as healthcare, housing, water, electricity, education, transportation and other social services are of high quality and guarantee. That is what we promised our people. It is only with such an approach in which we provide for those who have too little, that we can be able to say, 'We are progressing'.

3.34 p.m.

The PPP/C has shown, by this budget, that it is anti-middle class and anti-working poor. It is focused on making a few super-rich at the expense of poor Guyanese. That this budget has no focus on measures to alleviate and ultimately reduce poverty is a serious indictment on this uncaring Government that facilitates the impoverishment of our people. In this regard, I wish to refer this House to the draft of measures I outlined in last year's budget to reduce poverty. The Hon. Ms. Teixeira came and lifted the document up. After that, she did not.... [Mr. Mahipaul: It is Mdm. President.] I am speaking to her in the capacity of a Member of Parliament. After that, the Hon. Member was unable to say anything else because the information was there. Apart from the absence of anti-poverty measures in the budget, the delivery of a mere 6.5% to our public servants is unacceptable and forces me to repeat our call for workers to be provided with a liveable income and for the income tax threshold to be raised to \$150,000. Mr. Speaker, that should be easy to do in this oil economy. For some reason, the Government seems to not want to improve the lives of ordinary people. We urge you to. Many in this country spout the words that Guyana is the fastest-growing economy in the world. It is among the 10 richest countries in the world. With the 2024 Budget now out, the immodest refrain includes it being the highest budget in the country.

While all of these sentiments are true, there seems to be very little awareness by the Government that the newfound wealth is not reaching as widely and deeply as it should into the economy and the lives of our people. The reality is that the wealth from oil is not meeting our people. Many children of the poor in this country cannot go to school because their parents do not have the resources to send them. I am concerned that we can produce a budget that does not serve our people. The lyrics of success are mostly from the oil and gas song which sits at the top of the billboard of economic industries in Guyana and is likely to remain there for a long time unless something catastrophic or dramatic occurs. If the Government does not address this new reality and its consequence in a prudent and careful manner, Guyana can

easily become a country deeply afflicted by many crises that resource-rich countries are known to experience. We appear to be already heading in that direction.

We have started to become conspicuously divided by wealth and we must prevent the income chasm from widening and from leading to economic and social instability. We should use our wealth to promote stability and not divisiveness. We must build an economy that uplifts the quality of life of our people and the environment in which they and our businesses must operate. We must make true the maxim that *a rising tide lifts all boats*. We cannot afford to leave the powerless behind. We cannot afford to leave the poor behind. Clearly, the oil and gas industry has changed our country, as reflected also in its impact on our economy and revealed in the demand for goods and services through employment, through the need for various support services, and through its involvement in sporting and cultural activities. Positioned in a dominant role and soaring like the formidable and majestic harpy eagle, the oil and gas industry accounted for 70% of Guyana's Gross Domestic Product in 2023. It is expected to make an even larger contribution in 2024 and several years beyond, as it flies high above the other industries that many continue to cling to for their livelihood, and that is important. We seem to be treating the oil and gas industry as if it is the only thing in Guyana when a lot of Guyanese depend on other industries.

The Government needs to take action to stimulate growth and development in other industries and to initiate development in new industries, as stated by the Hon. Member, Mr. Holder. In this regard, the Government is advised to establish a broad taskforce on new industries and services to ascertain which industries and services should be developed, having discussed and formulated policies and programmes based on proper scientific analyses and studies. Unfortunately, this Government seems not to have an interest in such studies, but they are important. Unfortunately, this budget has no sums allocated to undertake this important task. Clearly, the Government lacks vision. Less than five years ago, it took 20 of the 29 industries that we tracked to generate 90% of our GDP. It now takes eight industries. This means that 20 out of 29 public or private-sector-oriented industries now account for 10% of the national pie. It is necessary that we work assiduously to ensure that the non-oil sector is expanded to reduce the dependence on oil and ensure we develop a resilient and diversified economy that could protect and serve the interests of future generations. I wish I had seen this as a goal of the budget.

This concentration of income among a small number of industries clearly has implications for how the resources of this country are being distributed among its industries and people. This is a concern that is not obvious to us in this budget, as reflected in the massive spending on infrastructure with little regard for our people, as will be shown later. I must clarify that we are not against capital projects, but we are saying to you that capital projects that bear no relationship to human resources and other development will not serve us good. I might be forced to wake up the Hon. Bishop Edghill. Thanks for getting up. You did say to us that if we do not want the Wismar/Mackenzie Bridge, we must tell you. We are telling you that we want it, and we are telling you that it was us who initiated it. We want cheap electricity, but neither the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service nor the Prime Minister could tell us the actual figure of what we will pay. They keep telling us it will be half the cost and a quarter of the cost. I want to remind you that Skeldon was to do the same.

This budget fails to charter a course for a wider array of industries to contribute to our national income. Our people-centred development strategy (PCDS) will undertake the task since we are sanguine that a wider array of industries can contribute far more resources to allocate to the people's development. Industries such as other crops, construction, gold, real estate, administrative services, financial services and distributive trade are among the top eight contributors to our GDP. Though currently so placed, they have also changed positions. The budget does not seem to acknowledge the changes which are occurring. Other crops is now second in place, while gold, which previously occupied second place, now sits in seventh place.

Rice manufacturing which ranked 15th in 2019 was ranked 19th in 2023. Education which ranked 12th in 2019 was ranked 15 in 2023. The redistribution in the ranking of many industries shows that some industries that were once significantly placed in our economy no longer hold that profile. There might be reasons other than the influence of oil and gas for the change in ranking, but it is clear that the affected industries must think of what the changes mean for their competitiveness and their future in the economy. The budget has no measures to address this changed situation.

More importantly, education, which fell from 12th in 2019 to 15th in 2023, is a clear indication that human resource development is not given the focus it deserves. It is not that we are against certain things, but the focus is necessary. Our people-centred development strategy will significantly

improve the education sector because we believe that the development of human capital is critical to the success of any country's development. Mr. Speaker, if you go through all the countries in this world and their development, one common trend that runs through them is the quality of education. So, we urge a greater focus on education.

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 foreign exchange earnings in 2023. According to existing data, one can envisage oil exceeding the 90% share of foreign earnings, which it was responsible for in 2023, in the not-too-distant future.

While we bask, as a country, in the financial glow of the oil industry, one must wonder what role the current policy on the management and the use of foreign-generated earnings might be playing in determining access to foreign currency for the business community and the wider society. This is another issue not addressed in the budget. We believe it is important and incumbent on the Government to manage the situation properly so that our local private sector can access foreign exchange to grow its businesses. If you like the local private sector, then you need to manage our foreign exchange sector so that the private sector does not cry out. The shortage of foreign currency should not abound in a country where export revenues have grown by over 700% in less than four years and its trade balance has shifted from a deficit in 2019 to a surplus of over US\$6.5 billion in 2023. It hurts when the private sector keeps crying out that it does not have adequate resources. By blindly supporting the investment priorities of this Government, private sector entities might be serving as the architect of their own inability to access foreign currency to conduct their business. The Government's insistence that cement, sand, and stone must dominate the consumption patterns of the country ought to cause consternation among Guyanese. Our foreign exchange management must facilitate the development of the local private sector in the non-infrastructure sectors.

When Guyanese had budgets in the hundreds and two hundred billion, the Government could not complete spending the money in a reasonable time. The delays in projects were obvious. In a matter of two years, the budget has jumped from billions to trillions. All Guyanese know that two years were not enough time to see an expansion in the absorptive capacity of this country to handle a budget that has grown three times in size. Imposing this undue

burden on the finances of our country, knowing the risk of waste, inefficiency and corruption, leads one to the inevitable conclusion that the PPP/C Government has scant regard for the people of Guyana.

3.49 p.m.

Therefore, in this regard, Government needs to ensure that we improve our capacity to implement programmes and develop projects that can be realistically implemented and avoid developing projects which will place the nations' resources in the hands of the PPP/C elite, families, friends and, by now you know, their favourites. The reconfigurations of our economy just mentioned do not seem to be a matter of concern to this Government since this budget, as any budget should, appears not to anticipate the challenges that will confront the people and businesses of this country. The Government continues in its old ways in a new situation. I want to draw to the attention of this National Assembly that the situation has changed and this old approach of large budget and plenty spending, would not necessarily result in development.

Admittedly, the Minister used plenty of jargons and an array of numbers to convey the impression that his Government cares about the people of this country. What he said in the budget does not comport with the general sentiments and feelings about survival in this oil-rich and fastest growing economy. Mr. Speaker, I want to urge those on that side to be on the road and understand what people are facing. Mr. Prime Minister, as you fly pass with outriders, to which you are entitled, remember that you are missing the opportunity to know the reality of the people. I want to say this to you, Mr. Prime Minister, while you talk about being on the ground and listening, when we see the videos of the Vice-President and company, they tend to ill-treat the people and not listen to them.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, be careful with imputing.

Mr. Norton: Okay. Let me rephrase. We believe that you need to listen to the people so that you will understand the reality and do not arrive at your own conclusions about them. The concern that this presentation expresses here can be understood in the situation of the public servants who endure all sorts of inconveniences and hardships – from inadequate wages, high prices, blackouts, water shortages, poor health services and transport fatigue – to keep the Government functioning. These should not be the hallmarks of the fastest growing economy in the world; unfortunately,

they are. Mr. Speaker, when the Prime Minister was speaking...I know that his house has generator, but blackouts are many.

Amidst the daily stresses of life, their patriotism – this is the public service – and commitment to work continue to be abused by the Government. One theme that has been emerging constantly, as if intended as therapy for the workers, is the reduction or removal of VAT from certain commodities and the gaining of special treatment by the private sector. The impression one gets is that the Government has been trying to focus the attention of people on imaginary taxes and tax benefits while spending their money on goods and services. We see this as an attempt to distract consumers from the relatively meagre incomes that they are receiving and the economic plight in which they place them. Another case of deceit, I contend. That gimmick is not working because public servants know what they can afford and what they cannot afford. They are the ones living and feeling it. They are the ones who know if they can feed their children seven days a week or only two days.

We have been fortunate, over the years, to have benefitted from the wisdom of Professor Clive Thomas, a distinguished Guyanese Economist and a champion of workers' rights in this country. He has contributed extensively to economic thought regionally and around the world as well. His work makes it easy for us to dispel the illusion that Guyanese are benefitting from the oil wealth of this country. Professor Clive Thomas, in a series of articles in 2012, drew our attention to a simple technique, referred to as the tax level, that can be used to determine how the income in an economy is allocated between the government and the rest of us. It is very important for Guyanese to be aware of this because this Government, in its budget presentations, has perfected the art of deceit and tries to tell us that the reduction of tax here and the removal of tax there ought to be making our lives better. Nothing could be further from the truth. Professor Thomas pointed out that the tax level indicates the amount of money that the government takes from us and the amount with which it leaves us. Because his tool considers the impact of all taxes on our income, no harm is done in ignoring the constant referral by the Government to the removal of VAT here and there. Whatever taxes will impact us would show up in the tax level analysis.

The 2024 Budget will leave Guyanese with 88% of their income, while the Government will take 12%. Withdrawals from the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) are included here, since royalties and taxes paid by ExxonMobil Guyana and its partners are paid into the Fund. The high percentage of

disposable income – 88% – belies the reality of public servants in this country. In 2024, the public servant will receive 2% of all the income Guyana earns. This means that the public servant will keep 1.92% of that money. The Minister told this Assembly that inflation will be 2.5% in 2024. What it means then is that the public servant, in this oil-rich country, will get the benefit of 1.88% of the money earned. With that share of income, the public servants can hardly believe that the Government is grateful for their service. The reality is that the people of Guyana are benefitting little or nothing from the budget. Our people-centred development strategy will rectify this situation and put more money in our people's pocket through direct and indirect transfer of resources to our people, while ensuring we promote and protect the right of future generations to benefit from our national patrimony. With a benefit of only 1.88%, it should be clear to all who care to pay attention that the oil money is not reaching public servants of this country and the current wage practice of the Government has made public servants worse off than they were before. The evidence of this assertion is in the progressive yearly rise in real income under the APNU/AFC from 4.21% in 2015 to 4.92% in 2019. The Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service will tell you that it is true.

In contrast, every year from 2021, under the PPP/C, the real income of the workers went down. An important revelation here is that all the exemptions and removal of taxes are of no real benefit to the public servants of this country in the face of this reality. Our comparative performances show that between 2015 and 2020, people were our priority and we attempted to ready the nation for first oil. Our people-centred development strategy will continue this trajectory. To make this point clearer, it is useful to examine the transfers that Guyanese, including public servants, received under the various handout packages of the Government. In 2024, the Government plans to give Guyanese 1.44% of the country's oil wealth to supplement their income. These moneys will go directly to support schoolchildren, teachers, youths, pensioners, and those depending on public assistance. Some will also be used to support business ventures. This is money that will go directly to the beneficiaries, whether through cash vouchers, or other forms of transfer. I want you to see that I am acknowledging that people are getting money. The problem is they are not getting enough.

When public servants' incomes are combined with the supposed generosity of the Government, they would have gained access to a mere 3% of the 2024 income of this

country. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that the people of this country place more emphasis on remittances which, at 5% of the 2024 GDP, exceeds the entire earnings and grants public servants received from the Government. It is clear that Guyanese in the diaspora are doing more for the working poor in Guyana than the PPP/C Government. I wish to thank our patriotic Guyanese in the diaspora and reject Minister Ramson Jnr's idle talk about Guyanese sending money to those in the diaspora. Even if that is true, it is only the PPP/C elite which has such capacity. The average Guyanese cannot afford to live much less to send money to friends in the diaspora. He walks with his head in the air and knows not what happens on the ground.

This Government might have people on their minds but not at the centre of the country's development. Consequently, it is not surprising to learn through the media, including social media, of how desperate poor Guyanese have become that they have resorted to improper financial practices. When I saw a young man going to jail recently, it was heart wrenching. The Government cannot find the solution for these problems because they are part of the problem. However, what is interesting is the reluctance of this Administration to pursue the allegations of wrongdoings at high levels in this society. They are well prepared to go after the small man, but the machinery protects he who can damage us. It is against this dismal background that the Government and its acolytes are going around selling illusions to the people of this country that owning a home automatically enables them to be a business investor. I was surprised when I heard the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service saying that. The people of this country are advised to understand that the doubling of the value of a home does not mean that one is capable of servicing a loan. This grandiose notion about homeownership and business investing can lull people into losing their homes to a bank or some other creditor if the business is a failure. Potential borrowers could be sent into depression if rejected by a bank for inadequate cashflows. The advice from this side of the House is to get advice from experts and not any politician or *fly-by-night* business promoter. Always keep in mind the old adage, *look before you leap*.

Mr. Speaker, there is hope. Our PCDS will provide homes on a rent to own basis, and we will replicate the successes the People's National Congress (PNC) had when it produced houses in South Ruimveldt and other areas without putting the house owner at risk of losing the house. The Government's admission that it will have to change the

withdrawal rules of the Natural Resource Fund to finance its profligate spending demonstrates to the nation what we have been saying all along. There is no plan whatsoever or method to the PPP/C's madness, save enriching themselves, their friends, families, and favourites. This is especially clear, given that it was only a short while ago that the PPP/C passed that law, hurriedly, amidst widespread public condemnation at the lack of consultation. We must also bring to the nation's attention that the chaotic governance, in consort with a willingness to change the Natural Resource Fund rules on a whim, puts the nation's finances and economy at great risk, while also robbing future generations of the certainty that there will be resources saved to help them face their own challenges and opportunities in the future.

4.04 p.m.

The PPP/C is not accounting for a possibility of a prolonged price crisis, such as we saw during the 2014 - 2016 oil price crash or even the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, they have accelerated spending on infrastructure, which we all know to be a primary avenue used to place ill-gotten gains at the disposal of the PPP/C and its cronies masquerading as contractors. They are doing this because they know that this is either their last budget or their second to last budget. Additionally, the Government refuses to engage in any conversation about the interest payments received by the NRF, which we have pointed out are valuable sources of revenue, once the structure that facilitates sustainable spending is developed.

Your APNU/AFC Government in-waiting will be involved in sustainable spending while putting the improvement of the quality of life of the people at the centre of such spending. We are not opposing spending. We want it to be done properly and the people must benefit. This attitude of unsustainable spending carries over to the Investment Committee of the NRF. The PPP/C has still not appointed the Opposition's choice for the Investment Committee though I have reminded my Hon. Friend, Dr. Ashni Singh. Is it that they are hiding activities of the Fund which they know will be revealed once our representative is appointed? I am glad if it is not. Well, then appoint him. The NRF, with its hundreds of billions of dollars in deposits, cannot continue to drift along in the wind like a discarded \$20 bill. We must see action on this issue immediately.

I have remarked about the PPP/C's relentless thirst for plundering the treasury, but I must not neglect their similar enthusiasm for incompetence. The Government has

increased its Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) by nearly 60% without implementing the desperately needed governance reforms that would allow them to effectively manage yet another sharp increase in spending. Every day, we traverse the streets, there are more potholes than road or we witness some fresh calamity. How many more times will the Government have to rebuild the Grove Road before it is even? Half of the road is always higher than the other half and the Minister of Public Works has the audacity to say that the road is being affected because of large trucks traversing it. Obviously, a road which serves sand trucks must be built to the specifications, Mr. Minister, that will allow them to operate, unless the intention is to have the road deteriorate so that another contract can be awarded. The Hon. Minister of Public Works should take note that we are still building a lot of roads on the specification of the days when we had two-ton trucks as maximum. **[An. Hon. Member:** That is not *(inaudible)* Well, tell us. Why those same big trucks in the United States, *etcetera*, do not damage the road?

We in the Opposition are committed to the good governance of Guyana and will dedicate resources to hiring experts, consultants and thousands of Guyana's young people to conduct analyses and gather data. Right now, even the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service must surely be in the dark as to the unemployment rate or the rate of wage growth or contraction last year, since no official statistics are being regularly published. I tried my best to get the unemployment rate and I cannot. **[Mr. Mahipaul:** They are hiding it.] If they have it and they are hiding it, that is also sad. This is unacceptable and we need to see a renewed focus on gathering data and conducting analyses. There is a saying that you cannot manage what you cannot measure, and that certainly is the case in Guyana today. When I saw the Vice President saying that all we know to do is studies, *etcetera*, I was glad because it is the studies that we did which has allowed them to implement bridge and a number of other things. But the things they are doing now have no studies.

What we can measure, however, is the epic scale of the waste and *squandermania*. The PPP/C has refused to engage with International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that out of every dollar spent in the Public Sector Investment Programme, 41 cents are lost, and the IMF consistently urge governance reform. Last year, ignoring these necessary reforms resulted in \$172 billion in waste. And this year, the total will climb to over 1/4 of a trillion Guyana dollars. In fact, the PPP/C is borrowing approximately as much money

as it is wasting. This squandering of our nation's patrimony must not continue. This casual approach to enormous sums is reflected in the Government's handling of the audit of oil resources. The Government must commit to funding auditors, training auditors and hiring first class audit firms to examine offshore oil expenses. We saw Guyana nearly miss out on more than \$100 million that could be recovered, and the Government has demonstrated little interest in furthering the arbitration process that will reclaim these funds. Any patriotic government would have wanted to get those funds, to put it at the service at the people of Guyana.

On the other hand, the Government has again demonstrated its disinterest in the working people. That they could present a budget in excess of \$1 trillion while offering a minimal increase in the tax threshold is disgraceful and they should...Sorry, I cannot use 'be ashamed'. They should review it. Low to middle income Guyanese are paying tens of billions of dollars in taxes, while Government wastes money rebuilding roads over and over again. We reiterate our call for the tax threshold to be raised to \$150,000 immediately and for further large wages and salary increases, given the oil industries continued growth. Low to middle income Guyanese should not be paying taxes in a country that, adjusted for prices, has the 10th highest GDP per capita in the world. We must all bear, as a warning, the historic example of Equatorial Guinea, which once boasted both of a 75% poverty rate and a per capita GDP higher than Spain. The PPP/C does not like to think about poverty, hardship or the day-to-day struggle of business and so the idea of a large tax threshold increase would never occur to them. A reduction in the rate of VAT to 8% is also feasible, given the expected tens of billions of additional tax revenue for 2024. If this is done, it will also put billions in the pocket of everyday Guyanese, directly combating the cost-of-living crisis. Guyanese can look forward to a significant reduction in tax under the next APNU/AFC Government.

We believe that our country needs to democratise finance. That means increasing access to banking across Guyana, improving financial literacy and developing our local stock market. I spoke with an Economist at length, who is not PNC, on this issue. Industries in our hinterland regions made a significant contribution to the non-oil economy, but most banking requires gold miners, loggers and others to come all the way to the coast to deposit savings. This not only discourages savings, but it also hinders those local economies that could benefit from access to credit, which can only materialise if they are savings institutions. These should be complemented by mobile money and online

banking services. Of course, you will have to extend the internet properly and do not hide it from people. To facilitate such development, we can offer investment concessions to banks which open branches in hinterland regions, and these tax concessions will quickly pay for themselves in the form of increased growth and tax revenue across these regions. This is reflected in the lack of access to our stock exchange that is limiting the average Guyanese's ability to invest.

The few brokers that allow citizens to purchase stocks are concentrated in Georgetown, and they are hindered by a stock market that only trades once a week. These brokers should similarly benefit from tax concessions for establishing more branches across Guyana, but also be encouraged to develop financial products that serve the investing needs of average Guyanese. At this point, it would be remiss of me not to emphasise the need for financial literacy and a more focused thinking government attitude towards finance in general. Financial institutions have expressed distress at the fact that regulators are extremely slow to consider and approve new financial products, even where those products have clear benefits for the average Guyanese.

Retirement investments vehicles, such as target-date funds (TDFs), should be encouraged so that Guyanese can better plan for their future. This is a critical issue and I do believe the Government needs to revisit the pension that retired government workers are getting. They are nowhere close to liveable incomes. Our citizens must also be educated about the benefits of investing, planning ahead for expected life expenses and the general advantage of making use of the financial system. This must be introduced at high school level, but also at the University of Guyana (UG) and other high learning institutions through a deliberate Government outreach programme. As this economy changes, if our people are to benefit, their level of financial literacy has to increase, and it is incumbent on the Government to do that. The United States of America's (USA's) Federal Reserve highlights that 58% of Americans own stocks, often through varied financial products, where sadly, many Guyanese are not even aware that Guyana has a Stock Exchange. These policies and interventions will benefit Guyanese considerably with the Federal Reserve indicating that US households added US\$2.6 trillion in wealth in just one quarter last year due to the ownership of stocks. On the other hand, firms will no doubt be encouraged to list on a more developed Stock Exchange as well as those currently on the exchange benefit.

Similarly, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the expansion of banking and finance to those who lack such access can contribute to growth of more than 1% of the non-oil GDP annually. This is surely a low hanging fruit that the Government can pick. Even further, improving access to banking and financial markets will also provide an opportunity for Guyanese to increase domestic competition in the private sector. This is vital to help bring prices down during this cost-of-living crisis. We believe the Government should encourage this by, in addition to the above measures, providing the Small Business Bureau (SBB) far more resources for loans and grants. The minimal increases in loans and grants provided to small businesses demonstrate that the Government, sadly, has little interest in small businesses. We have also advocated the establishment of a national productivity bank, which should aim to finance productivity-enhancing efforts by medium to large scale businesses. It goes without saying that the Government must support the work of the Competition and Consumer Affairs Commission (CCAC), but we believe much more must be done in this regard. A deliberate effort to educate the public about the Commission as well as the dangers of anti-competitive business practices must be made.

4.19 p.m.

This should include reaching out to high schools, the University of Guyana, and the other institutions of higher learning, as mentioned above, with the goal of ensuring that citizens can recognise anticompetitive behaviour and are aware of how to report these practices. We recognise that protecting consumers is an important element of this commission's responsibility, but it also critical that we address the anticompetitive behaviour that consumers and businesses are complaining has kept prices elevated, even as some elements of imported inflation [*inaudible*]. Promoting an environment in which there is free and open competition is in the interest of business, citizens and our country, as a whole. We cannot allow local industries to suffer, rather, we must develop a culture of innovation and dynamism. I know that the Government is running from competition because competition tends to remove your power to allocate resources arbitrarily, but you should move in that direction.

It will be remiss of me if I do not point out that the national priorities in this Budget are misplaced, and in some cases not existent. The fact that *Budget 2024*, like those since 2020, is not guided by an integrated development strategy in plan is starkly evident. Had it been, it would have contained national budget priorities, but the Minister identified none.

Every expenditure was treated as equal in importance and necessity. As I move to conclude, the next APNU/AFC government will have the following national priorities:

Alleviating and ending poverty and a guaranteed liveable income: As a priority, not much needs to be explained here. The PPP/C ducks and ignores this critical national goal and instead hides behind the smoke screen of increased disposable income. But as every Guyanese knows, higher disposable income is a myth against the reality of high cost of living, increasing inflation and rising household debt. The APNU/AFC will treat this issue of ending poverty and guarantee a liveable income as a serious priority.

Two, combating the high cost of living: I do not think Mr. Speaker I need to go through this but to say to you that we need to combat the high cost of living and the APNU/AFC will do that.

The third priority is defence and security: How can the PPP/C Government neglect to speak about defence and security as a budgetary priority? How can the Government fail to treat defence and security as an integrated strategy, deserving special and holistic attention? One would have expected that spending on the following matters would have merited a dedicated section in the budget speech: a stronger military, enhanced diplomatic capability, more robust border protection, special programmes for border communities and a Venezuelan migrant resettlement policy, but not with the PPP/C shouting. None of those that I have mentioned can be found in the Budget. The Budget leaves much to be desired when it comes to the protection of our territorial integrity. Guyana faces threats from its eastern and western border, though less eminent from its eastern neighbour. Inattentiveness to our foreign policy has led to the downplay of diplomacy as our first line of defence. This short sidedness was evident from the delay in appointing ambassadors to two of our important border countries, the Federative Republic of Brazil (Brazil) and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (Venezuela).

It also appeared in the lack of diligence by our foreign service to remain unaware for more than one year that a sister Caribbean Community (CARICOM) nation had accepted a gift that degraded Guyana's ownership of the Essequibo. The failure of this CARICOM country to alert us to this occurrence in a timely manner raises questions about the suitability of that person to remain fairly engaged in a neutral way in the follow-up to the Argyle Declaration. We wish to inform this House that we do not have confidence in his leadership. It is not in the interest of Guyana for that

particular Prime Minister to be involved in the follow-up to the Argyle Declaration. Thank him for the service given before but let him move on. Our confidence that the seriousness of the Essequibo is fully understood by this Government is very low. This is a point of concern because the Budget does not give clear enough signals that all appropriate actions will be taken to place our citizens in a stronger position to invest and enjoy life in the Cinderella county. An appreciation of the potential of Essequibo as the largest region of our country must be in priority, being given its development and that of its residents. Where in this Budget is this priority reflected? Nowhere.

There is need for a clear strategy to engage Guyanese communities bordering Venezuela so that they are engaged, conscious, secured, trained, and committed to ensuring Essequibo continues to be part of Guyana. We cannot just hope. We must use the resources of this country to achieve these noble objectives. Merely saying that Guyana is 'we own' will not allow us to achieve those objectives. We need a plan to ensure Essequibo continues to be 'we own'. There is need for a well-designed-and-articulated economic diplomatic strategy aimed at promoting and protecting our territorial integrity and for the enhancement of the capabilities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation to implement such a strategy. We cannot sit idly by and allow Venezuela to use Petrocaribe dollars to undermine individual Caribbean countries' solidarity and support for Guyana against Venezuela. We are sleeping at the wheel. We must be of assistance to sister Caribbean nations in our time of plenty, as Trinidad and Tobago did in their time of plenty. To do that demands the careful management of oil resources so we can have an oil diplomatic strategy. Unfortunately, our oil resources are being mismanaged.

Skill development and job placement is our next priority: While *Budget 2024* highlights the problem of labour shortage, temporary employment and the mismatch between jobs and skills, and while the Minister does mention the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) and other Government training programmes, what is missing is the treatment of this issue as a national priority. One would have expected a cohesive and coherent plan that includes a national coordinating agency to achieve such objectives as skills upgrading, matching skills to job, measures to increase retention of workers, measures to increase women participation in the workforce, measures to expand apprenticeship scheme, and programmes to teach

fundamental numeracy and literacy. Plenty ideas for you to work on.

Five, increasing Guyana's share of oil revenue: The Government has made it clear that its position is to depend on the addition of new floating production, storage and offloading (FPSO) vessels as the sole means of increasing oil revenue for the country. We on this side of the House view it as a national priority to increase oil income through tighter audits and monitoring to prevent financial leakages, building our human capacity to monitor oil operation and the employment of expert firms to advise this Government.

Six, national teachers and workers. Many who sit in the Government benches are promoting the building of schools and hospitals as if it is the solution to the crisis in education and health. We on this side of the House believe – I want you to listen to this Hon. Manickchand – we on this side of the House believe there is a need for schools and hospitals. However, we believe the mere building of schools and hospitals and training of teachers and nurses will not solve the problem. We need to train and retain existing teachers and nurses through the provision of greater benefits, higher status, and the creation of a teaching environment propitious to children learning and teachers and other supportive staff in education being comfortable. That is what is needed. The same is equally true for nurses. In this regard, therefore, the next APNU/AFC government will establish a national taskforce for the training and retaining of teachers and nurses. Having studied the problems, the taskforce will be responsible for developing policies, programmes and projects to ensure we have trained teachers and nurses whom the system can retain. There is no sense in training for export.

Youth development: This Budget fails to adequately address the youth question. Our youth need to be prepared to take the opportunities that are emerging. Unfortunately, the youth is faced with many challenges among which are high levels of illiteracy. Many do not matriculate, making it difficult to obtain a job and they lack both the resources and access to the resources to invest and develop business. Those issues will be addressed as part of our people-centred development strategy. There will be an effective literacy and numeracy programme both in school and for those who would have dropped out of school. There is also a need for technical and vocational training in schools and at the community level. Our youth should be incentivised to attend these institutions. This must be complimented with a provision of jobs that offer a liveable income.

I heard the Hon. Minister say that these have been provided. I would like to see the amount of community based technical and vocational (tec-voc) programmes you have. There might be some in the school. What I am trying to say to you on the other side of the House, this issue cannot be addressed solely in the school because there are a large percentage of children who would have already dropped out of school and, therefore, we need programmes outside of the Guyana Technical Institute (GTI) at the community level to deal with these issues. These issues will be addressed as part of our people-centred strategy for development. In addition, there is need for a network of night schools across Guyana that will allow the youth to return to school and for those who completed school but failed to obtain Mathematics and English at the CXC to be able to obtain those subjects permitting them to matriculate. We must not sit here and just be idle. We have students out there with less than five CXCs without Mathematics and English and cannot get a job. Therefore...

[**An Hon. Member (Government):**
(*Inaudible*)]

Yes. To say that means you are failing. Sorry. Additionally, we will develop the youth in micro and small business programmes to ensure that the youth can access the resources he or she needs to venture into business. This programme will have a component to train the youth in financial literacy and small business management, to prepare them to utilise the opportunity we will create for them to venture into micro and small business. I must point out that these programmes existed when the APNU/AFC was in Government. Unfortunately, a certain minister who is firm and no content ended those programmes that were delivering significant benefits to the youth of Guyana.

Expansion of the productive capacity of the economy: The Government mistakenly believes mere spending on infrastructure will automatically lend to the expansion of the country's productive capacity. It will not. Spending over \$200 billion to upgrade and expand roads and villages in the community and elsewhere, as it plans to in 2024, sounds like the good thing to do but it will not correspondingly increase farm output, open new lands for industrial parks or increase access to new mining and forestry resources. These factors should be considered. This is what should be the focus, and the APNU/AFC's infrastructural development agenda will pursue these objectives. I must say infrastructure, as is presently structured, comes over as a slush fund to enrich the elite, the friends, the families and favourites.

4.34 p.m.

What Budget 2024 has failed to do is to include a set of unified measures to expand the capacity of the economy to

produce more goods and services and to reduce production costs and improve the quality of life of those who need resources more.

The APNU/AFC will, in a structured way, developed inter-regional highway and bridges to link the 10 regions, opening lands for agriculture, mining, industrial parks, forestry and in opening new vistas for tourism. Governance in this country is bad. I want to also point out that the Hon. Minister of Agriculture, in dealing with the contentions of the Hon. Member, Mr. Jordan gave us a set of projects that they are doing all over. We never said that you were not doing projects. We said your projects were not structured to create sustainable agriculture in the regions. That is what is needed. You can do the world of projects all around; if they are not geared towards the sustainable development of the region, of the community and of the people, it is a waste of time. I do not want to go into the comparative analysis between what was done in 2015, *et cetera*. I want to urge this House to begin to look forward, and look forward means progressing, not coming with retrogressive legislation, not coming with legislation to kill accountability and transparency as you did with the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). We need legislation that promotes democracy, we need legislation that promotes good governance. It is that that will carry us forward.

The Hon. Attorney General himself said that a country cannot progress if it does not have good governance. You have condemned this country not to progress because there is no good governance here. Governance in this country is bad. The Opposition is consulted only when the Government's back is against the wall, as recently occurred in the crisis with Venezuela. The Opposition has no access to the State media except when it is used by Government to vilify us. Our police have been politicised, misused, to institute trumped up charges against prominent political opponents, while refusing to investigate credible allegations of bribery against a sitting Vice-President.

Constitutional bodies are being brought under the control of the Executive. Institutions that should be independent are being brought under the control of the Executive. If you talk about democracy you have to speak about independent institutions. This Government has eroded the independence of every institution that it puts its hands on. Let us stop this nonsense. Fear, fear, Mr. Speaker, is instilled at all levels of our society, depriving people of their freedom of speech and association. Democracy is being eroded and we are hurtling from an authoritarian society into a dictatorial one. Good governance is needed if our society is to develop. I did not

come here to criticise the Government. I came here to say to the Government that a lot of its priorities are misplaced. I came here to say to the Government that the average man out there is not benefitting from the billions we are having. I came here to say to the Government that we can put resources to ensure our children get to school. What is the sense of having schools and the children cannot afford to go.

Mr. Speaker, I come here to say to you, implement a much better hot meal programme that gives our children at least two hot meals. Children who go to school on an empty belly will focus on hunger rather than the subject matter. It is incumbent on us to recognise that the power lies in our hands to decide whether our people will continue to live in poverty or get a proper standard of living. That is all we ask you for. At least I can assure you that I ask for nothing for myself, I ask you to serve the people of Guyana. I wish to close by saying to you, the people of Guyana, have no fear, have no problem. There is a critical and credible alternative, the APNU/AFC. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Leader of the Opposition. Before I call the next speaker, let me recognise Georgetown's first citizen, His Worship the Mayor, who has been with us for this afternoon, and also another from Marian Academy, but this time a primary school student, Mr. Manveer Sharma. We now call on the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, to close the debate.

Dr. Singh (replying): Mr. Speaker, the privilege is mine to rise on behalf of this our People's Progressive Party/Civic Government, to conclude this first half of the process of consideration of Guyana's national budget for 2024. In doing so, I wish to join you in welcoming the Sixth Form students from Marian Academy. I believe they are the Upper Sixth students. There might be some Lower Sixth students too. They are, of course, together with the other cohorts and batches of high school and, indeed, primary school students who joined us during the course of this debate. They are, of course, the future of Guyana. I anticipate that there will inevitably come a time when one or more of them, and I expect more rather than one of them, will be sitting in these very seats that we of today's generation have the privilege so to do.

They are living at a time when, as I have said on many occasions before, it is the best time in Guyana's history to be a young Guyanese person. They are living in a time when they and their parents are able to be better informed than any

of the generations that would have preceded them, not only because they live in the age of information and the age of instantaneity – the internet is now widely available – gone are the days when one is dependent on a radio report or a newspaper report that comes with a lag of 24 hours. Today we get information and news instantaneously. Immediately we get images delivered in our hands – in an instant. They and their parents enjoy this privilege which none before them have previously enjoyed. So they and their parents are far better placed than their grandparents and their great grandparents would have been placed in their time, to be able to form a judgement on matters of current interests. These young people and the rest of Guyana and the rest of the world just heard the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Aubrey Norton, regale us on the virtues of democracy, good governance, accountability, and transparency.

This very generation saw live and direct on their smart phones, in real time, the Parties that Mr. Norton now leads, attempt the most blatant, disgraceful, and vulgar attempt to derail democracy in this country. Anyone of them can *Google* Norton, Ramjattan, Nagamootoo, 33 is not bigger than 32. They can *Google* it now and they will see the videos of... I do not want to mention eminent legal counsel associated with an Hon. Member. He is not in the House, and he is not a Member of the House. His name is well-known, and his surname is well represented on a nameplate staring me in the face directly opposite. *Google* the name. An elaborate, intellectual explanation that 33 is not bigger than 32. [Mr. McCoy: And the British accent.] I do not want to trouble people about their accent and so on. That is a whole different discussion.

There are a couple of very interesting, and indeed entertaining videos on *YouTube*, of the then Prime Minister, Mr. Moses Nagamootoo, adopting – you know he has a particular tone of voice that he adopts – a particular tone of voice and explaining why you do not have a half of an MP. Do you remember him explaining to the world, you do not have a half of an MP and so, that is why 33 cannot be bigger than 32. The Sixth Formers of Marian Academy are more than capable of judging for themselves – they and their parents. So when Mr. Norton comes here... [Mr. Mahipaul: The Hon. Member, Mr. Norton.] ...the Hon. Member, Mr. Norton, comes here and adopts his accustomed stance of a lot of lofty sounding words, beautiful sounding words, and sound bites, lecturing the nation about the importance of good governance and accountability, the people of Guyana are more than capable of judging for themselves.

4.49 p.m.

When I presented the Budget on 15th January, I allowed myself – and I am still wrestling in my mind whether I should have or should not have – but I allowed myself to be distracted momentarily by some of the heckles that came from the other side. And heckling is a well-established tradition as part of parliamentary life, a well-established part of parliamentary life. I allowed my attention to be caught by it, and I responded to some of it. One of the statements that I made when I responded to the heckle that came from the other side was that when my mother sent me to school, I went to school. I want to return to that note because amongst the schoolbooks that my mother made me read and all of us in this House will recognise these books immediately, and we are now providing books in schools. [An Hon.

Member: (Inaudible)] I was not necessarily going to say *cheating donkey don't win* or, Sir, 'does not win' if you want to anglicise it a little bit. Sir, we would all be familiar with books like the *First Aid in English*, *Junior English Revised*, and *The Students' Companion*. I think generations before me, and even those after me... I see some of the young Marian Academy students smiling with recognition. I believe *The Students' Companion* is still in popular use. [An Hon. Member: Junior English too.] And *Junior English Revised*, I am advised.

In one of those books – I believe it is *The Students' Companion* – there is a list so there are all sorts of things: antonyms, synonyms, homonyms. There is a page and a section devoted to proverbs. [Mr. Mahipaul:

(Inaudible)] You read my mind. You read my mind with your customary perspicacity; you read my mind. There is a page in *The Students' Companion* that lists proverbs that we all learnt. A few stand out in my mind and came back to me during... [Mr. Mahipaul: You write it down there boy.] And I did write it down. A few came back to my mind, and I made a mental note of them during the course of this debate.

I will mention just three of them, and you will all recognise them. *The proof of the pudding is in the eating*. It does not matter how the pudding looks, it does not matter how the pudding might smell, it does not matter what you tell people went into the recipe of the pudding, *the proof of the pudding is in the eating*. Another proverb that came to my mind, and that my mother ensured that I learnt and committed to heart, is the following: Action speaks louder or rather *actions speak louder than words*. No matter the fancy words that are uttered... [Mr. Ramson: And the promises] ...and the promises that are made, what really matters are the actions

that are taken, the actions that are implemented or indeed the lack thereof.

The third that came to my mind is a slightly shorter but no less appropriate one, and that is as follows: *Talk is cheap*. I am not referring to the fact that telephone rates have reduced so dramatically, thanks to the liberalisation that they promised and we delivered. *Talk is cheap*, and so we were regaled over the past five days with a lot of cheap talk coming from the APNU/AFC, who regaled us with all sorts of grandiose ideas and plans, all sorts of intentions, all sorts of proposals. Sir, had we not known, we might have actually been hoodwinked and duped by these lavish promises, Sir, had we, including the Sixth Formers of Marian Academy, not known that these very people were in government for five years. For five years they had an opportunity. The Bishop used an analogy, my colleague Hon. Minister Edghill used an analogy about a couple, he used an eminently appropriate analogy about a couple, and promises that were made and never delivered, and when the couple now parts even bigger promises are being made. Sounds familiar? Sounds familiar?

I sat here today and my intention was to be brief, uncharacteristically brief, but my intentions at brevity got derailed by the... I will only mention a few presentations that we were regaled with today. We heard from the Hon. Member Ms. Catherine Hughes, former Minister of Public Telecommunications, I believe it was, who amongst other things, took issue... the Hon. Member Ms. Catherine Hughes regaled us with the standard menu of arguments that they have offered about the budget. She began, I think early in her speech, speaking about disparities between the hinterland and coastal educational outcomes – just to give one example. Sir, many of us would have seen my colleague, Hon. Minister Manickchand, already address this matter on social media where she pointed out, in a lengthy and very informative post that, first of all, a pass at the CXC does not mean or require a Grade I pass; that, in fact, Grades I to III are considered pass rates; that we have increased pass rates dramatically in the hinterland, including, to give you a couple of examples, in Aishalton from 22% to 67%, at Annai from 19% to 58%, at Sand Creek Secondary from 15% to 66%. Those facts are out there, and the Hon. Member Ms. Catherine Hughes must be aware of this but still comes back to this House to repeat the same tired argument that she and those associated with her have previously proffered; notwithstanding that they have been resoundingly debunked, they come back to repeat the same tired arguments.

One cannot help but remind oneself that this is the same individual, whom one should not perhaps be baffled by the fact that the Hon. Member will come to this House and repeat that same tired argument and package it as though she is telling us something new, because this is the very Member who, as a sitting minister, awarded contracts by her own ministry to a private company of which she is the principal, and went on to certify vouchers for payment. Let me read *Kaieteur News*. [**Hon. Members:** (*Inaudible*)] Sir, we are not in the least bit fed up with it. They do not want to be reminded of it, but the people of Guyana remember it. Let me read from *Kaieteur News* of 28th February, 2021:

“The documents, which were seen by this publication even show Hughes in one instance appearing to have personally approved a payment, with her signature...

...in 2019 *Kaieteur News* had reported Hughes categorically...”

...denied that she had used

“...her office or participating in the decision-making process that led to the award of a contract to Videomega Productions...”

In fact, Videomega Productions had benefited from a grand total of nearly \$19 million worth of contracts from a variety of government ministries, while the Hon. Member, as a sitting minister, continued to deny. So when they speak about friends, family, and favourites, they are judging us by their own sordid standards. They are judging us by their own sordid standards, but the People's Progressive Party/Civic is not the APNU/AFC and will never be, will never be. This morning... [*Interruption*]

[*Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, please. Hon. Minister Dr. Singh.

Dr. Singh: Sir, the Hon. Member, Ms. Volda Lawrence, came this morning, wringing her hands and speaking about polarisation in our society, speaking in a voice full of anguish on polarisation in our society, speaking about the need for a people-centred approach to government. On 30th November, 2018, the Hon. Member Ms. Lawrence, then I believe Minister of Public Health and no less than Chairwoman of the People's National Congress/Reform (PNC/R) – not a regular member – the incumbent Chairperson of the People's National Congress/Reform said,

‘The only friends I *gat* is PNC, so the only people I *guun* give *wuk tuh* is PNC. And right now, I looking *fuh ah dactah* who can speak Spanish or Portuguese and *ah* want *wan* that is PNC.’ Sir, *sha looken fuh ah dactah* who could *takk* Spanish or Portuguese but, more importantly, he *gat* to be PNC – *Kaieteur News*, 30th November, 2018.

5.04 p.m.

Young people of Marian Academy, all of whom have their smartphones in their hands, *Google* ‘Volda Lawrence jobs PNC’ and you will find 30th November amongst several others. I put to rest several others. This was widely reported. What is more is that when confronted with this statement, which was incidentally recorded so there is a video, the Hon. Member did not apologise; the Hon. Member did not deny making the statements publicly; and the Hon. Member did not address the criticisms received. I will quote from the *Kaieteur News*:

“Lawrence has not denied making the statements publicly and did not address the criticisms she has received as a result... Instead, a statement appeared via her ... Facebook page ... and indicated that she stands by her views on the issue of jobs and unemployment ...”

According to *Kaieteur News*, the Hon. Member is standing by her views. I am not going to get into the fact that the Hon. Member's signature mysteriously appeared on an electoral declaration for Region 4. I am not sure in what capacity her signature appeared on an electoral declaration for a region. I do not know if the Hon. Member was an electoral official. I do not know what role the Hon. Member was playing. I believe that matter is currently being ventilated in the courts of law. In case we are in any doubt about how intellectually bankrupt the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) continues to be in the Opposition as they were in Government, I want to share simple examples that all of the people of Guyana relate to. I am not going to get into complex arguments. The Hon. Member, Ms. Volda Lawrence, devoted at least 10 minutes of her speech to speak about the cover of *Budget 2024*, which incidentally includes Guyana's first new modern four-lane highway along the East Bank Demerara that has been constructed in decades. It is the first four-lane highway ever to be constructed along the East Bank Demerara, which currently serves almost 45,000 commuters every day and saves over a million manhours a month. The Hon. Member made an 11-course meal of this cover. Sir, I want to share with you what five years of the APNU/AFC's speech covers look like.

[The Hon. Member displayed a picture.]

They look like that. They made another 11-course meal about the theme. In 2015, they had: *Fresh Approach to the Good Life in a Green Economy*. In 2016, they had: *Stimulating Growth, Restoring Confidence: The Good Life Beckons*. In 2017, they had: *Delivering the Good Life to All Guyanese*. In 2018, they were still: *Transforming the Economy, Empowering People, Building Sustainable Communities For the Good Life*. I will not tarry for too long on this matter as the Hon. Member did. I cited only to illustrate that they unable to find any substantive argument against the Budget, resorted to trivialities. I do have...

[Mr. Norton: (Inaudible)] I am coming to you, Hon. Leader of the Opposition. Do not be anxious; you are not going to be left out, Sir.

There was a particular gem. It really is a small matter, but I cannot resist highlighting it. As the Prime Minister, a man for whom we have infinite respect approached the podium to deliver his speech, there was all sort of heckling about all sorts of things. Several Members on that side of the House endeavoured to attach to our Prime Minister – a retired general of the army and a distinguished retired military officer of high rank – sought to call him a rubber stamp. They are so intellectually bankrupt that they cannot even come up with an original nickname. They do not realise that the name rubber stamp will forever, indelibly and irreplaceable be associated with one man, the one and only, the original rubber stamp, Mr. Moses Nagamootoo.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member...

Dr. Singh: I withdraw, Sir.

They are incapable of coming up even with their jokes. Forget that they cannot come up with their own policy; forget they cannot come up with their own idea; and forget that they cannot come up with their own initiatives; they cannot even come up with their own joke, nickname and they want to run a country.

[Leader of the Opposition left the Dome.]

I see that the Leader of the Opposition has existed the House. I do not want to speculate about where the Leader of the Opposition has gone but I trust that he will return. I do not want him to feel neglected in my presentation. The Hon. Leader of the Opposition delivered, amongst his gems, much ado about the fact that I said that in 2023 we won two seats in Linden, whereas in the previous Local Government Election we won one. He made much ado about this. I want

to explain why this matter is a particular sore point. I want to explain why this particular matter was deemed to be... I want the young people sitting in this House, the young people watching on the television and through other media, to understand why really the Leader of the Opposition made such a big deal about this one seat in Linden. The point I made in the Budget Speech told a very – to borrow a phrase – an extremely inconvenient truth that the APNU/AFC are not prepared to face. That truth is that they were resoundingly trounced in this year's Local Government Election. It is because they were resoundingly trounced and because it was such an inconvenient truth for them. I will repeat it, Sir. We won 66 of the 80 Local Authority Areas that were in the Election in 2023. They won 14. Out of the 66 that we won, we won 13 by a no contest because they could not find a single candidate to represent them in those 13 areas. We won 906 seats in total and they won a grand total of 274 seats. Even where we did not win the majority of the council, we increased our vote and seat counts.

In Georgetown, we increased our seats from seven to 11 and they reduced their seats from 23 to 19. In New Amsterdam, we increased our seats from three to six and they reduced their seats from 11 to eight. In Linden, we increased our seats from one to two and they reduced their seats from 15 to 14 but, importantly, we won 2,464 Proportional Representation (PR) votes in Linden, six times the votes that we won in 2018. Everybody knows the mathematics; we are well on our way with those votes that we won in Linden. If one doubles it with another couple more, we will win, by virtue of those seats, another national seat in the National Assembly at the next general election. That is why they want to make light of this matter; they moved from one seat to two seats. I will tell you what, we have six times the number of votes – take that home. I do not want to say take that home. I think there is another proverb or saying that states, take that home and smoke, chew on it or something or put it in your pipe. We won six times the votes that we did in 2018 in 2023 and as the saying goes; *you can take that home and smoke it in your pipe*.

They have some old drums that they like to beat. The Hon. Leader of the Opposition spoke about the Skeldon Sugar Estate. The Opposition likes to cite the Skeldon Sugar Estate. No lesser person than the Hon. Vice President himself, just a few days ago, provided a detailed explanation that – I think was very important because sometimes we do not remember these things – where he pointed out and reminded us that we had contracted a world class company named Booker Tate Limited to be responsible to designing

and supervising the construction of the Skeldon Sugar Factory. When the Factory did not deliver on its expectations, we, the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government, prior to demitting Office in 2015, took Booker Tate Limited to court to hold it accountable for its failures in relation to delivering on its contractual obligations. That matter was ultimately subject to a first decision in the court of its first consideration in 2015. If I am not mistaken either mere days before we demitted Office or mere days after. It was around that period of April or May.

5.19 p.m.

The A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change who assumed Office in May, 2015, owe an explanation to this country why they discontinued the legal action against Booker Tate. Up to today, in 2016 the former Minister of Agriculture, Dr. Leslie Ramsammy, a former Member of this House - I am not speaking about the Vice-President's press conference last week or the week before, I am speaking about 2016 - wrote a letter that was published in *Kaieteur News*. In that letter, he said the Government and the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) rightfully tried to get Booker Tate, which was the contractor responsible for factory design and for completing land conversion, to take corrective action. When Booker Tate failed to take necessary corrective action, GuySuCo sued Booker Tate. That was not unjustified blaming; it was holding Booker Tate accountable. They were paid. They needed to deliver. Skeldon was not the wrong decision, Booker Tate made mistakes in the designs, some of which were reckless. I continue to quote, he says:

“Trotman, Professor Thomas, and others must explain why GuySuCo has not continued...”

Mr. Speaker: I know you are quoting but you are calling names of people in the quote who are not persons...

Dr. Singh: Sir, Dr. Ramsammy identified certain individuals whose names I shall not call because... as so closely associated and appointed by the APNU/AFC, including one who was a Chairman of GuySuCo. I think there was a period when it had two chairmen because they were confused. I think two boards have been appointed. Do you recall that thing where somebody had published... Anyway, one of them was a chairman of GuySuCo. The former Minister Dr. Leslie Ramsammy said these individuals must explain why GuySuCo has not continued the legal action against Booker Tate. Sir, he asked that question in 2016. We need to put this matter to rest, because those who are on that side of the House like to bandy this business about Skeldon. We went to

court; we took Booker Tate to court to hold them accountable for what they were contracted to deliver. The APNU/AFC failed to continue that legal action. [Mr. Ramjattan: Probably it had no merit.] I now hear Mr. Ramjattan trying to justify. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, said... I am not going to repeat the unparliamentary word that the Hon. Member used. To quote Mr. Ramjattan and to place him on record because the television cannot hear his heckle, I understand. Mr. Ramjattan in his heckle said, “Probably it had no merit.” I am dropping the word that we would not want our young children to repeat. “Probably it had no merit”.

A large project, at the time, the largest civil works project in this country; a project that would have transformed the sugar industry and kept the sugar workers in work; and a project that would have delivered 30 megawatts of electricity through the cogeneration plant. We went to court seeking to hold the contractors accountable. I am saying here in this House again what Dr. Ramsammy said publicly in 2016 and Vice-President Dr. Jagdeo said on multiple occasions since, the APNU/AFC owes this country an explanation, why they did not continue that legal action if they are so concerned about Skeldon? **[Mr. Ramson:** They were never concerned, Dr. Singh.]

The reality, as my good friend, the young brother, Minister, Mr. Charles Ramson said they were actually not really concerned at all, because they were in the habit of feigning concern but, in reality, they are not in the least bit concern. I am quoting Minister Dr. Ramsammy from 2016. Sir, may I address the young people through you? On 21st November, 2016, Dr. Leslie Ramsammy wrote a letter in *Kaieteur News*. The caption of the letter is:

“Skeldon was the right investment decision at the time”.

Google it, read the letter and see whether – we are in 2024 – if from 2016 to 2024 anybody in the APNU/AFC has ever explained why they recklessly abandoned that legal action. Up to today, they cannot provide an explanation, but they come here and they beat their drums about Skeldon. They beat their drums and they thump their chests as they are one to do, they beat their drums and thump their chest and they wring their hands about Skeldon workers and sugar workers and the poor people of Guyana, but the reality is that they do not care.

Another gem or another pearl of the Hon. Member, Mr. Norton's, presentation, when he spoke about planning, he cited an article published in *Americas Quarterly* on the progress being made in Guyana. The Hon. Member, in

particular, made reference to His Excellency, the President, ... If I am permitted, Sir, I am sure I can refer to His Excellency, the President, as he did. ...on this question of planning. He seemed to find it slightly odd that the President spoke about planning or evolving our plans as we go. The planning process as any of you... I do not think you need to be a nuclear scientist or a cardiologist or a neurosurgeon to know that. ...is a dynamic and living process. One does not make a plan and leave it down; a good plan cannot be a static plan. One plans; one works with his plan; one adapts, one adjusts, and one evolves depending on changing circumstances. There is nothing peculiar, odd or usual about planning. I believe we all plan as we go. We would get into our cars or we would walk on the streets, we would plan to go to a particular destination, we see an accumulation of traffic and we would divert to another route. We are planning as we go; there is nothing unusual about that. I am glad that Hon. Member raised this question about planning because much was said about the fact that there is no plan. 'There is no plan' was a common thread in their arguments. Let me say, for years even perhaps decades, we in this country have been engaging in successive processes to prepare plans and identify priorities.

Let us go all the way back to when Vice-President Dr. Jagdeo was Minister of Finance. We would all recall the widespread national process and consultative process, no less, that led to the preparation of a National Development Strategy. In fact, in those days the Carter Center provided valuable support to us because our Government institutions were so severely decapitated by the pre-1992 dictatorial years and years of destruction. The Carter Center having played a role in the restoration of democracy also played a role in rebuilding of institutions and development of this National Development Strategy. The National Development Strategy included chapters or sections on the environment, the deployment of our rainforest for the purposes of earning revenues and it spoke about carbon offsets. I will quote, *it will also promote international agreements on carbon offset for industrial pollution in developed countries as another source of compensation to Guyana for setting aside part of its natural resource base.* Does it sound familiar, Sir?

Today, with the intellectual leadership provided by the successive People's Progressive Party/Civic Government and, in particular, under the leadership of the then President, Dr. Jagdeo, we were able to conclude the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) which resulted in a bilateral agreement with the Kingdom of Norway and which resulted in an agreement which would see Guyana being eligible to

earn US \$250 million over a five-year period for the climate services provided by our standing forest. It resulted in our second-generation Low Carbon Development Strategy, the LCDS 2030, now with a more mature environment for marketing of carbon credits than existed in 2006 to 2009 period. The new LCDS came at a time when the market for carbon is emerging, spoke of the certification and marketing of our carbon credits. As a result of which, Guyana, under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government or with the political and intellectual leadership of this People's Progressive Party/Civic Government, became the first country in the world to obtain jurisdiction scale certification of our forest carbon, concluded a transaction with the HESS Corporation that totalled US \$750 million for the sale of only a part of our certified carbon credits out of which we are already drawing down proceeds from the sale of those carbon credits and out of which 15% of the gross proceeds are earmarked for our Amerindian brothers and sisters. In fact, they have already started to draw down on those resources.

In the interregnum, in the lost years of 2015 to 2020, that tragic interregnum, the APNU/AFC did not only put aside the LCDS, which laid the foundation to earn money, they put aside US \$135 million that had already been earned and could have been programmed for projects to benefit the Guyanese people. They put that aside too. If they felt to themselves different projects could have been financed, they could have reprogrammed the resources. As the Hon. Member, Ms. Rodrigues, said when she spoke, *'yuh gotta got sense fuh spend money'*. They parked US\$135 million. They did not touch it, parked it, did not even draw down on it and did not even design a single project. Those resources today are being used to execute land titling projects, drainage and irrigation projects that are benefitting the people of Guyana as we speak.

5.34 p.m.

They come here and claim to love our Amerindian brothers and sisters but not a single Amerindian village got its land title during the lost years of 2015 to 2020 – not one; not one. They claim to love our Amerindian brothers and sisters and they are full of ideas. I am going to come to their ideas in a minute though. They parked the Low Carbon Development Strategy and they came up with a Green State Development Strategy (GSDS). Sir, I hear my boy [*inaudible*]. They came up with the GSDS – a Green State Development Strategy. I not going to tell you. I am going to ask them to tell Guyana how much revenue this Green State Development Strategy generated for Guyana compared to our LCDS. Was it \$1?

We generated US\$250 million. Our new LCDS generated already US\$750 million. Did this Green State Development Strategy earn for Guyana US\$100 million, US\$50 million, US\$20 million, US\$5 million, \$1 million or \$5? The Green State Development Strategy did not earn Guyana \$5. Instead, it cost us. Instead, we, the taxpayers of Guyana had to fork out \$400 million to pay for this useless strategy.

Sir, it is a small wonder – small wonder, small wonder – that the man in the street considers the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change... I do not want to depart from this question of planning. So, we participated and led the process for the National Development Strategy (NDS). If we go back to the National Development Strategy which was a consultative document, let us talk about what it states on energy. I will quote only one or two sentences. Under Hydropower, here is what the NDS – a consultative national document, not a PPP/C document – prepared since the 1990s states:

“It would seem from the available data, that priority should be given to the development of Amaila, the utilisation...”

I am quoting from page 75, paragraph 7.1.4.4. of the National Development Strategy. This is not the People's Progressive Party/Civic's Manifesto. [Bishop Edghill: It is the National Development Strategy.] It is the National Development Strategy. [Mr. Nandlall: Dr. King worked on that document.] You would recall that there was another former Member of this House, the distinguished Dr. Kenneth King from on that side of the House. Dr. Kenneth King must be turning in his grave because of those who have now inherited the mantle of representing the Party that he so proudly represented on the front benches in this House. There must be a lot of graves being churned up now – such as the former President, Mr. Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham; the former Prime Minister, Mr. Ptolemy Reid; and the former Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Shripal Murray. These gentlemen must be turning in their graves to see the shadow that their Party, the People's National Congress (PNC), has become. I gather they have been fighting amongst themselves to see who is shadowing whom. These distinguished gentlemen would be turning in their graves to see the big, colossal disaster of a shadow they have collectively become. Let us move on.

The NDS also speaks about roads. I have not started to quote from the PPP/C's Manifesto. I will be there in a half hour, Sir. On roads, the NDS states:

“A north–south highway,”

I want you to listen carefully. I am not quoting the PPP/C's Manifesto. I am coming to it shortly. We all know this document well. I am quoting from the National Development Strategy. Here is what it states:

“A north–south highway, parallel to the existing East Bank Road will be constructed between Eastern Mandella Avenue and Soesdyke. There will be at least four east–west roads connecting the East Bank Road to the new highway.”

Does that sound familiar? Does that sound familiar? Guess what? We are making the road and they are making a plan. Another one goes on to state:

“The east–west national highway, that is the road between Georgetown and Moleson Creek would be much improved.”

[Ms. Manickchand: When was this thing written?] It was since the 1990s. It was since the 1990s when Vice-President Dr. Jagdeo was the Minister of Finance. He led this process. He led this process.

[Mr. Speaker left the Chair.]

[Mdm. Deputy Speaker, assumed the Chair.]

Vice-President, Dr. Jagdeo, led this process. He was subsequently invited by the Carter Center to visit a number of developing countries to speak about the planning process and the preparation of this National Development Strategy. I am delighted that Vice-President, Dr. Jagdeo, and the General Secretary of the PPP/C, is still very much in the leadership of the Government to see this plan delivered – to see this plan delivered.

Governing is not unskilled work. The Government is not about unskilled work or flying by night. It is not unskilled labour. There is no disrespect meant to all those who do honest unskilled labour in this country, but the Government like anything else requires a particular set of expertise. The NDS goes on. I can cite examples whether health, education, youth, infrastructure, and sector after sector. I can read for you the very projects that we are implementing today. When we were going through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative – as it was then called – to alleviate the burdensome stock of debt that we inherited from PNC's mismanagement during the pre-1992 dictatorship, we prepared a Poverty Reduction Strategy that replicated all

these priorities. To give you another set of examples, I am going to read the 2011 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), page 61. It has a section called, Production of Soya Beans and Cashew Nuts. Does that sound familiar? Does that sound familiar? It states:

“Another important sub-sector that holds potential for income generation and poverty reduction is the production....”

Listen to these words. Listen all the way to the end. This was in 2011.

“Another important sub-sector that holds potential for income generation and poverty reduction is the production of soya beans and cashew nuts...”

Listen to these last few words.

“...for export and stock feed.”

Does that sound familiar? Does that sound familiar, Minister, Mr. Mustapha? Today, we are delivering on this plan. We are delivering on this plan. We have not been planning – making plan after plan – and not implementing anything. We have not been changing course every day – deciding on one idea today, one idea tomorrow and random ideas.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker. We have been ‘Staying the Course’. As the People’s Progressive Party/Civic Government, we came into Government in 1992 as the PPP/C and we are still in Government as the People’s Progressive Party/Civic or PPP/C. Mdm....

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, in order for you to stay the course, you need an extension of five minutes. He does not?

Minister of Education [Ms. Manickchand]: The Hon. Member, in his rebuttal, is not limited by time. I will ask kindly that he be allowed to continue until he finishes without any time interruptions.

Motion put and carried.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Please, continue until you are finished, Minister.

Ms. Manickchand: Thank you.

Dr. Singh: Thank you very much, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. Mdm. On this same subject of planning, I brought with me three documents. I brought the People’s Progressive

Party/Civic’s Manifesto for 2020; and the APNU/AFC Manifestos for 2015 and for 2020. Through you, Mdm. Deputy Speaker, may I invite the sixth formers from Marian Academy and the generation that they represent today – all the young people of Guyana – to *Google* these three documents? In fact, make contact with my office and I will make the documents available if they cannot be found on *Google*. Ours is available but I can make them available. *Google*, the PPP/C’s Manifestos for 2020 and 2015, if you want, the APNU/AFC’s Manifesto for 2015 and the APNU/AFC’s Manifesto for 2020. I want to spend a few minutes.

[**Mr. Mahipaul:** (*Inaudible*) 100-day promise.] I am coming to the 100-day promises. You know I cannot miss it. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, through you, I cannot possibly miss the 100-day promises.

Before I depart from the subject of planning.... I am speaking to empty benches on the Opposition’s side. I hope the camera is focused not only on me but is panning the audience. In a customary fashion, the APNU/AFC speak and then leave. They speak and then they leave. [**Ms. Ferguson:** I am ‘Staying the Course’.]

I must give credit. I must give credit. I want to acknowledge the Hon. Member, Ms. Ferguson, for indeed being a demonstration. This is not the first time the Hon. Member has done it. The Hon. Member does stay to the end. For the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, I heard he was grumbling about another event earlier, but I see that he sent his apology and came back. There is Mr. Figueira and Mr. Sears – four out of 30.... How many AFC Members are there? [**Mr Bharrat:** There are two AFC members; one PNC; and one Civic.]

Anyways, I want the young people of Marian Academy to observe that too.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, through you, this National Assembly presents to the nation valuable information for people to form the necessary conclusions that they need to make decisions, including in 2025. Let us speak frankly. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I want to share with you some excerpts because you know a lot was said about these plans. I referred to some of our plans and I believe I illustrated to you that we are now in the mode of delivering on those plans. I think I made that point. All of my Colleagues who spoke before me abundantly illustrated this – whether they are the plans in the justice sector, plans in the education sector, plans in infrastructure, plans in health, plans in the national security sector, housing and water, human services and social security and agriculture. My Colleagues abundantly articulated how we are now in delivery mode. This

Government is in delivery mode. We are delivering to the people of Guyana.

5.49 p.m.

Let us examine... I have made several references... Anyway, let me move on. [Ms. Ferguson: *Inaudible*] Madam, there is a magazine called the *Reader's Digest*. They used to have little thing called, *Laughter is the best medicine*. You cannot miss a good laugh. If you want a good laugh, you can read the 2015 and 2020 Manifestos of the APNU/AFC. Madam, here is what they promised. I have selected some of their promises. Mind you, these are people who were waiting 23 years to get back in Government. They had 23 years to prepare for their return to Government and here is what they promised the people of Guyana, having spent 23 years planning and preparing for Government, on page 18,

“An environmentally and economically sound development strategy.”

On page 19,

“A truly integrated hinterland development plan.”

On pages 20 and 21,

“Region 10 Policy and Strategic Development Plan”

On page 22,

“Re-configure and improve the national planning framework and prepare a long-term National Development Plan.”

On page 28,

“Prepare a 10 year development plan...”

On that same page 28,

“...in the first instance, the commissioning of a feasibility study for mine development...”

On page 30,

“...roads and river transportation...”

Sir, for 23 years, they were pondering what roads and rivers... Madam, for 23 years, they were pondering which roads and which river transportation infrastructure to put in place. Now, with an opportunity to enter Government, they promised the people of Guyana a new road and river transportation masterplan. And then, because that was not

enough, on page 31, they promised a port master plan. They figured that they needed to fix the National Insurance Scheme (NIS). Notwithstanding that every three or four years an actuarial study is done on the NIS. But not satisfied with those, on page 35 they said that they will undertake an expert study to replace the NIS by a comprehensive compulsory... We are searching in the archives for that study, amongst others.

On education, I have a couple of gems. The Hon. Priya Manickchand will love these gems because they have made much ado that we are building schools. In 2015, here is what they promised the children of Guyana and there are children in this House. They said they will:

“Commission a study of the issues which lead to the alienation of boys and young men...”

Have you found the study? Mind you, we are not even asking them what they did to implement the study. Where is the study? *Yuh tek* 23 years to figure out that you needed a study. *Yuh tek* five years and *yuh ain't* deliver the study and you want to know why the people of Guyana sent you packing back to the Opposition benches. [Mr. Ramson: They were studying how to do the study.] Hear, that is not the best one. Turn the page to page 39. Do you know that they are talking about building schools here? Hear what these characters promised the people of Guyana... [Hon. Member: *Inaudible*] I *ain't* want say jokers. 'Jokers' may be unparliamentary, Madam. Hear what these characters that comprise this merry bunch that describes themselves, more recently, as the APNU/AFC promised. On page 39, we will,

“Commission a study...”

I *ain't* want you alone to listen. Students of the Marian Academy and Children of Guyana, the APNU/AFC spent 23 years in Government and as they prepared to enter Government, they promised the people of Guyana to,

“Commission a study to recommend a more appropriate configuration of school classrooms...”

Man, if you do not believe me, as they would say on the streets, page 39. [Mr. Ramson: A more appropriate configuration.] “A more appropriate configuration of school classrooms”. And hear *nah*, they spent five years and they *ain't done* the study, much less build a single classroom. Now I understand why they did not build a single school. That is because they did not finish the study to figure out how to configure the classroom. [Hon. Member:

(*Inaudible*) Madam, madam, madam. Mr. Norton puffed up his chest and said, ‘We are offering ourselves to the people of Guyana as an alternative Government. Because they had a study on the boys – I am going back now. They also promised on page 35 an expert study of the issues and causes of risky behaviours amongst boys and girls, now. They needed an expert study on the issues and causes of risky behaviours. The wise men and women of the APNU/AFC sat down and said that ‘of all the things we will promise the children of Guyana... [Hon. Member: (*Inaudible*)]

The document is here. Madam, I can see my Colleague, Minister Walrond, looking in disbelief. I know she has read their *Manifesto* before, but perhaps she involuntarily expunged it from her memory, or so forgettable it was that she promptly forgot it. I would not blame her for that.

Madam Speaker, they talked about Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Do you know what they promised the people of Guyana on TVET? They did not promise them a new technical institute, they did not promise better equipped technical institutes. Hear is what they promised the people. On page 40, they promised the people,

“...a plan for universalising a programme of Technical and Vocational training...”

Minister Robeson Benn, I see that you are feeling left out and neglected. On page 44, your predecessors as they were preparing to enter Office, Minister Ramjattan would go on to hold quarter of that portfolio... Minister Benn, on page 44 they promised to,

“Develop a comprehensive Public Security plan.”

But, because that was not going to suffice, they also promised on page 48,

“Development and implementation of a sustained national crime prevention plan...”

One was on page 44 and one was on page 48. I suspect there are two different plans. Former Minister Ramjattan said he left a big briefing book. I hope the big briefing book that he left for you included both the public security plan promised on page 44 and the national crime prevention plan promised on page 48. They did not prepare the plan themselves, the Hon. Member boasts, ‘We brought down the British Security expert to prepare this plan for it’. Attorney General, once again, you are demonstrating your legendary perspicacity because you are pre-empting my point. The point here is that the APNU/AFC is very talented with lofty sounding words and ideas, plans and strategies. [Mr. Ramson: Green

paper and white paper.] Green paper, white paper and every other colour paper. I am surprised they even entertained white paper. I understand that the national colour was changed to green. Anyway, put that aside. What was very interesting though... They said that they did not have oil money. They convened a panel of experts to help them draft their 2015 Manifesto. An entire chapter in that Manifesto was devoted to the question of financing. I do not want to misquote them. That chapter was rather loftily described as “Reaping the democratic dividend”. They described in detail how, without oil money, all their promises would be financed. The Hon. Members Mr. Ramjattan and Mr. Norton – you heard them speaking about what percentage of the budget, 20%, 40% and calling random numbers about what percentage of the budget will go into inefficiency and is being lost into inefficiency. Since 2015, the APNU/AFC and their team of self-appointed experts and co-opted experts had already quantified this matter. On page 46 says that they were going to,

“Reducing procurement fraud...”

This is part of this inefficiency that they spoke of. They were going to “Reduce procurement fraud”, estimated by a former Auditor General of Guyana, whose name I shall not call, but who I believe is very well known and is closely associated with Mr. Ramjattan. He said,

“Reducing procurement fraud estimated by Mr. Anand Goolsarran, the former Auditor General, to be about 28-35% of total procurement spending of G\$140 billion.”

[Mr. Speaker assumed the Chair.]

Mdm. Speaker, they spent five years. Let us say that, in year one, they did not eliminate this procurement fraud, let us say in year one. By year two or year three, they should have eliminated it, along with all of the other aspects of the democratic dividend. They spent five years in Government. Where is the so-called ‘democratic dividend’? Where is a single dollar of the so called ‘democratic dividend? Yet, you come back to the honourable House and you spew, repeat and regurgitate the same imagined arguments – regurgitating them, seeking to hoodwink the Guyanese people. Once again, where is this so-called democratic dividend that you were supposed to be reaping since 2015? Not a dollar of it can be found.

Mdm. Speaker... [Mr. Hamilton: Mr. Speaker.] Mr. Speaker, my apologies, Sir. If you look at what they

promised in their 100-day promises – significant increases for Government workers, including nurses and teachers in primary, secondary and tertiary education; security personnel; civil servants on their traditional payroll. They promised a 10% increase in the Wage Bill. They did not deliver that. They promised a phased reduction of value-added tax (VAT) and the removal of VAT from food and other essential items. What do you think they did? [Mr.

Nandlall: They imposed more.] They imposed more. What was zero-rated, they made exempt and made it more expensive because you could not reclaim your input VAT. They put VAT on items that were previously exempted and zero-rated. There was VAT on water; VAT on electricity; VAT on educational supplies; VAT on medical supplies; VAT on data. They took some items and moved them from 16%-14%.

6.04 p.m.

They took a long list of items and moved them from zero to 14% and they called that a reduction in VAT. No wonder the Guyanese nation called them out for their duplicity. The list goes on. They promised the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector and they did not bring into force their own Telecommunications Act that they passed in this House because, I daresay, Sir, of vested interests. They now claim to love the pensioners and they are championing the cause of the pensioners. Let me be crystal clear. What we will deliver to the pensioners – we said to the pensioners in 2015. You all do not even know what was going on. Half of you do not even know what was going on. Are you coming here to defend the indefensible, Annette Ferguson? You are laughing. You do not even know what was going on. There is no doubt about what we will be giving the old age pensioners. We did not hoodwink... In 2015, when we asked the old age pensioners for their votes, we said to them clearly on the cover of our Manifesto that, during this term of Office we will raise old age pensions to \$40,000 per month. We said that clearly on the cover and in the body of our Manifesto that we will raise all these pensions to \$40,000. And guess what, Sir? We are well on our way to doing that.

In contrast, in their Manifesto, they promised that they will double old age pension and public assistance immediately. Guess what? [Ms. Ferguson: Never said that.] I am quoting from your Manifesto. They said that they would double old age pension and public assistance, immediately. Guess what? [Ms. Ferguson: (Inaudible)] Alright, what did you say? Did you say that you will do it in five years? Tell me what you said. Take your pick. What did

you say? Find the language. She is laughing, Sir. For those who cannot see, the Hon. Member is laughing. First of all, she does not even know what they promised the people. But, secondly, she knows fully well that is what they promised the people. But let us say you want to give her the benefit of the doubt. You promised them that you would double it in five years. Mr. Speaker, they spent five years, and they moved old age pensions... Do you know what was the average increase over five years? Give them a little doubt, \$1475 a year. Every year, over five years, they raised old age pensions by an average of \$1405. [Ms. Ferguson:

(Inaudible)] That did not require oil money. You promised the people that on the basis of your existing resources. You promised the people of Guyana that without even knowing that we had oil.

When that Manifesto was written, we did not even know that we had oil. They did not know that we had oil. They promised the people of Guyana that without knowing that we had oil. Hoodwinking the people of Guyana, promising them to double old age pensions and failing to do so in five years. They come here and I am saying this, we have young people, intelligent bright young people in this House as our guests and they represent the generation of tomorrow. We have others who are watching us *via* social media, the Internet and online streaming. They are watching us too. I am saying this so that they understand because they are the future of Guyana, the true nature of both the People's Progressive Party/Civic and the APNU/AFC... Here is what, to our young Lindeners, Mr Speaker, if I may speak to them through you, the APNU/AFC... Mr Devin Sears, I believe is a Lindener, so is Mr. Figueira. Two young Lindeners are in the House. To their credit they are still here. I will address my two young brothers, who have the decency to still be in this House. It might get them in trouble. One man already got in trouble because he shook the President's hand. Sorry, my brother, if they knew how many times you shook my hand, I do not know what will happen.

Mr. Speaker, if I may speak to these two young Lindeners here under the APNU/AFC, who know that they made the bad choice a few years ago to associate, but I understand you are caught in a political trap and the momentum of your association with that side of the House. But do not worry, our doors are open to all. You are young. I am saying this because I heard some of the things that both Mr. Figueira and Mr. Sears said they wanted for Region 10.

Here is what the APNU/AFC... Mr. Norton puffed up his chest and talked about how much seats they won in Linden and Region 10 and so on and so forth. [Mr. Ramson:

Puffed up his chest and his belly at the same time.] Do not distract me here, Minister Mustapha. They promised the following, in 2015... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] Yes, I will never stop telling the people of Guyana. Mr. Speaker, in 2015, they promised the people of Region 10, a region I believe they like to consider or used to consider their stronghold and the region who you would have expected, having rewarded them with some votes, I think they won a majority in Region 10 in 2015 and have always historically won a majority in 2010, for 23 years having waited inter Government, and having been elected with the support of the people of Linden, here is what they promised the people of Region 10. One, well, of course, it had to be here, 'Create a strategic development plan for Region 10'. Mind you, they love Lindeners. They are talking to Lindeners and consulting with Lindeners every day. They claim to know Linden and Region 10. But, after 23 years, in Opposition, waiting to come into Government and after 23 years of support from Region 10 and Linden voters, clueless and incompetent as they still are, in 2015, getting ready to come into Government, they said to the people of Linden, 'Because we do not know specifically what is needed in Linden and Region 10, we will create a strategic development plan for Region 10. Sir, I do not know where the plan is. A fair number of people in Linden and Region 10 gave you their votes. Where is the development plan? I am not even asking you whether you delivered on the plan or implemented it. Where is the plan?

Anyway, it did not stop there. They said we will rescue and modernise the bauxite industry. A lot of people in Region 10 used to work at a company called Russian Aluminium (RUSAL). A lot of people from Linden, a lot of people from Ituni, a lot of people from Kwakwani a lot of people even from New Amsterdam in Region 6 used to work at RUSAL. Mr. Speaker, do you know who was the President of the Guyana Trade Union Congress (GTUC)? Is it President or General Secretary (GS)? I get these positions mixed up sometimes. Not Lincoln Lewis. Is Lincoln Lewis the GS? So, it is the President. [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*]

I am not calling Mr. Lincoln Lewis. I am clarifying to rule him out. Do you know who was the President? Not the position occupied by Lincoln Lewis, the position occupied by the other leader. I think it is the President. Do you know who the President of the Guyana Trade Union Congress is? A particular trade union is associated with the teachers' union – Ms. Coretta McDonald. The Hon. Member, Ms. Coretta McDonald and the others in the People's National Congress (PNC), including the then Minister of Labour, came together and harassed this

investor. Did nothing to facilitate conciliation and agreement between the investor and the workers and chased the investors out of the Berbice River, resulting in the closure of the bauxite...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister of Finance, you are now, imputing on an Hon. Member – 'chased out'...

Dr. Singh: Mr. Speaker, they presided over a situation that resulted in the ultimate departure of an international investor in the Berbice River, producing bauxite, ensuring that the Berbice River remains well dredged. Ensuring that more than 1000 families had an income –Ituni families, Kwakwani families and New Amsterdam families and they come here today, Sir, and say they love the bauxite workers. Where is your rescue and modernisation? Where are the results of your efforts to rescue and modernise the bauxite industry?

They said, thirdly, that they will invite and support foreign investment from reputable and known multinationals to develop an aluminium industry, not bauxite, not alumina, an aluminium industry. I do not know if they understand what is needed for an aluminium industry. Sir, where is the investor? As a matter of fact, where is the plan? They said they will create new jobs. Do you know what they did? They closed the call centre and put nearly 200 young people out of their jobs. I think it was Mr. Sears or Mr. Figueira who correctly spoke about the vast potential and incredible importance of agriculture to Region 10 and, of course, to all of our regions. Here is what the APNU/AFC, your party, and you are young members and I understand neither of you was in Government during 2015 to 2020. But here is what the party with which you are now associated, through you, Sir, the party that the Hon. Members, Mr. Jermaine Figueira and Mr. Devin Sears, are campaigning for votes for APNU/AFC in Linden and in Region 10, Sir, that party went to the people of Region 10 in 2015 and told them the following: 'We will develop 200,000 hectares of the intermediate savannahs for citrus, cattle, legumes, vegetables as the country's second frontier to agricultural development'. Talk is cheap. I invite the Hon. Members to go and search. We are not going to ask them to find all 200,000 that their party promised their people, the same people in Region 10 that Mr. Sears and Mr. Figueira are being asked to go and asked to vote for the APNU/AFC. The same people that Mr. Norton is asking you to go and tell to vote back for the APNU. The PNC is easier to say.

6.19 p.m.

The same people that he is asking, the two Hon. Members and others to go and say to them vote back for APNU, go

and talk to them and ask them and say, 'Help *meh* find this...' not 200,000. We *ain't gon* press he too hard. We *ain't gon* ask for 200,000. Ask for 2,000 or 200, except for that set up at Millies Hideout. How much did that gentleman... [An Hon. Member: (*Inaudible*)] Was it 400 acres? At Millies Hideout or however much. Mr. Norton is asking young Members of Parliament (MPs), including Ms. Ferguson. He is going to send her to Linden, and he is going to ask her to tell the Lindeners to vote for APNU. Five years ago, or eight years ago, he promised the Lindeners or his party promised the Lindeners 200,000 acres. He *ain't* develop none. Guess what? We are delivering, not only the promises we made but anything that is in the interest of development of the country and in the interest of the people of Guyana. We will deliver. [Bishop Edghill: We built the conservancy for the first time in years.] That is correct. The APNU/AFC promised:

"Develop the Tiger Falls and other hydroelectric potential..."

Where is the 'Tiger Falls hydroelectric potential'? Where is the hydroelectric falls potential plant at Tiger Hill or wherever else?

"Promote furniture manufacturing..."

Where are the furniture factories? Minister Manickchand, I see you are shifting in your seat. You probably know what is coming up. Mr. Speaker, through you, I want to address Mr. Jermaine Figueira, Mr. Devin Sears, Ms. Anette Ferguson, Mr. Christopher Jones and Mr. Dineshwar Jaiprashad, the young APNU/AFC MPs. They will ask you all to go back and ask the people of Region 10 to vote for them in 2030. But guess what? In 2015, they asked some of you and others like you, other party members or other candidates, to go to the people of Region 10 with this Manifesto. Hear what they promised the people of Region 10:

"Establish a University of Guyana campus in Linden offering courses relevant to the developmental needs of Regions 7, 8, 9 and 10."

It is not one region alone. Mr. Speaker, you know me. I cannot resist repeating that. Forgive me for violating that particular Standing Order that admonishes us not to commit the sin of repetition. Sir, permit me. On page 21, point 11, the APNU/AFC promised the people of Region 10, and, in fact, the people of Regions 7, 8, and 9 too:

"Establish a University of Guyana campus in Linden offering courses..."

It is not just general courses:

"...offering courses relevant to the developmental needs of Regions 7, 8, 9 and 10."

Forget that piece about what kind of courses. Show me the campus. Where is the campus? When Dr. Cheddi Jagan started the University of Guyana, he did not build a big building. He started at Queen's College. They used to derisively call it Jagan Night School. The University of Guyana was started in the evenings in the Queen's College building. They have plenty buildings in Linden. Show me the University of Guyana campus in Region 10. You are sending Mr. Devin Sears, Mr. Jermaine Figueira and Ms. Anette Ferguson to go and tell the people of Region 10 they must vote for you again. No wonder we got six times as many votes. You wait for 2025. We will demolish you in the same Region 10, because the people of Region 10 will not forget you and they will certainly not forgive you. Sir, not to be outdone... [An. Hon. Member (Government): You got to show them people we (*Inaudible*) boy.] Plenty more. Sir, not to be outdone, they also had promises for our hinterland and Amerindian brothers and sisters. I will mention five of those promises. This is what they promised to our Amerindian brothers and sisters:

"An environmentally and economically sound development strategy..."

They rather vaguely worded:

"The economic empowerment of Hinterland people with requisite capital resources and capacities for agricultural development; housing and road construction; manufacturing and services."

Even the Hon. Member, Minister Manickchand is mesmerised by this lavish verbosity. Do not worry. There was also:

"A truly integrated hinterland development plan..."

It is not an ordinary hinterland development plan but a truly integrated one. They also promised:

"The development of the Indigenous Peoples..."

In such a manner and on such terms that do not force those citizens to migrate from their communities. They promised:

"Firm policies, legalities and standards of best environmental practice..."

Mr. Speaker, putting aside this incomprehensible verbiage – and I am trying to be polite here – what did they deliver to the Amerindian people? They terminated the Community Service Officer (CSO) programme and put more than 1,000 young Amerindian boys and girls out of work. They abandoned the land titling programme and did not give any village their land titles. They suspended the Low Carbon Development Project (LCDS) and did not disburse the LCDS resources through the projects that were intended to benefit the Amerindian communities and collapsed the One Laptop per Family (OLPF) amongst others, and the list goes on. My point is that the APNU/AFC now enjoys everlasting notoriety for grandiose promises, even if many of those grandiose promises are unintelligible. They now enjoy – as they fully deserve – eternal and everlasting notoriety for lofty words, grandiose plans, and delivery of nothing at all, and they want to know why the people of Guyana sent them packing in 2020. Every single sector of the economy – and I cannot let this pass – was destroyed by the APNU/AFC while in Government and they come here and try to rewrite history. Let me give you, Sir, a few examples. Let us take sugar. Let me tell you what they did to sugar. In 2014 – and I am only going to give two examples – the last full year that we were in Government, sugar production was 216,186 tonnes. In 2015, a year in which they were harvesting canes that were planted by us in 2014 and a year in which we spent almost five months in Government, total sugar production was 231,076 tonnes.

I recall their former Prime Minister, now permanently associated with the word ‘rubber stamp’, thundering the following words, ‘Sugar is back’. Do you remember those words, Hon. Seepaul Narine? The front page of the newspapers read, ‘Sugar is back’. Do you remember those words Hon. Members? He thundered, ‘Sugar is back’. [Mr. Mustapha: It turned around.] ‘Sugar has been turned around in seven months by the APNU/AFC’. Alas, in 2016, the first year that they were in Government for the whole year, sugar production was 183,000 tonnes. In 2017, it was 137,000 tonnes; in 2018, it was 104,000 tonnes; in 2019, it was 92,000 tonnes; and, in 2020, a year that they were in Government for almost eight months – seven months and a bit – *albeit* illegally, sugar production fell to a paltry 88,000 tonnes. Sugar production, under their watch, fell from 231,000 tonnes to 88,000 tonnes. That was their legacy in sugar and that was their legacy for sugar workers.

Do not bother with the fancy words. I mean I *does* use one and two fancy words every now and then, so I do not have anything against fancy words. Do not bother with the fancy

words. What did they say? ‘We are rightsizing’. What were the other words, Cde. Narine? ‘We are shuttering’, not closing down. Sir, the words, ‘Closing down the sugar estates’ were not good enough for them. They said, ‘We are shuttering these estates, and we are rightsizing the industry’. Sir, fancy words for sending more than 7,000 sugar workers out of work, taking the incomes away from more than 7,000 families who were directly dependent on the industry, and tens of thousands more, and catapulting those communities – not those workers – into deep, harsh and cruel poverty. [An. Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] That is correct. Do you know how many children could not go to school because their parents could not afford to anymore? Do you know how many corner shops were closed? Guess what? In their typical style, they commissioned a Commission of Inquiry (COI). Look, the COI Report is here.

[The Hon. Member displayed a document.]

Mr. Speaker, they commissioned a COI – a Commission of Inquiry on the Guyana Sugar Estate (GuySuCo). Their own COI did not recommend closing the industry. They threw away the COI Report and shuttered the estates. That is replicated across every sector.

6.34 p.m.

Let us take timber. In 2014, the last year that we were in Government for a full year, Guyana produced 531,000 cubic meters of timber. Sir, I want you to listen to this trajectory. In 2015 – 530 came down to 457; in 2016 – 457 came down to 353; in 2017 – 353 became 377; In 2018 – 377 became 385. In 2019 - 385 became 371 and in 2020, it went down to 344,000 cubic metres. In other words, over the five years of APNU/AFC Government, the aggregate production of the timber industry moved from 531,000 cubic metres to the grand total of 344,000 cubic meters, a complete collapse, bankrupting the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC). They have a member who was on the board. He came here and pontificated on all manner of things, but he presided over the bankrupting of the Guyana Forestry Commission and the destruction of the forestry sector. Do you know what that did to the economy, Sir? They spoke about sugar exports, but they did not go back long enough. In 2014, Guyana exported US\$88 million worth of sugar. Do you know how much we exported in 2020, Sir? From US\$88 million worth of sugar exports, we exported US\$24 million worth of sugar in 2020. They came and talked about value-added and all sorts of fancy words. In 2014, we exported US\$53.4 million worth of timber products. By 2020, timber exports totalled US\$27.7 million. It went from US\$53.4 million to US\$27.7 million.

Imagine decimating the forestry industry by half. This story was replicated over and over again. We heard that they did not build any schools, any new hospitals and they are not embarrassed to claim the Liliendaal Infectious Hospital that they left for us. Every sector was left in disrepair.

I want, as I come to the second half of my presentation... Mr. Norton spoke a lot. Let me see the direct quote. He spoke a lot about the ordinary Guyanese family. He said that we need to listen to the people. He said that we are anti-middle class and anti-working class. He said that the APNU/AFC offers itself to the people of Guyana as an alternative government. He said that the budget does not help the people. My colleagues have more than adequately addressed their respective sectors. I want, like I said, as I start the second half of my presentation, to zero in on just about two or three particular measures and to use, because of what I believe will be its effectiveness, the medium of a typical Guyanese family to illustrate what the APNU/AFC did to the typical Guyanese family and what we have had to repair and restore. I am not going to focus on the 200 taxes and all of those other things. I am going to focus on just... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)* provide *(inaudible)*] We do not need to provide it. Your own budget speech ... Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member came to this House and asked a question about which speeches... [Ms. Ferguson: *(Inaudible)*] I did answer it. I said that this information is already in the public domain. Do you know where it is, Sir? Their budget speeches had an Appendix VIII or IX. It was about 10 pages long. I have it here: the list of fees and fines being increased.

Sir, if you see Appendix VIII or IX of the budget speech during the APNU/AFC time. There was a nine- or 10-page annexe listing fees, fines, charges. [Ms. Ferguson: Those were *(Inaudible)* taxes.] Fees, fines, charges and other government imposts were all increased. [Ms. Ferguson: If 40 years ago the donkey cart used to be \$5.] The Hon. Member is proud to remind us that they even increased the fee on the donkey cart man, and you said that you are concerned about the ordinary Guyanese. Of all the people in the country that you looked to tax more... They claim to be the champions of the working class and they chose... of everybody in Guyana, they did not leave out even the donkey cart and the horse cart man. Even the hucksters fee got increased, whether pushed, animal drawn, or man powered, like a man pushing the cart. Even the pushcart fee... [Bishop Edghill: Even the snow cone man.] Even the snow cone man fee. Them snow cone man still out *deh*. They come here and they believe that the Guyanese people have forgotten.

I do not want to allow the Hon. Member to detain this second half of my presentation. Mr. Speaker, I crave your indulgence because what I am about to discuss is, in fact, a very serious matter. Let us focus on two or three critical measures. The APNU/AFC in Government very famously took away the one-month bonus that we were paying to members of the Disciplined Services. I want these Hon. Members who are sitting... They are all young people. They are Guyanese and they are all young people. They may be APNU/AFC, but they are Guyanese first and foremost. I want them to understand what they are being asked to defend. I welcome the continued presence of some of our young brothers and sisters, sons and daughters from the Marian Academy and all those who have stayed with us online. I want these APNU/AFC Members – the Hon. Member, Mr. Jaiprashad, the Hon. Member, Mr. Jones, the Hon. Member, Mr. Figueira, and the Hon. Member, Mr. Sears – to understand what their party... because I do not think that the trauma that they wrought on the Guyanese people is fully understood. They come here and they say that they love public sector workers. They gave them 77% increase.

Let us examine what they actually did to the very public sector workers. I am not coming to the private sector. Let us deal with the one-month Disciplined Services bonus. We have to pull it apart to understand. They very famously said that this was a bribe to the soldiers and the police and that they would discontinue it and they would give them a salary increase instead. They discontinued this one-month bonus. By taking away the one-month bonus, at 2015 salaries – I am not going to adjust the 2015 salaries – they took away a total of \$4.2 billion from our men and women in uniform. That number might sound like a big number. Maybe, you cannot relate \$4.2 billion at the individual level.

Let us talk about actual ranks. Through you, Mr. Speaker, a lot of these Hon. Members have relatives who are policemen, soldiers, firemen and prison officers. Let us talk about actual ranks and positions in the Guyana Police Force (GPF) and what taking away that bonus meant to those people. Over that five-year period, at a 2015 salary of \$63,683, they took away \$318,415 from every single Police Constable in Guyana. I am not going to the Commissioner. It was five years and one-month bonus. The salary, to be absolutely precise, was \$63,683. It was a one-month tax free bonus. From every Police Constable, they took away \$318,415. That is what their party did to every Police Constable and there are many Police Constables.

Do you know what you did to every Corporal? None of you really occupied any senior position in government. You have to understand why you are sitting over there and what your party did to the people of Guyana. There are a lot of Corporals. All of us know plenty of Corporals. They are our friends; they are our brothers; and they are our sons. At a monthly 2015 salary of \$77,106 for a Corporal, over a five-year period, they took away \$385,530. from every Corporal.

Let us go up the ranks to Superintendent. At a 2015 salary of \$156,831, over that five-year period, the APNU/AFC took away \$784,000 from every Superintendent of Police. These are not extravagantly paid people. Every Senior Superintendent, at a salary of \$197,482, when they lost their one-month bonus, the APNU/AFC took away \$987,410. Do you understand why you all are sitting over there?

Let us turn to the Army. For a Private Soldier – I am not talking about the Chief-of-Staff – at a salary of \$62,162, over a five-year period, the APNU/AFC took away \$310,810. Imagine every Private, youngsters who just joined the Army and who worked hard whole year, trained, defended their country or prepared to defend their country. At the end of five years, thanks to the APNU/AFC, they were \$310,810 poorer than if the PPP/C were in government.

6.49 p.m.

A Petty Officer would have lost \$444,185 over that five-year period. A Lieutenant, Sir, would have lost \$777,000. This might be a Lieutenant Colonel, actually. It cannot be a Lieutenant Colonel because they would be paid more than a Major. Sir, a Lieutenant – not a big rank like full Colonel – being paid \$155,546 at 2015 salaries...Every single Lieutenant, APNU/AFC pushed their hand in the pocket of that Lieutenant and took out the equivalent of \$777,730 – five years' worth of one month's salary.

Sir, if we go to Major...I said let me choose different ranks. You have to understand why you all are sitting over there and why they have you wasting time over there. You got to understand the nature of this party called the APNU/AFC and why those who sit on the front benches have consigned you...They are sending you all to Linden and they send you all over the country to ask people to vote for you. You have to understand the nature of this party, the APNU/AFC. Do you know what they did to every single Major in this country? A Major, in 2015, was working for \$224,851. The APNU/AFC said *tek* away *de* one-month bonus; its PPP/C bribe. The APNU/AFC literally pushed their hand in every Major's pocket and took away \$1,124,255.

And they come now, and they say they love public servants, and they love young professionals. These are young professionals, as Minister Manickchand just said. These are people who have just completed their training and they are now being promoted. They come now and they say that they love young professionals, and they love young people. The party that sits on the opposite side from us did that to every single Constable, Corporal, Superintendent, Private, Lieutenant, Major and every other – from Constable to Commissioner and from Private to Chief-of-Staff. I did not go to how much they took away from an Assistant Commissioner of Police and how much they took away from every full Colonel. I stopped at ranks below those levels. That is like taking away a whole car from some of these people, and you want to know why you are sitting over. You have to understand why the people said that they were sending you back to the opposition benches. Do not cry your *crocodile tears* and pretend to love the people of Guyana.

They did not stop there. As we also know, they also took away the 'Because We Care' cash grant. Forget the increase. We increased it after we reinstated it. At the 2015 level of \$10,000 per child, they took away a total of \$8.5 billion from the parents of school-going children. Sir, you imagine what that meant over a five-year period. If you had three children at school, that was \$30,000 every year. Over a five-year period, that was \$150,000. Every single family that had three children at school, they took away \$150,000 from them. Do not forget, of course, as Minister Indar reminded us, that the family then still had to replace that \$150,000. It did not stop there. Doctors and other professionals, including public servants in the Ministry of Finance, who were on contract gratuity, they said that they could not be on contract gratuity. They put them on the fixed establishment. Sir, that meant a 22.5% loss in their income because they stopped getting the gratuity. They also very loftily said that there would be no more salary *in lieu* of leave. Use it or lose it, a rule that apparently applied to everybody except the Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley.

Let us take a typical Guyanese family. A husband and a wife. Let us say the husband is a Police Inspector who is 35 years old. Hon. Mr. Sears, I want you to picture this. There are a lot of families like this in Linden, in New Amsterdam, in Corriverton, in Parika, in Mabaruma and in Lethem. Imagine this family, a very typical Guyanese family. The husband is a 35-year-old Police Inspector. The wife is a Government Medical Officer (GMO). She just graduated as a doctor, and she is 30 years old. The father-in-law, who is the wife's father, is a pensioner. He is 65 years old. The

young couple lives downstairs. The policeman and the GMO live downstairs and they have three children going to school. The wife's parents live upstairs. Her father is a 65-year-old pensioner, and her mother is still a civil servant. Let us say she is a Principal Assistant Secretary (PAS). We all know, those of us who serve in government, what a PAS is. Let us say she is a PAS, the rank just below, I think, Deputy Permanent Secretary (DPS). She is a Principal Assistant Secretary. She is 52 years old. This family took a loan to buy this house and they were benefitting from mortgage interest relief. The young couple was also planning to buy a motorcar to be able to take their children to school and to move around. Three of them have degrees from the University of Guyana. The policeman has a Degree in Public Management. The wife, of course, is a UG-trained doctor, and her mother has a Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting. They are all proud UG graduates, who financed their education with a student loan granted during the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government of pre-2015.

Then, APNU/AFC went into government. They took away the policeman's one-month bonus. They took away the contract gratuity for the doctor and the contract gratuity for the PAS Finance. They took away the salary in lieu of leave from both the doctor and the PAS Finance. They took away the cash grant from the three children. They put on back the Value Added Tax (VAT) on electricity and water because they took away those subsidies and the metres are in the father-in-law's name. He lives upstairs and he owns the house. They took away their mortgage interest relief. So, they now no longer benefitted...or they cut the mortgage interest relief by reducing the ceiling. Look at pettiness and vindictiveness. You came in and you met a ceiling of \$30 million. You cut it to \$15 million. You cut it by half. Do you not have to be petty and vindictive? Put aside everything else that they did. Put aside the fact that they (*Inaudible*). Well, I will come to the other thing. Mr. Speaker, if you quantify the loss of the bonus that the Police Inspector would have gotten...Sir, the Police Inspector, over that five-year period, lost \$545,570 at 2015 salaries. I held the salaries constant. At 2015 salaries, he lost \$545,570 over the five-year period. Obviously, it is more because salaries went up gradually over the five-year period.

Mr. Speaker, the contract gratuity and the salary *in lieu* of leave that was taken away from the GMO for that period came up to \$4,530,410. Anybody can calculate it. For the mother-in-law, the gratuity that was taken away from her and the salary *in lieu* of leave that was taken away from her came up to \$3,664,500. The cash grant for the three children,

over a five-year period, came up to \$150,000. For three children at \$30,000 a year, it was \$150,000. The VAT on electricity and VAT on water over the five-year period together cost them an additional \$70,560. The reduction of the ceiling on the mortgage interest relief resulted, over that period, in an additional tax bill or less tax relief of \$132,000. Sir, when you add those figures up, this very ordinary Guyanese family, very average, very typical, all of us know families like that...When you add all of those benefits that were taken away from them, APNU/AFC, over that five-year period, took away from this very ordinary Guyanese family a grand total of \$9,093,040. Do you know what it is to take \$9 million out of a household like that? Mr Speaker, do you know what it is, over a five-year period, to take away \$9 million from a family, a very typical Guyanese family?

Sir, that is what the APNU/AFC did. The young MPs who were sitting at the back there, and who are being told to go out and ask people to vote for APNU/AFC, and the young voters who are watching, some in the House and some online, need to know and understand that is what the APNU/AFC... They had nice words: we love the people of Linden; we love our Amerindian brothers and sisters; we love all working people; and we love the public servants. They had beautiful words, just as they have now, but when they went into government, from an average Guyanese family like that, they took away \$9 million. Sir, they did not stop there. Do you remember that I said three of those persons were UG graduates and they financed their studies with a University of Guyana student loan? Mr. Figueira, you need to be aware of this. Those three people in that household who were all UG graduates and who financed their studies with a student loan, do you know what your party said to these three people and to 17,000 more UG graduates? I turn to *Kaieteur News* newspaper dated 12th June, 2016, Sir, the article is headed, *List of names who failed to repay Guyana*. It stated:

“A forensic audit...”

They love these.

“...into the University of Guyana's Student Loan Agency (SLA) has revealed that from the year 1994 to May 2015, some 17,567... student loans were deemed delinquent because students were not honouring their indebtedness.”

Sir, they went on. They, first of all, sought to accuse the PPP/C.

“...during that same period, the Government of the day – the People’s Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) had approved...\$9,489,453,973 through the National Budget...”

This was to finance these student loans. Yes, we did. We did approve \$9.5 billion to finance student loans for these individuals, for 17,000 Guyanese persons will be able to get a student loan and get their degrees.

7.04 p.m.

Yes, we did. The article went on. It stated:

“...a notice was published...”

They were now in Government, and they loved the working people of Guyana. We have a lot of supporters, far more than half of this country, but I do not think anybody would suggest that these 17,567, to be precise, UG graduates were all PPP/C members, PPP/C executive members or, worse yet, PPP/C ministers who gave themselves scholarships and student loans. These were very ordinary Guyanese people. Do you know what the party you are now being asked to represent did, Mr. Figueira, Mr. Devin Sears and Mr. Jaiprashad? Hear what it did:

“...a notice was published on the Ministry of Finance website last Thursday where the Ministry is now asking students to settle their debts.

The notice stated that students must be reminded that repaying their loans is an obligation that must be honoured.”

It went on. There were a lot of names. I am not going to call the names. It had a big *exposé* of names; PPP/C names, PNC names, including members of this House on the opposite side. The names were all listed there. There are some names from our side. It was a big *exposé*. Let me quote from *News Source Guyana*. The lists were published to embarrass people, 17,000 ordinary Guyanese. You owe the government money; come in and pay. Let me quote from *News Source Guyana* on the 29th July, 2016 of the same issue.

“Jordan made it clear...”

They are referring to my predecessor in office, former Minister, Mr. Winston Jordan.

“Jordan made it clear that no decision was taken by Cabinet to have the passport of debtors stamped but said...”

Listen carefully, Mr. Figueira, Mr. Sears, Mr. Jaiprashad and all those who voted for the APNU/AFC in 2015. Hear what it turned around and did to 17,000 of your countrymen. Mr. Jordan said:

“...no decision was taken... to have the passports of debtors stamped but said agreement was reached...”

He is talking about the Cabinet. I continue:

“...on placing the information at ports of entry and exit to ensure compliance with repayment.”

It went on:

“While the Cabinet...”

It has quotation marks and I have not seen a rebuttal by Mr. Jordan or anybody else.

“While the Cabinet did not agree or had a proposal put about stamping passports, all information on recalcitrant borrowers will eventually be put at all immigration points and we will set up a desk at the same time for those who would be stopped from travelling to make the necessary arrangement for payment of the loan or debt prior to departure...”

Sir, this is 17,567 very ordinary Guyanese graduates of the University of Guyana. They criminalised them. They made a big hullabaloo the other day about Mr. Patterson and Mr. Patterson’s name, inadvertently or otherwise, being on a list somewhere. I think, subsequently, that was reversed. They made a big hullabaloo about Mr. Patterson not planning to travel. I understand it was reversed and I believe he is now traveling freely. I am not sure where he has been for the last five days. I do not know if they have revoked his slot to speak but I noticed that he did speak during the debate. Maybe, enjoying the liberty that he enjoys to travel, he might be out of the country. Mr. Patterson’s and Mr. Norton’s party planned to cause 17,567 ordinary Guyanese graduates from the University of Guyana to have their names placed at the ports of entry and exist in Guyana – the airports, Moleson Creek – so that they could not have left Guyana because they owed a student loan; criminalising them. These were ordinary Guyanese people.

Mr. Speaker, through you, there were people...I know people, personally – I am not going to call their names out of respect for their privacy – who were terrified and traumatised by this; who went to the bank and took a loan to pay off their student loan because they were frightened that

they would have gone to the airport and would have gotten blacklisted and embarrassed and would not have been able to travel with their mother, father, elderly relatives and their children.

[**Bishop Edghill:** They cannot go on vacation.] They cannot go on vacation to see their families overseas. I know people who were so terrified by this measure that they went to the bank and *tek* a loan. They pledged their house and *tek* a loan to pay off their student loan so that their name *ain't gon deh on any list* that the APNU/AFC was planning to put at the airports.

[**Ms. Manickchand:** All the while, they are *(inaudible)*] Meanwhile, they were paying for themselves to study overseas and all over the world. Ordinary Guyanese people who could not afford the UG fees and decided to take a student loan – they had now gotten a job and *ain't* start paying back yet or were struggling, hustling and making a choice between, for example, should I pay back this loan or should I pay my mortgage on my house or whatever the case might be – they published their names and said they would put their names at the airports and would block them from traveling. We promised that we will write off people's student loans.

[**Bishop Edghill:** And we will do it.] And we will. That is a fitting illustration of what makes the APNU/AFC very fundamentally different from the People's Progressive Party/Civic.

Now, Sir, I can see that you are puzzled because as a long-standing politician of many decades, I can see that you are asking yourself the following questions: if you have to compete for people's votes, why would you do something like this? I can see that as one of the most experienced, if not, the most experienced politician in this House, as man who has been in hustings canvassing and campaigning for votes, you are asking yourself which party that would be going back to the people to ask for their votes would do this, would take away the \$9 million from all of those policemen and teachers and that have family? Which party that is going back to ask people for their votes will say to 17,000 Guyanese people, *ah putting yuh name at de airport and yuh can't travel?* I am branding you a criminal and a delinquent borrower. Which party would do that, knowing they have to go back and ask these people to vote for them?

Now, the party that I have the honour and privilege to serve in Government is a party that knows that we have to compete for people's votes, we have to compete for people's affections, and we have to compete for people's hearts because we are a party that, at our core, believes in democracy. Sir, if you have a chairman, unilaterally installed.... They like to use this word installed. [Ms.

Walrond: That was an installation.] That was a real installation. If you had your handpicked chairman installed at the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM), you had a Chief Elections Officer handpicked and installed too, you had a Chief Returning Office for Region 4 also strategically handpicked and installed too and you had them lined up, then you did not need any policeman's vote. You did not need any army man's vote. You did not need any fire officer's vote. You did not need any prison officer's and teacher's votes. You did not have to win anybody's heart. You did not need that teacher's vote. You did not need that PAS's vote. That is why the APNU/AFC felt so comfortable and at ease. You did not need any of those UG graduates' votes – 17,000 of them. Is that not nearly three seats? Sir, 17,000 former UG students is almost three seats in this House. You did not need those 17,000 people to vote for you because you had your three men lined up already. [Ms.

Manickchand: *(inaudible)*] And some Members in this House, including, some would say, the Hon. Member, Ms. Volda Lawrence.

Sir, I took the time to outline these facts in detail because I know that even some of the young Members on that side of the House do not fully understand how they ended up on that side of the House. They waited for 23 years to win an election. They got into Government. [Bishop Edghill:

Full of plans.] Full of plans; it was only plans, but full of plans. In three years, they lost their majority right here. Sir, in five years, they lost their majority out there and you wonder why.

When we come to debate *Budget 2024*, which deliberately is consistent with a path that we have charted, a path that was defined by the manifesto that we presented to the people of this country when we were going to the elections, which comprised the promises that we are making to the people of Guyana and which we are now delivering to the people of Guyana...whether it be the highways on the East Bank and the East Coast; whether it be the schools in the hinterland and on the coast; whether it be the regional hospitals or hinterland telemedicine centres; whether it be the restoration of the cash grant to school children, which incidentally is now,

[**Ms. Ferguson:** *(Inaudible)* the \$3,000 what *y'all* give them *(inaudible)*] Madam, we were very clear

about what we would give the old age pensioners. Whether it be the restoration of the cash grant to our children or whether it be the restoration of the one-month bonus to our Disciplined Services workers, we are very clear about what we will do. Whether it is the 50,000 house lots that we said we will distribute and that we have already exceeded 30,000

and we are doing another 10 this year; or whether it be the 20,000 Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarships with people studying with international universities to get a qualification...Sir, do you see how agitated they are getting? They cannot take it. The Hon. Member, Ms. Annette Ferguson, cannot understand. She went out of the House. She should have stayed in the House. She cannot understand how *she end up over da side suh quick*. She cannot understand how she went back to that side of the House so quickly. Sir, I started by saying that we live in an age where people are better informed than at any other time in our country's history.

7.19 p.m.

Gone are the days when an APNU/AFC politician can spin some yarn about how badly they love the public servants; they know you, they know what you did to them. *Yuh kno* who were the parents they took the cash grant away from? They say they love the public servants. Do you know who are the people they took away the cash grant from? Almost all of the public servants. There are a few who are young or who may not be a parent, but I would venture to guess that at least 80% of the public servants are parents, and you took away the cash grants from those very 80% of the public servants. You claim to love the members of the discipline services, 80% of them are parents. We will never stop repeating for the benefit of the Guyanese people these very stark truths that they do not like to hear and they want people to forget. They come here and they talk about democracy and good governance and accountability and transparency and love of the people and caring for the working class and caring for working people. They have been judged by the Guyanese people for what they are and for the very clear duplicity that they demonstrated in 2015, that they demonstrated in 2020, and that they continue to demonstrate in this honourable House – their continued duplicity.

Budget 2024 is a budget for all Guyanese, not only public servants who will benefit from salary increases but also from cash grants, not only members of the disciplined services who will benefit from their bonuses, but we cast the budget in a particular frame. We spoke about the fact that, like no other time in our country's history, entrepreneurial opportunities abound. Whether you set up, whether you are working, it does not... the point that I made in the conclusion of the speech is, it does not matter what profession you are in, more of your goods and services are needed; it does not matter what you are producing, we need more to be produced. Whether you are a truck driver or a pumpkin farmer, whether you have a logistics company or a

security company, whether you are doing engineering or fabrication or food preparation and catering, it does not matter what business you are in, opportunities abound for all Guyanese. There are more business opportunities for ordinary Guyanese and potential entrepreneurial-inclined Guyanese. Whether you are a painter or a mechanic, whether you are a plumber or an electrician, whether you are a heavy equipment operator or a taxi driver, there are more opportunities for Guyanese today to engage not only in salaried employment but also in entrepreneurial opportunities. Minister Edghill went through various lines of the budget, and he spoke about the billions of dollars that are being spent in each line. I will not repeat what he said. Minister Walrond spoke of it too. The APNU/AFC wants to keep their supporters trapped in the narrow blinkers. They have just a few little mantras that they like to repeat, and they come here and they repeat those mantras, old tired arguments.

Mr. Norton came and he spoke of a very grand-sounding people-centred development strategy – another strategy; and I am told that term in fact is borrowed from former President Cheddi Jagan, which means that it is now probably several decades old. He comes here now and he says they will prepare a people-centred development strategy. Guess what, Sir? We are delivering and implementing a people-centred agenda. We did not wait to come into Government to prepare a plan, a strategy, do a white paper, do a green paper. While in Opposition, the then Leader of the Opposition, now Vice President, actually said, clearly, anything that you promised in your Manifesto that you will deliver for the good of the Guyanese people, we will support. Do you remember that being said by the then Leader of the Opposition? They are so petty and small-minded that they come here and they cannot... I should say in fact – you have to help me here, I do not know if it is schizophrenic – they are so schizophrenic that they say on the one hand, you are implementing our ideas, that was our project. The Wismar/Mackenzie Bridge, that was our project, the East Bank road, that was our idea; everything was their plan and then they turn around and *seh* 'but the Budget *ain't gat* nothing good.' *Mek up yuh mind*. If you say 'oh, that was our idea, the Wismar Bridge was our idea, the Demerara River Bridge was our idea, East Bank road was our idea, new hospital was our idea' but guess what? The budget *ain't gat* nothing. We are implementing what they want to claim as their ideas, but the budget *ain't gat* nothing good for the people. What are you saying about your own ideas? What are you saying about your ideas?

What that discloses to us is that, in fact, the APNU/AFC continues to be a clueless, incompetent, and intellectually bankrupt political party that has nothing to offer the people of Guyana. Meanwhile, we may not wave lofty and elaborate plans but we will deliver the things that we promised and we will continue to work through *Budget 2024* and through *Budget 2025*, and through another five budgets from 2026 to 2030, and through another five from 2030 to 2035, through another five from 2035 to 2040 and beyond. The Peoples Progressive Party/Civic will continue to craft and implement budgets that are in the interest of all of the people of Guyana. Sir, with those uncharacteristically few words, it gives me great pleasure to commend *Budget 2024* to this Honourable House. Thank you very much. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service. Hon. Members, we still have a few matters to complete before we finish the business of today. Hon. Members, we will consider and dispose of the report of the Business Sub-Committee of the Committee of Supply on the allocation of time for the consideration of the 2024 Estimates of Expenditure by the Committee of Supply. We will have to go into the Committee of Supply for this purpose.

Assembly in Committee of Supply.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, I wish to report that the Business Sub-Committee of the Committee of Supply met on Wednesday, 24th January, 2024, and considered the allocation of time for the consideration of the 2024 Estimates of Expenditure in the said Committee. The Sub-Committee passed a resolution on the matter. Copies of the Sub-Committee's Minutes, Resolutions and Schedules have been circulated. Will the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with the Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, kindly move the necessary motion.

RESOLUTION OF THE BUSINESS SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY, 25TH JANUARY, 2024, ON THE CONSIDERATION OF ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE FOR THE YEAR 2024

RESOLVED, That the Business Sub-Committee of the Committee of Supply recommend to the Committee of Supply that –

- (i) the number of Sittings to be allocated to the consideration of the 2024 Estimates of

Revenue and Expenditure in the Committee of Supply, should be a maximum of four;

- (ii) the allocation of time for the consideration of the programmes and agencies of the Estimates in the Committee of Supply should be as shown in the Schedule attached:

- Provided that time saved on the consideration of any programme or agency on that allocated, may be added to any other programme or agency, as may be decided on by the Chairperson of the Committee.

- Provided that time saved after concluding the consideration of agencies for that day, would be rolled over to the next day.

- An additional half-hour to be added to the time allotted in 2023 for each of the following agencies:

- Office of the President;

- Office of the Prime Minister;

- Ministry of Public Works;

- Ministry of Education;

- Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development;

- Region 4;

- Ministry of Health; and

- Ministry of Home Affairs.

- (iii) Approval for Ministers to answer questions and vote away from their seats would be sought from the Speaker (Chairperson of the Committee).

- (iii) the proceedings at the Sittings of the Committee of Supply during consideration of the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure should, if not previously brought to a conclusion, be concluded at the time recommended in the Schedule attached.

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

Dr. Singh: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The privilege is mine now to move:

“That this Committee doth agree with the Business Sub-Committee in the said Resolution.”

Thank you.

Motion put and carried.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, the Committee of Supply has allocated four days for the consideration of the Estimates. Consideration will begin, please note, on Tuesday, 30th January, 2024 at 10.00 a.m. and we will continue thereafter on Wednesday, 31st January at 10.00 a.m., on Thursday 1st February at 10.00 a.m. and on Friday, 2nd February at 10.00 a.m., Friday being the last day for the consideration of the Estimates. This is in accordance with the resolution of the said Committee. There are two particular matters to note. We have also agreed that the time saved on one head will go over to the next and the time saved on one day will also roll over to the next. We can see some consideration being, perhaps, shorter, some longer, and some days shorter and some days longer.

Assembly resumed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I think this now concludes our... Hon. Priya Manickchand.

Ms. Manickchand: Yes, please. Sir, there is still the matter of the libel really, or an abuse of privilege because it was in this House, of a number of teachers who were accused of graduating the teacher training college without going through the course. That also caused a lot of worry to parents who were listening to that; no information was supplied and I am asking for an apology, a withdrawal, or expunging of the record about that misinformation.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Yes, I did give the Hon. Members up to lunch today to produce the records, and I do not see the Hon. Member in the House. Hon. Member Ms. Ferguson, the Hon. Member Ms. Maureen Philadelphia accused the Hon. Minister of Education of graduating students who did not complete their course at the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE) but, more significantly, she said she had a list of these qualified persons who did not complete the course and she was willing to produce it. That was about, I think, 48 hours ago. We had called on her and other Members who had documents to produce, to produce them; the other Members did. We have one outstanding and that is from the Hon. Member Ms. Philadelphia. I do not

mind taking guidance from you. Should I pronounce on her now or wait until she is in the House on Tuesday?

Ms. Ferguson: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much. In due deference to the most resilient Member of the Opposition, I will wait until Monday. Hon. Members, I think this now concludes our business for today. Hon. Prime Minister.

ADJOURNMENT

BE IT RESOLVED:

“That the Assembly do adjourn until Tuesday 30th January, 2024 at 10.00 a.m.”

[*Prime Minister*]

Brigadier (Ret'd) Phillip: Mr. Speaker, I ask that we adjourn until Tuesday 30th January, 2024 at 10.00 a.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members the Assembly now stands adjourned until Tuesday 10.00 a.m. next week. Have a good night and a good weekend.

Adjourned accordingly at 7.34 p.m.