



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*

72ND Sitting

Monday, 22ND January, 2024

**PARLIAMENT OFFICE
HANSARD DIVISION**

Assembly convened at 10.09 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

MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT (38)

Peoples Progressive Party Civic (38)

Prime Minister (1)

Hon. Brigadier (Ret'd) Mark A. Phillips, M.S.S., M.P., Prime Minister [Absent- on leave]

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Hon. Bharrat Jagdeo, M.P., Vice-President [Absent- on leave]

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Hon. Mohabir A. Nandlall, S.C., M.P., Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs

Senior Ministers (16)

Hon. Gail Teixeira, M.P. (Region No. 7 – Cuyuni/Mazaruni), Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance and Government Chief Whip

Hon. Hugh H. Todd, M.P. (Region No. 4 – Demerara/Mahaica), Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation

*Hon. Dr. Ashni K. Singh, M.P., Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance

Hon. Bishop Juan A. Edghill, M.S., J.P., M.P., Minister of Public Works

***Non-Elected Member**

Hon. Dr. Frank C. S. Anthony, M.P., Minister of Health

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

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Hon. Joseph L.F. Hamilton, M.P., Minister of Labour

Hon. Vickram O. Bharrat, M.P., Minister of Natural Resources

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Minister of Human Services and Social Security

Hon. Charles S. Ramson, M.P., Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport

Hon. Sonia S. Parag, M.P., Minister of the Public Service

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Ministry of Housing and Water

Hon. Deodat Indar, M.P., Minister within the Ministry of Public Works

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

Hon. Warren K.E. McCoy, M.P., Minister within the Office of the Prime Minister

***Non-Elected Member**

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*Hon. Sarah Browne, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs
[Absent- on leave]

*Hon. Vikash Ramkissoon, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture [Absent-
on leave]

Hon. Bhagmattie Veerasammy, M.P.

Hon. Nandranie Coonjah, M.P. (Region No. 2 – Pomeroon/Supenaam)

MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITION (32)

(i) A Partnership For National Unity + Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) (31)

Hon. Aubrey Norton M.P., Leader of the Opposition

Hon. Khemraj Ramjattan, M.P.

Hon. Roysdale A. Forde, S.C., M.P.

Hon. Shurwayne F.K. Holder, M.P. (Region No. 2 – Pomeroon/Supenaam)

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Hon. Tabitha J. Sarabo-Halley, M.P.
Hon. Natasha Singh-Lewis, M.P.
Hon. Annette N. Ferguson, M.P. [Virtual Participation]
Hon. Juretha V. Fernandes, M.P.
Hon. David A. Patterson, M.P. [Absent]
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Hon. Richard E. Sinclair, M.P. (Region No. 8 –Potaro/Siparuni)
Hon. Devin L. Sears, M.P. (Region No. 10 – Upper-Demerara/Upper-Berbice)

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

Hon. Dr. Asha Kissoon, M.P., Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly

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Ms. Hermina Gilgeours, Deputy Clerk of the National Assembly

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ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE SPEAKER

New appointments of Ministers

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, let me formally acknowledge the appointments of the Hon. Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh as the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service; congratulations Dr. Singh. Also, the Hon. Minister, Ms. Sonia Parag, has been formally appointed as the Minister of Local Government and Regional Development; congratulations Hon. Minister, Ms. Parag.

The Speaker's Authority

Hon. Members, last Monday at the session when the Budget Speech was delivered by the Hon. Senior Minister, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, there were a number of little hiccups which I want to raise once again. First, the precincts of the Parliament and the Parliament Chambers fall under the purview of the authority of this Chair. When the Chair makes a decision there is only one way to challenge it, by a formal motion in the House, no other way. I intend to stick very steadfast to this rule.

Eating being prohibited in the Dome

I will raise another issue. There are Members of Parliament (MPs) who come to the House. The Constitution says no one should prevent them from participating in the business of this House, but there is decorum. We have had requests from a number of our Members of Parliament for coffee and snacks to be brought to them – we would not allow that. Eating is not permitted. If you have a cold and you have to nibble on a mint, I will allow that. Eating is not permitted.

10.13 a.m.

Persons and Members of the Media Visiting

For persons who are visiting and members of the media, you are here at the pleasure of the Chair. We have had one incident where I have had to be extremely firm with one person. Let us ensure that we stick to the rules of decorum in the House so that we do not have to deal with these irritants. Personally, I have been very malleable in the Chair, as you know.

Dress Code of Members

I see my good friend to the left with nice colours. The Clerk will tell me that it might be too bright for the Parliament and so we have dealt with the dress code but, Members, let us keep it the way we ought to so that we can deal with a good example from the House. I have said this before, I do not mind how you behave; you have a bigger audience. The Parliament's website gets hit by hundreds of thousands of people, so that is what you are playing to.

Presentation by Members

Finally, I want to say to Members who are making their presentation, if you are to step out of line, I am not going to stop the clock. If you are going to argue five minutes with me, I will prolong the argument with you and your time gets cut. If you are interrupted from the other side and I have to take a Point of Order, I will stop the clock but if you step out of line, the clock rolls.

Leader of the Opposition [Mr. Norton]: Mr. Speaker if I am permitted?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, you have the floor.

Mr. Norton: While I endorse what you are saying, it is assumed that there will be fairness and even-handedness. I have no problem whatsoever but there is a penchant in here for objecting to the Opposition while Government Members of Parliament manifest worse than any decorum you can talk about. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Leader of the Opposition. I will tell you fairness is a matter of subjectivity. The rule is or the rule book is the Standing Orders, that is where we start. When we speak of fairness, it is objectivity in the implementation of the Standing Orders, that is where fairness begins.

Mr. Norton: Mr. Speaker, you get it right away. You would agree that if it is based on the law then it is not subjective. It is objective because it is determined by law.

Mr. Speaker: I love this exchange, except to be a good speaker, you have to be a great listener. So, if you had listened carefully to what I have said, you would not have made that comment and I am not going to entertain another exchange with the Leader of the Opposition on this matter. I

said fairness is subjective. Then, I went on to say, where we start in this House is the implementation of the Standing Orders.

Mr. McCoy: Y'all thief the mase from in here and [*inaudible*].

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member Minister McCoy, please, watch the language. Do not let me have to ask you to excuse yourself from today's Sitting.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND REPORTS

The following Paper was laid:

- (1) Civil Procedure (Amendment) Rules 2024 – No. 1 of 2024.

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

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: Our first speaker today is the Hon. Member, Mr. Roysdale Forde, Senior Council (SC). Hon. Member, the floor is yours.

Mr. Forde: Good morning, Mr. Speaker. This \$1.146 trillion Budget, touted the biggest in the nation's history, is being packaged to fellow Guyanese as: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*.

If I am to use one word to describe it, that word would be “uninspiring”. It is built on shifting sand and devoid of a proper foundation. It lacks philosophical rudder. It fails to articulate a clear and compelling vision. It fails to articulate long term goals, objectives or a road map to sustainable development. It fails to tackle urgent and important societal issues. It fails to allocate adequate resources to key sectors such as education, healthcare and social welfare. It lacks clear economic and social indicators and measurements for success. It facilitates disproportionate allocations on concrete projects with \$2.214 billion with \$204.1 billion for roads and bridges at the expense of human capital development. It failed to engage critical stakeholders and citizens in meaningful consultations. It is simply uninspiring.

In fact, the rubric under which these nice sounding set of words and figures have been assembled: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All* is really another way of saying more of the same – more of the same partisan policies that exclude minorities and marginalised groups from participating in the political process. More of the same policies that facilitate and exacerbate social

and economic inequities in our society; more of the same policies that allow unsustainable growth and lopsided development in a trickled-down economy; more of the same policies that facilitate structural discrimination and corruption facilitated by the interplay of partisan politics and uncontrolled, impulsive splurging of oil money by the incumbent Government. This side of the House, last Monday, began to prosecute this Budget to determine whether the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) has changed its ways having heard the demands of the Parliamentary Opposition and other sections of society to be inclusive and to craft a budget that leaves no group or individual behind; or whether it has doubled down on the famous George Orwell's line:

“All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.”

This Budget has fallen short on many fronts. It lacks an inclusive approach in conceptualisation, equal and equitable allocation of resources, the hallmarks of good governance which according to the United Nations (UN) has eight characteristics: participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the Rule of Law. At paragraph 4.187 of the *Budget Speech*, the Honourable Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, stated:

“...on governance, this Government's hallmark has been to consistently embrace democracy, constitutionality and the rule of law, transparency and accountability, inclusion and participation. One Guyana champions these principles within the context of a united people and the oneness of our Nation.”

The 2024 Budget, as was done in previous budgets, the Government failed to heed the call for inclusivity, consistent with the Country's principal political objective, as outlined in Article 13 of the Constitution. Cognisant of this Constitutional violation, this side of the House not only condemns the disregard for citizens' right to the involvement, but will peruse this Budget line by line, taking seriously our Constitutional role and the foundational aspirations of our forebears, as enshrined in the Constitution and in our preamble of the Constitution to forge a system of governance that promotes broad-based participation and national decision-making in order to develop a viable economy and a harmonious community based on democratic values, social justice, fundamental human rights and the rule of law. Leading up to the Budget, the Government busied themselves with what one would call a 'public relation stunt' by inviting groups to participate in budget consultations. This you would recall, Mr. Speaker, was the period when

Government was placed under the international spotlight for its discriminatory management and rather than change course, they set out to deceive. Today, I offer up a friendly reminder, in the words of United States of America (USA) President, Mr. Abraham Lincoln:

“You can fool all people some of the time and some people all the time. But you can never fool all people all the time.”

This does much violence to the spirit and letter of Article 13 of our Constitution. In that context, nearly 50% of our citizens have been excluded from the process which arrived at decisions which would shape the course and quality of their lives, communities and nation. This raises serious questions about accountability and governance. This lack of meaningful consultation with those who bear the brunt of fiscal policies is not just a procedural misstep; it is a disconcerting display of governance that disregards the very essence of democracy. A serious disadvantage of sidestepping stakeholder consultations is the increased risk of misallocation of funds. This lack of insight from those directly affected by the budgetary decisions can result in a financial plan that simply fails to address the real needs of the people and hampers the nation’s overall progress.

Moreover, the absence of meaningful consultation undermines the democratic and good governance principles that should really undermine the budgetary process. Indeed, a budget is not merely a financial document; it is a reflection of collective aspirations and felt needs of a society. By excluding critical stakeholders such as community and other leaders, labour organisations, municipalities, town councils, regional democratic councils and representatives of marginalised groups, the Government is essentially sidelining the voices that could provide valuable perspectives on how to create a budget that is truly inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of the population. The groups who met with the Government took seriously their civic responsibilities to their constituents and got nothing meaningful to improve their quality of lives for the workers, the youth, the pensioners; the ordinary man, ordinary woman and child, and other vulnerable groups, who comprise society's majority. The touted \$3,000 increase in old age pension and disability pension rarely, in fact, amounts to \$100 or less a day. In Guyana, one can buy nothing for \$100. Raising the tax threshold by \$15,000, which represents a 15% increase means nothing to workers because, over the last year, the cost of living has risen exponentially.

10.28 a.m.

This Budget means nothing to those earning below \$100,000, in an oil-rich economy where the national minimum wage has remained stagnant at the miserly sum of \$86,150 per month. Nothing was heard about ensuring the viability of the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) as fear mounts as to whether it will be around for future generations. *Budget 2024* tells us that inflation was a mere 2% last year. Incredibly, with a contemplated massive 27% increase in the Government's expenditure this year, which is relative to last year's revised expenditure, inflation is expected to increase marginally to 2.5% this year. The Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean 2023 puts inflation in the United States of America and the United Kingdom (UK) at 4.4% and 6.8, respectively in 2023; and projects that it will be 2.8% and 3.0%, respectively, in 2024. Simply put, the Government's figures cannot be trusted. Mr. Speaker, if you want to measure the real inflation, just ask the ordinary women and men who face the market. For instance, a slice/cut of pumpkin is being sold for \$1,000 and sugar is \$300 per pound. A year ago, pumpkin was \$200 a slice and sugar was \$80 a pound. Rents have skyrocketed leaving many families desperate and in need of proper shelter. Just five years ago, a two-bedroom house in Georgetown attracted a rent of about \$60,000; today, the rental for a similar house is over \$120,000.

This House is reminded that the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change Government (APNU/AFC) did more for the citizens with less. It did more; we did more for citizens with less. By the time we left Office in 2020, we had moved the minimum wage from \$39,570 in May, 2015, to \$70,000 by January, 2019. This 77% increase, over such a short period of time, was done without the enormous cash resources that are available to the present Government. It was accomplished in the context of a growing economy and inflation that averaged 1% for the period 2015 to 2020, quite possibly the lowest inflation to be recorded in any five-year period in the country's history. It would take far more than the current wage to purchase the same basket of goods and services that were bought with \$70,000 in 2019. It is conservatively estimated that, in order for Guyanese to enjoy an adequate minimum standard of living, the minimum wage should be \$150,000 per month.

I am compelled to ask the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service an important question – is this trillion-dollar Budget, in fact and figures, the real budget for 2024? I am not being facetious. The records would show that for the past four years, the Government has returned to this august House, again and again, for

supplementary funds. In 2023, the Government returned six times for funds totalling more than \$900 billion. These supplemental funds represented \$900 billion plus the \$782 billion which was touted as the largest in the nation's history, gives us a grand total of \$1,682,112,890,947. In the realm of fiscal responsibility, the Government's penchant for presenting budgets only to scurry back to this House for supplementary funds marks not improper planning but, also, places the legislative process in a precarious position. This theatre of presentations seems to be a mere prologue to a recurring drama where the true financial narrative unfolds not in the initial grand announcement as we had on 15th January this year, but in the subsequent pleadings for additional allocations. Therefore, the pertinent question that now looms large in the minds of citizens is – which budget is the real one?

This sleight of hand where the Government habitually and ritualistically underplays the financial requirements and later seeks supplementary funds, raises serious questions about the credibility of the initial budgetary figures. It leaves citizens and policymakers grappling with a financial sense of disarray, unsure of whether the Government's budgetary projections are genuine or mere placeholders – so to speak – for the eventual plea for more money. Does the Minister not know that the reliance on supplementary funds not only signals a failure in adequate and accurate forecasting but also unveils a disturbing lack of strategic planning? It reflects a government who may be either oblivious to the true financial needs of the nation or one that intentionally downplays them for optics. In either case, it undermines the very essence of responsible government and prudent financial management. The practise of consistently returning to the House for supplementary funds, in a real way, transforms the budget approval process into a preliminary endorsement, leaving Parliamentarians and citizens questioning the authenticity of these figures. Understanding democratic governance, the continuous reliance on supplementary funding raises fundamental questions about the transparency and accountability of the budgetary process. I believe that the citizens of this country deserve a budget that truly reflects the true needs of the nation, not a mere prelude to a never-ending quest for supplementary funds. This nonsense must stop.

This level of spending could only be a result of several factors, some of which we would want to put some reason to – misuse of funds, improper planning, and certainly when it comes to the PPP/C, we should not rule out corruption and fraudulent conversion. Corruption is undisputedly....

Mr. Speaker: All right, we have two issues here. For the misuse of funds, the Standing Orders state that you cannot impute. On the second issue, I do not think that the last word you used is parliamentary. Let us continue on a good course.

Mr. Forde: Corruption is indisputably a contributor to political...

Mr. Speaker: Again, you have repeated it. We have ruled on that budget. This is the fifth budget presentation that we are going through.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Speaker, the source of Guyana's trillion-dollar Budget is the agreement signed by the APNU/AFC and ExxonMobil. The Government's approach to inclusivity is illustrated in its repeal of the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) which was passed by the APNU/AFC. The Government removed several safeguards against the abuse of the oil resources accruing to the nation. In the repealed legislation, there was provision for the establishment of a macroeconomic committee to advise on the maximum economically sustainable amount that can be withdrawn from the Fund, taking into account past spending from the Fund; the potential impact of future spending on Guyana's competitiveness; economic growth – agriculture and manufacturing; and the assessment of macroeconomic variables such as inflation, exchange rate, balance of payments and other public debt. The substituted provision provides for a schedule of annual withdrawals from the Fund, thereby dispensing with the need to exercise professional judgment by a team of independent experts in advising on the amounts to be withdrawn.

The reputable chartered accounting firm, Ram & McRae, in a recent *Stabroek News* report, indicts this Government's misuse of the people's money, projecting a loss this year of more than \$100 billion from ineffectiveness. This firm did not mince words while reminding us that the touted largest budget in history is all for the wrong reasons, as evidenced by the absence of an independent planning authority to oversee the capital budget which is now \$666.1 billion. According to Ram & McRae, Guyana will lose an excess of 10% through inefficiencies which represent more than \$100 billion, before any supplementary provisions are brought. There is no financial capacity or capability to handle the sums of money passing through the ministries. The 400 projects, many of which bear questionable names, will not be subjected to any serious evaluation and have the hallmarks of a slush fund. This Budget has expanded opportunities for squander-mania, or as the PPP/C's own, Dr. Cheddi Jagan would say, "waste, fraud and abuse". Assuming that this Budget

is the real one, at the very core of this trickle-down economy which I referred to, is the contentious issue that the Government is funnelling unprecedented sums to a very few at the top while giving handouts to the grassroots. It is public knowledge that there is a massive concentration of wealth among the few privileged persons, leaving the majority to contend with the crumbs that fall from the rich banquet. Even the distribution of cash grants and other assistance to the poor has been marred by irregularities. What happened to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cash grants? When would thousands of citizens be relieved of their pink slips?

This is the fifth budget presented by the Hon. Minister, yet the PPP/C has not been able to concentrate or demonstrate its ability or genuine commitment to improve the quality of lives of citizens, let alone to talk about prosperity for all. Who is really included in this, all? Citizens lived experiences and realities in local communities have created a sense of exclusion, rather than one of ownership and inclusion. Perhaps, this is the reason there was absolutely no public excitement or active interest among the populace in the days leading up to the announcement and the reading of this year's Budget. This critical event, the presentation of the nation's budget in the life of a government, has become a farce under this Administration. As the Government of our oil-rich country parades the grandiosity of its trillion-dollar Budget, a glaring void emerges – the stark absence of an overarching strategy. Instead of witnessing a visionary roadmap, citizens are left to grapple with a financial behemoth devoid of a clear direction which plunges our nation into a precarious abyss of financial uncertainty. Again, this lack of strategic direction exacerbates the risk of funds being allocated haphazardly without a cohesive plan that prioritises the most pressing needs of our nation. Styling the Budget, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All* given the nation's exponential wealth which is in the hands of few and growing poverty, we would be in order to question, why at this time. The Government has no short-term, medium-term or long-term plan for this nation. Yet, we are being told that policy prescriptions would be put in place to reduce poverty, improve malnutrition, reduce the rate of high school dropout and stop the nation – which was once the envy of the region for intelligence – from lagging behind countries in this region.

Budgetary decisions should be grounded in a nuanced understanding of the social fabric to ensure that resources are directed towards uplifting the most vulnerable rather than exacerbating existing disparities. We continue to see disinvestment in our people. This is contrary to the Hon Member, Dr. Jagdeo's, statement, at a press conference – there are pockets of poverty; in the midst of wealth,

poverty is pervasive in Guyana. According to a Food For The Poor's report, the poverty rate which is a share of the population living below US\$5.50 a day, is about 38.8%. It is 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%.

Very little, if anything at all, has been done for human development and human upliftment. Very little has been done in this area. For example: the allocation for the University of Guyana for 2024 is \$4.1 billion but the amount given to the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) project for this year is \$4 billion. No report has ever been submitted to this National Assembly on the impact of this programme. It is an insult and abrogation of duty to claim that the University of Guyana must have programmes that are accredited in Guyana when the University is a state-owned institution. It is the responsibility of the Government of Guyana to ensure that the programmes are accredited. This University was founded by Dr. Jagan and was expanded by Mr. Burnham.

10.43 a.m.

This Government seems to have little or no interest in ensuring the University functions as a 21st century tertiary institution, equipped to meet the developmental needs of the people and society. We would like to know who accredited the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) programmes. The Government has failed to invest in the people by instituting free education, in accordance with article 27 of the Constitution. The reality of the circumstances of the quality of life of large sections of the population is as follows: 25% of Indigenous children are stunted, a figure much higher than the national average; 16% of newborn Indigenous children are underweight; children from rural and urban poor families and other marginalised groups suffer from multiple poverty-related deprivations; the lack of social protection measures contributes to the cycle of domestic abuse, violence and neglect; most vulnerable children belong to already disadvantaged groups, Indigenous and tribal peoples and the urban poor; many children are not acquiring the skills needed for decent employment and limited opportunities for adult participation and engagement. Schools' curricula do not offer 21st century skills. As of 2023, one ought not to be shocked to find that there has been no observable impact on income inequality among the peoples and races in this country. There has been no dent in poverty – 32% of the Indigenous people live in poverty; 15% of Indo-Guyanese live in poverty; and 20% of the Afro-Guyanese live in poverty.

Considering the Rule of Law, the Hon. Minister presented a trillion-dollar budget for 2024, and boasted that our economy is moving full throttle. He talks about the dizzying pace at which we are delivering a modern Guyana, yet the leadership of his Government has failed miserably to do basic things to enhance and strengthen the constitutional and legal framework. For example, after 4 years in Office, the President is still to initiate consultation under article 127 (1) of the Constitution, which would lead to the appointments of a substantive Chancellor of the Judiciary and a substantive Chief Justice. In 2022, Justice Adrian Saunders, President of the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) called it a notable stain on Guyana's judicial landscape. He called for the substantive appointment of a Chancellor and a Chief Justice to be made before the year 2022.

Mr. Speaker, In the case of *Vinceroy Jordan vs. the Attorney General*, Justice Younge granted declarations compelling and requiring that the President must initiate the process of consultation as required by the Constitution. Despite the CCJ specifically saying, in the case of *Air Services Limited (ASL) vs. the Attorney General*, that it is the President and officials of State who are required to initiate consultation, notwithstanding the declaration by the High Court and the Caribbean Court of Justice's exposition of the law that places the President under a constitutional duty to initiate this consultation, 10 months have elapsed since the decision without any discharge of the President's constitutional duty to initiate the process of consultation. Failure by the President...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, the references to the President with respect to influencing the debate is non-starter also. You have to withdraw those.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Speaker, the failure by the Executive, by the Government, is now a travesty and a grave and continuing breach of the Constitution. We are in 2024, with a trillion-dollar budget but no substantive appointments. These appointments were not a matter of mere course, it is the cornerstone of a well-functioning democracy. The absence of these two substantive judicial figures constitutes a serious institutional void, undermining the principles of an independent and effective judiciary required for the purpose of upholding the Rule of Law. The Law Reform Commission was established in 2021. It has been said by the Government that you can only reform the law if you are aware of what the law currently is, but strangely, this has seemingly stifled and shaped the Law Reform process. The Law Reform Commission has not published and/or indicated its readiness or interest in receiving from the public any suggestions for law reform. Also, the Law

Reform Commission has not announced that it had submitted or identified any programme or areas for law reform. The Chairman of the Law Reform Commission has indicated that, in the 18 purple volumes of the Laws of Guyana, there were many mistakes, grammatical and typographical which infected the whole process of law. These creeping mistakes occurred as a result of the incompetence of the very current Attorney General in 2022, at a cost of millions of dollars.

On the question of Legal Aid, Mr. Speaker, many of our citizens, especially the poor and vulnerable, do not have access to this vital service. There is little awareness about this aspect of our legal architecture. The Opposition envisions a Legal Aid Action Plan, a roadmap to ensure the effective provision of legal aid services by the Government and other stakeholders based on collaborative and cooperative efforts in legal aid service, which would raise awareness and ensure the provision of legal rights education at the community level. Further, with respect for the Constitution and the Rule of Law, the Government has neglected to establish crucial commissions, including the Human Rights Commission, the Tribunal for the Ethic Relations Commission, the Rights of the Child Commission and the Petroleum Commission.

The Inter-American Convention against Corruption, obligates Guyana to create, maintain and strengthen the system to protect public servants and private citizens in good faith, reporting acts of corruption. The Protected Disclosures Act 2018, which is an important tool against mismanagement, corruption and unethical behaviour, to date, this Act has not yet been operationalised by the issuance of the relevant Order by the Minister of Legal Affairs. With all of the oil moneys, consultancies and experts available to the Government after 4 years, not much has happened in legal affairs. The justice system is burdened with extremely limited support from this Government. The Government risks misallocating funds, leading to inefficiencies, and perpetuating unmet social needs. A budget that lacks measurement and is akin to a scientific experiment without controls, with results being arbitrary ...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, the control from this side says you will need to get five minutes to conclude.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Chief Whip for the Opposition. Hon. Member, you may continue.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Budget lacks measurement which is akin to a scientific experiment without controls with results being arbitrary and conclusions lacking empirical grounding. This action by the Government is a fundamental deviation from the principles of evidence-based government. It can only shape a narrative of fiscal opaqueness, inefficiency, wastage, and a missed opportunity for real social- economic progress. In the world's fastest growing economy, the \$1.146 trillion budget is devoid of a plan that would provide social and economic upliftment for the small man, workers, pensioners, youth and traditional businesses. This is a budget that panders to the friends, family and favourites of the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C). This nation's founding fathers and mothers, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, Cheddi Jagan, Forbes Burnham, J.P Latchmansingh, Janet Jagan, Peter D'Aguiar, Jane Phillips-Gay would weep at the vast inequalities and inequities that exist in this society and the contempt for ordinary people and businesses. We urge a rethinking of this Budget that undoubtedly opens the floodgates to exclusion, waste, fraud, and abuse.

Mr. Speaker, this House is reminded of the advice given on the 16th January, 1964, during the Budget Debate, where the Hon. Member, Forbes Burnham, as then was, said that 'the Opposition Coalition's proposals will be made very clear during these debates. We say to you, the problems in Guyana are not the problems of the PPP or the problems of one section of the community, but the problems of the Guyanese people. And if we understand that, and face this problem in this spirit, I am sure that a more realistic attitude would be brought to the problems of this country. And that instead of sniping and swearing at those who fight to improve the economic and social position of Guyana, we should devote our effort to abolishing the reason for our poverty, backwardness, and degradation'. Thank you, very much, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much, Hon. Member. You displayed a very great example of how persons can switch into appropriate language. Now for the Hon. Minister of Labour, the Hon. Joseph Hamilton.

Minister of Labour [Mr. Hamilton]: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, whilst the Hon. Roysdale Forde was speaking, I reflected on a movie that I saw some time ago. The name of

the movies is *The Shadows*. It is about a notorious cabal who people referred to as a ‘band of brigands’ in the movie, some of the most corrupt crooks. I am speaking about...

Mr. Norton: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Hamilton: I am speaking about a movie, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I am speaking about a movie that I saw. [*Interruption*] This cabal of men and women, they were vile, vicious, and venomous. They relished in profanity but, at the same time, they presented themselves with pretence – The Shadows – that they were the moral barometer of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana; that they were the most upright citizens. What is also noteworthy of this movie is that it had 31 characters acting in the movie, very noteworthy. The speaker before me said that this and I repeat, he said, ‘Citizens lived their experience’, and he is so right. Between 2015 and 2020, the citizens lived their experience governed by the APNU/AFC and that is the reason after one term, they kicked them over to the Opposition benches. I want to [*inaudible*] the Guyanese people briefly about an experience. This experience is of four Ministers of the Government granting themselves scholarships. In one case, Ms. Annette Ferguson – \$2.6 million. I did the calculations. Some of these calculations are United States (US) dollars and some are pounds. Ms. Annette Ferguson – \$2.68 million; Dr. Nicolette Henry - \$10.4 million; Ms. Tabitha J. Sarabo-Halley... Mr. Speaker, I did not know that the Hon. Member finds me very cute, I am told. I am told that she said that some time ago. Ms. Tabitha J. Sarabo-Halley – \$2.68 million.

10.58 a.m.

One child of a Minister, Ms. Simona Broomes, \$46.8 million. Another child of one Minister Ms. Simona Broomes, \$28.1 million. ‘People lived their experience’. The Hon. Member just spoke about people being exposed to development and training. If we look at Technical and Vocational, Education and Training (TVET), the average cost to train a person in a Technical and Vocational, Education and Training programme...

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Chief Whip for the opposition, are you standing on a Point of Order?

Mr. Jones: Yes, Sir. Cde. Speaker and your guidance, the Hon Member, Mr. Hamilton, is making reference to former Ministers by name who are not in this house to defend... [Mr. Hamilton: These are public matters.] [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister of Labour, I do not think you have the designation of Speaker. So, please, he is speaking to me, allow me to answer. Yes, Hon. Member, Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones: That is the point, Cde. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you. Point of Order, he is making reference to facts he has, and he has to lay that over.

Mr. Hamilton: Mr. Speaker, just to note, these ‘people lived their experience’ – \$28.1 million. The sum total of this is that four Ministers and their families utilised \$90.8 million. In the case of Annette Ferguson, she could have trained 18 persons in TVET. In the case of Nicolette Henry, she could have trained 70 persons in Technical and Vocational Education and Training. In the case of the Hon. Member who finds me very cute, she could have trained 18 persons. One of the children of the Minister could have trained 315 persons. The other child could have trained 189 persons. The fact of the matter is that 610 Guyanese were denied training by five Ministers of the previous Government. And they come to this noble House with all kinds of pretence – that they care about the Guyanese people. ‘People lived their experience’ – shadows – and this is just one example of ‘people living their experience’. So, when you come with your pretence and your crocodile tears, the Guyanese people have not forgotten. They will never forget you because they continue to recover from the experience that you put them through.

Ms. Walton-Desir: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Are you standing on a Point of Order?

Ms. Walton-Desir: I am.

Mr. Speaker: Well please... Hon. Member Mr. Hamilton...

Mr. Hamilton: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: We have a Member on ...

Ms. Walton-Desir: On the Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, I find it distasteful that we have descended to referring to people's children in this National Assembly. It is unacceptable.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members again... and you will get back your time Hon. Member, Mr. Hamilton. Hon. Members, again, a person standing on a Point of Order, the relevant Standing Order, you only have two options. If it is gross misinformation and you have the facts, let it be known, but on clarification and you responding, I do not allow it. Hon. Members, you have been warned.

[Interruption]

Mr. Hamilton: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, go ahead.

Mr. Hamilton: Thank you, very much. Mr. Speaker, it must inform the nation that the fact that you have this excitement in the Opposition benches, it means that they are touched. This is because 'people lived their experience', as indicated by Hon. Member, Mr. Roysdale Forde. Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member.... *[Interruption]*

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, hold a second. Opposition Chief Whip, I urge you constrain some of your Members on your side. I am hearing an Hon. Member to my left shouting unparliamentary... shouting, not heckling, shouting unparliamentary words. Go ahead, Hon. Minister Hamilton.

Mr. Hamilton: Mr. Speaker, thank you, very much. Now that I have gotten the attention of the shadows, during the period 2020-2023, the Board of Industrial Training (BIT) engaged a total of 11,275 beneficiaries through the implementation of 549 projects across the regions of Guyana. We did not give ourselves scholarships – 610 children. Through the project implementation, training was done in occupational areas such as, welding and fabrication, heavy duty equipment operation, plumbing, general construction, commercial food preparation, electrical installation, fibre optic technology, tractor operation and maintenance, small engine repairs, air-conditioning (AC) and refrigeration, photovoltaic installation and repairs and early childhood development – to name a few. The number of 4283 males and 6992 females received training between 2020 and 2023 under

the People's Progressive Party/Civic. – no Minister nor their kids. In this regard, the Government has invested \$982,108,000 in the lives of Guyanese through skilling, upskilling and reskilling, through TVET programmes. Again, we did not - this is your legacy, \$90 million that could have trained 610 young people who needed training.

Mr. Speaker, testimonials, I stand before you today to underscore the remarkable impact of the Board of Industrial Training programmes as we deliberate the 2024 Budget. The successes of BIT, beyond the mere issuance of certificates, have left an indelible mark on the lives of the countless individuals, including beneficiaries like Mrs. Anita Ganpat, Mr. Noel Haynes and Ms. Kimberly Kissoon. These are their testimonies. In recognising the transformative influence of BIT, it is imperative to acknowledge the fact that the BIT programme serves as a motivational pillar, propelling participants towards success beyond the classroom. The comprehensive programme, extending beyond technical skills, has equip beneficiaries with essential life skills such as business approaches, workplace safety and language proficiency.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to share the inspiring story of Mrs. Anita Ganpat, a mother at the age of 48. This is her testimony. A trainee from Zeeburg, West Coast Demerara, who highlighted that: 'I can now stand on my own feet after completing a Board of Industrial Training Garment Construction course'. She further stated: 'I am never out of work as a seamstress now. Sometimes I have to start from 2 a.m. in the morning until late at night. The Government and BIT have helped to me stand on my own'. Mr. Noel Hayne, a retiree from New Amsterdam, Berbice, reskilled himself in BIT Small Engine Repairs course, as he always wanted to learn a trade he says. His advice to fellow retirees is to keep the brain active. Keep the brains active, Mr. Ramjattan. There is always a chance to continue your studies as you are older with less distraction. Last, but not least, Ms. Kimberly Kissoon, a 26-year-old Lindener, graduated from BIT's Commercial Food Preparation and is now a proud business owner of KK Corner Snackette located in Christianburg, Wismar. She has stated, 'This course has changed my life to make me my own money'.

Mr. Speaker, as we deliberate the budget allocation, we recognise the pivotal role of the Board of Industrial Training in shaping the destinies of individuals like Ganpat, Haynes and Kissoon. The Government I represent prioritise and will continue to support the Board of Industrial Training and we implore the Assembly at large to do the same. Do not give yourself scholarships, train the people. This investment ...and I heard some fanciful noise to my left. You know, 'people lived

their experience'. Presently, we have about 30 young people being trained to participate in the oil and gas economy. This is not gaff. You can go there at Port Mourant and see it. See it in three years... [Hon. Member (Opposition): *Inaudible*] Of course, APNU/AFC, the shadows over there, will say, 'You all took away our programme'. Every project is theirs. Every project belongs to them, they never conceptualise it.

The bridge – 'It is our project'. Whether it is a Demerara Bridge or a Linden Bridge, 'It is our project'. And ooh, I do not know how you have the temerity to speak about the Demerara Harbour Bridge, when you, the APNU/AFC, with all the intellect and capacity, would have been the first Government that erected a three-lane bridge in this world. All the capacity, all the intellect the shadows have. They would have put us in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. A three-lane bridge. The Hon. Member Mr. Roysdale Forde talked about how qualified and competent they are, but they were bringing a three-lane bridge.

11.13 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to highlight BIT's key achievements. We have the National Training Project for Youth Empowerment and the training of individuals from other specific population subgroups and projects, such as Persons with Disabilities, Women in Trade and the Basic Needs Trust fund. The implementation of these programmes resulted in 4,439 persons being engaged and trained by the BIT in 2023. Those are persons who did not have the skill. We could have done like *ya'll* – give ourselves and siblings scholarships and fail to train the people. Mr. Speaker, 3,230 youths commenced training during 2023 across all the administrative regions of Guyana in 50 occupational areas. Also, 235 persons with disabilities received training through the Board of Industrial Training through this cycle. Additionally, BIT collaborated with the BIT Basic Needs Trust Fund to offer heavy duty equipment operation training to 3,312 beneficiaries. However, moreover, it is befitting for me to highlight that of the individuals trained during 2023, BIT engaged 638 females in 21 non-traditional areas such as, electrical installation – 150; air conditioning and refrigeration technicians – 15; and heavy-duty equipment operators – 165. We did not give ourselves scholarships.

Let me further state that, we are a Government who keep our promises, in this regard and in keeping with the Government's manifesto promise to enhance opportunities in TVET through the

BIT, TVET programmes were implemented in all administrative regions. Additionally, residents of the hinterland regions and riverain communities, respectfully in Regions 1, 5, 7, 8 and 9 and Regions 2,3 and 6 accounted for 20% of the persons trained during 2023, a total of 881 beneficiaries, 390 males and 491 females. We continue, also, to implement the National Apprenticeship Programme. During 2023, 233 apprentices were engaged under the National Apprenticeship Programme at three master plants, namely, the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo), BOSAI Minerals Group Guyana Incorporated and the Guyana Industrial Training Centre. This is a significant increase because during the last full year of the APNU/AFC in Government, they only allowed for 60 individuals to be engaged in apprenticeship programmes. [Mr. Ramjattan: A whole year?] Yes. Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: As you are waiting to get your thoughts together, let us have an extension so you can conclude.

Mr. Hamilton: An extension? *Nah* man. How can that be? [*Inaudible*]

Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance and Government Chief Whip [Mr. Teixeira]: Mr. Speaker, I thought you said you were giving him back some time, so I was not...

Mr. Speaker: I actually gave him back three minutes.

Ms. Teixeira: All right. Thank you. Can I therefore ask that the Hon. Member be given five minutes extension to conclude his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Hamilton: Mr. Speaker, for occupation, safety and health, I can report that, when we took Government, 32 persons died in the last year the APNU/AFC was in Government. I can report to this Assembly that in 2023, that was reduced by some 37% under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government. We have moved from a complement of nine officers under the APNU/AFC to today 30, and we have established offices in all the different regions across Guyana. Mr. Speaker, do you know that it was under the APNU/AFC that the average rate of reporting was 64%? Today, under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government re-established Ministry of

Labour, we have moved from 64% to 85%. Importantly, we have recovered in three years, \$160 million for employees owed by employers.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister give me one minute. I made a miscalculation with your time.

Mr. Hamilton: I know you made a miscalculation. I know that. I did not speak for 30 minutes.

Mr. Speaker: Are you speaking to me or your Colleagues?

Mr. Hamilton: No. I was speaking to my Colleague, Vickram Bharrat.

Mr. Speaker: You actually started at 10.54 a.m. Folks, that clock is two minutes behind my time. You had three minutes of interruptions, so you should be finished at 10.27 a.m. plus five. At my time, you still have 12 minutes to go. Go ahead.

Mr. Hamilton: Mr. Speaker, moving on. We have recouped for employees \$160 million in three years. Just last year, we had recouped \$69 million. Do you know what? For the shadows, some of these matters were outstanding matters which they left between 2015 to 2020. In 2023, we had a 14% decline in complaints received when compared to 2022. This is evidence that the Ministry's policies, programmes and initiatives are efficient, effective and working. Under the APNU/AFC in 2015, when they took up Office, the number of complaints to the Labour Department increased by 51%. The first three years in Office, there were 5,497 complaints. During the PPP/C's first three years in Office, we received 3,103 complaints from workers, representing an almost 50% less than what they received. This was because of our proactive measures with numerous awareness sessions and working with our social partners to ensure that workers' rights are protected – a significant manifesto promise.

We continue to conduct regular workplace inspections in all of the regions to ensure that companies and businesses comply with the legislative requirement governing conditions of work with a view of achieving decent employment and working conditions. In 2023, we conducted more than 2,700 inspections. Of significant importance was that through our inspection activities, we were able to file charges against two employers for paying their employees below the national minimum wage. The APNU/AFC conducted 6,685 inspections in their five years. We have, in less than four years, conducted 6,872 inspections. Furthermore, our inspection activities in 2023, allowed for us to

reach or cover more than 15,000 workers. We are a Government that cares about the workers of this country. We did not give ourselves scholarships.

On the issue of child labour – the elimination of child labour in all its forms is imperative and verily a top priority for the Ministry of Labour. In 2023, a series of awareness events were conducted to raise awareness about the detrimental, emotional and physical effects that child labour and forced labour can experience. Sensitisation sessions were held in more than 14 villages and communities, especially in the hinterland. Presently, we have one child labour matter in front the courts.

We also continue to play our part in ensuring that there is a stable industrial relations climate in this country, Ms. Coretta McDonald. From 2021 to 2023, the Labour Department received a total of 54 requests for conciliation from both employers and trade unions. The Labour Department, through the Chief Labour Officer, was able to have these issues addressed with the parties at the conciliation stage. I must add that when I took office, there were many unresolved matters in the Ministry and the Trade Union Recognition and Certification Board. Employers were refusing to meet and treat with the union representative during the APNU tenure. Needless to say, we were able to bring the parties to the table and we have had those matters resolved, concluding with collective labour agreements. From 2021 to 2023, we have countersigned 54 collective labour agreements, a strong indication that good collective bargaining is alive and well.

Prosecution – in 2023, we filed 32 matters in the Magistrate’s Court, and we closed 2023 with 11 of those cases being active or ongoing in the courts. They are at different stages in the legal proceedings. We were able to get judgements or settle the other 21 matters. As you are aware, Mr. Speaker, in July, 2022, the Government, upon recommendation from the National Tripartite Committee, raised the National Minimum Wage *via* the National Minimum Wage Order and of the 11 active cases, two are against employers for paying below the minimum wage.

Moreover, in keeping with our obligations under the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), we continue to submit reports to the ILO on the application of the respective convention, both ratified and unratified. This obligation was neglected by the Hon. Members on the other side when they were in Government. We had to clear the backlog that they left and save our country’s image on the international plain by not allowing the Committee of Experts to flag

Guyana for not reporting on its obligations. Our work will continue in 2024 with the view to further enhance the quality and effectiveness of our services. In this regard, technological measures to improve accessibility, quality, efficiency and effectiveness will be pursued. In 2024, a digital complaint and inspection management system with mobile application will be implemented. The system would allow for real-time data which can be used to develop strategies and, also, to inform policymakers.

11.28 a.m.

Importantly, a user-friendly mobile application tailored for the public, workers and employers will be implemented where the users, that is, the workers and employers, can easily report labour violation and complaints. The application will offer an intuitive interface with complaints submission, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity.

The co-op sector: A project was started with the Attorney General's Chambers, the Ministry of Housing and Water's Central Housing and Planning Authority (CHPA) and the Ministry of Labour's Co-op Department. What we have started is to ensure that every property owner in every co-op scheme in Guyana is issued transport and titles individually. What there is, presently, is in co-op schemes, because leases are *en bloc*... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible.)*] Again, they started it. They could never stop. They started it.

People have houses that are \$100 million and \$70 million that are useless to them and their families presently because they cannot approach a bank to borrow money on those properties. That is what we are bringing to an end with this programme of ensuring that every citizen who has a property in a co-op scheme has their title or transport. That is to empower them so that they can utilise their assets. [Mr. Ramjattan: That is a lot of *gyaff*.] For the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, in three years, 162 no-objection letters were issued by the Ministry of Labour to the CHPA. As I speak to you, scores of people, Mr. Ramjattan, have already collected their transport and leases. Some of these are public matters. In 2024, this number will skyrocket as a result of the action that will be taken by the Ministry of Labour, in conjunction with the Ministry of Housing and Water, to ensure that all persons, as I have said, are granted their titles and their transport. As I said when I started, nothing that the Shadows do or say will change the direction of the Government and the nation. Upward.

You could talk about friends and families. All last week, I saw hundreds of people collecting their lands. Is that friends and families? Yes, they are our friends and families. Thousands of people are receiving the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarships. Are they friends and families? Yes, they are friends and family. Two hundred or three hundred persons are receiving \$600,000 per year for dialysis treatment. Are they friends and families? Yes, they are friends and families. We are not deterred by the baseless accusation. Every year, they come about the budget being for friends and families. All of Guyana are our friends and families. That is the reason we have and will continue to enact policies. We will stay the course to ensure that our friends and families benefit and develop themselves individually and collectively. Thank you very much.
[*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Minister, and now for the Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes.

[*Interruption*]

[*Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.*]

Hon. Member, you may proceed.

Ms. Fernandes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With the budget that the Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, presented in this House, touted to be the best budget the People’s Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) could have presented – that is how they coined it – I would have believed that the Hon. Member, Mr. Hamilton, would have actually come and given rationality and project the many benefits of this budget. His presentation brought me back to one line I saw one of our reporters quoted. He said, “every clown needs a circus”. This House is not a circus.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Hamilton, spoke extensively about the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme. You would believe that the TVET programme is doing so well. If the Hon. Member used some of that energy and bravado to actually execute the work of his Ministry, the building in Bartica, which is on a third contractor, would have been finished by now. If the Hon. Member uses any of that energy when he is planning for these programmes, students would not complete these programmes but be left waiting because the money finished, and the Ministry does not have any more money to execute the graduation ceremony for the programme.

When they are talking about training programmes, they must also equally address unemployment. The only mention of unemployment...Actually, it was not even mentioned in the Hon. Member's, Dr. Singh, presentation. The only mention when it comes to job creation in *Budget 2024* was to say that they will extend the part-time job programme. They are going to have \$10 billion put aside there. Guess what? Some 20,000 of you who are unemployed, we will give you all a little top up that we know cannot do anything for you all at the end of the month. That is not planning and that is not policy decisions that any economy should be following through.

Budget 2024 is the fourth budget presented by the PPP/C that is being carried by oil revenues. Standing at \$1.146 trillion, this year's budget covers all five of the non-oil budgets presented by the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Administration from 2015 to 2019. Surely, Guyanese had high expectations for *Budget 2024*, but true to their nature, the PPP/C came to this House, and they said, "we are staying the course". It is therefore important for us to analyse the PPP/C's course that they have been on and, more importantly, the course on which they intend to stay.

Let us look at wages and salaries. Governments are nothing without public servants. Naturally, any caring government would make sure that public servants are taken care of, and the most basic thing that is expected is that, as the economy grows, so does the wages and salaries for the public servants in Guyana. Between the years 2015 and 2019, the Coalition Government increased wages and salaries by 77% without one cent of oil revenue. It is important to note that at the end of this budget year, the PPP/C would have spent \$3.25 trillion since taking Office in 2020. With that sum, they could have only stood...and it was announced in this House by the Hon. Member, Dr. Singh, that they have increased wages and salaries by 23%. That is unacceptable for any government that is touting to be the master at managing resources. This is not what the Guyanese people are expecting, and it is not what they deserve. They deserve better.

This increase does not do anything for the ordinary Guyanese who are struggling to make ends meet with the rising cost of food items in the market. It does nothing for the thousands of Guyanese who were forced to move from their homes in outlying regions in search of jobs and now face astronomical increases in the prices in the housing market, as was identified by my colleague, Mr. Roysdale Forde. These thousands of people are now forced to consume and feed their families substandard meals because they simply cannot afford a healthy meal. The thousands of people who

are living in rented houses and apartments are now faced with the reality that they may not be able to afford to put a roof over their heads. All of this is happening in an oil rich economy with the first trillion-dollar budget coming in at \$1.146 trillion. [An Hon. Member: What a shame.] This is a shame. If the PPP/C is to stay the course, wages and salaries would be seeing an equally meaningless increase at the end of 2024, and the standard of living of the working class would be reduced even further.

It is important for us to examine debt and the PPP/C seems to be a lover of debt. The Government has put forward a budget with a deficit of \$395 billion. The PPP/C, with their memory difficulties might not remember, but when the PPP/C took Office in 2020, there was an external debt ceiling of \$400 billion. It was not \$400 billion per year, Sir. It was \$400 billion in total. The APNU/AFC Administration never met that \$400 billion ceiling and they never saw the need to do so. They executed and they managed efficiently without adding a debt burden on the backs of the ordinary Guyanese people. In this one budget, the PPP/C is adding almost the same amount of debt as the total external debt ceiling prior to 2020. The PPP/C is spending everything they can put their hands on and more. There is no interest in moving and improving the lives of the ordinary Guyanese. The total lack of planning for the long-term well-being of the State suggests that the PPP/C does not believe they will be in Office for much longer. This we can agree with, Sir.

11.43 a.m.

In this one-year budget, the PPP/C will be adding a debt burden of \$1.8 million on every Guyanese household. To break it down further, they will be adding a debt burden of more than half of a million dollars on every Guyanese. So, in an oil-rich economy, instead of creating a pathway to sustainable prosperity for Guyanese, the PPP/C has decided to shackle every man, woman and child with a debt burden and there seems to be no light at the end of this tunnel. Sir, for every child that will receive a \$40,000 'Because We Care' cash grant, they would equally receive a Because We Do Not Care more than half a million-dollar debt burden, compliments of the PPP/C Administration. So, it would be prudent for the Hon. Member, Mr. Hamilton, to tell Ms. Anika and Ms. Bissoon that after they were trained and the minimum wage was not increased, they are put in an economy in which they will be struggling, and not only struggling but they will be struggling with a government-imposed debt burden of half a million dollars on their backs.

If this is not bad enough, the PPP/C has signaled its intention to come back to the House to increase not only the domestic and the external debt ceilings but to also pass legislation to withdraw more money from the Natural Resource Fund than is currently allowed. The Natural Resource Fund will now be used to finance projects that will fail to get loan approvals because the projects lack the basic requirements for loan approvals. Case in point: after failing to secure the loan for the gas-to-energy project, because they could not present proof that it was feasible, the PPP/C Administration now plans to utilise the Natural Resource Fund to actually execute that project.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to note that when calculating the debt burden, I used the figures from the Guyana National Bureau of Statistics (GNBS) which stated the 2023 mid-year population number at 778,400 persons. I did not use the inflated number being touted by the Hon. Member, Mr. Bharrat Jagdeo, who is never here. I did not use that number which he is claiming the PPP/C Administration is working with a population number of one million persons. It is important to note that when the PPP/C budgets using an estimated population of one million people and then they come back to this House at the end of the year, and they say they have expended all of the moneys, where is the money going? According to the Guyana National Bureau of Statistics, they are inflating that number by more than 220,000 persons. These are the real questions that we need to ask in this House today. Though these numbers are alarming, they are even more alarming when we remember that the PPP/C plans to stay the course. So, we could expect a higher debt burden coming in the future. [Mr. Ramjattan: This is criminality.] This is criminality, as my colleague puts it.

We must look at the overdraft. It is extremely important to look at the overdraft. The PPP/C continues to be dishonest about the overdraft and, more particularly, the overdraft that they inherited. This is the third budget that was presented in this House in which the Hon. Member, Mr. Ashni Singh, dishonestly stated that the domestic debt ceiling...

Mr. Speaker: Okay. Three times I could have interrupted you. Right now, you have to withdraw the word dishonest. You are imputing.

Ms. Fernandes: Would the word disingenuous suffice, Sir?

Mr. Speaker: So, go ahead, let us get your presentation, which is going good so far.

Ms. Fernandes: Thank you, Sir. He is economical with the truth, Sir. The budget stated:

“The growth of domestic debt service payments was due to a full year's worth of principal repayments on debentures issued in 2021 to securitise an inherited overdraft at the Central Bank.”

The Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, used the word inherited because he wants to convey an image that the Coalition did not know how to manage the resources of the nation, but allow me to give some clarity and to bring truth to light on this matter. Mr. Speaker, it was in this very House where the Hon. Ashni Singh was asked what the overdraft was on 2nd August, 2020, when the PPP/C took Office, and he responded and said:

“The end of December, 2020, overdraft balance of \$116.6 billion on the Consolidated Fund account represents a deterioration of \$47.9 billion compared the 2nd August, 2020 overdraft of \$78.7 billion.”

The APNU/AFC Coalition had an accumulated overdraft of \$78.7 billion over five years. The PPP/C Government racked up an overdraft of \$47.9 billion in their first five months in Office, but that does not end there. The domestic debt repayment that Dr. Singh, Hon. Member, is referring to speaks to an overdraft of \$200 billion because the PPP/C further racked up the overdraft, and on 28th May, 2021, they issued \$200 billion of debentures to cover this overdraft. In nine months of the PPP/C being in Office, they were responsible for an overdraft of \$221.3 billion. So, the PPP/C cannot come here in this House and speak about an inherited overdraft when they are responsible for \$121.3 billion in overdraft in a nine-month period. Those are the facts. Although the PPP/C has stayed the course and has continued to misrepresent the facts about the overdraft, the evidence cannot be overturned.

Mr. Speaker, as we look at *Budget 2024*, it is important for us to make a comparison between what happened under the Coalition and what is happening under the PPP/C. If one listens to the Hon. Member's, Dr. Ashni Singh's, report on the sectors' performance, you will believe that the PPP/C is doing a great job at managing the economy while the APNU/AFC Administration did a poor job of managing the economy. However, this is far from the truth. So, allow me to do a comparison of the management of the economy under the APNU/AFC Administration as compared to the PPP/C Administration. To be fair, I will make a comparison between the Coalition's last full year in

Office, which was 2019, and the PPP/C's last year in Office in 2023. Let us examine six sectors – sugar, timber, shrimp, bauxite, rice and gold – and the foreign earnings received in this country by each of those sectors.

Let us start with sugar. The PPP/C loves to do comparisons and so Mr. Hamilton, this is for you. It was reported that the sugar growing sector was estimated to have grown by 28% in 2023. Sounds good, right? In 2019, the foreign earnings from sugar were US\$27.7 million while in 2023, the foreign earnings from sugar were US\$24.9 million. Some US\$2.8 million less was received in 2020 under the PPP/C stewardship than was received in 2019 under the APNU/AFC Administration. Those are the facts.

Let us look at timber. The forestry sector was reported to have expanded by 5.4% in 2023. Yet, in 2023, the foreign earnings from the timber sector were US\$20.5 million compared to US\$33.7 million in 2019 under the APNU/AFC Coalition – a difference of \$13.9 million. [Ms. Teixeira: Talk about what you did to gold.] I hear the Hon. Member, Ms. Teixeira, talking about gold. We are getting there, Hon. Member.

Let us look at shrimp. Shrimp production was reported to have expanded by 61.1% in 2023. Anyone listening to this report from the Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, would think that the shrimp sector is doing better under the PPP/C than it was under the APNU/AFC Administration. Again, it is far from accurate. In 2023, the foreign earnings from shrimp were US\$61.7 million and in 2019 – wait for it – it was US\$76.3 million. Under the PPP/C in 2023, the foreign earnings from shrimp were US\$14.6 million less than it was during the Coalition's last full year in Office in 2019. Those are the factual numbers.

Bauxite, now, Sir. It was reported that the bauxite mining industry contracted by 20.4% in 2023. In 2023, the bauxite mining industry's foreign earnings were US\$79.6 million. When compared to 2019, foreign earnings from bauxite were US\$127.1 million. The sector declined by US\$47.5 million under the PPP/C Administration.

Rice: During the budget presentation, we learned that the rice sector expanded by 8.3%. Let us examine the foreign earnings from rice. In 2023, the foreign earnings from rice were US\$211.7 million, while in 2019 the foreign earnings from rice were US\$222.9 million. Again, a decrease of US\$11.2 million in the rice sector.

For my friend, Ms. Teixeira, I turn to gold. The gold mining industry reported a contraction of 11.2% in 2023, resulting in the foreign earnings for gold being \$808.6 million in 2023. In contrast, Sir, in 2019, the foreign earnings from gold were US\$876.6 million. In short, the PPP/C is reporting that under its stewardship, the gold mining industry brought in US\$68 million less than the APNU/AFC brought in, in 2019. Those are the facts.

Mr. Speaker, those six sectors, under the APNU/AFC Administration in 2019, brought in \$158 million or \$32.9 billion more than the PPP/C did in 2023. The PPP/C is mismanaging these important sectors as they focus heavily on oil, and they are racing forward in the direction of the Dutch disease, and they do not like us to speak about that. Prudent management of the economy was well established under the APNU/AFC Administration. You cannot come to this House and dispute those factual numbers.

11.58 a.m.

So, when I read the headline in the *Guyana Times* that stated, “Leading Guyana to prosperity required Herculean task of correcting APNU/AFC’s wreckage”, I was convinced that the PPP/C was getting high on its own supply of propaganda. The numbers do not lie. The sum of \$32.9 billion more was received in foreign earnings in 2019 than in 2023 under the PPP/C. After three-plus years of the PPP/C being in Office, it cannot even bring these sectors back to the level at which the APNU/AFC left them before the PPP/C took Office in 2020. So, they cannot come to this House and try to lecture us about the management of the economy. If the PPP/C stays this course, it will mean that our country is in serious trouble, particularly our non-oil sector. For those of you who do not know, the oil sector has an expiration date. Whether it be 20 years or 30 years that the world’s largest oil importers have targeted for their plan to become carbon neutral, the industry is not going to be a cash cow forever. When the children of today become the parents of tomorrow and have children of their own, what we have today for oil resources will not be available the same way for them. The importance of protecting the development of the non-oil sectors cannot be overstated. I have clearly outlined that the best management of the non-oil sector was under the APNU/AFC Administration.

In spite of this fact, we are now witnessing the contraction of every major sector that is not oil or directly dependent on oil, a textbook example of the Dutch disease. Safeguards which the Coalition

Government had put in place to protect the State against the Dutch disease are being dismantled. All oversight of the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) is gone. Savings being kept aside for future generations will be depleted with their management. The Guyanese people can rest assured that when we return to Office, the non-oil sector, the part of the economy which we all are a part of and the part of the economy that puts a roof over our heads and food on our tables, will be restored to prosperity, as it was under the APNU/AFC Coalition Government prior to 2020. We will have to cure the PPP/C's Dutch disease. [Ms. Teixeira: *(Inaudible)*] When I excite Ms. Teixeria, I know that I am getting under her skin.

As we analyse the years of failure that have been characterised by the PPP/C's current term in Office, we must take time to measure the opportunity costs of its mismanagement. Let us move our focus to the very important question of what could have been. In the period 2015 to 2019, the APNU/AFC Coalition Government – and this is in dire need of repetition – spent a total of \$1.2 trillion. After the budgetary period comes to an end, the PPP/C will have spent \$3.25 trillion in the period 2020 to 2024, a difference of roughly \$2 trillion, and that excludes the many supplementary financial papers we know they will be bringing to the House during the course of the year.

One cannot help but wonder what this increased spending could have achieved and what it could have done for the ordinary Guyanese man and woman. Two trillion dollars, if you break it down per Guyanese family, it will bring you to \$9.5 million. It does not take anyone with a university degree to understand how life changing \$9.5 million would be to the ordinary Guyanese man and woman, and more particularly, to the most vulnerable persons in society, some of whom have to live and suffer the indignity of being in poverty. The sum of \$9.5 million per family could give them a decent roof over their heads and a car to drive. With the Coalition's policy position of free higher education for everyone at the level of the university, it would have made very well sure that their children and future generations would be lifting the standard of living. This is the Guyana that we should envision. All of this could have been done while maintaining the rapid infrastructural development programmes that characterised the Coalition's term in Office without a cent of oil money. This is the opportunity cost of having the PPP/C Administration in Office. The resources needed to give every Guyanese the life they dreamt of are finally here and under this PPP/C Government, our people have nothing to show for it, while the PPP/C is expecting to stay the uncaring course that it is on.

One would ask the question, why is this so? Look at what could have been. Struggling Guyanese, let us ask this question and answer it. If the money was there to give every family a respectable home, then why are some families still squatting? If the money was there to give every family higher education, then why did students have to drop out of university because they could not afford to pay the tuition? If Guyana is so wealthy, then why are thousands of families living in poverty today? The reason is simple. The PPP/C does not see hardworking Guyanese men and women as the key agents for development. The PPP/C does not believe in investing in people. Even after years of using the failed policy of the trickle-down economics, the PPP/C still sees the economy as a collection of businesses because it loves to secure its crony contractor class, as my colleague so nicely coined it. Again, I must remind the PPP/C, as I did last year...

Mr. Speaker: Let me remind you that your time is up. You would need an extension.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you. Hon. Member, you can proceed to conclude.

Ms. Fernandes: As I remind the PPP/C Administration, an economy is the total product of the collective efforts of hardworking men and women. It is only by empowering these hardworking Guyanese that we will see and realise the Guyana about which we all dream. The Guyana we dream of could only be built by their hands. Investing in the health, education and living standards of the Guyanese people is the only path to sustainable economic success. In his presentation, Dr. Ashni Singh spoke about:

“...those who generate prosperity will be those who adopt a comprehensive approach to deploying all the income generating capability on their entire household balance sheet.”

Self-improvement, educational accomplishment and hard work must be the pillars of prosperity. Prosperity must not depend on the ability to leverage large amounts of money to make investments. Your most powerful wealth-building tool is his/her income. For the average working Guyanese, this remains a small and insufficient sum. Yet, the PPP/C is telling Guyanese to leverage their meagre incomes to invest in risky business ventures. Investing money that one does not have

because of the confidence in steadily increasing property value, which the PPP/C is touting, is literally the economic mismanagement that created the 2008 global financial crisis. Yet, in spite of the many dangers of borrowing against inflating property values, the PPP/C's Minister responsible for Finance stood in this National Assembly and said:

“... those who generate prosperity will be those who adopt a comprehensive approach to deploying ... their entire household balance sheet.”

Being reckless with the nation's purse is one thing, but advising Guyanese to be reckless with their meagre purse is a whole new low. Guyanese must know that under the Coalition Government, those who generate prosperity will be the thousands of Guyanese who work hard and honestly. Under the Coalition Government, those who generate prosperity will be those who invest in educating their children with university education absolutely free. Under the Coalition Government, those who generate prosperity will be those who grab at every opportunity for self-improvement and development and not those who are called into meetings in the dead of night to cut backroom deals. We believe that the hardworking man and woman are the core of Guyana's economic engine. We believe that making our workforce more productive is how we develop our economy sustainably. We are not going to sit back and let the PPP/C run this economy down further than it has already done because we will invest in you and your children. Trickle-down economics has no place in Guyana's governance.

In closing, with the rising cost of living that Guyanese are facing, *Budget 2024* has been the biggest disappointment from the PPP/C thus far. With old age pension and public assistance increasing by \$3000, and no increase in the minimum wage, the PPP/C Government has proven time and time again that it does not care about any project or policy that would see the masses raising their standard of living and enjoying a better quality of life. Instead of a government of the people for the people and by the people, we now have a government for some of the people, and we all know who those people are. At the end of 2024, with the fourth oil budget, there will still be people living in the indignity of poverty in Tiger Bay and plastic city will still be there. The year 2020 to now has been a struggle, but I will say this: As the songwriter Sam Cooke said, it has been a long, long time coming but I know, a change will come. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Now for the Hon. Minister within the Ministry of Public Works, the Hon. Deodat Indar.

Minister within the Ministry of Public Works [Mr. Deodat]: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to give my few remarks on this budget. Normally, after the Opposition Members give their speeches, they walk out. Where is my friend?

Mr. Speaker, when I was a little boy, I had a habit of chewing my handkerchief. It was always a tasteless thing, but it was just a habit that I had. That presentation by the Hon. Member was just like chewing that handkerchief; it was tasteless. It was a tasteless presentation by the Hon. Member, Ms. Juretta Fernandes. It was like chewing a handkerchief. Try it sometime. Sometimes, I believe that the APNU/AFC think that the Guyanese people have goldfish memory – by the time we flip up in the air and come down back we forget – but we do not forget. Allow me, during my presentation, to remind the APNU/AFC, every single one of them, and every single person who is watching this budget debate. I will first turn my attention to the Hon. Member, Mr. Roysdale Forde, who spoke at the beginning of today's debate. He quoted one Mr. Christopher Ram, somebody whom I have known in the accounting fraternity for many years.

12.13 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Again, Minister, just be careful using his name; you could maybe use his article but not his name.

Mr. Indar: They said so; I am just reporting to what they said.

Mr. Speaker: You are cutting into your own time.

Mr. Indar: Anyway, the article that the Member quoted about Guyana will lose 100 billion United States (US) dollars or 10% in inefficiency. I do not know where that Mathematics came from or what justification they have to produce rather than an article that is quoted in this National Assembly. If any iota of evidence to show the inefficiency can be produced, let it be shown to the House rather than quote an article that does not have any route in any study of efficiency in Guyana – efficiency of procurement, efficiency on execution. If the article has a basis in fact, produce the fact. Other than that, it is just designed for enthusiastic corruption of the public good; that is what it is designed for, and it is repeated in this honourable House. I also want to touch on the

Honourable Members talking about trickle-down economics and waste, fraud, abuse, and slush fund. These are the things that they use to describe the budget that we presented on behalf of the PPP/C Government and talk about a visionary road map. He spoke about a visionary road map, that the PPP/C do not have a visionary road map.

Mr. Speaker, in any Government the collective wisdom of a cabinet is to the extent of what the leader of the cabinet sees. I am telling you, Mr. Speaker, based on their Government, their leader, Mr. David Arthur Granger, his vision, his road map, was selling cook-up, fried rice and fish and chips. That is what he went and told the people. That is the vision and the road map that the APNU/AFC Government will come here and tell us about having a road map. It was he who spoke it, not Mr. Indar. It was Mr. David Arthur Granger who spoke it. You cannot *unspoke* that or upspeak that; you cannot do that because he said it to people who wanted to hear about opportunities – fish and chips and cook up rice, that is the world vision of the APNU/AFC Government. That is what is called a street view; that is not a world view, that is a street view. That is the road map that the APNU/AFC's Member spoke about. Come on man. He spoke about poverty is pervasive. Mr. Speaker, I am a man who study the holy book. I go to church on a Sunday to keep sane; just to keep my foot on the ground I try to go to church every Sunday to hear the pastor. I know that every single nation on earth, since the foundations of the earth, had poverty; every single nation. Which ones do not have poverty, let anyone of those bright scholars over there show it. Poverty will always be with you; it is how you address it is the difference between our Government, which I will show you just now, and when they were in Government. I will show it just now.

He spoke about the University of Guyana's (UG's) \$4.1 billion and compared it to the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) Scholarship and talked about the GOAL Scholarship. I am not going to rehash what my Comrade, Mr. Joseph Hamilton, the Hon. Member spoke about. The GOAL Scholarship gave 21,442 Guyanese a chance of an education – 21,442 Guyanese from all walks of life, every part of this country – and you are going to cuss that in this honourable House. You are telling that 21,442 people, 'you do not deserve that.' Who are we in this House to say that? Our job when we were elected was to make sure we enhance people's lives and the only way through that is education. If a man was born and raised in poverty, his only chance out of that is *via* education. I am one that is standing here as evidence of that, that education

can take one out of poverty and bring one so that one can address this honourable House on the budget before the country. I am evidence of that.

He said the budget lacked consultation. I do not know which rock the Honourable Member crawled out of. I do not know which tomb just break and they just crawled out of the tomb. I will tell you, the Guyana Manufacturing and Services Association issued a statement because they had consultations; the Private Sector Commission issued statements; the Chamber of Commerce and Industry – over 1,000 members they have – issued a positive statement; the Upper Corentyne Chamber, the Berbice Chamber, the Region 3 Chamber, all of the Chambers... [An Hon. Member: The Essequibo Chamber.] ...the Essequibo Chamber, the Guyana Badminton Association, the Guyana Squash Association, every body issued statements on this budget because they were part of the process. And he now crawl out of a rock and say, ‘oh, there was no consultation.’ [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] He *bruck out he tomb* and crawl out, yes.

This Honourable Member Mr. Forde came to this House and spoke about the Constitution and adhering to the Constitution, and the appointment of the Chancellor of the Judiciary. He has the gall, the straight face, to come to this honourable House to talk about upholding the Constitution when they were squatting in office for five whole, long months. He led the fight to go to the court over and over, as they say in the countryside, ‘*gutaying wan dhal*,’ until they end up with something called *res judicata* because they were trying one case over the next for the same issue. And the Attorney General (AG) is laughing here now; even the AG finds it funny. That gentleman, who is the Hon. Member Mr. Forde, he was the one who was leading the fight to keep an illegal government in office, squatting, and he comes here to lecture us about the Constitution and adhering to the Constitution. We do not need a lecture from that particular Member. Maybe the younger members who were not part of it can come here and talk about that, not him. I will rebuke every mistruth, every misguided information that was spoken in this House.

They are talking about poor and vulnerable – the Hon. Mr. Forde. I will come to my friend Ms. Juretha Fernandes just now with that crazy Mathematics that came out, but let me deal with Mr. Forde first. Mr. Forde said that the budget does not cater for the poor and the vulnerable. There was something under the 2015 to 2020 government, under the APNU/AFC that I refer to as the ‘great turning away’. They turned their faces away from the poor and the vulnerable, and I will tell you how they did. The first thing that they did was introduce about 200 hardship measures; we call

it hardship measures because that is what it was. You do not tax fertiliser, herbicide and pesticide to grow food. That is what is a hardship measure. They talk about the poor and the vulnerable, the elderly folks; they taxed the elderly folks. The water that you use to pray, [*inaudible*] cook food, and the churches which feed the vulnerable, the water that they use, they put value-added tax (VAT) on it. Imagine they taxed the thing that you use to wash your hand and clean yourself to go and pray in the morning. That is what they did, and they are talking about the vulnerable and the poor. Water and light bill... they removed the subsidy from the light; that is what they did and they are coming to talk about the poor and vulnerable. Every single thing under the sun they taxed. All the fees they increased, even to the *badam lacha* man they taxed; that man pushing the little cart they taxed – the hustlers. The horse cart man, they increased the fee. The younger people in here do not know that. The previous Minister of Finance I think he used to wake up every morning – I am sorry he is not here to defend himself – and say, ‘where we *gon* tax today, Mr. Granger?’ I will tell you what else they taxed. They taxed education, developmental things. Look, there are some students over there. I was president of the chamber at that time. I had to run down by his office and *buse* he out for it. How are you going to tax development? Do you want the country to raise up dunces? [An Hon. Member: Shame.] Shame. It was a shameful thing they did.

Listen to me, the Irfaan Ali Administration did not put *puck puck* people inside this Government. He put up educated people in this House to defend this budget. Do not bring those things to us here. They taxed food. Imagine he is talking about poor. They taxed food, things like butter; they taxed butter. You could not even talk to your girlfriend or boyfriend *lang*; they taxed the data. The food, bread... people do not know how bread is made. You have flour and something named shortening that goes into it to make it. They taxed the shortening, so the bread price *gawn* up. The people start making... rather than the bread being so long, they bring down the bread to this size to maintain the price. That was what they were doing, and they are talking about hardship measures.

Mr. Speaker, they talk about the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo), and I am glad the Hon. Mr. Ramjattan is here because he always comes with two spears, five knives and every ammunition he could find to go after GuySuCo; but Mr. Forde spoke of GuySuCo. Mr. Speaker, I walked house to house in this country. Every community I go, I walk and talk to people. There was one time when I was walking in a place called Zeelugt North and I saw an old man sitting in a corner on a

step and I saw a lady picking shrimps; she was picking shrimps. [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] Be quiet, you might learn something. The lady is picking shrimps, so I asked if everything is okay. I had about three young ladies with me because they control the area and they were walking with me. I looked at the lady and the lady did not raise her head. I said, ‘what are you doing? Is everything okay?’” She said, ‘No.’ The lady continued to pick the shrimps. I am walking out now, and my comrade said, ‘Minister she does that for a living.’ I walk in back and I said, ‘Ma’am *yuh* picking shrimps to cook?’ She said, ‘*no, we does do dis fuh work.*’ She is picking shrimps, by *buttah* bowl they call it. They get \$140 per butter bowl. One can pick at most 10 of *dem buttah* bowl, so you are talking about \$1,400 a day this lady can work. Next door I see a man. I said, ‘*yuh* husband work and so?’ She said, ‘yes, but he get lay off. He used to work at GuySuCo.’ I said, ‘he does not do anything more?’ She said, ‘no, because when crop come back, he is going to go back and so.’ This is what the workers in GuySuCo... this is not the six billion number you are talking about. This is the lives you are talking about. That situation there, Mr. Speaker, was cascading across the country when they put over 7,000 people out of work. That is what it did to the family; it destroyed the family. And they come to this very House and boast about it. That is the most shameful thing that the APNU/AFC every did and to have Members like Mr. Ramjattan – [An Hon Member: (Inaudible)] You will have your time to speak later but I am speaking now – come and defend throwing *dem* people out of work.

Wales, mangled iron. When you go to Wales, you look at the factory, there is mangled iron; plus, they ‘thief out’ the mangled iron too. They give it to their friends; they destroyed Wales; 1,700 workers on the bottom line, and they come to this House and talk about GuySuCo as if those are not people; those are Guyanese just like me and you. They deserve every right to an employment and a decent wage to *mind* their family. So when we bring figures to this House to say we are going to keep the industry alive, we are going to keep it alive because they are people. They have children; they suffer the same way like we; they bleed the same way like we. They are not a different race; they are not a different culture; they are not a foreign entity; they are us.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to turn now to our good friend, Ms. Juretha Fernandes. She said, in her words, that the right Hon. Dr. Singh lied about the budget deficit and the overdraft. I do not know which book she was reading, or which report she was reading, but the Bank of Guyana had a recording in the creditors balance, which is supposed to always be a credit balance because it is a

creditor, a debit inside of there, which is owed to the Government of Guyana, hidden in those account balances, \$92 billion worth of off-the-book, unauthorised spending that they had. It was not part of the Consolidated Fund. It was on the Bank of Guyana books, and they hid it, and it was not reported. What happened is that it contracted the asset base of the Bank of Guyana. When you are looking for the money, you could not see where the overdraft was; they hid it. I took three analysts from the private sector – one is the president of the [*inaudible*] – and found it and made it public. That is what they did.

12.28 p.m.

That is what they did; they hid the debt so it was not showing up in the Government's books; it is in the Bank of Guyana's records. That is why our Government had to come here and bring legislation to carry up the debt ceiling, issue the treasury bills, and have the debenture. There was a US\$11.4 million increase in payments because of that debt. We inherited it. So, she is reading the wrong report. I do not know what kind of shadow Minister of Finance you have. She is reading the wrong report. [Mr. Ramjattan: You need to quote the Bank of Guyana's report.] It is there everywhere. Why do I have to quote the report? Go and check it. Go and read it. Go and read it.

Mr. Speaker, I want to speak a little about the comparison that the Hon. Member made. I want to know how much time I have left because I want to speak about some of that. She compared sugar, forestry, shrimp, bauxite, rice, and gold. They used that comparison; let me give you a comparison, Mr. Speaker, then I will come back to her and that garbage which she spewed. This here, which I have, is not the 2024 Budget; it is the 2015 Budget. It is the 2015 Budget that the then Hon. Member Mr. Winston Jordan presented under the APNU/AFC – a fresh Government. I want to show you a figure. This is not me; this is *y'all* budget. This is not Indar's budget. I was not catering for politics at that time. This here states that in 2015 they put \$39.4 billion as the total capital spending of the whole country. It was \$39.4 billion. [Mr. Nandlall: They promised a good life.] This was the year that they said was the 'good life' year. This was their capital spending. The rest was what they were eating and drinking. This was capital spending to build schools, roads, hospitals, bridges... [Ms. Manickchand: It was to do all the infrastructure.] It was for every infrastructure in every ministry – \$39.4 billion. In an oil and gas economy in which you have to prepare for a future, this money... [Members of the Opposition: (*Inaudible*)] In the

next year it did not go up. Do you want me to go to the next year? In the next year, it did not go up either; it moved by inches. *Suh, dont guh deh*. This is hurting them – the two boys up there. The Hon. Members are getting antsy. Let me finish; I was not disturbing your people when they were speaking. You might learn something.

In the budget speech, do you know how much they put for community roads? Hon. Member Bishop Edghill, you would be ashamed to know that they only put \$544 million to build community roads in this country. You can get less than 16 roads from that. If you take \$30 million to build a community road, it is less than 16 roads you will get from that. How are you going to build a country with 16 roads? Come on, this is not me; this is *y'all* budget. [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] *Yuh* want exhibit. Mr. Speaker, I borrowed this from the Parliament Office, but I can give you the exhibit if you want. This is the fact; this is the record that you were talking about a 'good life.' This is theirs. Do you know what is ours this year? This is just for this year alone. From the whole country's budget, for Miscellaneous Roads alone, there is \$73.2 billion because we, in this Government, care for the communities. We care for the children who walk in the mud to go to school. We care for the farmers who have to fetch the plantains on their backs to come out from the dams. We care for them and that is why we are building the country. We built over 4,000 roads since we came into this Government. So, when they talk about performance against the APNU/AFC and workload management, it is *chalk and cheese*; you cannot compare them. [Mr. Ramjattan: Why *yuh dont guh* and read the 2014 Budget and *(inaudible)*.] Hold on *nah man*. Hold on *nah man*. This is my presentation. Hon. Member, you hold on.

This Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, spoke about debt, debt management, and management of the economy. Lord, I sat down there, and I had to drink a glass of water so that *muh stumuck dont* turn. The debt of any country or the debt burden is calculated by the debt over the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). So, you call it your debt burden. It is the debt to GDP ratio – the debt burden. It is at 27%. It is 27%. The Hon. Minister, Dr. Singh, put it inside the document. She did not read, or she did not compare. If you compare it to the rest of the Western Hemisphere, no country has a low debt-to-GDP ratio or tax burden as Guyana. Guyana is the lowest in the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and it is the lowest in the entire Western Hemisphere. That is something that they could never achieve. So, do not speak about debt, debt management, and management of the economy.

I saw it big in the *Kaieteur News* that there is a ballooning debt of \$44 billion. The debt stock of this country goes back for decades. We are still paying for some of those old projects. It adds up and it keeps adding but it is 33.8% of our total spending. Just divide \$44 billion by \$1.146 trillion and you will get it. It is \$44 billion over the total budget sum which is \$1.1 trillion. You will get 3.8%. That is the smallest. When we took Government – the Senior Minister, Dr. Singh, normally comes to this podium and says the same thing – your debt service ratio was 153%. It meant for every dollar you earned, you had to borrow 53 cents to pay – just servicing the debt. That was what we inherited from the APNU/AFC Government – a People’s National Congress (PNC) Government at that time. You know that in usual reptilian mode, the reptiles change their skin. So, they now come with a different thing – how they know to manage the economy. They know how to manage the economy. You know that some reptiles change their skins all the time – the PNC, the People’s National Congress/Reform (PNC/R), PNC/R-One Guyana, the APNU and the APNU/AFC. Recently, I saw community groups at the last Local Government Elections (LGE). They are just changing all the time. They are just changing all the time in the usual reptilian mode.

We had to call it for what it is. They do not know about managing any economy. I will tell you how they do not know about managing. They did all the wrong things. They spent money in the wrong places. They spent money on current expenditure – recurring expenditure. All the time, they just carried up the normal running of ministries and agencies. There was nothing to do with capital formation spending and social formation spending. Let me tell you what this Budget has inside to make sure that the entire world knows that it has everything good for Guyana. It is good for Guyana. I made some notes on it. [Mr. Mahipaul: *(Inaudible)*] More for the boys. First, they are talking about Guyana and the mismanagement of the economy. I do not know which economy on the face of this Earth grows, has the tag and title of the fastest-growing economy in the world, runs at 33% this year, and is next year projected to be 34% plus. Who manages a bad economy like that? Are we crazy in this House? Is this the *House of Crazyies*? I do not think so, Mr. Speaker. This is an honourable House. A 33% GDP, the fastest-growing economy in the world, does that sound to you like mismanagement? That sounds like someone just trying to find fault with something good.

The global growth is subjected to deceleration by 1.5% when we are growing at 34%. The entire European block is seeing a reduction in growth. When they do the economic reports in the ECLAC,

they pull out Guyana. Do you know why they pulled out Guyana from the normal set of countries? It is because we are termed in Mathematics as what you call an outlier. The law of averages puts everybody in one group, but we have to be plucked out and put separately because the growth is an outlier; it distorts the growth of the entire ECLAC region. So, they pulled out and put Guyana separately because that is how good we are doing. To have an APNU/AFC Member of Parliament (MP) come and say that the economy is managed badly, I do not know what to call that. I do not know if it is the garbage that I saw at Hill Street the other day when I drove through in Albouystown that the City Hall had to go and clean it up. It is plain garbage that they are coming here and spewing. I am sorry that she left the House because I like to rebut them when they talk. The entire Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region will grow at 2.2%. Do you see what I am talking about with the law of averages and the outliers? That is Mathematics and that is how they do these reports. We should be proud to know that Guyana is treated and seen in that way by even the international financial institutions that prepare the reports.

For this Budget, I had the opportunity to speak to some folks in Albouystown last Friday. I was talking about the budget and what it has inside. One of the groups of people in the country is a vulnerable group, the poor. When I spoke about the ‘great turning away’ that the APNU/AFC did, I will tell you now what it means. From this Budget, 205,000 children will receive \$45,000 come 2024. This will be 205,000 children from all walks of life, every race, and every creed. Do you know what they did? They turned their face from those people and said we are not giving you the cash grant. The former President of Guyana said that they could not afford it. How is it that the PPP/C Government could afford it suddenly and increase it to \$45,000? **[Members of the Opposition: (Inaudible)]** So, *y’all* did not have oil money in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018? Was oil not being produced? That is their excuse for not having a heart. That is their excuse.

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk about something different. In every person, there is a value system – you care for certain things, and you go after them. If the collective value system of the APNU/AFC is to deny children the right to a little money to help buy their uniforms and take them to school to get an education, they do not even deserve to be an opposition. That is what they did. They took it away from children. They do not even deserve to be an opposition or, worse yet, a government. This Budget has about \$70 billion, and whether it is for Old Age Pension... Do you know what they did? They plucked out Old Age Pension and said it is a \$3,000 year-on-year increase. They

did not realise that when we took Government it was \$20,500. It is now \$36,000 – nearly doubled. There was a 75% increase in the Old Age Pension but they decided to pluck that out and say, we are going to go after this one; we are not going to talk about the other good things in the budget. My job is to talk about the other good things in the Budget. The children will get their cash grants. There will be 13,000 people in the tax bracket of under \$100,000 who will now not pay tax. That is only what is recorded in the Guyana Revenue Authority's (GRA's) system. There are a lot of people out there that pay people and that is not recorded by the GRA. They also will benefit from it. [Mr. Mustapha: *(Inaudible)*] Yes, at Bath Settlement when they had the fees.

Apart from the Old Age Pension, I want to talk about the survivors' benefits that we have now. All these things are geared to help the poor and vulnerable. They turned their faces away from children, older folks, and the public assistance programme. We have a whole Ministry that is run by Minister Vindya Persaud, and it deals with all these things. All day, every day, and all over the country, people are being looked at and given these benefits. They never used to do these things. When you go out in the country, you walk the place rather than sit like armchair generals in your offices and do desk reviews; go out, meet people, and you will hear from them. A lot of people are being helped by this Government. We do not turn our faces from the fatherless. We do not turn our faces from the blind. We do not turn our faces from the downtrodden. We embrace them and put programmes in place to help them. That is what this Budget is delivering. That is what it is delivering. You check every line of the budget, and you will see it.

Mr. Speaker: All right. I checked my time and I see that you need an extension to conclude.

Mr. Indar: Thank you.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask for the Hon. Member to have five more minutes to conclude his excellent presentation. Thank you.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Minister. Hon. Member Mr. Indar, you may continue.

Mr. Indar: Mr. Speaker, I also want to raise the issue of drainage and irrigation. Drainage and irrigation will see \$72.3 billion. Let me say this – farmers in this country who *mine* the rest of this country in terms of producing the bora, boulanger, pumpkin, squash, eddo, and everything else,

need drainage and irrigation to increase their crop yields. If they do not have drainage, the water will flood the land and the little that they have, they will have to sell very expensive. So, the drainage and irrigation are designed to help the thousands upon thousands of farmers that we have and bring down the cost of food because the yield goes up. That is what we are doing here. This is an entire section of our country that we are addressing.

12.43 p.m.

The Hon. Minister Zulfikar Mustapha... They talked about shrimp production and money that we get from shrimp and rice. I do not know if it is *jumbie* mathematics but what they need to know is, Guyana has been leading with food production in the entire region. That is what you call leadership. The President of this country, along with the Minister is leading that fight. We are planting things that we never planted before. Crops that we never thought of engaging in, we are now engaging in, planting, and having production out of it. That is what agriculture is doing for that segment of our population. Farmers have families too. Farmers have children too. Farmers need to pay and eat too, so we have to help them with fertiliser. We removed all of the taxes from the fertiliser that they taxed. Imagine *y'all* taxing things that grow food *fu* *people eat*. Imagine the APNU/AFC were taxing the very things for farmers to use to grow food for they themselves to eat and their children. What more economic madness than that could you conduct in a country? Herbicide and pesticide, they taxed that too.

Mr. Speaker, for education, \$135.2 billion was budgeted. That is investment in the next generation. All of us in here would not pass the mortality rate. Some of us might be lucky to transgress over 65 to 70; the rest of us need to look to the next generation. We need to build a country that has bright people to deal with what the future will bring to us. The challenges of global warming, disaster and global hunger, we need people in this country to deal with those things. How do you do it? We have to train them; we have to put them in schools, and we have to build a country with a good knowledge stock; not what they did by taxing the people. [Mr. Ramson: And give themselves scholarships.] Yes, and give themselves scholarships.

Mr. Speaker, \$129.8 billion for health care. How else do you show love to a society other than caring for them when they are most sick? How else does a government express love to the people that elected them other than showing that when your child, aunt, uncle, grandmother, *chacha* or

whoever is sick, we have a hospital for them to go to; they will get free drugs. We are building a modern health-care system in this country. This money is an expression of love to the people of Guyana. This is how you care for people through dealing with the health care. My friend and Hon. Member Dr. Frank Anthony is leading this; and there is no better man to do the job. Thank you very much, Sir. [Mr. Mahipaul: *(Inaudible)*] *I aint done with you yet*, Mr. Mahipaul.

Mr. Speaker, I want to also point to roads and bridges. The last one, roads and bridges, \$204.1 billion. Last but not least. [Hon. Members: *(Inaudible)*] Someone said that it is stupidity. I want all of you to go into the community and let the people *brick y'all down* – excuse my language – for not building the road. Do you know what they did in 2015? I have their budget. They did 16 roads – 16 roads. One community that we go to, we built more than 16 roads. You cannot erase the records of the APNU/AFC Government in this country, no matter how much you scrub it or tear out the page. You cannot erase it; it is there. It is in the records, and I will show them the records. The \$204 billion for every community, from bow to stern in this country, will see development and has seen development because, as I said, my good friend and partner in the Ministry of Public Works, we built over 4,000 community roads. All of the highways, byways, and bridges, we are building them.

Mr. Speaker, I know that you have signalled that my time is up. I can spend another day at this podium, but I want to say that this Budget that they presented belongs where it is, in the past. It should not and their Government should never see the face of Office again because of their philosophy. Their philosophy is limited. The collective wisdom that they have is shortened. Only two or three persons made decisions in their Government. This Government that we have is one that seeks counsel from every single minister, every single public officer. That is how we operate; that is how we operate. I will close by saying that the 2024 Budget that was read out by the right Hon. Member, Dr. Singh, is a budget for every stratum of life in Guyana – every stratum of life. It addresses all the problems we are facing, all the problems we are facing in the various groupings of people, including building a country that when the foreigners come in here by the thousands, they see a country that everyone is talking about overseas, that is the number one growing economy. They see that the country is revving with economic activity. Thank you very much, Sir. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Minister. Hon. Members, before we break, I have a couple of housekeeping matters. I would like for us to decrease the movements behind and in front of the speakers whenever they are at the podium because many times the persons who are exiting on that side and the other side of the House block the view of the camera. We have a wide cross section of people who are online also. You have to ease yourselves away to the exits which are not covered by the cameras. Hon. Members, we will return in one hour and 10 minutes which is at 2 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.50 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 2.09 p.m.

Hon. Members, please be seated. We were off to a very good start this morning. A few shame, shameful, *et cetera*, came in. Please let us reduce those. We will now hear from the Hon. Member. Mr. Ronald Cox.

Mr. Cox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, good afternoon. To all my colleagues of this noble Assembly, a prosperous new year. To the hardworking, but inadequately compensated of course, staff of the Ministry of Finance, thank you for your sacrifices towards another budget. To all my other Guyanese brothers and sisters, I say to you, brace yourselves and do not be swindled by the numbers. Do not expect much as another budget for the elites is presented.

Mr. Speaker, before I proceed to my presentation on the debates for *Budget 2024*, allow me to make two comments. The speaker from the Government side who spoke just before the break for lunch did a folly of himself by comparing the APNU/AFC's 2015 Budget allocation for Capital Expenditure to the 2024 allocations. What that speaker failed to tell the people of this country is the figure of the total budget for 2015 as compared to the now much touted GY\$1.146 trillion. In 2015, the budget was just for five months as compared to this one which is for 12 months. The 2015 Budget was \$221 billion, a mere fraction of \$1.146 trillion. Even a primary school student would understand the comparison attempted by the Hon. Member, Mr. Indar. I say no more.

Mr. Speaker, I would hope that the Government speakers have so much to say. This is my second comment, this is in relation to the Hon. Member, Mr. Hamilton. As a father, as a teacher, as a hardworking public servant of this country, I strongly object to the reference of persons' children.

I would hope that the Government speakers have so much to say on this \$1.146 trillion budget that time will not permit them such utterances, but much to the dismay of those glued to the televisions and smartphones as they listen to this year's Budget debates. It is no secret that the cost of living and the hardships associated with such have forced the ordinary, hardworking, and decent citizens of this nation to the precinct of marginal existence and survival. It takes great skill and resilience to survive in the current environment where most consumers in the streets of Georgetown and elsewhere would tell you in no uncertain terms that the prices of basic commodities have risen by far more than a 2% inflation rate that was reported in this National Assembly. In fact, I am sure that every Guyanese household would tell us that they had to expend more than 6.5% of their incomes to meet their basic needs of food, transportation, and rent. A cursory understanding of economies tells us that once households are forced to spend more to meet the basic of daily survival, a reduction of disposable income and savings follow. In other words, the future of such household seems very bleak and heading into very uncertain times.

Mr. Speaker, of all the budgets presented by the PPP/C Government since 2020, this is the only one which I will change just one word of the theme presented by the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance. A classical theme for *Budget 2024* 'Staying the Course, Building Prosperity for Some'. The only word I will change here is "All" to 'Some'. The PPP/C is well on course as they build prosperity for their elites and well known three Fs, something Guyanese have grown weary of. It is alarming that the Government prioritises infrastructure over social policies. We know from reports and experiences that this creates fishers for something known to many of us, a word that is not permitted to be used in this National Assembly. The figure for our national budget, now in the trillion, does not necessarily impress the ordinary man, especially now that the majority of Guyanese are still crying out as they struggle to make ends meet. That is something the Hon. Members of the Government may not agree with. In order for them to agree with this, you must attempt to live on minimum wage yourself as many Guyanese do every single day of their lives. Mr. Speaker, one would question whether the Government's priority is on our people or just a highlighted or selected few - selected of course by their own bigoted policies.

2.17 p.m.

The Government came to the National Assembly last year with additional financial papers, as my Colleague the Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, mentioned earlier. Is this the real Budget? This is a clear indication that the ordinary man must not be duped to expect any massive ease in the struggle of his daily life. *Budget 2024* is another disaster to the poor but, of course, an illuminated Disney World for a few and their friends. The figures in any budget are critical and important. What is equally important is efficiency and responsible spending, compounded by accountability and transparency, something on which most of my presentation will be based as it relates to the Barima Waini region. I am not too fancy about the figures budgeted. We are fancied about whether or not our people benefit from those allocations. Contemporary wisdom tells us that prosperity is a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted concept. The World Bank Group tells us that prosperity speaks to an enhanced human well-being measured by achieved economic growth and development, enhanced human wellbeing balanced with a quality environment. Again, I say, is this a reality for many Guyanese? The answer is a resounding no; building prosperity for some. Of course, they will say yes. Prosperity also takes into consideration the human element of development and concerted efforts at poverty eradication and expanding human freedoms, social cohesion, justice and maintaining adequate standards of living. Again, building prosperity for a few.

I turn my attention to an issue that is affecting the residents of Region One and to be specific the villagers of Chinese Landing. Another sore issue, one might describe as blatant disrespect of the Indigenous brothers and sisters in Chinese Landing. Contrary to the position of the Hon. Minister of Amerindian Affairs, the Hon. Member, Ms. Pauline Campbell-Sukhai-, the villagers never sought to cease mining totally. They sought to cease mining in a part of their village called Tasiwini. I want to quote from the article presented here by Inter-American Commission on Human Right (IACHR). It states:

“The petition indicates that the members of the Indigenous Carib Community of Chinese Landing are facing threats, harassment and acts of violence in the context of their opposition to mining activities in their lands. The representatives alleged repetitive incidents of threats and harassment, which would occur "daily" or "regularly"; informed on acts against persons in particular vulnerability such as aggression to a young man, attempted rape of a minor, and threat with a knife against an elder person; as well as the extensive use of firearms, with firing incidents. The beneficiaries have also received

collective death threats, reportedly perpetrated by mined workers. For example, the Toshao, who is the leader of this community was allegedly warned if the village wins its lands back the miners would not leave easily, and people would die.”

It is a national embarrassment that this Government, through the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, may want to distance themselves from the side of the residents of Chinese Landing. I trust that when the Hon. Minister of Amerindian Affairs time comes to speak, she will bring much clarity to the issue and, of course, decide on which side of the fence the Hon. Member stands as it relates to the livelihood of the Indigenous people of this nation. There are many more information detailed in this document that I am willing to share. If time permits, I would like to return and quote a few. This level of disregard and disrespect for our Indigenous people, I believe have seep into the halls of this august Chamber with offensive names calling and baseless accusation of our elected Indigenous representatives with misappropriation of public funds. The name calling will not deter us. Even as we challenge those on the Government side to bring the evidence, at least we were never escorted by persons in specific colour of clothing, with the flexibility and free will of our limbs restricted. Staying the course, building prosperity for some is a classical theme. *Budget 2024* measures do not adequately address any serious attempts at ‘Prosperity for All’. Since the PPP/C Government took Office in 2020, the allocation and distribution of state resources have been skewed in favour of some. This Budget proposal reinforces the inequality and inequity that is the character of the PPP/C Government approach to developmental planning and implementation of projects and policies.

The Indigenous population of Guyana as of 2022 was projected to be approximately 10.5% of the total population and the fourth largest ethnic group in Guyana. The International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) 2022 is the source of that. As a minority group, Indigenous contributions to national development is phenomenal. We are in the frontlines to fight against climate change. We are in the frontlines in the protection of Guyana’s territorial integrity and our lands and resources are in the frontlines of the economic and social transformation of this country. We are happy that the Hon. Minister and his Government have allocated \$9 billion to be spent on the developments in Indigenous communities across Guyana. While we are happy and we welcome...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I am happy to give you some more time, but someone has to move that motion.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Cox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to quote from the Report of the Auditor General of 2022, on page 197 as it relates to Region One. It states:

“The Regional Administration breached the provisions of Section 43 of the Fiscal Management and Accountability Act 2003, when it failed at the end of the year to refund 755 cheques totaling \$771.898M for the year 2022. As a result, the Appropriation Accounts were overstated by this amount. At the end of reporting in September 2023, fifty-four cheques totalling \$72.948M had become stale dated and were still on hand.”

The entire Report on Region One is a nightmare so, as I said earlier, I am not too fancy about the numbers budgeted for this region. We are more concerned with your accountability, your transparency and your integrity. The citizens of Region One will judge you by that and not by the numbers that will be screamed here this afternoon. On page 199, it states:

“The commencement orders were not seen attached to payment vouchers nor were they presented for audit examination. As a result, it was difficult to determine commencement dates; and thus, the schedule completion dates for the Contracts.”

That is something Region One has always been known for and I guess my Hon. Friend, Mr. Collin Croal, knows this well since the Hon. Member is the Government’s Member of Parliament (MP) with responsibility to Region One. I wonder what his advices would be when he visit those regions and speak with his colleagues of the Regional Democratic Council (RDC) and more especially the Regional Executive Officer (REO). On page 203, it states:

“The Audit Office recommend that the Regional Administration should (i) immediately desist from certifying payments for incomplete works with the intention to cut and hold a

cheque (ii) the Regional Administration should monitor the pace of works closely and encourage the Contractor to expedite the completion of the works.”

This is as a result of giving one man too many contracts that he cannot handle and, again, the Budget: ‘building prosperity for some’. It goes on to state:

“Audit Examination of Payment Vouchers and supporting documents revealed that details on the signing of the Contract, Contract duration and the defects liability period could not be determined. A physical verification conducted on the 14 July 2023, discovered that the site was abandoned and the works were incomplete, while our inspections, measurements and calculations revealed an overstatement of \$10.557M as shown in the table below:”

The Report has pictures of evidence of the abandon site. A classical picture of things happening within the Baraima-Waini region. As time does not permit me to elaborate on much more that is happening in my region, I would like to turn my attention, in closing, to the *Report of the Auditor General on the Assessment of the Ministry of Education Hinterland School Feeding Programme*. Briefly, on page one, it states:

“Students not catered for due to poor planning, meals not monitored for compliance for nutritional standards, meals provided were not nutritious.”

Again, it is not the figure that will be screened here; it is the reality of my Indigenous brothers and sisters even at the level of the school system – very sad. There are other additional information that I wish to turn to, but I just want to conclude by saying there was during the debate when APNU/AFC were in Government, a very gentleman who is well known for his popular channel that seek comment, proposes 50% increase for public servants.

2.32 p.m.

In addition to that, another gentleman who is well known for not sticking to his words and becoming arrogant when questioned by ordinary Guyanese in this very National Assembly, questioned in a screaming tone, “what about our nurses? what about our teachers?” Well now, the nurses and the teachers are asking, what about us? The Hon. Member is in the position to ensure the questions are answered but the question is not being answered. My final remark on *Budget 2024...*

Mr. Speaker: Fortunately, I cannot take the final comment because you are already two minutes over the five minutes but I will give you 30 seconds to wrap up.

Mr. Cox: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Let me conclude by saying that *Budget 2024* is not supportive of the impoverished nor is it favourable to public employees. I implore the Members of the Government to intensify their efforts in eradicating poverty and offering material support and assistance to economically disadvantaged families, especially those residing in rural areas and ensure that every child has access to a reasonable standard of living. *Budget 2024*, staying the course: building prosperity for some. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Now, the Hon. Member, Mr. Lee Williams, you have the floor.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Firstly, let me start by saying that the shadow Opposition seems to be having mental illnesses. Why I say this? It is because when they are in Opposition, they think wise but when they came into Government, they forgot about the poor people. [**Mr. Duncan:** We do not know you.] You do not know me, but I know you as APNU/AFC who disappointed we, the Guyanese, in 2015, when you promised *A Good Life For All Guyanese* but you failed to fulfil your promises.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Cox, talked about salary increases. You promised a 20% increase in 100 days but, instead, you increased your salaries by 50% and left the Guyanese people on the side. The Hon. Member, Mr. Roysdale Forde, said there is poverty in the Amerindian villages. It is an insult to us, we, the Amerindians. We are not in poverty. It is you, the APNU/AFC Government, who put us in poverty between 2015 and 2020 by snatching away the Because We Care cash grant. If I should ask those students at the front the age they were in 2015, I am sure they were four or five years in nursery or grade one or year two. You snatched away their \$10,000 cash grant and you put them in poverty. My good Friend, Ms. Juretha Fernandes, had fun with numbers. I would like to ask the Hon. Member of Parliament to go on the ground and see what is happening in every village of this country. There is development that is taking place in every Amerindian village and in every region.

The Opposition speaks about the elite, friends and families. Again, I would like to ask the Hon. Member, Ms. Dawn Hastings-Williams, to tell her Colleagues that her husband is getting contracts

in Region 7 because he is our friend, family and the elite. The Hon. Member needs to tell you that. **[An. Hon. Member: (Opposition): (Inaudible)]** Yes, because she is benefiting from contracts in Region 7. She is getting contracts from Region 7, so you need to tell your Colleagues on the opposite side.

With that, *Budget 2024's* themed: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity For All*, builds upon the previous Budget that was passed since 2020, and underscores the Government's commitment to building prosperity for all. It is transformative and paramount to the lives of the Guyanese people. It is a people-centered Budget where, my Government, the PPP/C, continues to deliver on its promises outlined in the 2020 Manifesto. There is no doubt, the Guyanese people benefitted from these developments in every sector owing to my Government's strategic budget allocation during their tenure in just three years. Yearly, the increases of disposable income went into the pockets of all Guyanese from the coastland to the hinterland. With this being said, I want to highlight some of the successive and transformative measures that the PPP/C Government did to change the lives of Guyanese, especially in the hinterland.

Prior to 2015, my Government initiated the Because We Care cash grant whereby \$10,000 was given to every school child. However, when we demitted Office peacefully in 2015, the APNU/AFC moved immediately to abolish and abandon the programme leaving parents, especially those in vulnerable situations, in the darkness and with no hope. As a matter of fact, I can recall the Hon. Member of Parliament, Ms. Coretta McDonald, on her social media platform saying that the Because We Care cash grant distribution was a waste of taxpayers' money. The Hon. Member continued the following year by labelling it as 'a political gimmick'. I want to state in this honourable House that it is not a political gimmick but it is an investment in the nations' children, where we are taking away some of the burdens faced by the parents, both in the public and private schools. It is a fail for the APNU/AFC Government. In keeping with our commitment of increasing the cash grant to \$50,000 by 2025, the PPP/C Government increased the cash grant from \$10,000 to \$19,000, then \$35,000 and now it is \$40,000 with an additional \$5,000 uniform allowance, which gives a total of \$45,000 per child in 2024. A total of 205,000 schoolchildren will be benefiting from this programme while injecting \$9.2 billion of disposable income into the pockets of parents, including those on the Opposition benches. We are 'Staying the Course'.

The Government sees education as a solid foundation for growth and, therefore, there is investment to improve educational infrastructure across the country. I choose to highlight Region 7 where school buildings will be constructed and rehabilitated. Of course, the PPP/C Government is committed to deliver a safe and conducive learning environment which is why considering the volume of students at Waramadong Secondary School in Waramadong; a new dormitory will be constructed; while a new secondary school will be constructed at Jawala, Upper Mazaruni. This will allow students to learn in a safe, spacious and modern learning environment and so I reiterate that we are 'Staying the Course'. The Government has embarked on the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarship programme which has awarded 21,000 scholarships to ordinary Guyanese in contrast to the APNU/AFC's track record in five years. In Region 7, to date, a total of 698 persons have been awarded GOAL scholarships. I dare say that numbers do not hide, we are 'Staying the Course'.

The PPP/C Government has undertaken developmental initiatives in the hinterland region in the area of health, with the expansion of health facilities in Regions 1, 7, 8 and 9. Further, the 2024 Budget provides for the construction of modern hospitals in Moruca, Region 1, Kamarang in Region 7, as well as to upgrade the hospitals in Region 9 – \$1.5 billion is the mark. Also \$5 billion is allocated to retrofit health centres, health posts and other health facilities countrywide, including the hinterland. Also, the Bartica Hospital will be reconstructed, replacing the current structure. These hospitals will be outfitted with modern amenities, including a surgical theater at Kamarang Hospital to provide special care for our Amerindian people, thereby, reducing the need of travelling to Georgetown for specialised service. The 2024 Budget caters for the expansion of technology in our health centres where the telemedicine programme will be expanded to additional 26 villages. This will make access to specialised care, consultation, treatment and diagnosis readily available to the Amerindian people in their own communities. This programme is expected to be implemented across the hinterland region. To date telemedicine has been installed in the Upper Mazaruni, Region 7, Philipai, Chinoweng, Kamarang and Paruima. So far, there is a total of 26 consultations with patients from August to December, 2023, and from January there has been 10 consultations.

The hinterland water coverage has grown from 45% of the hinterland population accessing potable water in 2020, to 75% at the end of 2022 and 83% by the end of 2023. In 2023, 36 wells were

drilled in the hinterland, signalling a \$1.4 billion investment. Again, I will highlight Region 7 where a number of villages are now accessing potable water. In the Upper Mazaruni, several villages are now seeing running water in their homes including Kamarang, Jawala, Waramadong, and Paruima. Well works are still in progress at Kako where the Hon. Member, Ms. Dawn Hastings-Williams, resides. A new well is also being drilled in Jawala that will serve the other half of the village. The Government intends to achieve 93% coverage in the Hinterland by the end of 2024 and 100% by the end of 2025. In *Budget 2024*, a minimum of 40 wells are planned to be constructed with a budget of \$1.5 billion.

My Administration remains unwavering in its commitment to the first people through target infrastructural, social and economic development. The sum of \$9 billion, inclusive of \$2.7 billion carbon credit funds have been allocated to further advance development in Amerindian villages across the length and breadth of Guyana. Since the PPP/C assumed Office in 2020, the presidential grant increased significantly from \$500,000 to \$1 million, from \$1 million to \$1.5 million and from \$1.5 million to \$2 million, respectively, paving the way for economic growth and community wellbeing. In 2023, over \$9 million was expended to support 243 projects through the presidential grant in sectors like agriculture, tourism and transportation among others. In 2023, 15% of revenue from carbon credits were transferred to 242 villages, totalling to \$4.7 billion leading to the implementation of around 500 villages with projects that will improve livelihood income generation, food security, tourism and social upliftment.

The village projects in Region 7 have been completed by 90% while some projects are ongoing in various communities. In 2024, \$1.2 billion is allocated to continue direct employment and skill training opportunities to the Community Support Officers (CSO) programme. Over 2,600 young Indigenous CSOs will be benefiting, compared to zero under the Coalition Government who dismissed all of the 2,000 CSOs in 2015.

The hinterland agriculture development is paramount to the Government which is why investments were made to provide tractors and trailers, along with implements to over 200 Amerindian villages so, they can utilise this equipment to generate and improve the lives of their villages. I want to put on record and I will use one village as an example. There are other villages that are generating revenues in their village economy using the tractor and the implement. There is one village, Paruima, that has generated \$4 million in income utilising the tractor and is projected to generate

another \$6 million in the next three months giving a total of \$10 million in the village economic boost. This is the vision of the PPP/C Government where programmes are implemented for villages to sustain the village economy and gain financial independence. The PPP/C Government has resumed the hinterland electrification programme after it was abandoned by the APNU/AFC Government during 2015/2020 period. We, the PPP/C Government, said to the Amerindian people in the hinterland, remote, riverain and rural areas that there will be light so there is going to be light in every home in the Hinterland.

2.47 p.m.

Distribution of solar systems has already started and is near completion in some regions, while distribution is still ongoing in other regions. Figures do not hide, because 26,398 solar panels have been distributed to date, bringing electricity to many homes. Another 3,602 solar panels will be distributed in 2024. Upon completion, 30,000 households will benefit from reliable electricity for the first time.

My government sees our young people as our future asset and as such, Government has allocated \$200 million to improve community grounds so that our youths can have proper sporting facilities to improve their skills. Around 23 Amerindian villages in Region 7, including Kako, has benefitted from this allocation. The Government will continue to invest in training and sporting facilities for young people in various disciplines.

The PPP/C Government continues to support development of our tourism products in Amerindian villages. To this end, 49 new tourism experiences were launched, 22 of which were launched in 2023 through successful partnerships with some communities. In keeping with our Manifesto, promise of promoting nature, eco and adventure tourism, culture and heritage, culinary and tourism will be pursued this year. Support will be granted to the development and promotion of Amerindian villages. This will help to build the capacity towards establishing and management of the tourism enterprise through community inclusion and good governance practices to create a more diversified tourism product.

A sum of \$530 million is allocated to provide opportunities for skill training, upgrading and life-long learning by offering competence-base training. In Region 7, the community of Karrau has received support as part of “Discover Essequibo”. Tourism product assessment was conducted in

2023 and found that cultural and mining tourisms are worth pursuing. Packaging and development of these experiences will be done in 2024. Paruima officially launched its tourism product in 2023 after receiving support from the Guyana Tourism Authority. Importantly, Paruima is on the catalogue for international trips. As a minimum, eight international trips are planned for 2024. Communities nearby such as Phillipai, Kamarang and Kako – the village of Hon. Member Ms. Hastings-Williams – are on radar for support in which they will be improving new tourism experiences. With these interventions, income will be and will create employment opportunities for locals, demonstrating that this Budget is not only for the Private Sector but the local man as well. Although...

Mr. Speaker: For you, you will need five minutes to conclude.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister Teixeira. Hon. Member, you may continue and conclude in five minutes.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Transformational infrastructure projects will continue across the country, including constructions of roads, bridges and airstrips in every community, thereby making access easier. Our Government continues to bridge the gap between the coastland and hinterland regions, through infrastructural programmes. In 2023, \$6.5 billion was spent to support Hinterland roads in areas such as Issano, amongst many others. In 2024, \$5.5 billion is budgeted to develop roads throughout the Hinterland. The PPP/C Government continues to support the rehabilitation and maintenance of our airstrip to promote access and economic opportunities between the coastal and hinterland region. Work has advanced on these airstrips, particularly the Paruima airstrip which is progressing and will be completed in a few months. This initiative is expected to boost village tourism experiences. I am sure similar projects in other communities will benefit in the same way. A sum of \$2.3 billion is earmarked this year to complete construction of these airstrips, rehabilitation and maintenance.

There are so many success stories that can be told in this honourable House, not only in the Amerindian villages, but in every corner of the country. However, because of the time allotted to me, I cannot divulge in all. With this being said, I voice my support and endorse fully *Budget 2024* which will ensure national prosperity for all, create opportunities, provide disposable income, support vulnerable groups and improve the lives of every citizen. I, thank you. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member and now for the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul. You start at 2.53 p.m.; go ahead.

Mr. Mahipaul: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I stand before this esteemed Assembly as a passionate advocate for the people, honoured to contribute to the discourse on *Budget 2024*. I extend sincere commendations to the dedicated public servants, especially those at the Ministry of Finance and all other Ministries, regions, departments for their tireless efforts in ensuring we have this Budget. Their hard work often overlooked, forms the backbone of our public service, from doctors and nurses to teachers and disciplined service men and women. While the colossal \$1.146 trillion Budget is my primary concern today, the lack of balance in allocations, particularly towards human capital development and support for vulnerable taxpayers, leads to my inevitable nonsupport.

As I acknowledge the importance of infrastructure, my constructive criticism emphasises the crucial need for emphasis on human capital development for sustainable growth and development. As we enter the fourth full year under the current regime, marked by public dissatisfaction, the financial landscape projects an unprecedented expenditure of \$3.332 trillion by the end of 2024. Anticipating supplementary budgets, this raises a fundamental question – what is the real impact on citizens' quality of life? It compels us to explore beyond the surface and uncover the genuine story, recognising that this Budget, like a book, demands to be read beyond its cover. The 6.5% taxable salary adjustment or as some prefer to call it 'a decrease' stands as a disheartening chapter in our nation's history. Allow me to present figures that underscore the apparent indifference of the current regime. In 2015, when the APNU/AFC assumed Office, a one-time salary increase was granted to Ministers of Government, elevating senior Ministers salary to \$870,000 and Junior Ministers to \$696,000. It is worth noting that no further increases were provided in the years 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. The APNU/AFC Ministers left Office in 2020 maintaining the same salary levels.

During this period, the PPP/C criticised the salary as “fat cat” salaries, pledging not to accept such increases and advocated for a 50% increase for public servants. Fast forward to today, and we witnessed Senior Ministers of the PPP/C receiving a salary of \$1,070,000 and Junior Ministers receiving a salary \$856,000. Since 2021, the PPP/C has augmented what was previously dubbed a “fat cat” salary with an additional \$200,000, making it an overweight or an obese cat salary. This raises a simple question to our hard-working tax-paying citizens. How many of you received the \$200,000 salary increase from 2021 to now? While our dedicated public servants, disciplined service men and women, teachers, doctors and nurses – the pillars of our nation – contend with the rising cost of living, Government Ministers sit comfortably in their offices receiving an obese cat salary. Additionally, allowances totalling \$800,000, bringing the total monthly remuneration of ministers to an astounding \$1.87 million. The very people who are receiving this obese cat salary vehemently criticised the APNU/AFC ministers who were receiving a fraction of that figure. Yet, we are expected to be grateful for the 6.5% increase, which was taxed and claims that the public purse cannot afford more.

Let us reflect on our nation’s budget history, particularly its impact on hardworking citizens and the minimum wage. In 2015, the APNU/AFC Government with a \$221 billion Budget raised the minimum wage by \$10,460 showing commitment to peoples’ welfare. Subsequent years saw commendable increases, with the minimum wage reaching \$70,000 in 2019, under our five budgets, bringing minimum wage to a \$30,000 increase in five budgets of the APNU/AFC. However, the current landscape marked by the fifth budget under the PPP/C’s Regime, only delivered a meagre \$15,000 increase in minimum wage, despite an \$826 billion Budget last year. With a budget of \$1.146 trillion this year, there is no minimum wage increase. This stark contrast raises concerns about the Government’s commitment to improving the livelihood of the working class, considering the significant strides made in the previous Administration.

Let history bear witness to the fact that it was the APNU/AFC Government that brought tangible joy to the faces of public servants, through retroactive and tax-free salary increases to our resilient public servants, disciplined servicemen and women, teachers, doctors and nurses. I earnestly appeal to you, stand steadfast with us for our return is on the horizon; a return that pledges to rekindle the genuine smiles that were once a hallmark of your dedicated service.

In the records of our nation's financial history, a glaring anomaly leaps forth from this Budget, an unprecedented \$541 million earmarked for refreshments and meals, a sum that has never cast its towering shadow over our fiscal landscape before. Behold, a grand feast laid out for the powers that be in the impending year of 2024. What we have is a group of people eating lavishly with absolutely no expenses, fully protected by the State, receiving an obese cat salary and using their offices to make their friends, families and favourites as rich as they are. Meanwhile, the toiling masses of ordinary hardworking Guyanese find themselves shackled by the way of a punishing reality, striving tirelessly to make both ends meet. A sad Guyana indeed, Sir. This regime claimed that they spent \$500 million in last year's budget on the Men on Mission (MoM) scam, \$255 million dollars on humanitarian activities, \$1.7 billion on the Sustainable Livelihood and Entrepreneurial Development (SLED) Programme and \$300 million on small business development. This year, they have budgeted another \$500 million for the Men on Mission scam, an additional \$255 million on humanitarian activities.

3.02 p.m.

Five billion dollars on the Sustainable Livelihoods and Entrepreneurial Development (SLED) programme and \$450 million for small business development, with over \$7 billion allocated for cost-of-living reliefs. While these figures may sound promising, they create an illusion of inclusion. I challenge this regime to provide the public with a list of beneficiaries for the \$500 million Men on Mission (MoM) scam. Show us how it was spent, and you will see that it did not benefit the poor and vulnerable. Prove me wrong that it was not pocketed by the already wealthy. Show us the recipients of the \$255 million allocated for humanitarian activities. Provide a breakdown of the \$1.7 billion SLED funds and disclose the beneficiaries of the \$300 million for small business development. This Government has failed to produce proper documentation and verification of the spending of these significant sums of money, indicating that these funds were directed towards the regime, their cronies, families and lackeys, essentially constituting slush fund moneys.

Mr. Speaker, had they genuinely conducted a study and earnestly assisted the deserving poor and vulnerable, we would not witness widespread cries across this country about the cost of living. From Region 1 to Region 10, people are crying out. The only individuals praising this budget are the wealthy who do not worry about daily expenses or caring for the poor people's children. Those

residing in fancy mansions, with a luxury of security and lights while they sleep, are the ones benefiting. This Budget in essence serves to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Shifting the focus to the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, a bastion that spans the entirety of Guyana, warrants critical examination. Notably, I must acknowledge the removal of a person I deemed not only notorious but diabolical, as I advocated for the resignation of that notorious individual earlier last year. Today, we stand in the aftermath of that demand being met and achievement heralded by many, particularly our young Indigenous boys and girls. However, the pressing question that looms is: Who do we have now? Well in all fairness to Hon. Sonia Parag, I must allow her to show what she can do, but we do note that she was no good at the Ministry of Public Service, and in all her speeches in this House, none qualifies for a passing grade, so, we are not optimistic about seeing a better Ministry under her leadership and time will confirm just that.

In substantiating my earlier claim that the Ministry has fallen short, I present before you, Mr. Speaker and the viewing public, a litany of failures under the stewardship of Hon. Anand Persaud. Let the facts speak for themselves. In the hallow chambers of this honourable House, promises were made in January, 2023, under the banner of Policy Development and Administration. A commitment was made to train 50 staff members in specific areas. Yet, as the curtains fell on 2023, a mere 38 staff members had undergone the promised training. The Local Government's sector strategy touted as a cornerstone of progress was to be completed, yet it languished in a state of unfinished business. Similarly, assurances were given about the establishment of a local government data infrastructure, the finalisation of the Ministry's strategic plan, the completion of the sanitation sector plan and the formulation of a monitoring and evaluation framework. Mr. Speaker, let it be known that not a single target within these programmes was met. Despite the resounding failure to deliver on these crucial commitments, the audacious claim emerges that 100% of the 2023 budgetary sum was spent, a paradox of inefficiency and disregard for the expectations of the Guyanese people. For these glaring shortcomings, Hon. Anand Persaud should gracefully exit the Ministry. The people of this nation deserve a level of competence and dedication that has regrettably been absent in this chapter of the Ministry's history.

In preparation for political power in 2025, the APNU/ AFC commits to a comprehensive and proactive approach to foster sustainable communities and harmonious coexistence. The strategy

encompasses the 70 Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) and 10 municipalities, including the capital city, Georgetown. The Coalition plans to initiate robust community engagement programmes, involving residents in decision-making processes through fora and town hall meetings. Prioritising urban renewal and enhancement plans for towns, the focus extends to empowering local leaders and residents, improving critical infrastructure and promoting economic activities. As was the case between 2015 and 2019, we will continue partnerships with enterprises and non-governmental organisations and international organisations seeking to leverage resources for infrastructural development. The Coalition emphasises an organised approach to maintenance and repair of public assets and aims to stimulate local economic activities, support small businesses and attract investments in alignment with local economic priorities. Initiatives which include sustainable agricultural practices, environmental policies, waste management programmes and renewable energy projects, educational and healthcare facility improvements, technological solutions for service delivery and transparent budgeting practices will also be prioritised.

Mr. Speaker, unfortunately during our tenure between 2015 and 2020, we had to clean up what was left there for 23 years, but now we are in a better position because we know the foundation that we laid, and we will come back and do much better. Mr. Speaker, by focusing on these key areas and fostering a culture of collaboration, innovation and inclusivity, we will aim to lead the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development in building sustainable resilient and harmonious communities across Guyana. In short Mr. Speaker, we will not be a Dharamlall; we will not be a Parag; we will not be a Persaud; we will simply be champions.

Mr. Speaker, the Local Government Commission in its current construct and composition is a national embarrassment to our country. Without a doubt the Local Government Commission Act of 2013 needs to be amended earliest. That Commission that is currently heavily politicised is doing no good. We need a Local Government Commission that will scrutinise the appointment of local government officials to ensure a merit-based and transparent selection process; provide oversight to prevent corruption, nepotism and abuse of power within the local government bodies; investigate allegations of misconduct or malfeasance by local government officials and take appropriate actions; act as a neutral mediator in disputes among local government bodies, officials and residents; facilitate conflict resolution processes to maintain harmony and effective governance at the local level and address grievances and complaints in a fair and impartial manner.

We do not need a commission that is biased and employs political lackeys of the PPP, as in the case with the employment of the Linden Town Clerk, Tushcen-Uitvlugt Overseer and Typist Clerk, among many others.

Mr. Speaker, I must bring attention to a matter of grave concern regarding the National Procurement and Tender Administration and its board, the National Procurement and Tender Administration Board (NPTAB). The legislation governing this body demands urgent re-evaluation, if not, outright repeal to be replaced with a more contemporary framework that upholds the principles of fairness and equality among contractors, devoid of political interference in the allocations of projects.

A glaring example that demands scrutiny is the allocation of billions of dollars for the construction of four pump stations at Belle Vue, Meten-Meer-Zorg, Pouderoyen and Jimbo/Grove. While the public witnessed a substantial number of bids for each of these projects, 26 for Belle Vue, 27 for Meen-Meer-Zorg, 30 for Jimbo/Grove and 23 for Pouderoyen, the subsequent award of contracts raised eyebrows. In a puzzling turn of events, when inquiries were made regarding the decision-making process, it became apparent that the lowest most responsive bidders were not granted the contracts. The National Procurement and Tender Administration Board defended their actions, citing that out of the 26 bids received, 13 were deemed non-responsive, particularly in the case of the Meten-Meer-Zorg Pump Station. However, the situation became even more alarming when examining the Jimbo/Grove and Belle Vue Pump Stations, astonishingly the NPTAB acknowledged that the second lowest responsive bidder and the third lowest priced responsive bidder were awarded the contracts from the same 26 bids received for the Meten-Meer-Zorg Pump Station. This admission wordlessly confirms that the lowest responsive bidder for the Jimbo/Grove and Belle Vue Pump Stations were disregarded – the lowest most responsive bidders were disregarded. This re-evaluation raises serious questions about the transparency, fairness and integrity of the procurement process overseen by NPTAB. It is imperative for the Government to recognise the evident flaws in this body characterised by potential mismanagement and a departure from the principles of meritocracy. Many contractors complained bitterly to us, almost on a daily basis, and yes there is a measure in the Procurement Act to address contractors' complaints but that is basically putting those 'fat cats' over there to watch milk.

Mr. Speaker, let us not fool ourselves, in the interest of good governance and the well-being of our nation, it is paramount that we collectively address these concerns and work towards the establishment of a revamped, accountable and impartial procurement system. The current trajectory, with its potential for further deterioration warrants immediate attention and decisive action to restore public trust in the procurement and tendering processes of our beloved country.

As I stand at this microphone, I cannot let the unfolding drama surrounding the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) escape unaddressed. The Hon. Bishop and Ms. Teixeira in their attempts to justify their conspicuous absence from PAC proceedings, frequently assert that the Opposition's desire to expedite examinations is the root cause of the issue. They argue that the 2019 fiscal year remains untouched by the National Assembly's scrutiny... [*inaudible*] Pointing out that the current PAC has convened more frequently than its counterparts in the Tenth and Eleventh Parliaments, spanning from 2012 to 2020. Allow me, Mr. Speaker, to reiterate a truth that has been spoken before and will continue to be spoken. The PAC of the Twelfth Parliament explicitly agreed in one of our meetings that Mondays would be our statutory meeting day. This decision was not arbitrary, it harks back to the tradition of previous PACs that convened on that particular day. Notably, the PAC of the Eleventh Parliament was chaired by His Excellency the President, when he held the position as a Member of Parliament (MP). Back then, the quorum requirement, as it remained until April, 2022, was any three members. The infrequent meetings of that PAC contributed significantly to the quagmire we find ourselves in today.

3.17 p.m.

From 2015 to 2020, the PAC only managed to complete one Auditor General's report – the 2015 Report. When we assumed control in December, 2020, we had to pick the pieces from the Auditor General's Report of 2016 in the year 2021. It is worth noting that all previous PACs could have afforded to meet less frequently because they were up to date with the examination of the Auditor General's reports. The PAC of the Tenth Parliament – chaired by the Hon. Carl Barrington Greenidge – is a perfect example. It diligently completed the Auditor General's Reports for the years 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. This occurred despite the prorogation of the Parliament, lasting just three years. In stark contrast, the PAC of the Eleventh Parliament had a full five years but managed to complete only one report. Now, in its fourth year, this PAC has seen changes in quorum requirements, has completed just one report – the 2016 report – and grapples

with difficulty convening due to the reluctance of two Government Ministers to have the 2020, 2021 and 2022 Auditor General's Reports scrutinised. Roughly, 30 meetings had to be cancelled due to this...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have had three infractions so far. The last one was on the imputation of the two Ministers. You cannot impute. The other two, I will say, when you mentioned those 'fat cats' over there, the Standing Orders are quite clear that you refer to Members on the Opposite side as honourable or comrade. Then there was an earlier one with respect to the use of terms. Let us continue, you are doing well so far.

Mr. Mahipaul: Thank you, Sir. Roughly 30 meetings had to be cancelled due to this obstruction, yet the PPP/C expects us to believe that it champions transparency and accountability. The solution is straightforward. Either we revert to the previous quorum requirements, or the two Ministers must yield their seats to other less purportedly busy members from their side. There are experienced individuals like the Hon. Jennifer Westford, Hon. Dr. Bheri Ramsaran and others who seem to do nothing more than occupy seats in this House. However, it appears that Bishop Edghill...

Mr. Speaker: Here you go, you are imputing. You are calling two Hon. Members seat warmers; come on.

Mr. Mahipaul: However, it appears that the Hon. Edghill and Ms. Teixeira by title, believe themselves as superior to their counterparts, yet lack a fundamental understanding of their responsibilities at the PAC. It is time to navigate beyond these political theatrics and refocus on the core principles of accountability and diligence in service to the Guyanese people.

I must address the harsh reality affecting Region 3, specifically focusing on the island of Wakenaam, a stronghold of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. Noting the time constraints understandably imposed on me, my Colleague, Hon. Beverley Alert, will focus on other communities. During our time in Government, the island of Wakenaam witnessed significant development, including 100% asphaltic concrete roads, extensive sea defence projects, street lighting and a fully functioning hospital with two resident doctors. The agriculture sector thrived with fair equipment usage and the police operated without political interference. Educational facilities were upgraded and access to services became more efficient and equitable. However, the

current state of Wakenaam is alarming. The hospital lacks a resident doctor leading to incidents where four individuals in the most recent past were declared dead by a Nursing Assistant, and the mortuary struggles to accommodate bodies. Two dangerous PPP/C brothers on the island exert control over the excavators, police operations, hospital management and fund distribution favouring only selective PPP/C supporters. This unfair treatment and malpractice inflict hardship on ordinary Wakenaam residents. I urge the people to reflect on their choices as they hold the power to rectify this situation. If the status quo persists, the people must recognise their role in creating these issues. To bring about fairness and proper management, I implore them to make the change and vote for APNU/AFC in the next election, shifting towards improved governance for Region 3 and the entire nation.

The state of Leonora Cottage Hospital is a testament to the neglect under the PPP/C's watch. Oddly, the head of this hospital sits comfortably in this House but, like a backbencher reading from a script, she could only utter praises for the PPP/C. God forbid she voices any criticism, she knows she would be replaced in the blink of an eye. That is the PPP/C...

Mr. Speaker: In a blink of an eye, we need an extension.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Mahipaul: Thank you, Sir. That is the PPP/C's modus operandi – *Papa Jagabat's* word is law, and any descent will exile you to a corner to rot. It is time to expose the charade and demand accountability for the neglect and the mismanagement in Region 3. In a \$1.146 trillion budget, there are alarming reductions in capital expenditure for Education Delivery across eight regions. None of us wants a situation like the one that was in Mahdia, but going forward, any regional challenges must be attributed to the Minister of Education who approved this Budget with significant cuts in capital expenditure during a Cabinet meeting. Similarly, for Health Services Delivery in Regions 4 and 7, there are reductions, reinforcing our stance that this Regime lacks interest in human capital development. This budgetary approach raises concerns about the

Government's commitment to providing adequate resources for essential services, potentially impacting the Education and Health sectors in various regions.

In wrapping up, it is abundantly clear that this current regime wielding power must rise above its lacklustre performance and do right by all our citizens. The tiresome narrative of enriching the elite while penalising the ordinary and vulnerable segments of our society must come to a screeching halt. This incessant boast about having the grandest budget in our nation's history, yet yielding little substance for the ordinary citizens, is nothing short of a bitter pill for the masses to swallow. Fear not, my fellow citizens, for my message to you all is straightforward and resolute. We possess the collective power to rectify this situation. All it requires is the removal of the PPP/C from the seat of authority. We have done it before in 2015, and for those glorious years, smiles adorned the faces of our people. During that time, we bestowed upon the business community the focus and recognition they rightly deserve, all while judiciously balancing decisions to uplift the working class and the vulnerable among us. We established a robust accountability system that resonated even with contractors, who found satisfaction in the transparency of the tender board's operations. Our unwavering dedication to community development, education, health, infrastructure, social protection, and the overall wellbeing of our people was unmatched. The present Administration's feeble attempt to measure up to our past accomplishments falls woefully short.

Upon our triumphant return to Office, we pledged to rectify the multitude of wrongs inflicted by this apathetic Regime. Guyana, under our watch, will not just grow, it will flourish. The PPP/C may celebrate in its brief power, but the indomitable spirit of the Guyanese people will prevail. Together, we will usher in an era where the concerns and aspiration of every citizen are not just heard but addressed. It is time for a brighter future, and that could only happen when the PPP/C is consigned to the archives of history. I, thank you, Sir. [*Applause*]

Minister of Education [Ms. Manickchand]: Mr. Speaker, I am asking that the reference to two PPP brothers on the island of Wakenaam, who are PPP/C leaders, be expunged from the records. They are identifiable and they are not in the House to defend themselves.

Mr. Speaker: I do not agree with you. Speaking about PPP persons, I know I cannot identify them.

Ms. Manickchand: He said two PPP/C brothers on the island of Wakenaam.

Mr. Speaker: There are plenty.

Ms. Manickchand: They are identifiable.

Mr. Speaker: Secondly, the only thing, I was about to before I called on the next speaker...The other infraction which the last speaker made by calling the name of the former Minister of Local Government who is not here to represent himself. That was identifiable in my regard.

Mr. Norton: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: At 3.29 p.m., I now call on the Hon. Mr. Anand Persaud, Minister within the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

Minister within the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development [Mr.

Persaud]: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to rebut a statement that the Hon. Ganesh Mahipaul uttered in his speech and to say to the Hon. Member that my Colleague, Ms. Sonia Parag and myself are Ministers of this Government. **[Mr. Mahipaul:** We *ain't* know that. Now *yuh* telling we.]

I know what you and the Members on the Opposition side will be. I took an oath on 2nd August, 2020, to work hard to ensure that you the riggers, the electoral riggers, of the 2020 Election, will never ever get power again in this country. Minister Parag and myself, along with my Colleagues, led by Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali have been working hard, day and night, for the people of this country and we will continue to do so. In a few words, let me describe this \$1.146 trillion budget, presented under the theme: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*, as good, pro-people, pro-development, pro-infrastructure, pro-business, pro-welfare, and pro-poor. This Budget is fiscally balanced and shows how we plan to manage our financial responsibility in a prudent manner. I say, without fear of contradiction, that this is the most comprehensive, well thought out and down to earth budget that the Senior Minister of Finance has brought to this august House on behalf of the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government.

3.32 p.m.

By bringing this Budget to the House, we have outlined our vision to continue 'staying the course', thereby ensuring prosperity for all. Of course, even with oil resources, this PPP/C Administration has not lost and will not lose sight of the goal and purpose which are to have better financial management of all resources, including oil and gas to catapult Guyana's development while

making up time for the lost dark ages under the APNU/AFC's rule. Similarly, this PPP/C Government will accelerate and sustain the growth which we have achieved so far by making sensible decisions and careful planning based on grass root information. From 20-year-old Navin Singh of West Coast Berbice; 50-year-old Michael Brian of Victoria, East Coast Demerara; 38-year-old Shanlinee Fraser of Linden, Region 10; to 18-year-old RK Sharma-Singh of Region 2; and 76-year-old Samanta Ignatius of Region 1 – they confirm that this budget offers hope and a path to prosperity while 'staying the course'.

Mr. Speaker, I now turn to some measures in *Budget 2024*. The PPP/C Government brought this budget in very troubling regional and international times, when the Caribbean and the world are still grappling to put their economies back on solid footing after the damage done by COVID-19. There are two wars happening at the moment, resulting in food shortages and scarcity of resources. In sharp contrast, Guyana is blessed to have bountiful resources that the PPP/C Government is exploiting for the human and infrastructural development. I shudder to think if the other side were in power, they would have exhausted Guyana's wealth taking it four steps backward into bankruptcy and financial ruins. Mr. Speaker, never again. Let it be remembered that the APNU/AFC had an atrocious record in Office. In 1992, when the PPP/C Government took Office, every single sector was in the red – total bankruptcy. We built this country back and struggled with our people all the way to financial viability. When they got into power, here again, they went on the rampage of spending up all the moneys in the treasury. Forestry, education, gold, bauxite, tourism, health and finance, to name a few, were all struggling. In three years' time, 'Dr. PPP/C' was healing the sectors, bringing them back to financial viability, while making sound and well calculated investments in our people. Mr. Speaker, this is progress. Mr. Speaker, this is growth. Mr. Speaker, that is vision.

Now, the PPP/C Government has once again come up with the key measures which we will implement to keep our economy along the right path. *Budget 2024* does not promise the public that it will significantly increase old age pensions within the first hundred days of being in Office, like the Coalition did. As a matter of fact, the APNU/AFC had a deceptive manifesto, empty and nothing for all. According to the *Guyana Times* newspaper and *Kaieteur News*, on 31st March, 2015, they promised significant increases to pensioners. We know that the APNU/AFC increased the pension by \$1,475 on average per year. The APNU/AFC Administration, whilst increasing the

pension by \$1,475 on average, just like thieves in the night, took away the pensioners' water and electricity subsidies. The pensioners were left with nothing. They ended up paying millions more. If this is not sad then I do not know what is. The senior citizens are still waiting on newly remodelled centres or homes and other reliefs that the APNU/AFC promised them during their tenure in Office. Shame on those riggers.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, you need to withdraw those 'shames' and stop using that word.

Mr. Persaud: And so, I do, Mr. Speaker. That is the APNU/AFC's legacy, an indeed sordid record in Office. So, do not come here now to lecture the PPP/C on addressing issues regarding the senior citizens. Mr. Speaker, compared to that dark period, this budget offers the seniors a more practical and realistic increase. We have steadily increased the old age pension. That moved up from a shameful pittance that APNU/AFC gave the seniors to \$25,000, representing a \$4.5 billion investment in 2021. It was later increased in 2022 from \$25,000 to \$28,000, placing another \$2.3 billion of disposable income in the hands of our elderly. In 2023, the PPP gave a further increase from \$28,000 to \$33,000 and this budget makes allowance for \$36,000. This represents a 75% increase. I do not think any sensible Guyanese would fault our Government for making sustainable decisions for our seniors who have benefitted from \$14.1 billion more this year than 2020.

Let me say pellucidly, this *Budget 2024* is jam-packed with projects and policies which are geared towards improving the lives of the ordinary Guyanese in the short term and, more importantly, long term. Those Opposition seat warmers who criticize and focus on *Budget 2024* are visionless, hopeless and backward thinking. The Government aims to build household prosperity, community prosperity and national prosperity with *Budget 2024*. Perhaps, the APNU/AFC Members of Parliament (MPs) are not sure what position to adopt in relation to the budget, other than the old rhetoric of corruption, racism, and discrimination. After all, they are still battling amongst themselves to decide who should be their leader. This is because 'blank cheque', I mean the Hon. Aubrey Norton is too busy visiting at *Bam Bam Alley* and socialising with the bottle. Mr. Speaker, only this morning I was browsing *Facebook* and came across a *Newsroom* post:

“Norton hints ‘violence’ at next general election”

In the same post the Hon. but in fact, should I say Hon.?

Mr. Speaker: Minister, let us stay away from that because you are going to use a source that is not acceptable media reports to impute on the Hon. Leader of the Opposition. Stay away from that.

Mr. Persaud: Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind and refresh Members of APNU/AFC of a song *Dis Time Nah Lang Time*. It was also mentioned that ‘should the APNU/AFC return to power’, well, ‘Mr. Should’, *Budget 2024* sets the tone for Budget 2025 and beyond. While they are fighting, the Hon. MPs Walton-Desir and Forde, et al, according to an opinion piece I read in the *Chronicle* newspapers and online, are busy teaming up with others, in and out of the National Assembly, to discard of their current leader. So, their story is bitter; it is sour. The bitterness continues for those on the Opposition benches and is proven to attack their psyche and thoughts about the Budget or the people’s business. I rather suspect this is why the APNU/AFC politicians went on *Nation Watch* and on a public relations (PR) campaign trying to discredit the budget. We do not want to be in the same category as the APNU/AFC Administration or party. We are different. We plan for the present while looking ahead. Should we build another Durban Park? Should we have a barbershop fiasco? Should we have another drunk and pissing and shaking of genitals scandal? Or should we have another jewellery, bangles and computer scandal?

Mr. Speaker, I want to remind this House of the *Chronicle* and University of Guyana (UG) funds fiasco involving two Hon. Members of this House. I am proud this afternoon to know that we have students from various schools present and to remind this House that the Hon. Ganesh Mahipaul used funds from the University of Guyana Student’s Society (UGSS) Committee without any authorised approval. That for me amounts to misappropriation of funds.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, using without permission and... I do not agree with them so take out the last part.

3.47 p.m.

Mr. Persaud: Okay, so I do, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I want to remind this House also that it was *Sherry Dunc* – Sorry, Mr. Speaker – Sherod Duncan, the Hon. Member, who also misappropriated funds from the *Guyana Chronicle*. There were over 20 questionable transactions. Guess who freed him, who dismissed him? It was the Hon. Member, Ms. Chandan-Edmond. We have a country of 83,000 square miles to run. We are too busy working. Our energies are firmly set on building and improving communities in a timely manner while improving our infrastructure

in line with our development policies for a modern and just Guyana. In the budget, you will see \$10 billion for the continuation and expansion of the part-time job programme. This is in addition to the creation of employment for 196 persons *via* the job bank last year and 863 over three years. Over 9000 people have gotten into jobs, directly and indirectly, because of this PPP/C Administration's astute policies.

Additionally, to address the issues plaguing the University of Guyana (UG), this PPP/C Government will look at addressing student loans and the costs of young people's tuition towards making education available for all. We plan on increasing the monthly income tax threshold from \$85,000 to \$100,000, removing 13000 persons from paying income tax which will result in a \$4.8 billion increase in the disposal income of workers. There is \$7 billion allocated for measures to be determined after consultations with stakeholders. This is aimed at maintaining production while containing the impact of the price increase. This is not how the 2020 electoral riggers, named the APNU/AFC, hid the \$18 million signing bonus. In the meantime, we will implement initiatives that will help people survive the cost of living. After all, the PPP/C is and will remain a pro-poor government. The PPP/C is determined to increase public assistance from \$16,000 to \$19,000 monthly – more than double the public assistance since it resumed Office. This will increase the disposable income of over 35,000 persons. We would recall that the riggers of the 2020 elections – the APNU/AFC Government – had two Ministers handling the portfolio of education for which my colleague, the Hon. and beautiful Ms. Manickchand, now has sole responsibility. They were *two round pegs in square holes*.

More than \$135.2 billion has been budgeted to further realise the Government's vision of a world-class education. Added to that, the PPP/C Administration proposes to increase the 'Because We Care' student cash grant from \$35,000 to \$45,000 to benefit over 205,000 school children in public and private schools, placing an additional \$1 billion in the hands of parents. This is after the treacherous and vengeful politicians in the APNU/AFC Coalition axed same but had the nerve to fortify themselves with the *fat cat* and hefty salary increases for friends, favourites, and families of the APNU/AFC Government. Shame.

In health, we propose to spend over \$129.8 billion. There is \$78 billion to further develop housing infrastructure, not forgetting the \$22.5 billion that has been budgeted in the water sector for further

advancements. Some \$2.7 billion has been budgeted for the continuous development of culture and arts while \$4.6 billion has been allocated for sports.

Mr. Speaker, *Budget 2024* provides the sum of \$1.1 billion to advance youth development initiatives. I pause here to address something the Hon. Leader of the Opposition said on social media. The Hon. Member said that he does not think this Government is serious about youths and young people. Mr. Norton should be the last person to express this sentiment and should hang his head low – really low and very low. I am going to remind this House of his record on youths and children. The APNU/AFC downsized the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport into a department. An entire Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport was not in existence during their tenure. Very little investments – if any – were made in young people’s development and hardly any importance was given to see them excel. There was no scope for young people to be part of the decision-making process at the level of the APNU/AFC Government. They shattered the dreams of young people and relegated them into nothingness. As the saying goes, *fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.*

I say this is no country for old men who only have dreams to offer. This country, under the PPP/C, is a place where youths are thriving and having a say regardless of if they are Africans, East Indians, Chinese or Mixed. Mr. Speaker, the old must give way to our young people. The PPP/C Administration believes in our youths and rewards them with training and jobs. After all, they are our leaders of tomorrow in a modern Guyana. I heard only the other day that the Hon. Member, Mr. Norton, relegated and berated one of his politicians on that side of the House, the Hon. Mr. Figueira. I saw you sitting there on that side of the House all alone. I brought a picture if they want to refute same.

I want to categorically state on record that our first peoples, who has always been on our side through good and bad times, will not be forgotten by this PPP/C Administration. We will continue to work for the development and improvement of their livelihoods in healthcare, education, and agriculture – to mention a few. This budget is Amerindian/Indigenous friendly. It is geared to ensure that money flows from the national coffers straight into the villages and communities of Amerindians/Indigenous peoples. This year, Amerindians will have the National Tshaos’ Council (NTC) Secretariat building to host meetings and discuss key issues at a total cost of \$147.8 million. An amount of \$100 million will be provided in 2024 to support the hosting of the NTC Conference

with a further budgetary allocation of \$800 million to support the land titling programme. The PPP/C Administration believes in the real development of our Amerindian people and lets them decide their paths. It is already known far and wide that we care for our Amerindian brothers and sisters. That is why we invested our time and worked to ensure that they are paid for the sale of carbon credits which will further enhance their communities.

Local democracy and regional development are the cornerstones of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. The PPP/C had to rebuild democracy which was wrestled away from municipalities and Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) by the APNU/AFC Government. This Government is focused on building institutional assistance to foster accountability in each community across Guyana. We want to have transparency and accountability in all municipalities and Neighbourhood Democratic Councils. This Government advanced the infrastructure development and enhancement across communities in the year 2023.

This year, we will provide direct cash assistance through subventions to our Local Democratic Organs (LDOs). In 2024, \$1 billion is budgeted to be transferred to LDOs as subventions. This means that we will be ensuring that each LDO delivers on its work programme. Additionally, over \$50 million is budgeted for the rehabilitation of LDO buildings in various communities. Some of these buildings were falling apart under the watchful eyes of the then Ministry of Communities and nothing was done. The Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development will ensure that these subventions are spent to the strictest adherence because, in the end, it is the communities that will suffer.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister. For you to conclude, you need an extension of time.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Persaud: This year, the PPP/C Government will see the construction of three bridges from Wanaina to Wauna, the construction of bridges and timber revetment at Barima end access road, and the rehabilitation of the Morakaiko road. The progress continues in *Budget 2024* with the

construction of health huts at Tobago Hill, Bamboo, Aranka, Eyelash, Triangle and Wanakai and the construction of living quarters at the Mabaruma Regional Hospital. I trust the APNU/AFC is listening. *Budget 2024* will make provision for the construction of revetment at Hague and Kingston kokers and the construction of a reinforced concrete (RC) bridge at Hague. The rehabilitation of bridges at Schoonhoven and Caria Caria will also take place. Let me say that in this budget, the PPP/C plans for the construction of revetments at Mahaica and Enmore; the construction of timber sluice door at Buxton; and the construction of bridges at 2nd Cross Street, Mahaica. There will also be the rehabilitation of the Mibikuri cattle bridge and the construction of Medex living quarters at Plegt Anker Health Centre. The purchase of an ambulance is also planned.

4.02 p.m.

We will see the upgrading of a section of Wowetta road with asphaltic concrete. Staying the course and buildings prosperity for all in the budget, will see the PPP/C Government rehabilitating bridges at Dalliwala in Region 10. We will rehabilitate creek roads at South Amelia's Ward, Lewis Street, Wisroc and upgrade the roads at Central Amelia's Ward and Success Avenue among others. It is no secret that Guyanese saw hope restored to this country and every citizen has witnessed unprecedented economic growth in every sector in a rapidly transformed new and modern Guyana. This PPP/C Government has demonstrated its vision and leadership in ensuring a plan of action to attract private investment, improve infrastructure and social services; and provide opportunities and improve the lives of all Guyanese through the creation of jobs and the creation of opportunities for all to grow and enjoy a comfortable life. A budget of \$1.3 billion is allocated for the completion and rehabilitation of markets, including Hydronie, Leonora, Charity, Mon Repos, Kumaka, and Suddie. This initiative is part of the Government's efforts to improve the selling and shopping environment. This catalyses economic growth. Unfortunately, Parika, Charity and Corriverton markets were ravaged by fires. As a result, the Government began the reconstruction of these facilities.

Guyana's First Lady, Ms. Arya Ali, has initiated projects to develop multipurpose parks in Region 3 as part of the National Beautification Project led by her office. This park is located at Tuschen, East Bank of Essequibo (EBE) and is aimed at enhancing community spaces and providing residents with recreational and sporting facilities.

In 2024, the Ministry will be moving to upgrade existing dumpsites to environmentally accepted landfills, developing and operating waste management facilities along with advocating the 3R Initiative: reuse, reduce and recycle. This budget is good for Guyana and good for development. I want to state again that these budgetary allocations, along with the spirit and letter of this budget, will be commended to this House. Mr Speaker, we must not celebrate the past and present, but I want to reach out to my colleagues on the opposite side of the House to join us to celebrate the future. It is our future in which we will find our greatness. I wish to commend this budget to the House with the words, *stability towards prosperity*. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Minister. Now, for the Hon. Member, Ms. Coretta McDonald, to make her presentation.

Ms. McDonald: Mr. speaker, I rise to make my contribution to this 2024 Budget. My colleague who spoke before me – I am calling him colleague because we have a mission to do – while he spoke about the US\$18,000, he forgot to mention the making of a scapegoat of an ordinary public servant with the US\$211 million which was written off. Even the Minister claimed that he did not know who authorised the public servant to do that. I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition, the Hon. Compton Aubrey Norton, for allowing me this privilege to do what I have to do here. As we debate this budget, we must remember that quality education is the most powerful tool to realise opportunities – a tool that children can use to end poverty and unemployment, despite their circumstances of birth, race, geography, or gender. The Ministry of Education has a mandate that is critical to the nation’s development. That is, if managed properly, it is a glorious opportunity for the nation, but when mismanaged, it is the disaster that we find ourselves in today.

Mr. Speaker, *Budget 2024* was delivered under the theme, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. A quick glance at this budget will reveal that there has been a daring misplacement of this theme in the history of presentations in this House. As a natural consequence, the budget needs to be re-themed and bear the title, staying the course for the elite friends, families, favourites and flatterers: building prosperity for the PPP/C cronies. There is nothing here to transform the lives of teachers or change their sad working reality. This budget has confirmed to teachers once again that their work is not valued by this Government, and that the only hope lies in ensuring that they can get registered and prepare to return the Coalition Government to power.

The Minister has lowered his office by delivering to us a shameful, intellectual opportunism for five hours. The Hon. Member has confirmed that this Government is in trouble by stretching statistics, numbers, and percentages to their thinnest to make this Government look good. The Hon. Member dabbled in the dark arts of spinning numbers and narratives. This is the same skill of stretching the dollar in the case of teachers and mothers in Guyana at the moment who have been forced to master the art of stretching food and money to their thinnest to survive in this elitist economy. If this budget were delivered as an assignment in any classroom, it would have been given a 'F' grade and the author's parents would be called in. The Hon. Member lost credibility when he sought to mischaracterise the 2020 elections and failed to mention that the documented evidence indisputably shows that it was, and it is the People's Progressive Party/Civic who set this nation on a path to pain and national stress in December, 2018 when a parliamentary coup was launched against the Coalition Government. It set Guyana on a path of two years of pain and distress where schoolchildren were attacked, policemen were chopped, and nurses returning from work had their cars destroyed, all at the hands of the PPP/C.

The hard, documented evidence is not going anywhere – valid ballots changed to rejected ballots, rejected ballots changed to valid ballots, electors voted with oath of identities were not listed on the official list of documents and I can go on. As we continue to go on, this culminated into Guyana's first installed regime. Here we are, the fifth budget by a regime that does not reflect the will of the people. The budget reflects the thinking of a government that believes in trickle-down economics, which means fattening the ruling class and hoping that they would pass the wealth unto the bottom. Hence, the education sector and teachers cannot expect much from this kind of government with that outdated thinking. Education is in trouble, and one can surmise this: education is not a pappyshow. Education is a critical sector. But what have we seen? We have seen gloating in quality and not gloating in quantity. That gloat has landed us in the crisis that we now find ourselves: mispronunciation of words at several forums, both locally and internationally; not knowing where to put the word 'she' and whether to put it is a preposition or a pronoun; and the many fights amongst students. Education is in trouble. The disrespect that has been meted out to teachers from learners, parents, and education officials...

To illustrate the grand failure of this budget for the education sector, it is necessary to compare what we did while we were in Office and what this Government has done thus far. Under the

Coalition Government, the incomparable Minister of Finance, Mr. Winston Jordan, on a path of unprecedented levels...During his tenure, the Hon. Winston Jordan, former Minister, presented *Budget 2015* to this House in August. It was entitled, *A Fresh Approach to the Good Life in a Green Economy*. In January, 2016, the Minister presented again to this House a budget entitled, *Stimulating Growth, Restoring Confidence: The Good Life Beckons*. I can go on and on to tell us about the ‘good life’ the people of Guyana lived under the Coalition.

These budgets reflected the philosophical thinking at providing a ‘good life’ for all Guyanese. That remains the strength of the budgetary allocation for education that were made under the watch of the Coalition. Sir, importantly, for the five budgetary allocations for the education sector by the People’s Progressive Party/Civic is the fact that money is being thrown to a Ministry that continues to suffer the worst under the leadership that we have ever seen in education. Since time immemorial, the Ministry of Education has been preserved for learned technocrats who do not significantly and overtly dabble in politics and in campaigning every day of the school year. The proud tradition has been maintained by all past Ministers of Education – Mr. Burnham, Baird, Mr. Chandisingh, Dr. Bisnauth, Mr. Gaskin, and Dr. Henry, just to name a few. The reason that the Ministry of Education is normally staffed by a technocrat minister is to avoid a critical aspect of national development from being politicised. Unfortunately, education is now well politicised. Today, the Ministry of Education is saddled with political leadership that is solely focused on the advancement of the party and not on the welfare of our learners and our educators.

4.17 p.m.

Educational leadership is a collaborative process that brings together the skills and abilities of teachers, parents, learners, their communities and, by extension, the Government, thus ensuring that change is guaranteed by improved performance. This has to be the sole focus of a Minister of Education. It is not to sit and campaign every second of the day on a smartphone. Mr. Speaker, Lot 68 Brickdam has been so politicised, just like many other Departments of Education, where you have political lackeys with fat contracts who are clueless about education. They are now in charge of the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, could you imagine our University of Guyana, which is 60 years old, has been given \$4.1 billion dollars while a three-year-old Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL)

Scholarship Programme has been given \$4.1 billion dollars? It is a shame that we have our university here and we do not seek to promote and to build what we have.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I allowed the first one to go. This is the second time that you are using it.

Ms. McDonald: I am guided, Sir. The Departments of Education have been politicised while the experienced and technical education personnel have been sidelined. Therefore, the budget can allocate trillions and zillions to this sector, but once this situation remains the same, education will continue to fail, and the crisis will continue. When we look at what is happening in our schools, it leaves one to wonder. When we look at the videos that are circulating with fights, *et cetera*, it leaves one to wonder what is happening in education. But we seem to be saying that buildings seem to be the solution to the problem. If buildings were the solution to the problem, then there would be no need for a Ministry of Education. There would be a need for two Ministries of Public Works. Therefore, this budget will not and has not done anything for our people in education. The reason we have not seen the articulation of any clear education policy is because we hear the razzle and the dazzle of social media noises but there is no mechanism to measure performance and programmes. A Minister of Education should not be versed in the art of *cuss out and buse out*. A Minister of Education should oversee the drafting of policies, institute performance measures and conduct monitoring and evaluation systems. Sir, the effect of this wanton politicisation is seen in the data. Even though Guyana boasts of a 90% literacy rate, functional literacy remains at an estimated 40%. Mr. Speaker, 55...

Mr. Norton: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, proceed.

Mr. Norton: You began this process by saying there should be decorum and you have a Member of Parliament over there describing people as *dangles*.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, please, you have to stand on a point of order, with due respect, and I did not hear the Hon. Member, Ms. McDonald, violate the present business. Hon. Member, you had the protection of the Chair. You will get back your time.

Ms. McDonald: Thank you, Sir. Mr. Speaker, just to remind the Hon. Member on the other side that the Hon. McDonald... I am an adult and we usually have consented arrangements, unlike the Julius arrangement.

Mr. Speaker 55% of our students at the secondary level are failing English A. Some 37% of students are passing Mathematics at the Grade Four level, while 63% of them are failing Mathematics. This data is dismal. Despite the razzle and dazzle of a few high achievers and cutting the ribbons for brand new buildings, education still remains in crisis. This is the result of sheer politicisation and incompetence. The dangerous effects of this level of incompetence can be seen if one examines the *Education Sector Plan 2021-2025*. The Plan is premised on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG) which states:

“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

The Plan that they have there is entitled, *Eliminating Illiteracy, Enhancing Tolerance and Modernizing Education*. The aim of the Education Sector Plan (ESP) is to contribute to employment and the reduction of poverty by increasing performance at all levels and reducing the disparity between sub-groups. Based on the standard set out by this Plan in the year 2024, the benchmarks have not been met and it is safe to conclude that the billions thrown to this sector have missed the mark, within the three years of the billions being thrown, to allow the sector to achieve its aim. So, by the mechanism outlined, there is dismal failure at the level of the Ministry. Based on this reality, we have no confidence that the \$135 billion that has been allocated to this sector in this budget will move or change the dismal data that haunts education in its current state. As usual, the money will go to the friends, the family, the favourites and the flatters, and the entire crony class. We have not seen a single report with outcome measures that provide information on progress towards desired results in the key areas and the effectiveness of programmes impacts on clients. There are no intermediate outcome measures that show some desired outcomes, and those results may not be known for several years. This only happens when a ministry is run by a person who is politically driven. We must follow international best practices and standards and place a competent person with experience in the classroom or elsewhere at this ministry before it is too late. Unless this happens, the budget allocations for this sector are exercises at throwing money at incompetence.

Mr. Speaker, the aforementioned politicisation of the ministry has led to false narratives being peddled at the level of the Minister. Chief among the false narratives is the suggestion that the APNU/AFC did not start or complete a single secondary school. Sir, let me say from the onset that one of the reasons the Ministry is busy building secondary schools or constructing secondary schools is due to the fact that since the PPP/C was installed in August, 2020, there has been the mysterious burning of secondary schools. There is a school of thought that the cronies must be constantly fed and, as the pie is divided up amongst friends, family, cronies and flatterers, there will be none left, and attention has now turned to an opportunity to create another hustle. Sir, this never occurred under the Coalition Government and so there was no need to constantly construct secondary schools. What we did during our tenure in Office is there for all and sundry to see. Let us not forget the Kato Secondary School fiasco. As early as 2016, work started on many primary schools and nursery schools across Region 2. These projects have been estimated within the millions. Undertaking the executions of these policies improved the educational facilities and the lives of students and teachers in the Pomeroon-Supenaam region.

There were extensions at many schools, and these are all there for us to see. Further, there was \$196.... \$1.9 million that was invested in school construction, and repairs. This was the mess that the APNU/AFC had to clean up when we took Office in 2015. There was the rehabilitation of the living quarters in many areas. Teachers were able to live comfortably, students were able to live comfortably in their dorms, and parents were happy that their children were safe. Under the Coalition Government, without the benefit of oil money, there was the construction and rehabilitation of schools, I must say, everywhere. There were no mysterious burnings under our watch. So, again, there was no need to build schools at that time. But under the watch of this Minister, there have been the most fires in the history of Guyana and the region. The Minister seems to believe that the building or the construction of schools is the solution to all of the crises that we are facing. It therefore means that the issues that we face in education must be addressed. When we look at the need for improved quality education, no attention is being paid there. Providing teachers with a liveable wage, no attention is being paid there. Providing the resources and the environment that is conducive to teachers teaching and children learning...If we want to be factual, let us look at the St. Gabriel's Nursery School where up to a day like today, the flooring is still sandy and dusty. Do you know what they did? They took vinolay to cover that. Cheap labour but big contracts.

We fail when we want to duck our heads in the sand and pretend that these are not happening. Let us go to the Mahdia dormitory fire. Among those was the saddest event in the country's modern history. The gross incompetence at the Ministry, which we constantly referred to, cost this nation the loss of the lives of 20 beautiful indigenous children in Region 8. This man-made disaster, in normal society, would have resulted in wanton resignations and firings but not under the watch of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. Instead, what we had was the usual denials and attempts to escape responsibility by the Ministry of Education and the Minister while scapegoating of the Regional Education Officer (REO) was done. Prior to that fire, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Guyana Fire Service (GFS) had submitted reports to the Government of Guyana warning about the safety of dormitories across Guyana and had also submitted recommendations to correct the risk. The Ministry ignored these submissions.

4.32 p.m.

The Government made matters worse when it sought to escape paying compensation to the families of those victims and established a Commission of Inquiry (COI) after incessant calls by the Coalition. This uncaring behaviour continued when the Government appointed a COI without independent international commissioners. The COI completed its work and the report has been presented. We were not confident that this report will place the blame where it needs to be, squarely at the feet of the ministers. Sir, the doctrine of ministerial responsibility is clear. It is a fundamental constitutional principle in the Westminster parliamentary system, according to which ministers are responsible to the parliament for the conduct of their ministry and government as a whole. Ministerial responsibility is central to the parliamentary system because it ensures the accountability of the Government to the legislature and thus, ultimately, to the public. We suspected that the report would have been crafted to suit the political aims of the regime. In the interest of the victims, their parents, the people of Region 8, and the general population, we will continue to call for an independent probe and a fair and proportional compensatory package for the victims and their families. We reiterate, the next Coalition government will review this matter and make proper restitutions that fully respect the full scope of the loss of lives and grief experienced by those affected.

The budgetary allocations to the education sector reflect the lack of a long-term vision. The allocations cover construction, distribution of textbooks, the National School Feeding Programme,

the purchase of textbooks, the University of Guyana, the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) programme, an arrangement with Coursera Inc., the information and communications technology (ICT) training for students, and support for technical and vocational training. Some of the aforementioned are necessary, but Guyana's largest budget has to be made with much stern and grand vision.

On that consideration, I now direct my attention to the Coronavirus disease (COVID- 19) pandemic and its effect. Technically, the pandemic has not disappeared, and reports suggest that the virus is making a return. Sir, if one examines the National Consultation - Final Report, one would appreciate concerns that this Budget does not include a clear programme that considers the fallout of the pandemic. The Report noted that:

““[Guyana] risks losing between 0.9 and 1.1 Learning Adjusted Years of School (LAYS) per students on an average, due to the elevated dropout rate and learning loss.” If not addressed, it is estimated that there will be an average reduction in future earnings of USD791 per student per year. The present value of all *future lost earnings* across Guyana is estimated to be at USD1.2 billion...”

More sensible countries have announced huge catch-up programmes. The Republic of Chile has detailed a four-year plan to catch up on learning losses from COVID-19, not Guyana. Currently, there is no budgeted national catch-up plan. This concerning data behoves any planners of the country's fiscal direction to include plans to address the effects of the pandemic and place the nation on a path to cushion the next disaster. In so far as this Budget, it does not cater for that and it has dismally failed.

Sir, according to companies overseas, Guyana has had an internet penetration rate of 37.33% in 2017. What that means is that less than 40% of Guyana's population, then, had access to and were using the internet. DataReportal, an aligned platform which summarises third party data to illustrate trends and provide insights, indicated that of January, 2020, 55% of the population of approximately 430,000 persons were using the internet. Comparatively, the Caribbean region has a 60% rate internet penetration, while South America has a 72% rate. One of the main issues encountered during the pandemic was the problem of the access to the internet. Where is the

allocation in the largest budget to address this problem in the event that we are forced to take education fully online again?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, we will need to give you an extension to conclude.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Ms. McDonald: Sir, long term and strategic planning requires a greater vision. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) submitted that there is no doubt that ICT can impact learning in a significant way, but also cautioned that teachers must be computer literate. This Budget should have included a programme for teachers to address the use of technology for teaching purposes in every sphere of this country. In the context of the oil and gas revenue, ICT can play a significant role in the delivery of education, but the teachers must be crucially a part and equally involved in this process. The literature notes that ICT can result in positive transformation for the delivery of education, but it has to be buttressed by teachers who are computer literate, not some but all teachers. The sad reality is that once you have a minister who is focused solely on scoring political points, these things will not be considered.

The University of Guyana is under attack. If there was any question about this, this Budget and the Vice President has removed all doubts from our minds. There is no other assessment to make. Again, imagine our University, and I must repeat, imagine our University, 60 years old, is allotted \$4.1 billion while a three-year-old is allotted \$4 billion. What a travesty and unpatriotic move by the caring Government, the PPP/C. The PPP/C does not want the University of Guyana to grow because they are fearful that it poses a threat to their controlled *freakism*. Over the years, the University has emerged as an important institution that indirectly checks the Government and its excesses. The physical attendances lead to the congregation of students in societies. They discuss the world and, invariably, students leave the University conscious and more educated. Added to this, they sit in classrooms with lecturers who teach them how to think critically. This is the fear of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. They cannot control the University and what they cannot

control they do not fund. This is the same fiscal treatment that the Georgetown municipality receives. It is the same treatment that the Critchlow Labour College receives, it is the same treatment that the International Decade for People of African Descent Assembly (IPADA-G) receives, and then we want to talk about a caring government. Well, someone is hiding somewhere because they do not understand the meaning of caring.

The PPP/C has always viewed the University as an institution of resistance, and for that, they must be punished. This is laid bare in the presentation of *Budget 2024* with the \$4 billion allocation to the newfound Guyana Online Academy of Learning. While we welcome any chance for Guyanese to be qualified and to add to their résumé, we must remain concerned over this approach. The Government's push to online education should be coupled with the development of the University. The two objectives can be combined. On one hand we can develop UG and at the same time move to online learning. It is unacceptable that the University's funding is now equal to an academy of learning that is under direct political direction. This would have been the perfect opportunity to fund the University of Guyana and make it into a world class institution. As there is no monitoring and evaluation of the GOAL scholarship programme, our research has uncovered major issues with the GOAL programme. Nobody knows where the ranking...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, you will have to wrap up in half of a minute.

Ms. McDonald: Why would the Government throw \$4 billion to a programme without a report that answers the concerns of our students? *Budget 2024* is funnelled and fixed between the treasury and the pockets of friends, families, cronies, and flatterers of the People's Progressive Party/Civic to allow the oil money to flow into a small circle without a single drop of the oil money escaping to reach the people at the bottom of the society. In its current state, I cannot support this Budget.
[Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. And now, as the Hon. Minister, Anand Persaud, has described her, the beautiful Minister of Education, the Hon. Priya Manickchand.

Ms. Manickchand: Thank you kindly, Mr. Speaker. I take this opportunity to welcome our young people, the students who are in here. I hope you are seeing both what you want to be and what you do not want to be, right in this House, and that you are going to pattern your own presentations accordingly. It is important to be able to make arguments that are sensible, practical, and

constructive, and that will contribute to the development of your country without becoming *ad hominem*. For the Member who just spoke that means personal. I want to also congratulate warmly the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and his team, and the President and Vice President, who contributed to the crafting of this Budget, a Budget that is going to see Guyana progress, Guyana develop, and Guyana develop rapidly.

The role of education in a developing country like ours is critical. It equips individuals with knowledge, skills and critical thinking abilities necessary for economic progress and growth. By investing in education, a developing country can empower its citizens to break the cycle of poverty, drive innovation and contribute to nation building. Education fosters a skilled workforce, promotes social cohesion, and enhances democratic values. It is the key that unlocks the doors of opportunity paving the way for a brighter future for individuals and a nation as a whole. Any government that understands this would invest in education, and that is what the PPP/C has been doing and doing consistently. We have heard the vacuous statements about the Budget not catering to development. The OECD countries, that is, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, gave about 10% of their budget to education. Guyana, on average, is giving more than 13% in this Budget. That is investment in our people.

4.47 p.m.

We have seen repeatedly how that investment benefits the people of this country. We know that Guyana ranks high on the Human Development Index (HDI), that is, the United Nations Index that measures the standards of education and health and overall well-being in a country. They have said very clearly that we are doing better in education, we are doing better in health. That investment, repeatedly, over the years, has moved us from 30% of our children being able to access secondary education in 1992 to 78% when we left Office in 2015. Unfortunately, when we came back, in 2020, it was the same 78% because you did not build a single secondary school in this country. It moved us from about 33% of our teachers being trained in 1992 to now, 99% of our teachers trained or in training. Those are the numbers, those are the facts, those are the deliverables. That is how we measure. It moved us, the World Bank said in 1993, from 67% of our people living in poverty, that is 67 out of every 100 persons living in dire poverty, to 38% in 2008, half the number of people living in poverty. That is what investment, sensibly done, does.

The Hon. Member before me spoke of an education sector plan. I am very happy she had one to speak of. The only time this country went without an education sector plan that was published from 1993 to 2015 to now, is the five years that the APNU/AFC was in Office. They did not have a sector plan. This is the Government that said they are the Party which could plan and project and measure, and they did not even have a sector plan. If the Hon. Member could have read that in a way that allowed her to understand it, what she would have seen is that the deliverables and the measurables are right there in the sector plan. I will give you some results, Sir. The Hon. Member spoke about some Grade Four, which does not exist anymore, and something about a thirty-something percent in English which are all fake and all false. We will throw those numbers up just now. These are results. Let us take primary: Arthurville Primary moved from 36%, in 2022, English, to 50%. They moved from 50%, Mathematics, to 83%. They moved from 29%, Science, to 50%. Let us take the hinterland: Aishalton's pass rate moved from 22% to 67%; Annai's pass rate moved from 19% to 58%; Sand Creek's pass rate moved from 15% to 60%. This is measurable. When we talk about these numbers, we mean more people, more children passed, more children are going to be able to access opportunities and thrive in this build-out that we are building in Guyana.

I was curious at some of the heckles when the Budget was being presented and at some of the talk shows that are happening. The conversation from the... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*]. I am no longer curious because the Hon. Member just made it very clear what her Party's position is. The APNU/AFC holds the view that there is no need to build any secondary school because they have enough. I wonder what the Hon. Member, Ms. Hastings-Williams, has to say about that, where children in Jawalla and Kopinang and Upper Mazaruni do not have a school to go to. I wonder what the Hon. Member, Mr. Henry, who is from Region 9, has to say about that, when the children of Awaranau and Maruranau and Karasabai and Shea do not have a secondary school to go to. I wonder what the Region 1 Member of Parliament, whoever it is over there, has to say when the children of Kwebanna and Barama River and Waramuri and Hosororo do not have a secondary school to go to. Is that your Party's position?

When I left Office in 2015, we needed 7,000 seats for secondary children. That means, my young friends, the children your age, do not have a school to go to. That is what we left. When I came back to Office in 2020, we needed 7,000 because the APNU/AFC failed, neglected, and refused to

build a single secondary school in this country, did not start or finish a single secondary school in this country, punishing children like you, right here on the coast and in the hinterland regions. We have to begin by having access. Apparently, the thing is, there are fights in schools, apparently that is a new phenomenon; there are cameras in schools now, that is the new phenomenon. Apparently, their solution to that is not to have a school. If you do not have a school, you cannot have a fight. Apparently, that is the big, fancy solution.

Mr. Speaker, remember I said I met the need for 7,000 seats. In the last three years we have provided 4,575 children, the children of this country – Amerindian, African, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese – with seats in a secondary school. How could you not support that? How could you have a criticism for that and how could you stand here and barefacedly tell this nation that you do not think those 7,000 children need seats in a school. That should have you all hanging your heads and resigning today because you have declared that you have no intention of educating the children who cannot be seen. Your Amerindian and hinterland...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, all those “you” are directed to me.

Ms. Manickchand: They are, Sir. I am looking at them, but I am really speaking to you.

Mr. Speaker: Yes.

Ms. Manickchand: You, Sir, the Hon. Member. Mr. Speaker, let us begin. We built the Abram Zuil Secondary School, De Willem Secondary School, Westminster Secondary School, Good Hope Secondary School, Yarrowkabra Secondary School. We extended the East Ruimveldt Secondary School, St. Winifred Secondary School, Queens College, Bishop’s High School, St. Roses High School. By doing that, we provided 4,575 seats to children who, hither to, did not have seats in school. This year, we are going to be finishing the Hosororo Secondary School for 700 children, which will take care of the Mabaruma catchment – Hosororo, Wauna – the riverain schools; 662 children did not have access in this area to secondary education. That is what you found, that is what you left, and you could not care less. As you said, it is a waste of time, why are we building schools. In the North West Secondary School, we are going to finish that school this year. It will cater for 850 children; Kwebanna Secondary School, way up Region 1 – [Hon. Members *(Inaudible)*] I am hearing them, where is Kwebanna? Of course, you do not know where

Kwebanna is. The people of Kwebanna are not important to you – 500 children. The Moruca catchment – Kwebanna, St. Nicholas, Barama Rivers, Waini Rivers school.

Region 7: We will be building a school in Jawalla, which will cater for 500 children. That is in the Upper Mazaruni. Kako, Jawalla, Kamarang, Phillipai. There are Members in this House who are from those villages, who should have gotten up when you said that building schools are not important, when the Hon. Member that spoke before me, that said building schools are not important and they are not going to solve any problems. They should have gotten up and made their objections known. By not doing that, the entire APNU/AFC has adopted that position. In Region 9 we are building in Karasabai and that will take care of 500 children. In Georgetown, we are building the Christ Church Secondary School, North Ruimveldt Secondary School, St. George's Secondary School, St. Mary's Secondary School, and extending the St. Stanislaus College. We will also be building a school at Prospect on the East Bank Demerara, and begin the building of the school in Christianburg in Region 10; \$28.7 billion was allocated towards construction, rehabilitation, and maintenance of school buildings.

Mr. Speaker, we are unapologetic. Every child in this country, whether from primary, secondary, nursery, whether from the deep hinterland or the coastland or here in Georgetown, whether from an APNU/AFC stronghold – if they have any left – or a PPP stronghold, every child in this country will be able to access education under the PPP/C Government. I hope we have heard what the APNU/AFC's position is and what our position is. We say that without apology, students. Even as we build schools, and we are also building six primary schools that are large primary schools. Those are going to be done at Recht-Door-Zee in Region 3, Tuschen in Region 3, Tabatinga in Region 9, Wisroc in Region 10, Hobediah, in Region 1, and a second Diamond Primary School, because we have extended and expanded our housing programme. We have large communities and settlements going up in places. We now need primary schools also, although the United Nations has declared us as having attained universal primary education. Even as we build the physical infrastructure, we are very conscious, very cognisant, that like the rest of the world, and particularly us here in the Caribbean, we have to change the quality. It has to improve. We would like to see our children do better. We would like to see them learn differently. We would like to see them leave with more critical thinking skills. What are we doing to change the quality of education?

Let us begin with the training of teachers. Last year, 1,796 teachers graduated from the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE), giving us the largest number of teachers trained ever in the history of Guyana. Hitherto, before that, the number of teachers that could be trained was only 535. We quadrupled that amount, which means there will be a better quality, as well as more teachers in the classrooms. From 2020 to 2023, 3,198 teachers were trained, particularly in the hinterland where we have the biggest problem with quality. **[Hon. Members: (Inaudible)]** Chicken and egg. The problem sprung from the fact that we did not have trained teachers in the hinterland because the programme did not cater for that. Let me give you what the picture looked like in 2019. In 2019, to be clear, Hon. Speaker, we had 31 teachers training from the hinterland – Regions 1, 7, 8 and 9. Under the PPP/C we have 1,011 teachers from those same villages trained. Trained teachers will go back into the school and make the children do as well as you will do. They will give the children the same quality that our children out here on the coast are getting. When we speak about wanting better for people, our actions must match our words. You had 31 teachers being trained in the hinterland. We have 1,011 teachers in one year being trained in the hinterland. That is love for people; that is love for children. Additionally, the CPCE has implemented some new programmes. A special major in Literacy is going to be implemented in 2024, a special programme in Special Education Needs was implemented, Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) is going to be implemented, Portuguese is going to be a major for the first time, French is going to be a major for the first time, Music is going to be on the Associate Degree (AD) programme for the first time, Physical Education (PE) is going to be on that AD programme for the first time, and Visual Arts is going to be on that programme for the first time.

Mr. Speaker, additionally, let us be clear, the PPP/C was very clear. We gave each teacher who is being trained in the Cyril Potter College of Education a full salary of \$90,000. The APNU/AFC gave \$10,000 to those teachers. We are giving \$90,000 to each teacher. In addition, we heard how badly-off teachers were. Here is what teachers are getting under the PPP/C: we have changed the number of years when a teacher could now become a senior, that is, from seven years to six years; we have added more senior vacancies across all schools so more teachers could become seniors; we have reduced the records that teachers are required to keep; we are paying \$10,000 to each teacher with a degree. Mr. Ronald Cox, when you are finished with that GOAL degree you will get a \$10,000 more – the same programme that you all do not want other people to do. Seventeen

hundred and ninety-six teachers were trained in 2023, 1,900 will be trained in 2024, 1,500 teachers will be trained in 2025; all senior teachers above 52 are going to get a duty-free concession.

5.02 p.m.

All senior teachers above 52 will get a duty-free concession; increased payment for teachers with a master's degree; increased payment for teachers with a doctorate; all teachers on the GOAL programme will be paid for their new qualifications; unlimited number of teachers allowed to attend the UG, it used to be a very limited number before; ninety-nine per cent of all our teachers are trained or in training. For the first time in the history of this country, we gave teachers money to buy their cardboard, chalk, and school supplies that they need. They needed it in 2018 and 2019 too, but you did not give a cent. We have increased the stipend for trained teachers. A trained teacher under the People's Progressive Party/Civic at, say, St. Margarets Nursery School – and we have a recently retired headteacher that is from there and we are grateful for her years of service – or Starters Nursery, in 2019, was taking home \$227,000, in 2023, is taking home \$316,000. That is growth along with all these benefits. The teachers, we have two heads of departments in here, one is from St. Joseph's one is from North West. Our secondary school teachers, if not heads of departments, in 2019, were taking home \$210,000, in 2023, \$289,000 and all these benefits. Mr. Speaker, do not listen to me. I have a reason to say these things. Let us read from 4th September, 2018, the *Guyana Times*.

“Teachers got more under the PPP Govt – GTU”

And this picture looks remarkably like the speaker who came before me. She has changed her hairstyle, but it looks like her. It stated:

“The teachers' strike continues, and the Guyana Teachers' Union (GTU) has said the nation's educators had received more under the People's Progressive Party (PPP) Administration than what they currently get under this coalition Administration.

GTU General Secretary Coretta McDonald, who has been at the helm of the leadership of that union and would have sat in several negotiations with both the previous and current administrations, made this statement to teachers on Monday. McDonald told scores of teachers assembled in the GTU auditorium at Woolford Avenue, Georgetown, that it was

under the PPP that teachers, for the first time, received additional benefits apart from a salary increase.”

Quite like those I was reading out just now; they received these new ones last year.

“If we look at what transpired under the PPP Government when they were in power and what is transpiring now...”

And she had to pause because she was gasping at what was transpiring then.

“...remember we didn’t want the five percent. We made noise about it. But with the five percent we got a whole lot of non-salary benefits,”

From the glorious People’s Progressive Party/ Civic.

“...she said, to loud applause from the large gathering of teachers.”

Mr. Speaker, I am going to lay this over to refresh the memory of the Hon. Member who now seems to be forgetting what she actually said, and what the truth actually is. In addition to building schools and training teachers, we are going to change quality. We are providing, in this year’s budget, textbooks and exercise books to the tune of \$2.9 billion. Over the last three years, it is \$8 billion that we provided in textbooks to our children; and each child will get all the textbooks they need and exercise books that are of a better quality. Here is what we came from, because when you stand here to speak you must stand on a record Hon. Member Mr. Cox, through you of course, Sir. In the area of textbooks – and we were talking about the Auditor General’s reports – here is what the Auditor General said, for the period 2017 to 2019, the Ministry spent millions to purchase textbooks yet failed to supply 71% of the population with textbooks that were required by the schools. Seventy-one per cent is just quite shameful, shameful.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister.

Ms. Manickchand: Disgraceful, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: *Yeah.*

Ms. Manickchand: Mr. Speaker, it went on to speak about how over \$998 million worth of textbooks were to be purchased. I do not think this is the audit report that spoke of when the

APNU/AFC bought billions of dollars in the wrong textbooks. Then we must ask, where those textbooks went and who got to resell them. Who got to resell them? When we talk about friends and families and cronies, but I do not get personal; I never get personal. But you go and do that research for yourself.

Additionally, on the issue of quality, the children these days... this Mr. Speaker... [An **Opposition Member:** (*Inaudible*)] It is true, Mr. Speaker, that some exercise books had the wrong information because we went out to a public bid, not something the Hon. Member is familiar with, given that they used to hand this out to friends and family, and hand it out to the Guyana National Printers Limited (GNPL) that would then sole source it to the friends and family of Trinidad. Here are the articles in the *Kaieteur News* when you did that. We went out to public bids, this is a public advertisement, and when people, the printers – we hope that mistake would not be made this year, but our contract will be changed – retyped, they got it wrong and we were upset, but we were not going to stop giving the books; we asked the teachers to use it as a teaching and learning process and correct what was wrong. This year our contract will be different, and it is going to say, anyone who prints inaccurate information that was not given to them will stand the cost of the repair themselves. We are not going to duck and hide from this, we are giving the books you never gave; you never gave the books.

Mr. Speaker, and I also want to point out too, on this issue that has been raised repeatedly today about friends and cronies, every procurement done by the Ministry of Education – and I am prepared to put my head on the block for this – every procurement done by the Ministry of Education is done in accordance with the procurement laws. These are publicly advertised, people bid, and the National Procurement and Tender Administration (NPTAB) evaluates. So even if they were to say... and I heard the vacuous idiotic statement about us burning schools. First of all, the APNU/AFC is on record as saying the PPP/C burned these two schools so they could give their friends the land space. The schools are going up now, so they have dropped that one and they said it is to give people the contracts. These contracts were publicly advertised, and people publicly bid, and they won the contract.

We are also helping our parents by increasing our provision to school children for their school feeding breakfast. This year this Budget allows us to give every single child in the hinterland nursery, primary and secondary, a meal, either breakfast or lunch. Every single child in the

hinterland will get a meal this year. This Budget allows us to give every Grade Six and every Grade Five child a hot meal for breakfast. And this Budget allows us to give every nursery to Grade Two child 45 biscuits and juice. This is the same population, Sir, the same children whose parents had the same jobs. I would like to posit and pose a question to Hon. Member Mr. Henry and Hon. Member Ms. Hastings-Williams and their colleagues about whether children in the hinterland were not hungry in 2018 and what was done during those years, 2019, to feed them? What was done in 2016 to feed them? Now you wake up and you find out that they are hungry, and when we are trying to provide a meal you want it to be your meal. Let me say this, the communities will have a firm say in what meal is provided. So, if you come from the coastland and decide that you do not want Amerindian children to eat cassava bread because it does not have your nutritional value, I tell you now, we will rubbish that contribution. This Budget will allow us to add 42 schools plus 234 schools in Grade Five, adding a total of 19,000 additional children who will get meals in the hinterland.

We heard earlier about something that I really want to address. And I really do not know how much more disappointed I could get. Any person in Guyana or anywhere else in the world for that matter, young or old, who wishes to pursue an education should be facilitated as best any government can, any single person. The PPP/C's Cheddi Jagan started the University of Guyana, and Hon. Bheri Ramsarran will tell you when he started it the PNC called it 'Jagan's night school.' It is now our University of Guyana, and we will fund it and continue to fund; it is very precious to us. When we left the government, the University of Guyana had... we left fees; it was \$160,000. When the APNU/AFC went into Office in 2016, it was raised by over \$70,000. This is an article from the Guyana Times:

“After increasing Tuition fees, UG to now increase fees for Services”

And it goes on with a lovely picture of the University of Guyana. Less than one year after [Hon. Members: *(Inaudible)*] This is an example of what I was telling you do not do; this kind of market behaviour.

“Less than one year after the University of Guyana approved a 35% incremental increase on tuition fees,”

under the APNU/AFC

“...the institution on Wednesday approved increased”

fees

“...for their service fees, set to be implemented from March 2, 2018.”

Twenty-eighteen was under the stewardship of the APNU/AFC. I will lay that over, Sir, and hope that you circulate it to the National Assembly. Then there was another article, Sir:

“UG students bemoan increase to administrative fees”

Where the students were begging, the UG students were begging, for relief, and the APNU/AFC was silent. They ignored those pleas, but we now know why. Hon. Mr. Hamilton this morning told us why. Let me say very clearly, Coursera is different from GOAL, GOAL is different from the University of Guyana. It is important that we understand what they are. Coursera is a series of short courses offered to the people to upskill or reskill through various, hundreds of universities, renowned universities like Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Princeton University, University of Oxford and University of Cambridge, those are the Coursera courses. When Guyana offered Coursera in 2020, Mr. Speaker, do you know what is painful? The Commonwealth of Learning was begging the APNU/AFC to offer Coursera in March, 2020. They did not; Trinidad, Grenada, Antigua, and Barbados, they all did. The APNU/AFC was engaged in the enterprise of trying to stay in government by rigging an election, so they did not launch it. We launched it in September, 2020. And true to character, so it is a pattern, the APNU/AFC jumped on the programme and advised people not to do it when they themselves were doing Coursera programmes. They told the nation not to do it. There are public posts with that, and then...

Mr. Speaker: With that, we need to get an extension for you.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask that the Hon. Member to have much more time, but I am forced to, based on the agreement, to ask if she could have five more minutes to conclude her excellent presentation. I know that she could speak for another hour, easily.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Go ahead.

Ms. Manickchand: Mr. Speaker, Guyana, this our little Guyana with our people, recorded, on the programme, the highest enrolment in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, except for India, leading Prof. Dr. Asha Kanwar, then President of the Commonwealth of Learning to say, ‘I have never seen something like this, the appetite of Guyanese to study and a government who facilitates that.’ And that is on the public record. I would recommend a few courses for you Mr. Duncan.

5.17 p.m.

Then, came the Guyana Online Academy for Learning. Let me say very quickly what that is. The GOAL is just a medium through which other universities are engaged. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ronald Cox, is not studying at GOAL but he is studying at a renowned university in a foreign country online and the Government of Guyana is paying for that programme. The Hon. Member could tell you. You can gather with him when you go outside to eat and ask him. He is not studying at some place named GOAL. When you say we, the Government, are paying for friends and families, it means that these 17 and 18 universities are our friends and families. Mr. Ronald Cox, you are our friend and family. By the way, I think, you should come over here because the Opposition is clearly very envious of you. There are one or two Members there who do not have what you have and that is why they might want to take it away from you. A good example is the Member who came just before me. This GOAL scholarship offered so far to 21,442 Guyanese people; black, Indian, Amerindian, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, male, female, from the coast land and hinterland the opportunity to study. They are studying. They are graduates of the programme.

There is the Get Ready for Opportunities to Work (GROW). I want to talk quickly about GROW. The Get Ready for Opportunities to Work is a programme done under the GOAL which allows people who dropped out from school or did not get a chance to finish school – perhaps because of your poor management in the five years – now want to be able to enter a university. A total of 430 of persons graduated from GROW. From that, 1,072 have begun their degrees; 81% of the people who graduated before could not even enter a university. We have given them the opportunity to go and they have begun. I want to say that the GOAL is being funded by the PPP/C Government of Guyana. The University of Guyana is being given a billion dollars more than last year being funded by the PPP/C of Guyana. The PPP/C will continue to offer opportunities whether it be courses, certificates, degrees, masters or Doctor of Philosophy (PhDs) to as many people that want it. We will not apologise for that.

Lastly, because I know my time is running out, well, second to last, in this year's Budget \$28 million is set aside for the rehabilitation, maintenance and construction. With that, we intend to continue to rehabilitate dorms. I want to read from the Mahdia Commission of Inquiry Report. This is what the Report states:

“We learnt... in 2015, the then Minister of Education, Dr Rupert Roopnarine commissioned an inquiry to conduct an assessment of the Education Sector in Guyana. According to the report which was tendered before us and titled, Commission of Inquiry into the Education Sector of Guyana Preliminary Report, the objective of the inquiry was to establish a baseline analysis of the state of public education in Guyana, and to provide recommendations of broad strategic guidelines for the enhancement of public education.

The Commission tabled its Preliminary Report to the Minister of Education on 28th April, 2017.”

The whole Cabinet had it. It continues to state:

“The report placed high emphasis on the deplorable state of student dormitories and made recommendations that they should be addressed.”

The 2017 A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Cabinet got these reports.

“It stated that attention must be paid to the level and quality of supervision in dorm facilities.

...the CEO also told us an audit was conducted into the Education Sector during the period of 2015 – 2020 under the auspices...”

The audit made recommendations that were never implemented. We get opportunities ever so often in our professional lives and our personal lives to stand for the people of this country. We could be opportunistic and prostitute ourselves on the altar of dishonesty where we think we could get cheap votes or we could stand and face some of the hard questions. This Ministry of Education expended 98.9% of its local capital budget last year and 99% of its recurrent budget. We are going to be able to expend this year for the betterment of people.

I want one last thing. You see me, Sir, you see me in the newspapers because that is the nature of the system, the minister's photograph. What you do not see is the people behind me some of whom went home at 1.30 a.m. on New Year's morning. You do not see the professionals who slave in their offices. The PPP/C was in Office and we never ever brought into disrepute public officers the way the Hon. Member before just did. You cannot say you love teachers and when I promote teachers to the position of leadership in this country you come in this National Assembly and exploit your privilege and abuse them. My staff, the very creditable, experienced, educated, learned staff at the Ministry of Education and I will take this programme forward so that the children of this Country could be the leaders of Guyana and can compete in the Caribbean and the world. I thank you all. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister. Hon. Members this is a good time to take a half of an hour break and cold down.

Sitting suspended at 5.23 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 6.02 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Now for the Hon. Member, Mr. Deonarine Ramsaroop.

Mr. Ramsaroop: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take this opportunity to wish you and your family, the staff of the Parliament Office, Members of the Opposition, Members of Government and all Guyanese a happy New Year. I also would like to congratulate the Senior Minister and his team for preparing *Budget 2024* and those staff of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC) and Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC) specifically.

Before I continue, I have a couple of points that I would like to set straight in this National Assembly for the former speaker, the Hon. Minister of Education, Ms. Priya Manickchand. For the records, the Good Hope and Yarrowkabra schools were financed under our Government, started to be built and were completed under the Hon. Member's Ministry. In addition, in 2013 and 2014, there were no trained teachers. I find it strange that the Hon. Member did not realise that the PPP/C was in Government for 23 years. They pretend as if those issues never existed. They want to pluck

everything on a government who took over after 23 years for five years and wants it to work a miracle.

On another point, on the point of free University of Guyana (UG) study. The University of Guyana was free in this country. In 1994, the PPP/C put US\$1,000 as the tuition fee. At that time US\$1,000 was equivalent to \$127,000. In 2017, US\$1,000 was equivalent to \$200,000. It was always the PPP/C who burdened the students with UG tuition fees. Free education was in the Constitution of Guyana but we seem to forget that. It was our government that touted and had in its Manifesto that we would bring free education from nursery to tertiary. The concept that the Government talks about of free education is highly misrepresented because it is saying that its free education will bound the students to stay in Guyana. I want to make that quite clear. The Minister also boasted about the construction of new schools, but I want to quote a paragraph from the *Stabroek News* today. The headline states:

“Non-resident Paramakatoi teacher laments deplorable living quarters”

I will just quote the first paragraph for you, Mr. Speaker. It states:

“A teacher, who is based in Paramakatoi Region Eight (Potaro-Siparuni), is on the verge of calling it quits as her plea for better living arrangements is not being met by the relevant authorities.”

I will not quote the person’s name. It continues to read:

“...lamented her squalid living conditions on social media on January 19, showcasing the almost caving-in ceiling of the living quarters she has been assigned as a non-resident.”

This thing about building schools and schools not being maintained is a serious problem with the management and governance in this country. We keep building and not having the ability to maintain and fulfil. It is the same thing in the health sector. The Hon. Member boast about 12 hospitals, but we do have enough staff to accommodate those 12 hospitals. How do we maintain the current ones that we have? I will leave that for the Hon. Shadow Minister of Health.

This first ever trillion-dollar Budget approximately equals the sum of all five years of the Coalition’s budgets. It is five times what the Coalition had at its disposal in each of those five years

but the PPP/C in its old ways is attempting to deceitfully mislead the people by comparing what its trillion-dollar Budget as with our \$250 billion annual Budget. Thank heavens, the people are not illiterate as the PPP/C think they are. Our people know the budgets are about priorities. They know that a budget tells who the government is and what its philosophy is. The people can see and feel. The Government's heart and soul are definitely not with the majority of the people who live in impoverishment struggling day-to-day to make ends meet, while the one per cent comprising families, friends and favourites are hauling off the hog of the money. The impure facts are that a meagre 10% of the Budget is going to the one-third of the people comprising of public servants and pensioners, with almost twice that amount being handed out to families, friends and favourites for road construction alone. Let me repeat, a meagre 10% of this Budget is going towards the lower one-third of people, while almost twice that amount is going towards roads alone earmarked to benefit families, friends and favourites in the contracting business.

As I mentioned earlier, budgets are always about setting priorities for the people. It is crystal clear that the PPP/C's priorities are starkly upside down to what the people want. Mr. Speaker, I will bet my life that if you ask the people, they will choose food over roads, water over roads, healthcare over roads and education over roads. However, nothing could be more at odds with the people's wishes than the revulsion for feeding the people being frequently expressed by the Vice-President's many public utterances and I quote: *All the APNU/AFC wants to do with the oil money is to feed people*. We are happy that even the Vice-President admits that we put the people's basic needs first.

6.11 p.m.

Also, Sir, may I remind this National Assembly that even the PPP/C when they had somewhat of a conscience, at the time, shouted our Budget down exclaiming to the top of their voices 'we cannot eat road'. This characteristic, flip-flopping by the PPP/C, no doubt, proves their lack of principles and untrustworthiness to its people. With commitments to only filling the pockets of their families, friends and favourites or – to be a little bit charitable on this beautiful afternoon – maybe they have come up with a new invention to make roads edible.

Development – I stood in this National Assembly and witnessed the passing of five budgets totaling over \$2,750,000,000,000, which is more than double what the APNU/AFC's five years in Government. What do we have to show for that? We certainly cannot now say that it is the now

Hero's Highway, nor the Demerara Harbor Bridge, nor the Linden four lane bridge, nor the Mabura/Lethem Road. All this were financially secured under the APNU/AFC Government. Mr. Speaker, you can ask my Honorable friend, Mr. David Patterson. The Hon. Member will tell you and give you all of the records. What they have for their development records are the Skeldon Sugar Factory; the Amelia's Falls Hydropower Project, which now postponed until 2027; – still selling pipe dreams – the specialty hospital; the fiber optic cable project; and now the Gas-to-shore project, which is very worrisome especially since they do not have a financial plan to show the execution of that project. These highly credible institutions will require stringent policies to manage these projects just as the Norwegians Funds. Mr. Speaker, I must tell you that it was the APNU/AFC Government who sorted out the release of the remaining funds after they were blocked for poor project management and accountability.

As I take a look into the non-oil and natural resources – other than the oil – I was stunned by the performances of these sectors as mentioned this morning by the Hon. Shadow Minister of Finance. I want to look at gold. As mentioned in the Budget Speech by the Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, where the gold mining subsector contributed 6.1% of the non-oil Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 52.1% non-oil export in 2023. This gives an indication that there is a serious contraction of the performances of the other non-oil sectors. Let me put on record, in 2020 gold contracted by 7.8%, in 2021 it contracted by 14.8%, in 2022 it contracted by 2.5% and in 2023, it contracted by 11.2%. This is the record. When my friend, the Hon. Member, Mr. Joseph Hamilton, said “upward, upward, upward”, I am saying downward, downward, downward. This is what the record shows. Therefore, if gold contributed 52.1% of export which is more than half of the non-oil exports, then my conclusion is that the non-oil sectors are in deep trouble. There is no sustainability plan for the sector. I am yet to see a strategic move by the investment committee of the Natural Resources Fund (NRF). We do not know anything about what is happening there. Therefore, this will put pressure on our Government after the 2025 elections to come up with a strategies to raise these numbers. This is what we will do: we will create policy for a gold refinery and the minting's, it is very important to set up these refinery structures because one has to measure its gold reserve with the United States of America dollar with your currency. It is very important because the rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) would create a very bad effect on our dollar. I see no plan for this.

Number two: we are going to improve the monitoring by using a state-of-the-art satellite system. We will invest in the lidar system to ensure that we do the proper monitoring of the gold. We have to ensure that we invest heavily in training of the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC) staff. We are going to create a level playing field for all the small miners and all miners. We will ensure that small miners are given enough land because their declaration contributed significantly to the overall performance of this sector. We will ensure that they have a seat at the table just as we did with the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC). It was the APNU/AFC Government who, after 23 years, installed a small private sector representative on the board. We will ensure the interest of and concern of small-scale mining community at the highest level of decision making within the GGMC, which would be contributing to the Government's commitment to inclusive policy making. We firmly believe that the inclusion of the small miners would be mutually beneficial; foster cooperation, dialogue, and progress within the mining sector while also supporting the country goals for responsible resource management, economic growth, and inclusivity.

Bauxite: I have not seen any improvement in this sub-sector and I do not know what is the plan or any intention of that natural resource to get that over the bar.

Quarry: I must say that quarry improved by 98%, as mentioned in the Budget Speech. We know that is because of the oil money and the construction. That is putting pressure on the other sectors such as forestry.

Forestry: the Government's review last year, as mentioned, is that they received a bankrupt forestry sector. The fact is it was the APNU/AFC Government who took over the bankrupt forestry commission in 2015. An audit was done and concluded by Mr. Anand Goolsarran and the Hon. Member knows that. This Report clearly pointed out that forestry was bankrupt. It was in a state of overdraft to an amount of \$90.245 million and that is what we took over. I wanted to set the records straight. Let me give another point on the same audit. There was an investment of \$300 million to Colonial Life Insurance Company (CLICO). When the Auditor asked for the instrument to show the request of allocation to CLICO for that investment, there was no record. Later on, the forestry board received a letter stating that 'oh, there was a phone call that was made by the Minister that the \$300 million should go to CLICO for the investment'. There were no records; this is how they used to do business. Let me give the performance of the forestry sector. I will start

from 2019 it had 93,861,000 cubic meters of logs; in 2020 – 77,334; in 2021 – 74,487; in 2022 – 63,676; and in 2023, up to the third quarter, – 31,682. As the Minister said, there was an increase of 5.4%. In doubt, if one sees the trajectory, it is a downward trajectory we have.

Mr. Speaker: What is down now is your first tranche of time; you will need an extension.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Ramsaroop: What we will have to do – this is going to put pressure on us again – is to overall the entire modeling structure of the forestry. We will ensure that we move the tenure of land from three years to five years for the small operators and for the large operators, we will move it from five years and 15 years to 25 years, so that an investment platform is created for investors to happen. We will change the permitting system based on geographic location, because those in Corentyne are different from those in Essequibo. We will do that. We will create a roundtable where all the stakeholders meet together and all the Government agencies. The red tape will be reduced because one stakeholder has to go around at five ministries or five agencies to get the work done – the permission. We will strengthen the standard operating procedures (SOP) to ensure that no manager will get up every morning and say, ‘I will do this and I will do that’. It will be based on the standard operational procedures.

I call carbon credit a hoax and this is the reason. I have been talking to consultants at the board in the Republic of Suriname and in Brazil. The carbon credits, if a company wants to buy carbon credit for that piece of area or that carbon that it is buying, let us say 10,000 tonnes has to be protected. Here, there is a system where the entire forest and the country have been assessed for carbon and was purchased by this company, but it does not know exactly which part of this carbon we bought. We will change that model by creating a win-win situation for everybody. It will benefit the community directly. The model that we are going to put in Government after we take over in 2025 is going to benefit the community level.

The revolving fund: in the Budget Speech, we have learnt that the Hon. Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service mentioned 550 operators, 11 of those are the ones who benefitted from that revolving fund. It was simple because, again, the concept of revolving funds was born from the private sector. One has to understand that they do not understand the concept and model of the revolving fund and, therefore, only 11 people out of 550 stakeholders were qualified. Insignificant... [Mr. Duncan: Listen *nuh mawn*; listen.] It is in the Budget Speech.

As I come to the oil and environment, luckily, we have signed this deal in 2016 and rescued this economy. The PPP/C's only interest is to tear down the guardrails that we left in place for cost effective safe and environmentally sound management and oversight of the oil and gas industry. Foremost was the APNNU/AFC 22 Members oversight Committee representing all demographics and organisation of our society to determine how that oil money will be spent. However, unabashedly, the PPP/C out of the blocks, replaced this committee with a five-member team, all of whom were appointed by their Government – all.

As I come to an end, the environment... Let me say this once again, despite this massive Budget, we do not see anything close to investment needed for human capacity building to provide effective oversight and monitoring and to meaningfully expand services to the communities outside of Georgetown. We are in deep trouble. It is as if they do not give a darn about the attitude of not providing the basic needs such as food, healthcare and education to its people. It is not enough. The unlimited flaring and toxic water dumping, no Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), PPC have taken it to another level with the disastrous betrayal of the nation's environment. The Government said that there is no need for an EIA for the Gas-to-Shore project – imagine that; for a big project as that. The Government has taken things to an unbelievable limit of abandoning its own people and the people of the Caribbean to save ExxonMobil's money, when it had to sue to implement the Coalition's most reasonable legal requirements that ExxonMobil has as a parent company guarantee to cover the cost of any oil spill but, the most mind-boggling, the Government joined ExxonMobil in appealing the Judge's overwhelming decision in favour of guarantee which included ExxonMobil's deposit of USD \$2 billion. Yet, that \$2 billion, when we tried to find out if it existed, they filed again and joined to say that we should not go and ask to see that money.

In conclusion, if we are to stay the course in this Budget, as one of the movies I saw ‘Terminator Salvation’, we all dead. Thank you very much. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Hon. Member and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, Mr. Hugh Todd, you may have the floor.

Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation [Mr. Todd]: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and good evening. It is indeed a pleasure to stand here before this noble House representing the Government of Guyana in the presentation of our 2024 National Budget.

6.26 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, before I begin, allow me to humbly thank my dear Colleague, the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, and his capable team for once again delivering on the promises made by the People’s Progressive Party/Civic’s Administration for which we made our commitments prior to taking Office in 2020. This is the journey. This journey requires us to stay on the course and build prosperity for all.

Might I remind this House that the People’s Progressive Party/Civic’s Government is a pro-poor political Party? We have never removed from our core objective – being people-focused, people-centred, and a government that is directed by the people. I recall that the former Hon. Member, Mr. Ramsaroop, mentioned that we forgot that we were in Office for 23 years. We did not forget. We remember clearly because when we took Office in 1992, this was a bankrupt economy – a highly indebted and poor economy. Successive administrations under this People’s Progressive Party/Civic, moved this economy from being a highly, indebted and poor one to a middle-income economy when they left Office in 2015. Those children who were around during 1992 were able to benefit and see the growth and development of this economy. When we returned to Office in 2020, we came to continue the progress of a political party who understands governance, understands development, and understands how to move the central pillars within the economy – social, economic and political.

Before I go into describing and explaining how we are connecting the economy with our foreign policy objectives... I think it is important for us to link the President’s mandate and our foreign policy objectives to what we do here at home in Guyana to show the people of Guyana that

connection between a strong, robust economy and the advancement of the promotion of our foreign policy agenda. It is cometh upon me to give regard to the President, the Prime Minister, the Vice-President, the entire Cabinet and Members of Parliament (MP) for the leadership and representation that we provided to the people of this country over the last three years. I daresay, the representation on this side reflects the plural nature of this society. It is, of course, a true representation of the diversity of this beautiful country we call 'Guyana'. That is why we were proud to present the list to the people of this country prior to taking Office. They have accepted and supported it. That is why we are here presenting the 2024 Budget which the people have mandated and which we are proud to deliver to them.

It is also important for me to link all our objectives here to the global positioning and the global priorities – that being, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030. Everything that we do here within the Ministries...You have heard from the Ministers of Labour, Education, Local Government and Regional Development and Public Works who spoke before me. You would see, Mr. Speaker, that we, in the People's Progressive Party/Civic, as a government, believe in ensuring that that we have a strong and robust economy, which helps us to advance our foreign policy objectives. I want to make that connection.

For example, let us take the social pillar which deals with social services – government services – such as education and healthcare which are provided to communities. There is \$135.2 billion being awarded to the Ministry of Education. This is squarely in line with the Sustainable Development Goal, number four – connecting education to global priorities. The people of Guyana can understand why education is a priority for us. It is not a priority for us only because it is a national objective; it is a global priority. This helps us in ensuring that we not only have educated people but, more importantly, an educated labour market. The President spoke on several occasions about having a sophisticated and educated labour force to support the diversity and the growth trajectory of this country. The advancement in the education sector which talks about the University of Guyana, the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) programme, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme; treating the Because We Care Cash grant; and improving the learning experiences, are all part and parcel of ensuring that we prepare for an advanced labour market.

Now, we have to build out this economy very fast. In some cases, we have to do some leapfrogging. Members on the other side complain about spending money on the GOAL; we have to. It is a logical and practical initiative because we need more people to be trained in a faster manner. That is why we have said, based on consultations that we needed to train 20,000 persons within the next five years. We are right on course to ensure that we can provide the training. This year, we are going to train 6,000 additional or new students, with the current batch of 3,967. Ensuring that we have an educated workforce that is diversified to cater for all sectors is important to us. That is why I want to commend my Colleague, the Minister who is responsible for Education – who is on a break – for the valiant work that the Hon. Member has been doing. The Hon. Member has been working hard to ensure that we can have an educated workforce that supports my Colleague, the Minister of Labour.

Let us touch on healthcare. Under healthcare, we have \$129.8 billion budgeted for 2024. This fits squarely within the Sustainable Development Goal, number three for good health and wellbeing. We are ‘Staying the Course’. We want to also have a healthy labour force to improve productivity, life expectancy and the human development index which will also provide for our happiness. As the President mentioned, also, we need to have a happy population. Having a population that is healthy and educated, improves wellbeing; improves the standard of living and quality of life; and provides for a happy population. You can check out the happiness index; it is a real thing. I know that my Colleague, Minister, would repeat this, but we continue to advance in building out a world-class healthcare system. Looking at the development of the six regional hospitals in Bath, De Kinderen, Diamond, Enmore, Lima Sands and Number 75 Village added to the upgraded hospitals in Bartica, Suddie, West Demerara and Lethem, all speak to ensuring that we maintain a healthy environment where our population can have quality healthcare, not only here on the coastland but within the communities across the 10 Administrative Regions and three Counties of Guyana.

If we look at social welfare, we have a further \$8.3 billion budgeted for welfare programmes. This speaks to protecting citizens from economic risk and insecurities in their lives. This is for Sustainable Development Goal, number 10. We have increased the Old Age Pension from \$33,000 to \$36,000 per month. This places an additional \$2.7 billion in disposal income in the hands of 76,000 pensioners. This reflects a 75% increase to the Old Age Pension since the PPP/C resumed Office in 2020. In addition to that, the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) received monthly would

now be \$43,075, which results in \$2.6 billion in disposal income to benefit over 27,000 persons. We also have an increase of \$3,000 – from \$16,000 to \$19,000 – per month for Public Assistance. We are not leaving anyone behind. As we have mentioned, time and time again, everyone will be included to ensure that they benefit from the growth and balanced development of this Government. Everyone is included; we are providing for everyone. That is why the social pillar is very important in helping us at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation. We want to be able to have people who are living longer and who are educated so that we can attract the foreign investment that we so desire; and ensure that we are providing for human development and human capital to be able to advance this economy. We cannot do it without the people of this country. The people of this country have given the People’s Progressive Party/Civic, in Government, the mandate to deliver on the promises.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to go to the economic pillar. This is based on Sustainable Development Goal, number nine – industry, innovation and infrastructure. The overall GDP of this country is expected to grow by 34.3% in 2024. It is the fastest-growing economy in the world. My Colleagues on the other side would know that when we took Office in 1992, we were one of the poorest economies in this region, second to Haiti. Now, we are admired by the rest of the world for the leadership that we have provided between 1992 and 2015, and since we took Office in 2020.

6.41 p.m.

When we talk about infrastructure and we look at the connectivity, ensuring that we connect northern Brazil with the Atlantic; connecting the three counties east to west, ensuring that we have the right infrastructure in place which will improve productivity and efficiency, which will lead to our improved competitiveness and, Mr. Speaker, we cannot do without infrastructure. When we are speaking on international stage and we are talking about Guyana and the progress that Guyana is making, we are able to sell Guyana and to position Guyana in the global environment where we can attract the kinds of investment needed that will be able to build this country out because we cannot do it alone. We have to do it with our friends, with our partners and we have to have an economy that we can actually present to the people of this world. Mr. Speaker, to note, the Government has allocated \$19.7 billion to advance the construction of the new Demerara River Bridge and, also, \$4.2 billion to commence construction of the new Wismar River Bridge. This is connectivity. In between that, if you look at connecting Linden to Lethem, 45 concrete bridges will

be constructed and that is very important. We understand that if we are going to connect the Guyana shield, and if we are going to be able to position Guyana, we have to be able to build out our infrastructure; we have to be able to drive efficiency. That is reduced cost right there. That is making our country more competitive, and we have to be competitive to be able to advance our foreign policy agenda.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to highlight, also, the fact that we are also focused on ensuring that we give particular attention to drainage and irrigation. Mr. Speaker, as you know, we are a low-lying coastal land, and we have to ensure that we can build resilience by ensuring that we can keep our northern border safe and protected. Mr. Speaker, \$72.3 billion budgeted for upgrade and maintenance of the National Drainage and Irrigation (D&I) network in 2024 will see us investing in new pump stations, will see us ensuring that we can be able to build resilience to climate change due to the high sea level rise. For that I must commend my Colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, for his responsibility over the years, for protecting us and giving the people of Guyana the surety that we can be protected at the northern end of this country which is with the Atlantic. Briefly, on sea defence, we are treating with \$6.9 billion in this budget. These are all well thought out numbers that are able to be put together so that we can ensure that we deliver for the people. This is part and parcel for our security.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to speak on the Industry and Commerce Sector. My Colleague, Oneidge Walrond, is responsible for this sector and has been doing an outstanding job in promoting small businesses in Guyana. Small businesses are dominant in ensuring that we have employment, creativity and innovation, which is also Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 9, connecting Guyana with the rest of the world. The People's Progressive Party/Civic Administration continues to recognise the integral role of small businesses in improving livelihoods and employment in this economy. In this regard, the Government has allocated \$450 million for the replenishment of the Small Business Development Fund, which is very vital. Our Administration has also allocated \$331 million to the Small Business Bureau for initiatives that will continue to grow the small and microbusinesses development and promote entrepreneurship to address the structural changes, promote business development and cultivate entrepreneurship behaviour to strengthen business cooperation.

One of the things that I want to note is, when you observe the People's Progressive Party/Civic Administration, we have been dismantling structural barriers from the time we took Office in 1992. We have been removing barriers. We have been creating equality, equal opportunities, equity and ensuring that there is fairness in this economy. The structurally violent economy that we have inherited in 1992, we moved swiftly to dismantle those structures, to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity in this country. That is why you can have fantastic grades coming from Regions 5, 6, 3 and the hinterland. We have done that with education. We have done that with healthcare, to ensure that everyone can get quality health care all across this country. We have done that with small business ensuring that everyone across this country, once they are qualified, will have a stimulus to ensure that they can thrive and grow their small business. That is the nature of this Government.

I can also float agriculture, but I will leave that for my Colleague to deal with, but I need to talk about it a bit. That \$97.6 billion is part of the diversification of this economy and we have heard time and time again that the President and the Cabinet, whether we are in Georgetown or whether we are in communities, we always remain focused on the diversification of this economy and not being susceptible to the resource curse. That is why we have focused a lot of our attention on the non-oil economy, ensuring that we can diversify this economy using the support that we have provided to the other two pillars to ensure that we can have an economy that is fit for purpose, that is innovative, creative and competitive, ensuring that we can survive oil because oil is a finite product. The Fisheries Sector is expected to grow and \$1.2 billion was budgeted for fisheries, aquaculture, and development initiatives. In the Forestry Sector, we expect a record growth of 3.9%. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal No. 12, where we spoke about responsible consumption and production. The Extractive Sector is also expected to grow by 43.6%. The gold and bauxite mining sub-sectors are expected to grow this year by 15.7% and 57.2 %, respectively.

There you have it, Mr. Speaker. We have an economy that is growing progressively. We have an economy that is benefitting from balanced development. We have an economy that is ready for 2030 and beyond. We are on the right course, and we are 'staying the course', Mr. Speaker. The numbers do not lie. We can go all the way back to 1992 and we can crunch the numbers. We have shown steady progression. We have shown that we are capable of leading this nation, not only here in the region, but to provide global leadership.

Allow me to speak a little about the political pillar. I know this is quite interesting to the people of Guyana because they know that our political system is stable and progressive because of their participation, because they are able to elect their representatives and they are able to ensure that this country remains a democratic country where people's rights and privileges are maintained, where there is rule for law and where there is good governance. Look at our country brand, Mr. Speaker. The brand of this country has improved exponentially since we returned to Office in 2020. Our national brand has improved. The people are proud to be Guyanese. We are well respected now and it is because we are able to nurture a political system driven by the people, not what we had to survive during the 28 years of dictatorship, where it was directed by the State, where there was party paramountcy. That does not exist now. There is consultation, partnership, there is respect led by the people, where priorities are taken on board, respected and we deliver on it. We know all too well that we are not going back to those days. Those individuals who witnessed, the young people who witnessed the 2020 Elections clearly saw the tragedy and agony that their parents and grandparents had to endure during the 28 years of dictatorship and five years of repression. Mr. Speaker, we are not going back. The reason the President, the entire Cabinet and executives of this Government can travel, be respected, listened to and admired is because our political system is on the right course, and we are 'staying that course' – we are 'staying that course'. We will lead this country to another free and fair elections, free from fear, and we will return to continue the journey.

This budget is not only about numbers, it is about progress. It is about our commitment to service. It is about delivering on the promises we have made, and we have to do that by using resources. This is what we are about, Mr. Speaker. They are more attracted to the numbers. When we left Office in 2015, we had over \$800 million in the Consolidated Fund. Do you know what they did? They spent it out. They took care of themselves, their friends, and their families. The billions that we left in those agencies, they spent it all out. They never delivered on that 'good life.' We have always delivered, we continue to deliver, we continue to meet and exceed the expectations of the people of this country. We will continue to do it here in Guyana with the help of the people of this country because we have been elected to represent them.

Mr. Speaker, in an effort to strengthen and consolidate our bilateral ties with our neighbours and friendly countries, as well as multilateral organisations, we are working on preserving our sovereignty and territorial integrity to promote Guyana's trade and economic interest and enhance

the image and presence of our country and people on the world stage. His Excellency President Mohammed Irfaan Ali has undertaken bilateral, regional and multilateral visits to advance our foreign policy agenda. Which is said...

6.56 p.m.

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

[Interruption]

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask for my Hon. Member to be given five minutes to conclude his discussion and to also express my utter disappointment that here was a speaker who was speaking on a national policy and trying to raise a debate in this Parliament from the pits it has been in to a high level and all it led you to were guffaws and jokes. I just want to go on record.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Hon. Minister of Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, you have five minutes to conclude.

Mr. Todd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We would have seen the President undertake several international visits, all carefully crafted, all ensuring that we, the people, benefit. So, Mr. Speaker, what I want the people of Guyana to know and understand clearly is that, every time the President leaves Guyana, we are bringing benefits to the people. That is how we do it. We are building a strong and resilient economy; we are able to travel and represent Guyana in the international fora on all of the issues. You would have seen us advancing our climate agenda, our food agenda, as well as our energy agenda – all national priorities that are also global priorities. So, the President's visits to India, United Kingdom, China, Qatar, Dominican Republic and Washington D.C, are all visits that we have seen benefits. Might I submit to this House that the visits of His Excellency the President representing Guyana in advancing our foreign policy, we have had more than 40 MoUs, agreements, road maps all across the world from Ghana to the Kingdom of Netherlands, Trinidad and Tobago, Saudi Arabia, Rwanda, East Pakistan, and Tajikistan. So, when you think about the

rewards in terms of our representation in the multinational, international, and regional levels, we have been ensuring that we put the people of this country first.

Since we took Office, we have also undertaken 44 accreditations, and this is across the global environment. Republic of Angola, United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Swiss Confederation, Republic of Cyprus, Republic of Philippines, the Kingdom of Norway, the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, Japan, just to name a few. I just wanted to give you the facts in terms of our representation; accreditation which speaks to the number of countries that wants to engage us, whether it is on the political dialogue, whether it is economic cooperation, whether it is people-people exchange, we have been very busy working in the interest of the people through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, before I wrap up, allow me to briefly speak to our programmes. We have three programmes at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The first programme speaks to the development of a foreign policy agenda and that speaks to institutional strengthening of our processes, procedures. We have trained 93% of Foreign Service Officers in 89 programmes so far and we want to continue that trend for this year. The Argyle declaration – of course, ensuring that we are able to maintain the course with the case that we have before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Mr. Speaker, you will know that has been very inclusive. We have on board Mr. Carl Greenidge, who is the agent and is former Foreign Minister and former Foreign Secretary; Dr. Van West-Charles who is now Guyana's Ambassador to Venezuela; we also have Ambassador Mr. Ronald Austin, who is part of the legal team; we also have the Hon. Member Desir-Walton, who is a member of the Advisory Committee. So, we have remained inclusive when it comes to the national issue. Our representation with regard to the case before the ICJ is very inclusive. It remains intact and we are proud to display to the people of this country and the rest of the world that the People's Progressive Party/Civic is a truly inclusive Government. A bipartisan arrangement that speaks to our maturity and commitment to the people of this country.

Mr. Speaker, before I close, let me say that... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] We are on the right track. When you think about all of the Ministries, the allocations and the projects that we have to roll out for this year, it allows us as a Government to deliver on our promises, to remain focus, to 'stay the course', to ensure that we bring wealth and prosperity to the people of this country, and to continue to ensure that their rights, privileges and freedoms are respected. So, Mr.

Speaker, I commend the 2024 Annual Budget to this Assembly for its unanimous approval. Thank you. [*Applause*]

Dr. Mahadeo: Before I go into my substantive presentation, first of all, I would like to rebut or refer to some of the things said by some of my friends from the opposite side. Mr. Speaker, if they are saying that they had free education in their manifesto, a simple question: why did they raise the money, the fees, to UG? I will deal with the staffing for hospitals in a bit.

Mr. Speaker, before we decide on what goes into the budget, I do not know how the other Members across the floor do it, but we walk the villages; we go house to house; we talk to people; we engage them and one of the major complaints from the villages are roads. That is why the budget reflects what the people want. I would now like to deal with a few points my friend, the Hon. Member Mahipaul raised about the ... I was upset, Mr. Speaker, just like you, when he referred to two of my Colleagues, Members of Parliament and medical doctors, Dr. Westford and Dr. Bheri Ramsaran I could say safely that they are on the ground. They meet with people. They deal with them as politicians and as professionals.

Mr. Speaker, about Regions 4 and 7 not having proper investments from the Government, one of the good things about the internet and *WhatsApp* is that people hear, and they respond right away. The Region 7 Regional Health Officer (RHO) sent me that one. They have a theatre in Kamarang and within a week or so they we will start doing surgeries. Bartica is going to have a new hospital. The specialist outreaches to villages and community meetings; \$300 million from the Ministry of Health to renovate, develop, and to provide better services in every single healthcare facility in Region 7; \$562 million in capital from the Regional Democratic Council's (RDC's) budget in Region 7; six boats and engines, three ambulances, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and four motorcycles, among other things for Region 7. In Region 4, the RHOs sent \$300 million from the Ministry of Health for all facilities to be rehabilitated. The Diamond Hospital has been started – the new hospital. They are now doing surgeries at the current Diamond Hospital again. New facilities at Swan on the Highway and other places. A new hospital is being constructed, like I said, at Diamond. Not mentioning the Paediatric and Maternal Hospital right in Region 4. The Festival City Health Centre has been upgraded and there is \$240 million for new medical equipment for the health centres of Region 4. So, Mr. Speaker, I would encourage my friends to fact check before they come with these things.

I stand here and proudly say that I support this budget wholeheartedly. In saying that, let me take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed to this budget. From the man in the street to the Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs), the RDCs, the municipalities, the Ministries and, especially, the staff of the Ministry of Finance and the Hon. Minister himself. Job well done.

This budget is themed *Staying the Course, Building Prosperity for All*. This is what the Budget is – it continues to build on the foundation laid by other People’s Progressive Party/Civic Governments and other People’s Progressive Party/Civic budgets. You see, Mr. Speaker, we have a vision and a plan to achieve that vision. The PPP/C is not like the PNC’s (People’s National Congress’s) APNU/AFC who sold pipe dreams to the population in 2011 and, again, in 2015 and made promises they never fulfilled, which led to their Government’s demise. For emphasis I would like to reuse the quote that the Hon. Minister, Mr. Persaud, used, but in a different way. Quoting from Chuck Norris, the famous actor. As the adage goes, *Fool me once shame on you fool me twice shame on me*. It is time for patriots everywhere to rally together again and take back the country. The people of Guyana were fooled twice in 2011 and 2015 by the APNU/AFC. Then, in 2020, the people rally together and took back the country. Now we have a people’s Government working in the best interests of the people. You seem to have a lot of bright ideas when you are in opposition. Stay there.

I am the geographical MP for Region 6. The leadership of the RDC of Region 6 continues to do their good work over 2023. They did a lot of meetings – the Regional Chairman, Vice Chairman, Administrative Staff. They had over 600 community meetings across the length and breadth of Region 6, from Siparuta/Orealla, down to Mara, including Black Bush Polder, Baracara and in the Canje Area. Consultations across the board – at these meetings, persons are given the opportunity to air their concerns, ask questions and make suggestions. Based on these suggestions, the RDC’s management and administration is guided on the way forward. In fact, Mr. Speaker, that is how this year’s Budget, like other People’s Progressive Party/Civic budgets, was crafted. In addition, Ministers are seen in the region, and they are readily available to persons every single week, particularly over weekends. On any given weekend there are two or three Ministers in the region, walking the ground, meeting the people, talking with them, communicating with them and being in direct contact with the people we serve. Mr. Speaker, the Vice President visited Region 6 a number of times over the last year, holding about 20 community meetings.

7.11 p.m.

Additionally, His Excellency President Dr. Irfaan Ali visited Region 6 at least six times, conducted 26 community meetings like he would have done across the country. He would have presidential outreaches across Region 6 like in other regions. At these outreaches pending matters are resolved, suggestions are made on the way forward and concerns are raised. Like previous People's Progressive Party/Civic Presidents, this President is available to anyone and everyone, whether it be to lend an ear, shake a hand, give a hug or take out a picture in real life, as is our Vice President, Ministers and leaders of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. This is how one should lead. One should lead by listening to the people, being with the people and obeying the will of the people. Our leaders are men and women of the people, they are with the people and for the people.

If we look at education briefly – in Region 6, for 2023, maintenance was more than \$25 million; for 2024, more than \$27 million; the 'Because We Care' cash grant in 2023 was more than \$906 million. In 2024, the 'Because We Care' cash grant has been increased to over \$1 billion. The national school grant – more than \$94 million in 2023; and in 2024, more than \$287 million. School grants are being done termly instead of in the last term of the year and allows the school to determine the needs on an individual basis for each school. The 'Because We Care' cash grant increased from \$35,000 to \$40,000 per child. Continuous maintenance and upgrading of all schools are done and the commencement of construction of the Orealla Secondary School has started. That is, sharing the money alike so that people in the hinterland could also get benefits.

Health – in Region 6, there are significant improvements such as additional specialists, including some super specialists like a nephrologist, a neurologist and a gastroenterologist. The surgical department has done surgeries using laparoscopic techniques that lowers the lost of blood, less pain and faster recuperation time. This is why, in this year's budget, we have budgeted for another complete laparoscopic suite for the New Amsterdam Hospital. Benefit like other regions – in an upgrade in x-rays, there are now digital x-rays in New Amsterdam, Port Mourant and Mibicuri. The people at Mibicuri, who have not had that facility for a long time, can now get their x-rays done right there. You can have the digital x-ray on your phone. They could take out the x-ray in Mibicuri and consult with persons in New Amsterdam, in Georgetown or even overseas. We are moving forward, Mr. Speaker. Every single health facility in Region 6 was either repaired, upgraded and now has better accommodation and facilities for patients and staff. Specialist

outreaches to the different riverain communities and hinterland communities of Orealla, Siparuta and Baracara are done on a routine basis. There is no backlog of surgical cases in Region 6. On an average, the availability of medication and medical supplies to Region 6, like the rest of the country, is in the high 80% and 90%. I know that because every morning we would have a meeting with all the hospitals across the country. The blood bank in Region 6 collected the largest amount of blood in its history, 2,601, thanks to the hardworking staff and the giving nature of the residents.

At this time, I want to remind this House about services that were once provided, pre-2015 in Region 6, but stopped immediately after we lost the elections, after the People's Progressive Party/Civic lost the Government or sometime shortly after. I would like to mention that the geriatric care programme and the homebase care programme were stopped immediately after we lost power. Additionally, another travesty – while we were offering services to the special needs school in New Amsterdam, a doctor used to go once per month and the rehabilitation staff used to go once per week to deal with these students, to help them. Do you know what? Immediately after APNU/AFC took over, that stopped. We have restarted it. I could tell you, quoting Dr. Henry who led the last team there, 'I had the pleasure of restarting and offering services to the special needs school. The team of medical physicians, rehabilitation services and dental staff saw 51 students, four teachers, one parent. The team and I felt great satisfaction and are blessed with the smiles of the children.' These smiles were taken away by the APNU/AFC.

The National Ophthalmology Hospital that was literally non-functional between 2015/2020, has started doing back cataracts surgeries in February, 2021. We had to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to get it back up to scratch. Last year it performed 1,127 major surgeries and 546 minor surgeries. In most regions in Guyana there is no backlog anymore for cataracts surgeries. We currently, as I am speaking, have staff in the hinterland, in Regions 7 and 8. We are searching for patients who have cataract. Do you know what we will do, Mr. Speaker? Just like we did for Regions 1 and 9, we are going to identify them, screen them right there, fly them out, take them to Port Mourant, get them operated on successfully and take them back in there. Then we will send the specialists to do the final check in their own regions. That is taking care to the people and that is equity.

There is more good news. At Number 75 Village, we are building a brand-new hospital, a hospital that is going to provide care like never before in that area. In New Amsterdam, we are going to

build a level 5 hospital where we are going to have super specialists. We are going to have a Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory (Cath Lab) in the new hospital to deal with patients who have heart conditions, and we are going to have Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) services. The New Amsterdam Hospital will be one of two facilities in the Government system that would have an MRI. Are people still saying here that we are spending too much money on infrastructure? Come on.

Region 6 is known as the agriculture region. Rice production moved from 249,547 metric tonnes of paddy in 2019, to 330,899 metric tonnes in 2023, to give a rice equivalent of 162,206 metric tonnes in 2019, and last year, 215,084 metric tonnes. The Ministry of Agriculture has spent over \$25 billion over the last three years by rehabilitating the brackish water shrimp project, flood relief, fertilizer assistance, rehabilitation of drying floor, construction of model farm and shade houses, expansion of the pineapple project in Orealla, Siparuta and Baracara cultivation expansion, procurement of equipment, retrofitting of processing facilities, construction of solar dryer at Baracara, genetic improvement of cattle, sheep and pigs, honey production, clean milk project and tuberculosis (TB) eradication programme in cattle. That is the direction in which we are going. Forward ever. Part-time workers...

Mr. Speaker: Before you go forward, you will need five minutes.

Ms. Manickchand: If it pleases you, Sir, could I ask, respectfully, for five minutes for the Hon. Member to conclude his speech.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much. Hon. Member. You may continue to conclude within five minutes.

Dr. Mahadeo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Please allow me to tell you the story of a young lady who is 35 years old. A single parent with two children who left school when she was in fourth form. She obviously did not write the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) and always dreamed of being a nurse. This dream was shattered when she did not complete school. She took whatever job she could – cleaning homes, cleaning yards and helping people – to get money to send her children to school. What did the APNU/AFC do? They took away the \$20,000 that she would get as a grant

for her two children to go to school. She has gotten it back. Now, in addition to that, she got a part-time job – \$40,000. She said that she has applied for a low-income house and from the \$40,000 she will be able to pay her mortgage and still have some moneys left back to supplement what she is earning elsewhere. She has applied for and gotten into one of the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) programmes, so she is upgrading herself. Once she has successfully completed that, which is the equivalent to CXC, she is guaranteed that she is going to get into the nursing programme because the Hon. Minister has been saying that once you have the qualifications, we will have a space for you. We are not building hospitals just like that. We have increased the number of nurses we are training from just a couple hundred to over 2,000 per year. That is what we have done – a visionary Government. Once they have successfully completed their programme, a job is guaranteed for them. Let me just share some others. I just mentioned the GOAL programme. In Region 6, 2,239 persons have benefited so far from the GOAL Programme. If the GOAL programme did not exist, the 2,239 residents of Region 6 would not have gotten any programme and anything to do to upgrade themselves.

I would like to share the thoughts and views of two pensioners. One, Mr. Forbes Moore, a former candidate of the People’s National Congress – ‘I am a pensioner. During the PNC’s term in Office, I was receiving \$20,500 monthly, which in real terms was lesser in value due to the heavy taxation and value-added tax (VAT) that the APNU/AFC added on essential food and other items, along with the wicked and spiteful removal of free potable water by the incompetent and inconsiderate PNC/AFC Government. With the recent increase in my pension announced in *Budget 2024*, I will now be receiving \$36,000, which in real terms has a higher value, taking into consideration that I no longer have to pay for potable water. Moneys are there for me to do eye screening at a doctor of my choice and \$15,000 to purchase new glasses, adding tangibly to my resources, thanks to the caring Government. Also, because of the free GOAL scholarship – and this is a pensioner – that has no age limit, this Government has made it available. I am considering applying for one which will help me to fulfil my lifelong desire to enter the world of journalism. One love, One Guyana, Guyana is in good hands.

I would like to quote another poor pensioner, and this is more relevant to today’s debate. He is 92-year-old Mr. Inshanally from Reliance, Canje. His take on the budget was, ‘I sat and listened to the whole speech of Dr. Ashni. It is a very good budget. Pensioners benefit, all young people

benefit. Please tell Dr. Ashni thanks and thanks to the PPP/C Government. But you know Doc, you got some hard mouth people, who no matter what the PPP/C Government do for them, they will find fault. Them just hard mouth but *alyuh* continue the good work. Next year, I will once again go and vote for the People's Progressive Party'. His daughter-in-law, who owns a small business, said that she cannot wait for the gas to shore pipeline to land for her to get benefits. The PPP/C has a reputation of fulfilling its promises staying through the course. Our President continues to lead from the front and guided back by the wisdom, experience and brilliance of our General Secretary and Vice President and supported by the veteran warriors like Cde. Teixeira, the Prime Minister and a hardworking Cabinet. Exciting times are ahead. The pace of development will only get faster and more intense.

In closing, as the Director General of the Ministry of Health, I would just like to highlight one other thing. Region 8 never had surgical capacity, but last year we not only constructed a theatre and equipped it, but we also equipped the laboratory. We did the first set of major surgeries ever to be done in Region 8. That was done by a team headed by Dr. Amir from the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation (GPHC). But, do you know what? Within the first quarter of this year, we are sending a local team of specialist there to be based in Mahdia for the people of Region 8. I am proud to say I support this budget. The five years of the APNU/AFC was like a pothole on the road to Guyana's development and growth. We are now on a trajectory that successive PPP/C Governments will take Guyana way into the future with visionary and brilliant committed leadership. Guyana belongs to all of us – One Guyana. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much, Hon. Member, Dr. Vishwa Mahadeo and now for the Opposition Chief Whip, the Hon. Member, Mr. Christopher Jones.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, very much, Cde. Speaker. Like my Colleagues before me, I rise bearing the dashed hopes and echoing the frustration of the masses of Guyanese about *Budget 2024*, presented to this House under the theme, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity For All*. The PPP 'stayed the course' with the meagre allocation to the people of this country, confirms that Guyana is not a little Dubai, but rather, it is the PPP giving Guyanese little to get by.

7.26 p.m.

Last year, at the 2023 Budget, I ended my presentation by quoting His Excellency, former President, Dr. Cheddi Jagan and I will do so now, again. Sir, Dr. Cheddi Jagan stated:

“We cannot have a Cadillac-style living with donkey-cart economies”.

In 2024, the People’s Progressive Party/Civic has presented a budget of \$1.146 trillion. Guyana is now an oil-producing country. Last year, Guyana recorded the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in the world. This year, we are projected to grow by 33.4% and by 100% by 2028, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It is pellucid. Guyana has a Cadillac economy. It is the People’s Progressive Party/Civic who continue to have the Guyanese people living a donkey-cart lifestyle.

Let me turn my attention to the role of Parliament and the functioning of democracy by examining the sittings of this National Assembly and the Committees of this Assembly. According to the *United Nations Economic Commission For Africa*, the legislative arm of government plays a fundamental role in ensuring good governance. The Commission emphasised:

“In the 21st Century, there is growing interest more than ever before in issues related to democracy and good governance around the world. This is a reflection of the increasing acceptance of the fact that democracy and good governance are not a luxury, but a fundamental requirement to achieve sustainable development. Parliaments as one of the key state institutions in a democratic system of governance have a critical role to play in promoting democracy and good governance. As the democratically elected representative of the people, parliaments have the honorable task to ensure government by the people and for the people. In the performance of their key functions of legislation, representation and oversight parliaments can actively engage in the development and implementation of laws, policies and practices that promote democracy and good governance”.

Let us juxtapose expectations and the effectively functioning parliaments in a democratic system with that of ours. I want to draw this House’s attention to the real and dire situation that pervades our own democratic system, which is not unknown to you, Cde. Speaker, or the Members of this House. On 4th March, 2021, this House approved a total of \$383.1 billion, the outline of the national fiscal plan for Guyana. After the passage of the budget on 4th March, 2021, there was no sitting of this National Assembly for 97 days. During the 97 days of no National Assembly, the

Opposition submitted over 470 questions to the House for Ministers to answer. On 10th June, 2021, ending the 97 days of no sitting of the National Assembly, the Government submitted Supplementary Financial Papers No. 1 and 2 of 2021 to the House. The House was quickly called four days after, on 14th June, where it approved the Supplementary Financial Papers, totalling \$1.9 billion and \$21.4 billion, respectively. There were two sittings after that date, after which the House went into recess on 10th August to 10th October. After the recess, it took 64 days before this House met again on 16th December and approved Financial Paper, No. 3 totalling \$5.1 billion, and Financial Paper No. 4 totalling \$21.5 billion. The total supplementary budget totalled \$49.9 billion, which carried the overall budget for 2021 to \$433 billion. It appears that the National Assembly's only task is to approve money for the Government. For the year, excluding the budget presentation and consideration of the estimates, the National Assembly in the year 2021 met on 10 occasions.

In 2022, the frequency of the sittings got abysmally worse, with the House only meeting a total of eight times, again, excluding budget presentation, consideration of the estimates and the debate. In a year where the budget increased to \$552.9 billion, considerably higher than that of the previous year, one would have thought that it would have been in the best interest of the country and in the interest of transparency and accountability of the nation's finances, that the frequency of those sittings would have been higher than the previous year. Let us not forget consistently of the PPP style of democracy in 2023. In a year that plunged this nation of ours into so many insurmountable challenges and threats, this honourable House only met an astonishingly eight times, excluding again budget presentation, budget debate and the consideration of the estimates. The same year, the fiscal plan outlined spendings of \$781.9 billion. It is not surprising that this House has sunken to those startling figures, which highlights an infrequency of meetings of the National Assembly, given the track record of the PPP/C when it comes to transparency and accountability.

Irrespective of the fact that the fiscal plan increased significantly, along with the challenges facing our nation, compare those figures to that of the APNU/AFC Government. In 2015, the National Assembly met 19 times. In 2016, the National Assembly met 38 times. In 2017, the National Assembly met 27 times and in 2018, a total of 29 times. That is what a functioning democracy looks like, where a government was not afraid to answer the tough questions and to give accountability to the people whose patrimony demands no less. All of these sittings happened in a period when there was no oil money.

Parliamentary Committees play a crucial role in enabling the thorough examination of various aspects of government's policy and administration. The Committees provide a platform for Members from all sides of the House, representative of the people, to engage in discussions on matters of national significance, fostering rigorous dialogue. Importantly, they aim to reach consensus on key national issues, working towards the best interests of the country. Given this laudable expectation, we find it reprehensible and unacceptable that several Parliamentary Committees, including Sectoral Committees, are comatose or have never seen the *light of day*. At the most critical time in the nation's history, at a time when we face rapid development of our oil and gas sector, one which is currently plagued by the lack of transparency in the publishing of government's contracts and feasibility studies, the Committee on Natural Resources never met for the year 2021. In the year 2022, it never met. There was not one meeting in those two years. The Chairman of this Committee was the Hon. Minister of Natural Resources, Mr. Vickram Bharrat. There is *light at the end of the tunnel*. I am happy to report to this House that in 2023, under the chairmanship of the former Minister of State, Ms. Hastings-Willians, the Committee on Natural Resources had six meetings for the year 2023.

The Committee on Foreign Relations: the gravity of the Guyana-Venezuela border controversy cannot be overstated, especially in the light of the ongoing case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the recent military buildup of Venezuelans troops along the border and Venezuela's announcement in October and subsequently, the hosting of a referendum on 3rd December, 2023 and the alarming objective of annexing two-thirds of Guyana's territory. It is deeply concerning that in the year 2023, the Committee on Foreign Relations, responsible for addressing such critical matters, was convened only twice. This Committee is chaired by the Hon. Minister of Foreign Relations and International Cooperation, Mr. Todd. The Constitutional Reform Committee: the People's Progressive Party/Civic in its manifesto for the 2020 General and Regional Elections, under Constitutional reform, stated:

“Moving forward, we are committed to continuous revision of the Constitution. In this regard, we will ensure that the Committee on Constitutional Reform that will advance the work will pursue nationwide consultation following the model used in the past, that is, with half of the members from civil society and equal representation from Government and the Opposition”.

The Constitutional Reform Committee never met for the year 2023. This Committee is chaired by the Hon. Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs, Mr. Nandlall.

The Parliamentary Oversight Committee on the Security Sector: the crime situation in Guyana is out of control, now more than ever. Coupled with the local challenges is that of the influx of migrants, which has now added its own challenges for law enforcement authorities. The PPP/C is failing miserably when it comes to managing the crime situation in Guyana, so much so that it prompted the United States Embassy here in Georgetown on 17th July to publish:

“Reconsider travel to Guyana due to crime”.

This “Reconsider travel to Guyana” Advisory went on to state in its Country Summary:

“Violent crime, including murder and armed robbery, is common, especially at night. Local police often lack the resources to respond effectively to serious criminal incidents”.

The Advisory warned citizens that should they decide to travel to Guyana, the following measures should be taken:

- Be extra vigilant when visiting banks or ATMs.
- Be aware of your surroundings.
- Avoid walking or driving at night.
- Do not physically resist robbery attempt.
- Do not display signs of wealth, such as wearing expensive watches or jewelry.
- Enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) to receive security messages and make it easier to locate you in an emergency.
- Follow the Department of State on Facebook and Twitter.
- Prepare a contingency plan for emergency situations. Review the Traveler’s Checklist”.

This was from the United States of America's Embassy in Georgetown. The Parliamentary Oversight Committee on the Security Sector has the responsibility for examining the Disciplined Forces of Guyana. The Committee shall have the power to co-opt experts or enlist the aid of persons of appropriate expertise whether or not such experts or persons are Members of the National Assembly. It is alarming that a committee such as this, of paramount importance, in the year 2021 had zero meetings. In the year 2022, zero meetings. In the year 2023, zero meetings.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, the clock says you have zero time remaining on this first section.

Mr. Mahipaul: I move that the Hon. Member to be given five minutes to conclude his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Cde Speaker. The Parliamentary Oversight Committee on the Security Sector is chaired by the former Brigadier of the Guyana Defence Force (GDF) and current Prime Minister of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, the Hon. Mr. Phillips.

The Committee on Appointments: the 19th meeting of the Committee on Appointments was held in April, 2023 and arrangements for consultations on the appointment to the Rights of the Child Commission (RCC) were finalised. On 8th May, 2023, Members of the Committee on Appointments held a consultation with stakeholders where they were briefed on the agreed guidelines for nomination. To date, the Members are awaiting a meeting to be convened. The last meeting of this Committee was held on 8th May, 2023. This Committee is chaired by the Hon. Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance and Government Chief Whip, Hon. Mdm. Teixeira.

7.41 p.m.

The Statutory Instruments Committee never met for the years 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. The Standing Orders Committee never met for the years 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, today in his presentation, pointed and related to matters concerning the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and so, I will not go there. Cde. Speaker, there

continued to be allegations of bias on the part of the Speaker of the National Assembly. Sir, I draw this House's attention, on Monday...

Mr. Speaker: You do not want to go there.

Mr. Jones: There are allegations, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: You do not want to go there.

Mr. Jones: Cde. Speaker, on Monday, 22nd January, 2024, the Hon. Minister, Mr. Hamilton, in his budget presentation, called the names of former Ministers, Ms. Simona Broomes and Ms. Nicolette Henry. The Leader of the Opposition tried to catch the attention of the Speaker's eye. The Opposition Chief Whip brought to his attention that the Members...

Mr. Speaker: There is a provision to catch the Speaker's attention – and you are using up your five minutes – and that is on a Point of Order.

Mr. Jones: I am so guided, Cde. Speaker. The Hon. Member was allowed to call the two former Ministers names, even though those persons are not in the House to represent themselves. This afternoon in the House, Member of Parliament (MP), Mr. Mahipaul made the point:

“We will not be a Dharamlall; we will not be Parag; we will not be a Persaud...”

He did not call the entire name of any former Minister of the House. The Speaker, at his conclusion of Cde. Mahipaul's presentation, said that the point that he made of calling people's names... a stark contrast between what transpired earlier in the day to what transpired in the afternoon.

In light of Guyana recording the highest GDP in the world, projected a growth of 34.4% in the year 2024 and 100% in the year 2025, the Government, with all of the resources available at their disposal, gave to public servants a paltry 6.5%. In December, 2023, Cde. Speaker, I have here in my hands the pay slip of a member of staff of the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. In November, 2023, this staff member took home \$80,892. In January, 2024, it went up to \$86,150, a difference of \$5,280. A member of the Ministry of Health – a healthcare worker – on October, 2023, took home a salary of \$119,362. In January, 2024, it was \$123,966, a difference of \$4,604. A member of the Ministry of Education's take-home salary in November, 2023 was \$88,498, and in January it was \$93,483. This is a difference of \$4,985.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Member. Your time is up.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Cde. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Now for the Hon. Member, Mr. Seeraj.

Mr. Seeraj: Thank you, Cde. Speaker. From the onset, Cde. Speaker, please allow me to extend congratulations to the Hon. Senior Minister within the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, Dr. Ashni Singh, and members of his staff for compiling a budget, which I find quite inspiring, despite the Senior Counsel's, Hon. Mr. Forde, statement that it is not inspiring to him. Maybe the Hon. Member is occupied with other matters at his place and is unable to comprehend the fullness of this budget or he probably is just too old to be inspired now.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to quote from page one at paragraph 1.3, to put things into context as to what it is that the People's Progressive Party/ Civic Administration met at the beginning of 2020 in August after the torturous five months from the elections of March, 2020, and the eventual swearing in of the Government in August, 2020.

“It would be recalled that we came to office amidst crippling overlapping crises: a governance crisis caused by the APNU/AFC's refusal to respect the results of both the December 2018 no confidence motion and the March 2020 election; a public health crisis caused by COVID-19 and the unpreparedness of the public health system to cope with it at the time; and an economic crisis caused by both of the aforementioned situations compounding bad economic policy and woeful economic mismanagement from 2015 to 2020.”

This is what we took over. This is what we met and it is remarkable that today we can craft a budget with the theme, *Staying the course: Building Prosperity for All* with an amount of \$1.146 trillion. I hasten to add that it is not only the amount, but also the allocation – where you put the funds that can determine whether you look at interests in the short-term only or you look interests in the short, medium and long term. I must say that, given the knowledge, the experience and the vision of the leadership of the People's Progressive Party/ Civic, ably led by the Ministry of Finance and by the Hon. Dr. Singh, this budget, whilst it would not have met with the full

expectation of all, there is something in it for every single Guyanese, and this budget is positioning this government for the upward thrust into the future where all will benefit. Those of you who find a little bit discomfort – and I find there is a very small number – take hope in the fact that, in the years to come, the lives of all Guyanese will be placed on a solid footing and we will all be there to enjoy the benefit of our country because the investments are being made now to create a solid foundation for the future.

If the Hon. Mr. Forde could not see this, like I said, he is preoccupied with other issues and unable to see where this budget is going. He spoke about the increase of \$3,000 in old age pension in a disparaging way as if this does not mean anything, and he then went on to talk about the six times we came for supplementary provision. If as a government we come here for supplementary provision, it means we have more things to do and, more importantly, it means that we have the resources to do it. While a budget is a guide, we have to take into consideration the changing circumstances which meet our government and how we react to those changes. Hon. Member, Mr. Forde, also went on to quote Ram and McRae. He said that based on Ram and McRae, there will be approximately \$100 billion going to waste. Mr. Speaker, I also want to quote a financial analyst. I choose Mr. Joel Bhagwandin. I quote what he said today or yesterday. I cannot remember exactly when. He said:

“THE central focus of Ram and McRae’s budget criticism...”

And he was clear to point out that it is not an analysis but criticism.

“...was the inadequacy of the cost of living (COL) measures according to Ram, although the analysis provided by the firm failed to demonstrate by way of quantifying the measures contained in the budget.

Contrary to Ram’s view, however, the COL measures, altogether would amount to nearly \$300 billion annually based on my calculations, including foregone revenues to the treasury. This conservatively estimated sum represents 26 per cent of the 2024 national budget...”

It is more than a quarter, Mr. Speaker.

“...110 per cent of the sum to be withdrawn from the Natural Resources Fund (NRF) to partially finance budget 2024, and about eight per cent of (2023) GDP. Moreover, it equates to an annual subsidisation of \$1.5 million per household for household expenditure.”

This is the power, Mr. Speaker, of some of the measures that have been identified in this budget to address the cost of living. The Hon. Member, Mr. Forde, spoke about the lack of consultation. I think some of my colleagues have named some of the organisations in Guyana which responded in a positive way to the pronouncements made last Monday by Hon. Dr. Singh. These include but are not limited to the Guyana Manufacturing and Service Association (GSMA) Limited, the Guyana Badminton Association, the Guyana Golf Association, the Guyana Lawn Tennis Association, a number of sports agencies, a number of chambers: Essequibo Islands-West Demerara Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Berbice Chambers of Commerce and Development Agency. Rupununi, way down in Region 9, their chambers also recognised what this budget is going to do for their region. The Georgetown Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GCCCI), the Insurance Association of Guyana and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Guyana (FITUG) also responded, on a positive note, to the pronouncement made by Hon. Dr. Singh.

The Hon. Ms. Fernandes went at length to talk about debt. I think the Hon. Dr. Singh went at pains to explain before that you will not be able to borrow if you are not creditworthy, and the fact that we can borrow means that we are in good standing. We can borrow so that we can finance projects so that our people can start living the benefits now, rather than waiting for funds to come in. A number of our speakers also pointed out the debt to Gross Domestic Product ratio. All of us like to look at the United States of America or Canada in North America and some of the Caribbean countries closer to home. If we look at their debt-to-GDP ratio, I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that in the United States of America, the debt-to-GDP ratio in 2022 was 121.3% and it is projected to grow to 123.3% in 2023. The Canadian... [An Hon. Member: What is it in Guyana?] Hold a second. The Canadian debt-to-GDP ratio in 2022 was 107.4% and is projected to come down slightly in 2023. Venezuela, which is next door, debt-to-GDP ratio is 159.5%. Suriname's to the east is 120.1%. Guyana's, Mr. Speaker and Hon. Member Dr. Singh, debt to GDP's ratio is 26%. That is where we are positioned. In Trinidad and Tobago, it is 51%. So, the debt-to-GDP ratio clearly is pointing, when we look at the success in other countries, that Guyana is in a good place.

Guyana is in a solid place, and we can borrow more. We can borrow more to ensure that our people's lives are impacted upon. Not all of us have much time on our hands.

7.56 p.m.

Some of us are approaching our sunset years. We need to ensure that our people enjoy the benefits of an economy that is growing, as Dr. Singh said, at a dizzying pace. We need to put measures in place. If we have to borrow to make life good for our people, then that is what we have to do. The Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, said that our budgets are being financed by oil resources. The record of this Government clearly shows that even without oil – in the period 1992 to 2015 – we were developing our country, admittedly, not at that fast rate. But even without oil resources, we were developing our country year after year and making life good for our people. This budget, although it is over \$1 trillion, it is not totally financed by revenues from oil. Internal revenues amounted to \$408 billion. This is also going towards financing our budget.

It is important that we know some of these things which go to some of the points raised by Cde. Ronald Cox. The Hon. Member spoke about the numbers in the budget. He said to advise our people not to be swindled by the numbers and spoke about nurses and teachers and what is in it for them. I think the Hon. Minister of Education spoke at length about the education sector and did not miss out much, given the time allocated to her.

Mr. Speaker, if you will permit me, I can say that 3,200 teachers and 700 nurses were trained. Between the teachers, nurses and other members of the public service, they have benefitted from a cash grant of \$1.7 billion. They also partook in that salary increase of 6.5%, which amounted to another \$7.5 billion. For teachers, there is a monthly education allowance if he/she is pursuing an upliftment in the academic field. The sum of \$10,000 if he/she is pursuing his/her first bachelor's degree, \$20,000 if he/she is pursuing a master's programme and \$30,000 if he/she is going pursuing the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programme. These are benefits going toward teachers outside of their salary and other allowances. A total of 4,500 teachers are expected to benefit from this programme. Added to that, all graduate teachers have moved up to the maximum scale and 4,000 teachers have benefitted from the amount of \$1 billion simply by moving up to the maximum scale under this programme.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Ganesh Mahipaul, was talking about getting back into government. The Hon. Member is from Wakenaam and sought to say that they will win Wakenaam and the rest of the country. He spoke about salaries. He also spoke a bit about the 6.5% increase. In the budget presentation, the Hon. Dr. Singh said that, cumulatively, 6.5% represents a 23% over the years increase to public servants. For that 6.5%, some \$7.5 billion benefitted 54,000 persons. If I should quote Dr. Singh in terms of Hon. Member, Mr. Ganesh Mahipaul's ambition to take back the government... Firstly, let us deal with Wakenaam. In the recently held Local Government Election (LGE), we contested for 18 seats in nine constituencies. This island that the Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, claimed that we neglected was actually neglected by the APNU/AFC. on this island that he claimed we neglected, they were unable to contest in four constituencies. In the last minutes, they did contest in five. We contested in all nine constituencies. We won 15 seats out of 18 seats. The APNU/AFC got three seats. This is the model island on which Mr. Mahipaul is premising his victory. It is a piper's dream. It is not surprising because that island in 2015 cultivated 2,455 hectares of rice. By the time we reached to 2020, under the APNU/AFC that did so much for Wakenaam, that number of hectares came down to 754. From 2,455, under the caring APNU/AFC cultivation came down to 754 hectares. I am happy to announce that by last year, it had gone up back to 1,035 hectares. This year, it is going to reach in the vicinity of 2,500 hectares. There was a new school constructed in Wakenaam, the Arthurville Primary School. If the APNU/AFC's return to power is premised on this model of Wakenaam, it is not going anywhere at all.

I am doing some mopping up, Mr. Speaker, as we approach the end of the day. Some of these things we need to respond to so as to fix the record right. The Hon. Ramsaroop spoke about our emphasis on infrastructural development in such a manner to say that this is not going to help anyone – disparagingly. I did not expect that from a gentleman who has some amount of experience in the forestry sector. He had lamented that his business suffered because of the lack of access. Then, he came to say that we should make roads that one can eat. If I should quote him correctly, 'edible roads'. We really need some scholarships over there; edible roads. With the development of a road infrastructure of \$204.1 billion, we are going to address concerns of food security, of transportation, of moving from point A to point B and of value to one's holdings.

Mr. Speaker, I could very well tell you that with proper roads in place, people would be able to cultivate more, they would have access to all of the services, they would have access to different centres

and life would become easier. They will actually save more. Take, for example, the current situation coming from over the river. The Hon. Deodat Indar is not here. If one has to come from over the river from Tuschen, he/she has to leave home at 6.00 a.m. to get to work at 8 o'clock because there is an inadequacy of road networks. [Dr. Singh: What happens in the evenings and in the afternoons?] In the afternoons... The Hon. Mahipaul, when we have Public Accounts Committee (PAC) meetings, would say if we cannot finish by 3.30 p.m., we are going until 7.00 p.m. because he wants to avoid the traffic. His Excellency the President spoke about this matter. Thousands of manhours are wasted on the roadways. Hundreds of gallons of fuel are burnt up from persons just sitting in the line. Productive time goes to waste and there is wear and tear on the machinery. So, road infrastructure would actually benefit someone because he/she can put in another hour of sleep, he/she could get to work on time without idling anywhere on the highway, without burning excessive fuel and without wear and tear on his/her machinery.

This is just for the travelling public to get to work. Imagine the stress of the productive sector. Imagine a rice farmer bringing his/her paddy from Region 3 to the rice mill at Farm. Imagine the torture that he/she has to go through to bring a truck load or a tractor load, which we often see. The productive sector is under tremendous pressure with our limited road network. It is not surprising that this visionary Government has allocated \$204.1 billion for an improved road infrastructure and a bridge with four lanes. I am happy for the residents of Region 10 that the sod was turned recently for the construction of that bridge. With that single lane bridge across the Demerara River, it is torturous if one has to go to the hinterland. One way traffic is history now in this country, unless we want to go on the Hon. Member, Mr. Patterson's bicycle three lane bridge. One could go with two or three of them.

The Member spoke about gold. Actually, gold production for large companies – a least one foreign operator – increased. It increased by 7.8% while overall gold declaration came down. This operator because of size...I did a little bit of battel spinning in my days. Just out of high school, I worked a bit under Tumatumari Falls and so I can spin a battel. Water is important for a small operator to wash the gold and all of that. We have recently come out of an extended dry period which was beneficial to the agricultural sector, the Hon. Minister will tell you. It gave us an opportunity to get land preparation underway, lands that we could not have put under cultivation for a long period of time. In the gold sector, the dry weather affected our small and medium sized operators and that

is why we saw a decline. That was one of the factors. Of course, access was another factor because to get into some of these locations, the Ministers of Public Works need to put more roads there. They have to come for a supplementary, which I will support, for more money to build more roads so that our small and medium sized miners could have access to these areas. Notwithstanding that, the extractive industries actually increased production by 42.6%, notwithstanding, the decline in gold. Stone grew by 98% which is a testimony to the construction boom. This is another sector that took off in our efforts, Government and private sector, to create an infrastructure that is attractive to the kind of investment that we need to make this country really blossom. The stone grew by 98%, sand grew by 21% and manganese grew by 13%. These things were not mentioned by the Hon. Members. Mr. Speaker, sometimes you wonder if we are talking about the same budget.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, allow me to interrupt you at 8.08 p.m. We neglected to pass the motion to continue beyond 8.00 p.m. so that we could conclude the business of today. Hon. Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance, maybe you can move that motion so that, until the end of the estimates, we suspend that provision so that we can complete the work of every day's business if it goes beyond 8.00 p.m. It is in the motion after the proclamation. It might not be in the Standing Orders.

Suspension of Standing Orders No. 10(1)

BE IT RESOLVED:

“That Standing Orders No. 10(1) be suspended of the Twelfth Parliament to allow the sittings of the National Assembly to proceed beyond 8 p.m. until the business of today is completed.”

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

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask that the Standing Order be suspended to allow us to continue and complete today's list of speakers at this point.

Question put and agreed to.

Standing Order suspended.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you can continue.

Mr. Seeraj: Is it from zero, Mr. Speaker? Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. Thank you, Hon. Chief Whip. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramsaroop, spoke about the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC) and it being bankrupt as if the People's Progressive Party/Civic from 2020 to 2023 made it bankrupt. I want to quote what the Hon. Minister of Parliamentary and Governance said back in August, 2020, the 10th August to be specific. The headline of this article in the *Guyana Chronicle* stated:

“The PPP/C returns to a bankrupt GFC”

That is the Guyana Forestry Commission. I will quote from the article:

“AS the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC) continues to struggle to pay its staff and other debts, Parliamentary Affairs and Governance Minister, Gail Teixeira, is questioning how the Commission could have descended to its state of bankruptcy, when it had a surplus of \$4 billion at the end of 2015.”

8.11 p.m.

The Commission was finding it very difficult to pay its approximately 400 members of staff. So, if we allow these things to go, one would go away with the impression as if Mr. Ramsaroop, supposedly having an authority on the Guyana Forestry Commission, that he would have had...

[**An Hon. Member:** *(Inaudible)*] I did not know he was on the board. These are some of the things I wanted to talk about. In addressing other issues, we...

Mr. Speaker: You would not be able to address the other issues because you have gone much more than the five minutes over the time. You need to just...

Mr. Seeraj: Wrap up.

Mr. Speaker: Totally.

Mr. Seeraj: Mr. Speaker, I am not going to say anything new. I am going to say that I just want to commend this Budget to the National Assembly. I hope it receives the unanimous support that it deserves. Thank you very much. [*Applause*]

Ms. Coonjah: Mr. Speaker, I wish to congratulate the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance, the most astute and dignified Dr. Ashni Singh, for presenting a peoples-oriented budget, which will bring benefit to all the people. It is said that education is the key to success, and so, in presenting my first speech, I will start with the successful key.

I will begin with infrastructural development in my region for 2023. I have sat there and listened to a comment that the Minister of Education is only building, building. We cannot put our babies and our youths under a tent to learn; we have to make the learning environment conducive and comfortable. Rehabilitation was done on four nursery schools catering for the babies of this country, six primary schools, and one primary laboratory. It also provides for the growing population: one primary was extended and construction of two new nursery schools, two rehabilitated inclusive of one extended secondary school. Those schools are as follow: Lima Sands Nursery School, rehabilitation; Walton Hall Nursery, rehabilitation; Martindale Primary, Anna Regina old Nursery, Siriki Nursery School in the Pomeroun, all those are rehabilitated; Taymouth Manor Primary School, Abram's Creek in the Pomeroun, Friendship Primary, Sparta Primary all in the Pomeroun except Sparta; C.V Nunes Primary Laboratory (Lab); Mashabo Primary; C.V Nunes Primary was extended; Anna Regina Secondary rehabilitated and extended; 8th of May Secondary School, rehabilitated; Mashabo Nursery, a new building – never had it there; Ulele Nursery, new – we have a nursery school at Ulele but it was extended and yet it was overcrowded, so a new primary was constructed; Abram Zuil Secondary, the new state of the art secondary school in Region 2 is completed and commissioned, and we were told it is 10 of those kinds of school in the world. We are very fortunate, Mr. Speaker. There are works on roofs, floors and windows, along with the construction of sanitary blocks and walkways. We cannot allow our children now to puddle in the mud. Trestles, sheds, fences and drainage networks were also done to promote a conducive and a safer learning environment. Accommodation for students and staff are necessities to life; it enhances, comforts, and relieves stress for both groups. So, four rehabilitated dormitories for the secondary schools, two new and one rehabilitated teachers' quarters were catered for in the region's budget.

Education delivery: Throughout my speech I will speak about delivery and achievements, because if we cannot deliver and we did not achieve we cannot ask for more money. I must indicate that all dormitories received fire equipment and linen; textbooks and exercise books, furniture and school feeding supplies were also successfully distributed. Eighty headmistress and headmasters (HM) received cash grants to purchase teaching and learning materials to enhance the classroom. A total of 12,848 students were overjoyed in receiving their cash grant of \$35,000 each, which is now raised to \$40,000. Mr. Speaker, you can see happiness in the faces of those children. The breakfast for success programme was effectively distributed – 805 breakfasts to Grade Six students in 14 coastland primary schools. This breakfast will be extended in this year’s Budget to Grade Five students.

Achievements for education: The National Grade Six Assessment (NGSA), Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) and the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) were successfully completed. But I need to give this honourable House some information on the NGSA for 2023. The top student for NGSA hails from Sparta Primary School in our beautiful Cinderella county. The best performing primary school in Region 2 for NGSA 2023 is Aurora Primary School with 70.27% followed by Better Hope Primary School with 70%. Cde. Speaker, why should we not give our children better learning accommodation?

Mr. Speaker, Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) 2023. I heard children are being downplayed, children do not perform. I am elated to once again announce the name Alex Montaz, of Anna Regina Secondary School, who was awarded the most outstanding technical and prevocational candidate in the Caribbean. He copped 27 subjects, 23 Grade I and four Grade II. This is commendable for a region like the Essequibo Coast. When I heard this result I was dismayed, because in my time we were struggling with five subjects at the General Certificate of Education (GCE). Cde. Speaker, these are the opportunities provided to the youth of this country by our caring Government. Anna Regina Secondary School was celebrated as school of the year, 2023 – CAPE, a total of four students wrote the exam; three students in year one and one student in year two; 13 subjects were offered, five subjects in year one and eight subjects in year two. That school, Anna Regina Secondary School, saw 100% pass rate in all subject areas. Our region, the Cinderella region, is shining. I want to say to this House, investment breeds achievements. One student, Ms. Kuntie Singh, from the Abram Zuil Secondary School, copped 18 Grade I and five

Grade II, and she was placed fourth in the country. These are the performances of our children who will be the future leaders in the Essequibo Coast. I can see that the 2024 Budget will extremely benefit our students in the far-flung areas.

Mr. Speaker, talking about the GOAL scholarship, I want to say the GOAL scholarship is goal for us, the women, in the outline regions. In Region 2, 1,111 scholarships were awarded through that online academy; what a great initiative. Our region was labelled as a rice growing community; the region will now see more academic and better sowing in whatever area, whether it be rice, whether it be cash crop, whether it be ground provision, because when we sow, we are so educated. The women and mothers can stay in their own confines, of their homes, and qualify themselves; no rental will have to be catered for. They do not have to leave their children struggling on their own just to get themselves academically elevated, thanks to our Government. Thank you, Minister Priya Manickchand. I love training in whatever field, as I earlier said, education is the key to success.

8.26 p.m.

For those who cannot have academic qualifications, we have other areas that they can excel in. With the Women's Innovation and Investment Network (WIIN), I want to say to this honourable House that 465 women participated in online and face-to-face training in the following areas: garment construction, graphics, patient care, information technology (IT), project management, event planning, entrepreneurship, and business proposal. This resulted in some selection for patient care, nursing, and laboratory technician.

Mr. Speaker: At that pause, Hon. Member, you will need an extension to conclude.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister Ms. Teixeira. Hon. Member, you may continue and conclude within five minutes.

Ms. Coonjah: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, 35 of those women who completed their business registrations were recipients of \$35,000 cash grants each and now operate their own businesses.

On the Board of Industrial Training (BIT): 503 persons were trained under this programme, which consists of 302 males and 201 females. They were trained under the following areas: welding and fabrication, motor vehicle servicing and repair, small engine repair, information technology, office administration, general building construction, data operation, garment construction, block making, refrigeration and air-conditioning (AC) repair, heavy duty mechanic, fitting and machining, auto-electrician, and boat building. Cde. Speaker, I am sorry, Mr. Speaker. I am accustomed to my comrade; excuse me. We are living in a riverine area and boat building was very essential for that programme.

I now come to touch a little on housing. Region 2, like every other region in Guyana, has a growing population. There are demands for houses. Infrastructural works are progressing in three new housing schemes, namely Onderneeming – Phase 4, Plantation Buxton, and Plantation St. Joseph. In addition, there is the Charity Squatting Area which has now been regularised and almost 100 persons have received their titles. For the old schemes there is Onderneeming, Phases 1, 2 and 3, Lima Sands and Charity. The Ministry continues to resolve the inherited issue where poor peoples' lands were taken away under the previous Administration. When I was the Vice Chairman, I had to intervene and engage the Minister of Housing and Water as soon as he took office. To date, a total of 719 house lots were allocated, and it is only three years. The 2024 Budget will enable us to double or more than double our allocations. We do not have to import lands; every eligible adult can own their own home in Region 2.

Water is life. The installation and distribution of pipelines are being done in 12 areas on the coast and pumping assembly at Dryshore Pump Station and Mashabo were upgraded. There were repairs and renovations to the Lima Sands treatment plant, and the Cullen and Somerset Pump Stations. The construction of a new water treatment plant at Onderneeming is 60% completed. The drilling of a new well at the Lima Sands treatment plant is in process; residents will soon have better water. The drilling and installation of distribution pipes at Capoey, an Amerindian community, for the first time, was completed. The same is 80% completed at Hackney in the Pomeroon area. Five Amerindian communities – Akawini, Baracaró, Kabakaburi, Karawab, in the extreme end of the

Pomeroon, and Bethany – will soon receive the same distribution service. This is care for the people; services are reaching every person.

Roads: Rehabilitation work was done to the main public road within Supenaam to Bush Lot and 21 miscellaneous roads were upgraded within the Good Hope/Pomona Neighbourhood Democratic Council (NDC). Another 33 community roads were done in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Water within the five NDCs and five more community roads were done by the Regional Democratic Council (RDC).

Securing our river dams and sea defences: Maintenance works were done to the eastern embankment of Pomeroon in two lots. Maintenance was done along Dartmouth, Taymouth Manor, Resource, Cozier and Suddie, also. There is also the construction of rip rap sea defences at Le Ressouvenir, Good Hope, Abramsville – Phase 1, and Cullen. This is progress. There is drainage, irrigation, and the construction of revetment at Golden Fleece, Charity, Huis’T Dieren, Vilvoorden and the Somerset Cross Canal; the construction of a tail wall at Evergreen and Bounty Hall; and the construction of timber bridge at Cozier. These are just a few deliveries and achievements of the 2023 Budget. With the passing of the 2024 Budget, Region 2 will see an overall advancement.

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

Ms. Coonjah: Thank you, Sir. [*Applause*]

Dr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, before I go into my presentation, I wish to extend my warmest congratulations to the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, Dr. Singh, and his hard-working team for compiling yet another PPP/C people-centred budget.

In any country where democracy stands strong and stellar leadership is in progress, the people of that country is considered as the most cherished and valuable resource. Therefore, their wellbeing and livelihoods will be paramount. In this regard, like previous budgets under the PPP/C Administration, *Budget 2024* was drafted with the interest of the people of Guyana at heart. It is a budget that will continue to provide for and improve the standard of living. It will build strong foundations for our future generations while putting more money in the pockets of every Guyanese and strengthening our economy so that every Guyanese can continue to thrive in every aspect of

their lives and live with dignity. *Budget 2024*, being the largest thus far, is definitely a win for every citizen since it covers every sector in our country and will see the continuation of major developments like never before. Unlike the APNU/AFC, we in the PPP/C will stay the course while we continue to build prosperity for all.

In an attempt to mislead my fellow Guyanese, there are numerous narratives being pedalled by the APNU/AFC on various social media platforms regarding *Budget 2024*. May I remind everyone that it is said, those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. That is why, as Guyanese, we must never go back to those gloomy days that we experienced under the previous APNU/AFC Government, when we lived some of the worst moments in our country's history, since they were associated with attempted rigged elections in 2020; fired sugar workers; reversal of development such as disenfranchising our children from the Because We Care Cash Grant; the removal of the year-end bonus from our men and women in uniform; heavy tax burden on cell phones, building materials, medical supplies, mining equipment; scholarships for then Ministers and their families; the removal of subsidies for water and light from senior citizens; the increase of then Government Ministers' salaries which was done as soon as they took Office; and house lots for friends and families while the poor and ordinary man buckled under heavy economic burdens induced by a group of people without a vision and care for Guyanese people.

Today, there is evidence to prove that in just three years in Government we have not only managed to right these wrongs, but we have been able to add additional measures to ensure every household can live a life with dignity. Our Government, today, continues to create measures that will ensure every child, both in public and private school, receive a total of \$40,000 in the Because We Care Cash Grant. Our senior citizens will now benefit from an increase in old age pensions, from \$33,000 to \$36,000. This is supported with the monetary provision of \$3,000 for eye testing and an additional \$5,000 for the purchase of spectacles. **[Mr. Mahipaul: It is \$15,000.]** It is \$15,000; I am sorry. Persons living with disabilities will no longer receive \$16,000 but rather \$19,000 to assist with their economic needs. Our women from ages 21 to 65 will now benefit from an \$8,000 voucher to aid in the screening for cervical cancer. The removal of VAT from sports equipment and cell phone accessories is also being considered. Additionally, our young people from Regions 1 to 10 have so far benefitted from a total of 21,442 GOAL scholarships, with a total of 3,431 graduating over the past three years. This will see an additional \$4 billion that was

allocated in this year's budget to further enhance this programme. Over 30,000 Guyanese are now proud owners of house lots in just three years, as against a mere 7,000 that was allocated over five years under the APNU/AFC Government.

Mr. Speaker, as we continue to deliver on our Manifesto promises, this year the first phase of eliminating students' debt – write-off – owed by the graduates of the University of Guyana, will commence. This is another win for our young people of Guyana. The PPP/C Government will continue to deliver to every citizen of Guyana, irrespective of their gender, race, political belief, religious belief, or geographic location.

I wish to turn my attention to Amerindian development. One of the Hon. Members from the opposite side of this House mentioned that nothing is being done for Amerindian development. May I remind my fellow Amerindian brothers and sisters that it was the very APNU/AFC which voted against the \$800 million allocated for Amerindian development in *Budget 2020*. This year, as we continue to deliver to every Guyanese, a total of \$9 billion is allocated towards the continuous development of our Amerindian communities all across Guyana. Some of these areas include a \$1.2 billion allocation towards direct employment and skills training through the Community Service Officers (CSOs) programme. May we be reminded that it was under the APNU/AFC that 2,000 young, Amerindian brothers and sisters were fired, leaving them unable to enhance their economic and academic lives. Further, a total of \$105 million was allocated towards the Hinterland Scholarship Programme in 2024 which will see young Amerindian men and women well on their way to achieving their academic dreams. Our Amerindian communities are already benefitting from the sale of carbon credits which will see the further enhancement of hinterland locations.

8.41 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I turn my attention to health. With this year's allocation of \$129.8 billion, health care in Guyana will continue to improve significantly. In just three years, we have already provided adequate care for patients in hinterland locations through our Telemedicine Programme. Our pregnant mothers could now access adequate antenatal care through ultrasounds, laboratory tests and consultations with Obstetrician/Gynaecologists (OBGYN) specialists. Patients with chronic renal diseases are now able to access \$600,000 financial assistance for dialysis treatment. So far,

upgrade and construction were done for a total of 271 health care facilities and staff facilities across Guyana. The construction of the state-of-the-art Maternal and Paediatric Hospital has commenced already, with a total of \$10 billion being injected in this year's budget to see the completion of same; a major investment towards the well-being of Guyanese. Additionally, we will continue to see major upgrades of regional hospitals in Regions 2, 3 and 7 at an estimated cost of \$1.5 billion. We understand and we respect our biopsychosocial being in its entirety. Thus, we will continue to focus on mental health by training healthcare professionals at various facilities to intervene with counselling and management of patients suffering with illnesses such as substance abuse and other psychological alterations.

I turn my attention to development in Region 3. Like every region, Region 3 continues to see major developments in various sectors. As we speak, a total of 286 roads across the region are being upgraded and built as we cater for better accessibility and growth in this region. The new four-lane Demerara Harbour Bridge (DHB) is under construction currently. The Crane to Schoonord four-lane highway is well on its way to be completed in June, 2024. All of this will help to ease the heavy traffic burden experienced by commuters; yet another win for Guyanese who are traversing Region 3.

In education, so far, a total of 3,385 persons in Region 3 have benefited from the GOAL Scholarship programme. Our children across the region continue to benefit from the School Feeding Programme. Various schools in Region 3 have already been completed under the PPP/C Government, namely: the Tuschen Primary School, a state-of-the-art secondary school in Westminster, and the Arthurville Primary School in Wakenaam. Additionally, another state-of-the-art Tuschen Secondary School is well on its way to completion, which will further cater for an additional 800 students. This speaks volume of our commitment to the education sector.

In our 2020 Manifesto, we promised 50,000 house lots in five years. Today alone, in Region 3, over 6,000 persons have benefitted from allotted lands.

So far, in Region 3, 18 health centres and facilities have benefited from rehabilitation works, namely: the Hog Island Health centre, Saxacalli Health centre, Parika Health Centre, Vive-La-Force Health Post, the construction of living quarters at Morashee, and the enhancement of the High Dependency Unit (HDU) at the West Demerara Regional Hospital, just to name a few.

Patients across Region 3 continue to benefit from the availability of more drugs and medical supplies as compared to what they received under the APNU/AFC Government. Surgical Clinical Laboratory and Imaging Services continue to meet the needs of every citizen seeking medical attention across Region 3. For the year 2023, a total of 1,348 safe deliveries were done in Region 3 with a total of 274 delivery *via* caesarean section and 1,074 done *via* normal deliveries. A total of 1,138 patients were able to receive other surgical procedures within Region 3. Training for Patient Care Assistants will commence shortly as we recognise the importance of training for more persons within the nursing fraternity. The Hon. Member Mr. Ganesh Mahipaul mentioned that the Leonora Hospital is in a poor state of affairs, but may I remind him and the public that the Leonora Hospital continues to function fully with an Inpatient service, Outpatient service and Accident and Emergency service while providing laboratory imaging such as electromagnetic radiation (X-rays) and ultrasound, services such a visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) clinic, screening for patients with cataract, pterygium, and diabetic retinopathy. Additionally, very soon we will be able to offer minor surgery at this institution.

Mr. Speaker, as time may not permit me to continue further, I wish to encourage every Guyanese, and especially my young people in this country, to ignore the fallacies and flowery words of a ‘good life’ trumpeted by the APNU/AFC Members. There is no better time in history than what we are living now. This is the future, this is the Government that will ensure your dreams and aspirations become a reality, this is the Government that will continue to deliver on our promises and ensure that your children and generations to come live a better life. I, therefore, commend *Budget 2024* for consideration and passage in this honourable House. Thank you. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member; you are the first speaker to use the 15 minutes and not ask for time. Hon. Members, this concludes our business for today.

ADJOURNMENT

BE IT RESOLVED:

“That the Assembly now adjourn to 10 a.m. on 23rd January, 2024.”

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

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, we will meet tomorrow at 10 a.m. to continue the public debate on *Budget 2024*, in accordance with the Standing Orders.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the Assembly stands adjourned to 10 a.m. tomorrow, 23rd January, 2024. Thank you. Have a good night.

Adjourned accordingly at 8.49 p.m.