



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

75TH Sitting

Thursday, 25TH January, 2024

**PARLIAMENT OFFICE
HANSARD DIVISION**

The Assembly convened at 10.11 a.m.

Prayers

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (71)

Speaker (1)

*Hon. Manzoor Nadir, M.P.,
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Parliament Office,
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MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT (38)

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

Prime Minister (1)

+ Hon. Brigadier (Ret'd) Mark Anthony Phillips, M.S.S., M.P.,
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Georgetown.*

Vice-President (1)

+ Hon. Bharrat Jagdeo, M.P.,
*Vice-President,
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Georgetown.*

[Absent]

Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (1)

+ Hon. Mohabir Anil Nandlall, M.P.,
*Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs,
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Georgetown.*

+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Speaker**

Senior Ministers (16)

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

+ Hon. Hugh H. Todd, M.P.,
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+*Hon. Dr. Ashni K. Singh, M.P.,
Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance
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+ Hon. Bishop Juan A. Edghill, M.S., J.P., M.P.,
Minister of Public Works,
Ministry of Public Works,
Wight's Lane,
Kingston,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Dr. Frank C. S. Anthony, M.P.,
Minister of Health,
Ministry of Health,
Brickdam,
Georgetown.

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

* **Non-Elected Minister**

+ Hon. Zulfikar Mustapha, M.P.,
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Minister of Amerindian Affairs,
Ministry of Amerindian Affairs,
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South Cummingsburg,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Joseph L.F. Hamilton, M.P.,
Minister of Labour,
Ministry of Labour,
Brickdam,
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+ Hon. Vickram Outar Bharrat, M.P.,
Minister of Natural Resources,
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+*Hon. Oneidge Walrond, M.P.,
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+ Hon. Collin D. Croal, M.P.,
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Minister of Housing and Water,
Ministry of Housing and Water,
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+ Hon. Vindhya V. H. Persaud, M.S., M.P.,
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* **Non-Elected Minister**

+ Hon. Charles S. Ramson, M.P.,
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+ Hon. Sonia Savitri Parag, M.P.,
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Georgetown.

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

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

Hon. Warren Kwame E. McCoy, M.P.,
Minister within the Office of the Prime Minister,
Office of the Prime Minister,
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+ **Cabinet Member**

Other Members (15)

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East Bank Demerara.*

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Hon. Dr. Vishwa D.B. Mahadeo, M.P.,
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Corentyne,
Berbice.*

[Virtual Participation]

Hon. Mr. Sanjeev J. Datadin, M.P.,
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Hon. Mr. Seepaul Narine, M.P.,
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South Cummingsburg,
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41 Robb Street,
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Hon. Dr. Jennifer R.A. Westford, M.P.,
*55 AA Victoria Avenue,
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East Bank Demerara.*

Hon. Mr. Faizal M. Jaffarally, M.P.,
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[Absent – on leave]

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

Hon. Mr. Khemraj Ramjattan, M.P.,
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Hon. Mr. Roysdale A. Forde, S.C., M.P.,
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Hon. Mr. Shurwayne F.K. Holder, M.P.,
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Hon. Mr. Vincent P. Henry, M.P.,
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Rupununi.
(Culvert City Lethem)

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Hon. Ms. Tabitha J. Sarabo-Halley, M.P.,
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Hon. Ms. Annette N. Ferguson, M.P.,
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Hon. Ms. Juretha V. Fernandes, M.P.,
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Johanna Cecilia,
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Hon. Ms. Nima N. Flue-Bess, M.P.,
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East Bank Demerara.*

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Hon. Dr. Asha Kisooson, M.P.,
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Officers (2)

Mr. Sherlock E. Isaacs, A.A.,
Clerk of the National Assembly,
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Public Buildings,
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Ms. Hermina Gilgeours,
Deputy Clerk of the National Assembly,
Parliament Office,
Public Buildings,
Brickdam,
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Hansard Division Officers (16)

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Ms. Marlyn Jeffers-Morrison,
Senior Editor

Ms. Shawnel Cudjoe,
Senior Editor

Ms. Carol Bess,
Editor

Ms. Shevona Telford,
Editor (a.g.)

Ms. Indranie Persaud,
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Ms. Roseina Singh,
Reporter

Ms. Somna Karen-Muridall,
Reporter

Ms. Lushonn Bess,
Reporter

Ms. Eyoka Gibson,
Reporter

Mr. Tafari David,
Reporter (a.g.)

Mr. Daniel Allen,
Reporter (a.g.)

Ms. Hosia Halley,
Reporter (a.g.)

Mr. Parmanand Singh,
Pre –Press Technician

Mr. Saeed Umrao,
Audio Technician

Mr. Daison Horsham,
Audio Technician

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ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE SPEAKER

Welcome

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, this morning let us welcome the children of Tutorial High School. Good morning, children. Just to say to schools and other children who may want to attend from institutions or organisations, just pop a note to the Clerk and we will try to accommodate you as we try to bring Parliament closer to the people. I think this might be one of the first times I have seen this long-standing educational institution of our country, Tutorial High School, here in the Assembly, so welcome.

Housekeeping Matters

First, I want to deal with the Standing Order which I mentioned before and that is Standing Order 41(7) and (8). Standing Order 41:

“Contents of Speeches”

Standing Order 41(7) states:

“The President’s name shall not be used to influence the Assembly.”

10.14 a.m.

It does not say on which side but ‘influence the Assembly’, so please let us be very mindful of 41 (7). I bring your attention to 41 (8):

“The conduct of the President or any other person performing the function of President, Members of the Assembly and Judges of the Supreme Court of Judicature or other persons performing judicial functions shall not be raised except upon a substantive motion moved for the purpose.”

I bring that to your attention, again. There is also a Standing Order with respect to repetition. We have heard many statements over and over again by so many Members. Please, be careful.

Tabling of Documents

Finally, another reminder, to those who have to table documents that we raised in their speeches... We thank the Hon. Member, Mr. Jaffarally for tabling his documents. We have some outstanding from the Hon. Acting Chief Whip Minister, Ms. Sonia Parag, and we have the list of graduated unqualified teachers from Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE). For both Minister Ms. Parag and Hon. Member Ms.

Philadelphia, I give you until lunch tomorrow to produce or the statements are going to be expunged from the records.

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.

Hon. Members, we are having a better start today or our best start for the week. The previous days were at 10.20 a.m. and today we are starting at 10.16 a.m. I invite the Hon. Member, Ms. Natasha Singh-Lewis, to make her contribution. Your clock starts running at 10.17 a.m.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I commence looking at the Budget debates, I join with the Speaker in welcoming Tutorial High School

to the House this morning. I want to ask two young men across there to stand, Mr. Chad and Mr. Julio...

Mr. Speaker: That authority, you could have said to me earlier...

Ms. Singh-Lewis: I am sorry.

Mr. Speaker: ...you have two guests and you want to recognise them. Please, do not take no liberties.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May I please recognise Mr. Chad and Mr. Julio?

Mr. Speaker: You could recognise them as the Hon Member Mr. McCoy did but inviting people to stand is not your business.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: Thank you, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chad and Mr. Julio are special students. Mr. Chad is from a single parent family and he aspires to be a pilot. Mr. Julio is here with his mom and Mr. Julio is a Cuban and he also aspires to be a Doctor like his mom. Both young men are in school aspiring for a higher education in our country with their mothers alone. Congratulations to their mothers.

Mr. Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to present my contribution to *Budget 2024* in this House. I feel compelled to address two issues that have continuously raised their ugly heads every year during this period. One of the issues is that of Government scholarship. Education is important to all of us. You and I are guided by the text that we should *seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave*. Then, why should we come here every year seeking to ridicule the children of parliamentarians; whether they are children of the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) parliamentarians or children of the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) parliamentarians for utilising the opportunity given to them and all other Guyanese. It is sending a message that the PPP/C parliamentarians and their children are more superior and deserving than the Coalition Members and their children. That message was sent from day one to day three. The vulgarity must stop; our children should not be brought in to this vulgarity.

Mr. Speaker: I am going to ask you to withdraw this issue of imputing vulgarity on the Members of the Government side who spoke. I did not hear anyone ridiculing anyone's children. Persons were speaking to the issue of who got scholarship as a fact.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: So guided, Sir. If you ask me, I think I will tell you, every Member of this House and, particularly, my friends on the other side, we should let them be enrolled

in a programme of higher education and at minimum maybe some of the lawlessness might not come to this House. I have listened for the past three days with disgust. We...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, please, the issue of lawlessness in this House, withdraw and stop being guided. Thank you.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: Mr. Speaker, the solution to all of this is free education. Let us get on with the agenda of free education at the university level commencing this year 2024. We, on this side, have called for free education long before 2024. We have called. Let it be known that it is the PPP/C Government who is offering cosmetic measures to the issue of free education. Let us get on with the agenda of free education now.

The other issue that I am disgusted about within this Honourable House is the house lot allocation. It seems as though only the PPP/C seems to be entitled to such facility. On Tuesday last the Hon. Member, Ms. Sonia Parag, attempted to inform this House that Members of the Opposition benefitted from a process of applying for house lots in an expeditious manner and somehow that seems to be a big hullabaloo for the PPP/C. Let me remind our people especially the young people what the PPP/C Members of Parliament did when they were in Government prior to 2015. Their memories are not that short. One must not forget the House lots at the infamous Pradoville where the lands were developed with moneys from the National Industrial and Commercial and Investments Limited (NICIL) to the tune of more than \$100 million and sold at an undervalued price to current and former Ministers of Government at a tune of \$1.5 million per house lot. A former Minister sold back his house lot that he bought for \$1.5 for over \$100 million. A part of a deal, the former Minister was awarded 30,000 acres of land to develop soya and was given a number of mining licenses. Another current Minister sold back her house lot for over \$100 million. These are the people who stand in this House and are consumed with an Opposition Member of Parliament legitimately applying for a house lot, which was awarded to them and paid for at its real value. I do not want to describe these people as sanctimonious gangsters, but this level of white-collar crime exists in the Government.

Mr. Speaker, as I commence my presentation this morning on the debate of *Budget 2024*, allow me to express gratitude to the hardworking public servants who diligently show up for work each day even when faced with a lack of motivation. I extend my appreciation, especially to those individuals in various ministries who work tirelessly to craft

their respective budget against the backdrop of vindictiveness, intimidation, discrimination and hostile behaviour. It is both distasteful and disgraceful how our public servants are being treated, with special mention to the many dedicated staff members of the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security who endured victimisation but persevered due to the necessity to earn a livelihood. To those who felt compelled to leave, we express our regrets that the abuse became insurmountable, and you had to resign. As we dive into the intricate details of the 2024 national budget the resonating theme on my mind is far from reality. Let me repeat that, far from reality. A sentiment sadly articulated by the profound lyrics of Guyanese artist Natural Black 'Life's Journey' as the song suggests should be rooted in the harsh realities faced by the average Guyanese citizen.

However, upon scrutinising this Budget, it became increasingly apparent that the Government is navigating a path detached from the genuine needs and struggles of our people. The Budget evokes the melody of a composition that fails to strike accord with the soul of the average people. Harmonising more with the interest of a privileged few rather than addressing the pressing concerns of the working-class Guyanese. While the promised increases are welcome, they fall short of meeting the soaring expectations of the populaces grappling with the escalating cost of living. Our pensioners were granted \$3,000 increase which works out to approximately \$100 per day. I listened to Mr. Gordon Mosely on Jump Start yesterday morning, while coming to the Parliament. Mr. Mosely said that he was going to a meeting, and he stopped at the corner shop to buy mints. To his surprise, \$20 was for a Chico Chicks. One Chico Chicks is \$20; \$3,000 per month works out to approximately \$100 per day for a pensioner.

10.29 a.m.

Sir, this is what the pensioners get every day – five Chico Chicks mints. That is what their increase looks like. This white mint that we use downstairs at lunchtime is more expensive; it is \$30 for one. That is how the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government cares for our elderly. I know the Minister of Human Services and Social Security is coming to speak after me. Perhaps the Hon. Member can tell Guyana how the pensioners will get \$3,000 per month and the Hon. Member's increase is \$200,000 per month. Indeed, the 2024 National Budget was presented with much fanfare. Yet, it leaves us questioning whether the Government truly comprehends the urgent needs of the people or if they exist in a world divorced from the brutal reality. In this Budget, the faint echoes of promises reverberate. The promises of

prosperity, commitments to support vulnerable groups and assurances of a radiant future are all quintessential hallmarks of a political campaign. Remember they said that the General and Regional Elections is in 2025. Well, the 2024 Budget is preparing handouts for 2025. However, what unfolds before us are mere cosmetic endeavours, which lack the substance needed to address the genuine concerns of the population.

Let me list some of the concerns, specifically, to the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. I was asked to review the sector performance as it relates to *Budget 2024*. Unlike what the Government did to put this Budget together, the Opposition consulted with the people and here is what some persons sent to us: the qualified staff at the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security are leaving because of incompetence in terms of the leadership and nepotism from the leadership of the Ministry. Sir, let me remind this House that the staff in 2022 wrote a letter demanding that the Minister should resign. They demanded that the Minister should resign because of her policies of discrimination. The Minister should accept that request and leave for the betterment of the people of this country. The many people listening to these debates online might be wondering why I say that the Minister should accept the request and resign. Mr. Speaker, allow me to educate the nation as to what is really happening under the Minister's watch.

There is a massive turnover of staff at the Ministry. Most of the technical staff are leaving at an alarming rate. Let me speak of one of my colleagues who graduated with me from the University of Guyana (UG) at a master's level and who is employed as a Child Protection Officer – I believe it is either Region 4 or 3. She could not come to grips with the number of child abuse reports in her region and there is absolutely no resource to ensure that those children get help. Many of our pensioners did not receive the one-off \$25,000 cash grant. The Pensioners said they were told upon returning to the offices that the money was sent back to the head office. Is that not cruel, mismanagement and incompetence? I do not want to believe that the Minister knows about this and did nothing to correct the situation. I have a few names which were given to me when I was in Region 3 at Stewartville of people who did not receive their \$25,000 to submit. There are long lines until this day for pensioners to receive their pensions monthly. We have to be innovative to bring ease to our elderly. The seats for pensioners should be much more comfortable. We need to change these wood benches at the post offices. We need to add more benches. The Childcare and Protection Agency's

(CPA's) staff are leaving at an alarming rate. This is a report from some regions – over 80% of the staff left. In 2022, in some regions, there are approximately 3000 reported cases of child abuse. Could the Minister tell us about systems she will put in place to deal with this situation given that the staff are leaving?

In Region 1, the three sub-districts have one Child Protection Officer. Could you imagine that, Sir? Do you think that the PPP/C care? Baramita, a community in the said region, is overwhelmed with social issues, particularly child abuse and suicide. Do you think the PPP/C care? According to Dr. Singh, the people of this region have to 'Stay the Course'. In their punishment and suffering, the Hon. Member is asking the Guyanese to 'Stay the Course'. This is the PPP/C's promise of prosperity. The people of Region 1, as all of us, deserve better. Kwakwani, a sub-district of Region 10, does not have a child protection or probation staff in the community but someone from Linden visits the community once a month for half of a day. Do you think the PPP/C care? They do not care.

In Region 7, for the past six months, there has been no attending Child Protection Officer to serve the welfare needs of upper, middle and lower Mazaruni. Do you think the PPP/C care? They do not. Time would not allow me to continue listing the accounts of the Minister's incompetence. I must move on to look at what this Budget has to offer the people who are most vulnerable and deserving of public assistance, rehabilitation programmes and shelters – to name a few. Under the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security, the Government has allocated nearly \$800 million for buildings, upgrading facilities and other related costs, but it outlined no commitment to the eradication of homelessness or the provision of the highest quality services for those in need in our society. In a country with adjusting prices and the tenth-highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the world, homelessness is unacceptable. The Government must adopt a zero-homelessness policy and focus on building enough shelters and homes to properly combat the desperate circumstances these citizens face because they have no system of combatting the rise in the cost of living. That is a fact. We have seen that in all that they have presented. There is nothing to eradicate the high cost of living or even combat it at this point.

We need health and counselling programmes to help those who are too often beset by drug abuse and related health problems. Similarly, the Psalms Geriatric Home is beset by persistent complaints about the quality of the conditions our citizens endure in their sunset years. We need to restore and

upgrade this historic facility to the standard expected of a country with tremendous resources. The National Budget has tripled but the quality of services at the Psalms Geriatric Home have deteriorated. I had a meeting with some persons who are interested in the welfare of our people in the Psalms Geriatric Home. They complained bitterly about the state of affairs of our elderly who are accommodated at that institution. The mismanagement is beyond what the staff or the elderly can tolerate. Sir, I was told that the Ministry owes the caterer for the supply of bread – a few million dollars – so the Psalms Geriatric Home was cut off from the supply of bread for quite a while now. What has the Ministry done? The Ministry asked the staff to double up or double down under extremely uncomfortable circumstances and make bakes and other things for the elderly in the home. The staff doing it is not the problem, but the facility is inadequate for that quantity of preparation. The quality of the facility has also deteriorated. Sir, do you think the PPP/C care? This is both unacceptable and tragic. We must do better. This building which has been a landmark since the 1800s for our country, should be a source of national pride and perpetual admiration. If the Government cannot treasure its heritage, it is no wonder it cannot treasure its elderly. Do you think the PPP/C care? They do not care. Natural Black said it right – they are far from reality. Our senior citizens deserve better.

This brings me to the other area of scrutiny – that is – the Public Assistance Programme. That is a total mess. The Public Assistance Programme is a total mess; it is a catastrophe across this country. In a very subjective manner, the Minister has appointed Boards of Guardians across the country to scrutinise and approve applications of public assistance for persons who are deserving. I found that the action of the Minister has created mayhem that allowed the board members to discriminate against the poor people of this country. The boards were appointed without any objective criteria and, as a result, we see PPP/C Members and election friends being used to fill these Boards of Guardians. This same Administration who stands here and accuses us of not caring, has in its infinite uncaring wisdom, disqualified many single mothers and people with disabilities who were given public assistance under the APNU/AFC because they are deemed as friends or supporters of the Coalition. That is discrimination.

Under the uncaring PPP/C Government, I have a number of complaints from Region 10. The complaints go all the way back to 2021. I am aware of several meetings with the Regional Chairman whereby poor people of the region complained about their discrimination and nothing being done to bring relief to the people. I have seen letters written

to the Hon. Dr. Persaud, the Minister of Human Services and Social Security. As of two days ago, the Regional Chairman and the Regional Administration of Region 10 have not received a single response to these letters. I find this hypocritical since the Minister...

Mr. Speaker: I beeped you there.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: I am sorry?

Mr. Speaker: I will beep you.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: I am so guided, Sir. In the 2020 speech of the said Minister, welcomed participation and said that she has an open-door policy but cannot respond to one letter from our constituency. What do you call that, Sir, incompetence? I do not know what else.

10.44 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, but then, I have to tell you, this kind of behaviour confirms the frustration that the employees are complaining about. I demand that our citizens be treated better and for this to happen, the Minister must go. As I meticulously scrutinise the intricate details of this budget that is woefully short of reasoning with the pulsating heartbeat of our people, the orchestrated symphony of the pledges and assurance, whilst seemingly melodic, reveals itself as a mere overture. A prelude to political grandstanding that often overshadows the substantive policy considerations. It is evident that the budget is more about the artifice of optics than the pragmatic measures required to uplift the ordinary citizens facing the harsh reality of our nation.

The promises made akin to political sonnet, weave a tapestry of illusion rather than offering tangible solutions. It is as if the budget is a theatrical production and Dr. Singh is the main actor. There are three other actors, the four wise men in this theatrical act. The promises are stage props, carefully arranged to create an illusion of progress and empathy. They are far from reality, Sir. However, behind the curtains, the machinery of genuine governance and meaningful change, appears to be neglected. As we navigate through the smoke and the mirrors of this budgetary performance, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Government's melody is tuned to frequency of electoral politics with little regard for the symphony or the struggle faced by our people. Mr. Speaker, let me demonstrate what that means and I would use one societal ill, and one real experience. The dreadful issue of domestic violence is a scourge that stains the fabric of our society and demands our immediate attention and robust action. As a matter of fact, in this country, it is of paramount

importance for all of Guyana, just like the Venezuelan issues is for us, domestic violence is as serious as that. Violence against women and girls is eating away at our population...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, as you are on your feet, the fat lady has not sung as yet, we can get an extension for you.

Mr. Duncan: Gracious Speaker, energised by my Colleague's presentation, I plead with you for an extra five minutes.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, gracious Member of Parliament (MP). Hon. Member, you may continue.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: Thank you, Sir. Violence against women and girls is something that none of us should endure – none of us. To listen to the Hon. Faizal Jaffarally talk about an abuser coming back to this House, is an insult to all of us.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, we have to be very careful, again. I will give you back this time. I just need to read this particular legal principle, here. We are law makers and judges. Many persons think they are being creatively clever, and I have been allowing some of them to fool themselves. The law on libel is clear. While we are not liable in this instance, I am referring to how you refer to people. Basically, it says, 'If you do not call a name, but you say enough so that people could identify the person, then, you are guilty'. And, it goes on, but I will stop there. I will start your clock, running back to five minutes from now.

Ms. Singh-Lewis: Thank you, gracious Speaker. Sir, as we engage in this budget, let me tell you about one issue of violence against women and girls that demonstrate whether the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) cares about this issue or not. Since 2022, I started working with women and girls in Region 10, particularly, Linden and its outskirts. In the first quarter of 2023, Thesa was raped after her home was broken and entered by an unknown intruder. The next morning, I was called. I ensured that Thesa was taken to the police station. I ensured that the commander sent her to the hospital and the whole procedure for a rape victim was taken care of within 24-hours. Thesa went back home, I sent friends, she was comforted, *et cetera*. The next working day, I sent Thesa to the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security's office in Linden. She got no help. All we wanted was psycho-social support because we know the level of trauma that is associated with being raped. All we wanted was psycho-social support.

Further, in Thesa's case, I sent Thesa to meet with the Hon. Member, Hugh Todd, who was in the region. At the same time, I was in the region and I learnt that he was there, and I sent her to him. Sir, like any good politician, he listened to her, and he promised her. The only thing she wanted was some wooden bars for her house because she wanted to feel safe and wanted to go back into her house. She wanted some wooden bars for her house. He did not promise her wooden bars, he promised her grills for her windows. He even promised to send some hampers for her because she is a teacher and a single mother of three children. He made those promises, Sir. I know he engaged the political people in his region, the PPP/C people, and they were supposed to carry out the action. Three months after, I went back to Linden and met with Thesa, and she said: 'No, Miss. I *ain't* *geh* nothing. The following two days after, we came to the National Assembly, I met the Hon. Member, Hugh Todd, right outside and I told him of the instance. He remembered, and said: 'Oh *shucks*, them *ain't* look after the girl yet?' That was six months ago. Yesterday, Thesa told me that nothing was done for her. This is a single parent, a teacher with three children who was raped in her house, asked for help at all levels and was denied a single help. That is how the PPP/C care for abused women in this country.

I am not sure what more we can ask for in this House. Let me tell you what the A Partnership for National Unity and Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Government did to care for our women and children who were abused. We approached the international community, secured \$1 billion under the stewardship of Ms. Amna Ally, a great woman, a great People's National Congress (PNC) stalwart – \$1 billion. It was handed to the PPP/C in August, 2020. It constituted the spotlight initiative programme. After three years, ask the Minister of Human Services and Social Security, who will come here, why was Thesa not given any help.

This Government cares nothing about the abuse of our women and children. We have seen the level of abuse of our female parliamentarians on this side of the House. They do not care; they condone abuse of our women. But do you know what? They will come and tell you that the more that \$1 trillion in this budget is good for all of you. Sir, I cannot support this under these circumstances. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very, very much Hon. Member. I note you were extremely well behaved. Noting that, I now invite our Hon. Minister of Human Services and Social Security, the Hon. Dr. Vindhya Persaud, to make her contribution.

Minister of Human Services and Social Security [Dr. Persaud]: Good morning, everyone. Mr. Speaker, I stand here to congratulate my Cabinet Colleague, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, on a meticulously crafted budget. A budget that looks at global realities, national needs and with the input of his dedicated and tirelessly working team from the Ministry of Finance and from all the teams of every Ministry across this country, who would have given their inputs towards this \$1.13 trillion budget, I say to all of them, thank you for your tremendous effort and work.

My father who sat in this National Assembly for over 40 years, walking in with me when I came here, for the first time, said to me, ‘When people go low, you always stay on the high ground. He has always advised me to set my own standards and to always be civil, polite, respectful and to deliver with honesty, integrity and transparency to the people of Guyana. That was his legacy and I have not shifted from it. I also stand here to vehemently condemn the attacks on every person in this National Assembly by those on both sides of the House. In fact, I just received an entirely personal attack in what should have been a budget debate that I could have responded to. What bothers me is the consistent stream of vitriol that spouts every time. People, I will not say who, I think that is apparent, preceding me in every budget debate. Also, the constant distortions, the disingenuity and the downright disregard for representing things accurately, correctly, honestly and truthfully.

Mr. Speaker, I do not need to castigate anyone nor bring disrepute to anyone. I will merely share the work of the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security and I will share how it has impacted on thousands of lives from 2020-2023, and what is in store for the people in 2024. It is reprehensible that in the presence of our youth, who sit here to understand what a budget holds for them and how they can learn from the parliamentarians of today, that they are treated to that kind of presentation. However, I move on. I believe that to not support this budget, speaks to not understanding the figures that have been given. How can one say that \$29 billion allocated for health, which will deliver over 11 hospitals, upgrade of all health facilities posts bringing worldclass healthcare. Is it not for the people of this country? How can one say over \$132 billion dedicated to the education sector – those are the biggest allocations amongst some in the budget – will not benefit children like these sitting here in this House, when schools will be built, schools will be rehabilitated, the ‘Because We Care’ cash grant will be increased, textbooks will be provided and all of the children in every region will benefit?

10.59 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, tell me, when this budget dedicated to the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security, at a value of \$48.3 billion, caters for the most vulnerable in this country, our senior citizens, our children, our youth and women, tell me why people would refuse to support a budget like this that brings relief to people, that alleviates what is now being termed something of epic proportions, so much so that the world is looking at instances of food insecurity and our country is leading on speaking on food security. And as such, all of the allocations, be it agriculture, be it health, education, social services, speak to the nitty gritty of what our people expect to cushion the impact of what is happening globally. In this manner, you have seen our Government advance measures, as the Hon. Minister would have done through his budget debate, speaking to measures that will look at fuel and, also, freight charges to reduce the cost of many things that people need to have in their daily lives.

Mr. Speaker, much of the budget revolves around senior citizens and I am happy that the Hon. Member before me spoke at length about the 1800-year-old Palms – the Palms Geriatric Institution that was in the 1800s. I would like to say that this Government has allotted \$172 million for spanking new senior citizens home because we are concerned about the senior citizens across this country. It is important that the people of this country understand what the budget has to offer. It is not only a senior citizens home that we are doing for those who fall into that category, there are many other things. The senior citizens’ home will be based in Enmore, and it is our vision that, eventually, those persons will move to that home and the Palms will be something to look back at as where it all started. This is because it has absorbed so much in the rehabilitation and repairs to it.

The pensioners over the tenure of the People’s Progressive Party/Civic would have benefited from a 75% increase on their pension and that is much more than what was given in five years of the tenure of my Colleagues over the other side. The pensioners not only benefit from an increase to their pension, but they also are benefiting from the improvement to how they receive their pension. There are so many alternatives. Pensions can be deposited in the bank. Pensions are deposited in the bank account in the first five days of every month. Pensions are also received through Mobile Money Guyana (MMG) and pensions can be paid to pensioners every day of the month, a vast difference from what I inherited and every single day a pensioner can go to an alternate venue and benefit from their pension. We have

also changed the way in which pensioners receive their books. In fact, I am hoping that more pensioners gravitate to the bank so that we will have less and less need for the book in this day and age. And we also would have seen that pensioners received their books one year before they received their pensions, which meant the pensioners of 2024 received their books last year.

Coming to those who have not received cash grants. That is still an ongoing process because we have definitely started and expanded the 'shut-in delivery' where pensioners do not even need to go anywhere. Those who are bedridden or blind had their pensions or cash grants delivered to their homes. Mr. Speaker, 3000 plus pensioners are benefiting from this. They also benefit from a direct delivery programme in the hinterland and remote areas where, instead of having to travel far distances, our hard working and tireless officers – and I thank them wholeheartedly – go into these communities, village by village, community by community, to deliver pensions. There is more in store. If you would permit me, I will tell you that we have over 100 plus pensioners who are over 100 years old. That speaks to increased life expectancy and we started something called the 'Century Club' where pensioners, who are in those years, can benefit from amenities and facilities. That will be expanded to cater for those who are between the ages of 95 years and beyond the age of 100 years old. We are also going to be working at starting wellness and well-being sessions across communities in Guyana so that pensioners can have access to exercise, recreations, outings and social gatherings so that they can understand that we are concerned about their overall quality of life.

Mr. Speaker, I could share with this whole House and you, a number of comments from pensioners, but I think it is best to go on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security and listen to all of them because they are plenty. And so, Mr. Speaker, I say to you, the pensioners will continue to benefit from this Government of PPP/C, as was committed to in our manifesto. People living with disabilities – you know, I understand the dilemma of the Opposition because they have to find things to say about this budget. I understand. That is the purpose of an Opposition. But, when it could just be contained in very, very vile and vicious attacks, it says to me you really do not have much to say.

Mr. Speaker, I will say to you that I had a dilemma. My dilemma was maybe different and similar because I wanted to compare what we were doing with what you did, but a lot of the programmes never even existed, so I had nothing to

compare to. That was the difficulty I had. And so, Mr. Speaker, let me tell you about some of the programmes that have become flagship programmes in the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. Those include our persons living with disabilities programme. Last year, we opened a brand-new facility called the Learning Lab. Never before, people living with disabilities in their adult years had the opportunity to experience technical vocational education, nor did they ever have the opportunity of accessing micro-financing from a revolving fund, brand-new. We were able to train just under 300 persons from across the country living with disabilities, and we are aiming to increase that to beyond 400 persons.

Here is another programme – the persons living with disabilities, assistive and support aids programme. It did not exist. Getting into Office in 2020, I realised people had great difficulty in accessing things like a wheelchair, walkers and 'wild' canes, and so, this programme started, Mr. Speaker and we have been able to help hundreds of persons in every region. All they have to do is to request it – that is it. There is nothing more than that. And, Mr. Speaker, if that is favouritism, fine. This is because I love people who are vulnerable, and I am privileged to be able to serve them and to serve them with humility and serve them in such a way that their quality of life continues to be improved.

Another new programme – the eye care programme. This programme would have benefited, again, people in their thousands. From 2021 to 2023, since the programme started, we were able to provide free testing and free tested spectacles. It was never there in communities, in addition to giving... This is entirely free. What was there was some assistance towards spectacles.

Now, Mr. Speaker, getting into the office, let us talk about it. There was no difficult circumstances unit. What it was, was funding that was used at the Minister's discretion. There is now a unit that accounts for every penny and, also, serves people living with disabilities and the most vulnerable. From those persons who are experiencing difficulties, including the ravages of fire, persons who need help towards their funerals, persons who need help towards spectacles and, now, in addition to what the eye care programme is doing, there has been an allotment of vouchers that will benefit all children, 200,000 plus children in schools to help them with the testing of their eyes and helping children and pensioners with spectacles. That is real progress. You know we are building on something; we have something to build on, and, Mr. Speaker, when you have something to build on, you can

speak about prosperity. When you have not much to talk about, then we get what we got before.

Mr. Speaker, when I continue in this vein, in this presentation, in this home, I would like to say the Night Shelter. That is one of the first places I visited in 2020. Today, the Night Shelter's capacity has increased to 115 persons. Currently, there are 104 persons at the Night Shelter, which will now benefit from a kitchen where food can be prepared, meals can be prepared for those persons and that will be to the tune of \$17 million. The roof of the Night Shelter will gain some benefit from the allotment towards its repairs, as well as the fence. Mr. Speaker, do you know how many people were in the Night Shelter? There were 38 people in 2020. So, do not come and call figures and create distortions in people's mind. I am telling you the figures, go back and check them. The Night Shelter has some fabulous stories. I will tell you just one. There was a man living at the Wales Market. He was abandoned by his family. He had a fractured pelvis, and he was blind – he could not see. Do you know what happened? He was taken to the Night Shelter – one of many. He had surgery done for free and now he can see. This is because, under the Ministry of Health's programme, his cataracts were dealt with. That is what we do at the Night Shelter. I want to thank the staff there and my Colleague who sits in this House, Ms. Veerasammy.

Mr. Speaker, you know, it is easy to get carried away with oneself. But, Mr. Speaker, let me talk about 'Spotlight' – the Spotlight Initiative. That initiative is a hallmark signature programme of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. How do I know? It is because I signed on to the Spotlight Initiative, spearheading it on behalf of the Government and signed on with the then United Nation (UN) Representative, Mikiko Tanaka. I know because I was told at that time that Initiative was not interesting enough for anyone to sign on for. The rest of the region signed on, and, from then to now, we started eight months later than everyone in the region. Do you know what is the outcome? It is the most successful initiative across the region. Do you know what is the outcome? I now sit on an assessment panel of people, as the only person from this region, to look at other Spotlight programmes across the world. This is not my assessment. This is the assessment from the Spotlight Initiative team.

Last year, I held a ministerial forum bringing together my colleagues from the Caribbean. All of them, without exception, have said that they would like Guyana's model or elements of it in their own countries. There are many things that we started – the toll free 24-hour hotline 914. Everybody wants to take credit for everything, but you had five years to

do it. Is that right? Then, we also harnessed information technology (IT) and we have the *iMatter* app, where all the resources to combat gender-based violence could be found quite easily. That app is upgraded now with a WhatsApp chat feature, so persons who experience gender-based violence, including anybody, could have access to counsel, therapy, counselling and all the services of the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. All these things were started in the last three years. The Survivors' Advocate programme was started and will continue, and this gives a personalised assistance to any person who experiences violence. Mr. Speaker, we also had the survivor kit; we also have the safe voucher. We have also seen the expansion of our shelter projects and those are investments made by this Government, specifically shelter.

11.14 a.m.

We have been able to pay three months' rent for persons who experience gender-based violence when they want to leave home. It is a very comprehensive gender-based violence response and, instead of being against it, if you really care for the lives of women, tell them about these programmes so that they can get help. Do not sit and try to be a hero about it, tell them because I would like them to use these programmes as they are unfolding.

In fact, over 1,200 persons have enrolled for the Community Advocate Network programme. They were trained. That is in addition to 8,000 other people in key positions who were trained on gender-based violence. That is the investment we made to respond to gender-based violence. The Community Advocate Network programme will yield the kind of help in communities where people are part of the Government's initiative to combat gender-based violence. It is important to note that those persons who experienced gender-based violence do not only have to turn to Legal Aid, which is heavily subsidised by the PPP/C and was an initiative started, in terms of the subsidising of it, under the PPP/C Government. We now have the Legal Pro-Bono Initiative that caters to 500 persons, a collaboration with the Bar Association of Guyana.

Today, I want to speak on something that happened a few days ago. My brother and I, the Attorney General, had the privilege of opening, for the first time in the region, the Hope and Justice Centre – one of two. This was in Region 4. This is an initiative that was borne out of discussion, collaboration and the desire to ensure that the systems are easier for women, men and anyone who experience violence to report it and to get help. In one place – the first one is in

Lusignan, Region 4 – a person can make the report, they can get medical help and a medical report, they can get counselling, they can get legal recourse and they can have access to restorative justice. That is something I know the Hon. Attorney General is very invested in. All of this is work that happened and work that will continue in 2024.

I would also like to talk about trafficking in persons (TIP). Here again it is a collaboration among the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health and all those agencies that would have to respond to persons who are trafficked. We have seen our country retain its tier-one status up to last year. That is not insignificant. We have seen more prosecutions and we have seen thousands of persons who have been trained. When we look back at the budget that was apportioned in the past, for gender-based violence there was nothing really. We are now in the twenties when it comes to millions of dollars to tackle gender-based violence and, similarly, for trafficking in persons.

There are many agencies and units that fall under the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. Before I get into more of that, I want to tell you about the legislation. Under this Government, there was the Combatting of Trafficking in Persons Act. For this year, we will be putting a number of Bills on the floor, such as the Family Violence Bill, which has benefited from extensive consultations and will provide relief to those persons who seek protection under the justice system. Coming up, we have the Protection from Harassment Bill as well – both of those will have policies. In fact, the draft of the Gender Violence Policy will be completed this year. There is a referral system pathway that has been done by integrating all of the agencies across the ministries so that we can respond cohesively and competently. There is also going to be a policy that will be done this year on gender inclusion. There are many more policies and legislation that will be coming to the floor of the House, which I hope you will support, Hon. Members. I remember my baptism, when I first spoke on suicide and asked for the decriminalisation of suicide in 2016, you voted it down as the Government then. [**Mr. Ramson:** Wow, as Government?] Yes. I just want to give a background and context to what we are doing – solid, solid work.

We also have the Women's Innovation and Investment Network (WIIN) and that is very close to my heart. There is a lot of noise. You are telling people not to support, but the women in this country never listen to you. Do you know why? We were able in three years to train 11,500 women

under the Women's Innovation and Investment Network – WIIN. They ignored you completely. In ignoring you, what happened? Forty-eight per cent of those trained are now in entrepreneurship, over 850 women are on the WIIN Application where we harness IT to allow women, at no cost to them, to advertise their businesses. By the way, the WIIN programme is exactly and entirely free. Again, I cannot compare because nothing like that existed. The WIIN programme offers hybrid model type training, offers training at the Guyana Women's Leadership Institute (GWLI) and it also goes out into communities and train women. In every region, from one to ten, women have been trained, which puts women in the hinterland in a better position. When Dr. Anthony opens those hospitals, he will have no dearth of patient care assistance and elder care trained women. That is development. That is investment in human resource and people.

I would also like to say the WIIN programme will continue. In fact, we have targeted what we tried to do in two years, in just one year because we utilised the COURSERA platform last year, which allowed us to really be able to offer. Now, in collaboration with the Public Service Ministry (PSM), it will allow us to do even more training programmes. I have no doubt we will exceed that number. Not only did women receive training and had access to the WIIN in business clinics where they were able to benefit from business, literacy training and write business plans, but 25% of them gained employment. These are not insignificant figures; these are real people behind those figures. Go out there and look at all the springing up of new businesses owned by women, and all of them, if not many of them, will also tell you that they were at the We Lift expositions held by the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. Again, I cannot compare it but, in the first year, it was 75 women, in the second year it was 150 women and in the third year it was over 200 women. Your guess is as good as mine, in terms of how many more will come on board through the We Lift programme that this Ministry offers.

For the first time in the history of the region, there is a female business incubator that allows women to walk into the Cove and John environment or call to get support for growth, sustenance, expansion of their businesses, help with business plans, access to micro-financing, all of that and more. When I went to the Guyana Women's Leadership Institute, which was started as an initiative of the People's Progressive Party/Civic in the 90s, I was horrified. There was nothing in there to begin with. There was an old decaying computer room with a few broken computers. Go and see it now. In fact, I do not need to say that. The Hon.

Member, Mr. Duncan, went with me recently as part of the Committee on Social Services and all of you marvelled at what was there. We have a computer room, and we have a training facility. We are going to expand that computer room and we are going to open the culinary centre this year to provide training, for again, thousands of women who will benefit not only from the training, but the start-up of their business. Sometimes I wonder, in what surreal world or parallel universe...I will leave it there. I will not finish it. I believe that more information needs to be gathered when you speak about this Ministry. Not that kind of vile response, but real information to look at the real work that we have been doing, and not me alone, but all of the Members of the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. I extend my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to them.

You talk about people leaving. People have the freedom to go anywhere they want to go, whether it is to another ministry, to another occupation to have another profession and we continue to replenish those spaces. Why? The Government is investing in training. That is why. More and more young people are coming on board and having the opportunity to understand and to work for the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security.

I have not even touched on childcare so let me do that right, right now. The Childcare and Protection Agency (CPA) falls under the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. This year, we will be able to completely revamp the Sophia Care Centre which really needed revamping. We will be able to add to that facility a brand-new kitchen and dining facility built under this Government within the last three years. We are also developing a model residential facility for children living with disabilities – this Government. We are also building an entire facility for adults living with disability to the tune of \$112 million, \$73.112 million and \$44 million for children's residential facilities, all of that investment in people living with disabilities. I heard a lot of talk about cement, sand and stone budget, but you have to build things like these so that you can cater... You asked for those things so how else, if we do not use those ingredients for construction. Mr. Speaker, I do not know. Then, one of the speakers...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, we have another ingredient we have to give you, which is an extension so you could build on this foundation.

Dr. Persaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister of Local Government and Regional Development [Ms. Parag]: Mr. Speaker, may the Hon.

Member be given five minutes to conclude her excellent, excellent presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much, Hon. Minister Parag. Hon. Minister, Dr. Vindhya Persaud, you may continue.

Dr. Persaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I heard that there are soaring expectations. Expectations can only soar if people deliver before, and we have. It is as simple as that. If you did not deliver, what kind of expectation do you expect? You cannot have expectations when people are incapable of delivering, so yes, I understand that very well. That makes the most sense to me. I also want to say that the Mahaica Children's Home will have a complete rehabilitation to the tune of \$37 million. Now, let us talk about juveniles. These young people may come into conflict with the law, and we want to give them a second chance. We want to make sure they are dealt with in accordance with the Juvenile Justice Act. That Act provides for us to deal with these young people in a very different way. The Juvenile Justice Processing Centre will be built at a cost of \$63 million and that will be based in Region 4 to cater to the needs of our juveniles. Over 100 ex-prisoners and their families will also benefit from this Ministry's budget. The work that we do speaks for itself. I also believe that our young people should be very familiar with what this Government is doing for them, and I can see right here...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, let me just tell the person shouting that unparliamentary word, it is about six times he already did, I will ask his Chief Whip to control him, that very graceful gentleman.

Dr. Persaud: Thank you for your protection, Mr. Speaker. But you know, it comes back to what I said. You want to conveniently condemn things when you yourself engage in things that are unparliamentary and are completely unacceptable. You know we have worked on moving with parents in this country, so we have a parenting programme to roll out, a parenting manual and a parenting workbook. We are also looking at increasing the number of day and night care and early childhood facilities. This is a new concept. I spoke about this at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and all those who were there said, 'what on earth is that? We would like to get on board'. This is beyond the Caribbean regions now. This is Latin America.

11.29 a.m.

This is a new concept that will be introduced to our country and consortiums of women will benefit from this model because we have been training them. The Government has also provided the childcare subsidy to help persons to start these and, also, to help parents with three months of children being placed at day and night care and early childhood facilities so that we can have children cared for. In fact, two model early childhood day and night care facilities have been looked at. One of those is in Region 3. The Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul, should come when it is opened because it will be a model centre. This is a centre that will have early childhood development and day and night care offered there. It is very different to what is here now. We also have the reunification draft policy, the early childhood policy. This is very different from the existing day care and early childhood centres which are being run across the country with our oversight and supervision. The day and night care facilities are to the tune of \$89 million and \$75 million and will be based in Regions 3 and 4.

Mr. Speaker, I can continue to give you the fine details of everything that we are doing. I want you, the Hon. Members on the other side of the House, to speak to the people who continually benefit. I want to categorically say that when one uses the word nepotism, he or she should know what it means. No one related to me is at the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security. It is very important that when words are bandied around, people know what they mean. I want to say that the Government of Guyana and the Ministry of Human Services and Social Services will continue to commit to the delivery and the expansion of programmes and initiatives that will improve the quality of life of the people of Guyana, building on what we have already achieved and moving towards the prosperity of which we speak.

When we speak of this budget, it is a budget that is people-centred, revolving around infrastructural development and working with businesses – small, medium and large. It is a budget that works for our country to rise and to soar. You talked about soaring expectations. I ask the other side of the House to ease their conscience, support this budget and let us continue to deliver to the people of Guyana. I thank you so much. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Minister of Human Services and Social Security. Now for the Hon. Member, Dr. Cummings.

Dr. Cummings: Speaker of the National Assembly, Hon. Members, special invitees and members of the media, a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, at the outset, I wish to compliment the dedicated staff of the Ministry of Finance. They have worked tirelessly and beyond the call of duty to prepare *Budget 2024*, thereby permitting the continuation of the precedent established by the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Coalition of ensuring that there is an early budget which is read by January, the first month of the new year. Admittedly, good examples in governance are worthy of emulation. A dedicated, professional and well remunerated public service is an indispensable asset if we are to banish poverty and underdevelopment.

I also stand to acknowledge the hard work of the Government that they put into creating a budget that turned out to be a hatchet job on the poor, disabled, middle class and disadvantaged. Since this budget is a reflection of the values and priorities of this Administration, the real question is, why did the Government deliver less than the best? We are asked to sink or swim with numbers that do not add up but make us back up and say, what is this? Financial resources are critical to national development. Its availability permits us to undertake and promote varied economic activities, leading to increased production and accelerated economic growth. However, and above all, the Guyanese people expect, and certainly deserve, to be satisfied that the best economic decisions are made when there is value for money spent. They have the reasonable expectation that there would not be random and risky undertakings and senseless unsound investments. The Guyanese populace expect their government to utilise sound and reliable data and be forthcoming and transparent so that they can properly evaluate how taxpayers' moneys are being spent. Large, budgeted amounts in themselves are neither overwhelming or impressive unless backed by solid plans and reliable strategies. Therefore, an adequate addendum, Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, should be probably attached to your narrative. Going forward, it should accompany the document, if the Hon. Member wishes to consider.

The Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, the Hon. Dr. Singh, and his team have sought to identify, in *Budget 2024*, the global and regional economic context, developments in the domestic economy and the sectoral

achievements which occurred in 2023. However, the cries and welfare of the Guyanese people have not been adequately addressed. There was a scholarly attempt to give us a caption, which appeared on the surface to be profound as it read, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. A closer look at *Budget 2024* would show that the People's Progressive Party 'c' Government has run off course. In fact, the Government has run amok, and has built prosperity not for the masses, not for the common people, not for the working class, and certainly not for the small man who ought to be the real man. My colleagues on this side of the divide have convincingly shown, and I concur, that the budget under review has been designed for family, friends, the favoured, the faithful, the flatterers and the surrounding fawners. The budget's focus has not been on national priorities and has been big on infrastructure. I will reiterate that development cannot be defined only by an increase in material wealth but must include the welfare of the people.

Budget 2024 is coming at a time when the territory of the state is threatened by our neighbour to the west, a threat to our maritime zone to annex Guyana's maritime spaces. As a people, we will continue to be vigilant and to use the juridical process to prove that the tribunal award of 1899 is still binding. According to David Arthur Granger in his article entitled, *Secure Borders*, on page 7:

“Venezuela's fear is that, once a juridical process could prove that its contention that the Arbitral Award of 1899 was a nullity was proven to be baseless, its fifty-year strategy of attrition aimed at gaining territory from Guyana stands in jeopardy of the prospect of collapse”.

The Guyanese populace look forward to this beautiful country remaining the ultimate guarantor of peace. *Budget 2024* is also coming at a time when, from all appearance, the *Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana*, which should be sacrosanct and supreme, seems to be threatened, as well as the independence of the judiciary. All eyes are opened – and in literary language, we call it synecdoche – to the competence of the Executive Branch which, as you know, is essential to the viability of the State. May I remind you that the Guyanese populace is looking forward to an election process that is credible, and which will include a clean voters list and where Guyana, the tenth richest country in the world, with a projected 34.3 % growth, will utilise the relevant biometric during the voting process. The Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, Hon. Dr. Singh, made us aware, under developments in the domestic economy in 2023

page 10, paragraph 3.1, that on looking at a real gross domestic product (GDP), there was growth of 33% overall in 2023, with stronger than expected expansion of 11.7 % in non-oil real GDP. On page 23, paragraph 4.1, there is a rapid pace of transformation being realised in every single sector in our country. The goodly Minister alluded also to the fact that 4% of the budget was from carbon credit revenues of US\$150 million from the first sales contract. On page 25, paragraph 4.9, the Minister further reported that with *Budget 2024* projects, there would be the deployment of \$6.8 billion from the Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund (GRIF) resources earned under the original Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) and a further \$43.7 billion to be accrued from the sale of carbon credits.

Mr. Speaker, please follow the Member of Parliament (MP). The Hon. Member is going somewhere. On page 93, at paragraphs 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3, the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service reiterated the expansion of the economy at a faster pace in 2024 as the GDP is expected to grow by 34.3 %. The Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service noted that the economy will grow at an unusual annual average of 38.8% over the five-year period. The non-oil economy is projected to grow by 11.9%, since there continues to be a consistent expansion in all subsectors in the agriculture, forestry, fishing, and the construction services and the recovery of bauxite and gold mining. The Hon. Member noted on page 94 that three Floating Production Storage and Offloading (FPSOs) in the Stabroek Block will realise 550,000 barrels per day in 2024 with an expected ramp up of over 600,000 barrels per day in the latter part of this year. What I am saying is that there is adequate fiscal space to pay nurses and health care workers, there is enough fiscal space to address, in a tangible way, the rising cost of living, and there is no lack of money to give a liveable wage to public servants, pensioners, the Guyanese who need public assistance and the differently abled. Hon. Minister Indar, I agree that the poor will always be with us – Matthew 26:11. Please permit me to quote from page 2 of the article, *Democracy and Development*, by David Granger.

“The fight against poverty cannot be won through charitable handouts. Neither will trickle down economics be the panacea for pauperisation and privation. Providing jobs – particularly our young people – will be one of our priorities.there is a crisis of youth unemployment.”

So, most of our young people not finding jobs would find it difficult to escape from the poverty cycle. The author continued to note that the war against poverty under a social compact must be characterised not by exclusion, but by an inclusionary democracy and an inclusionary process. In other words, there must be not just rhetoric but real social cohesion, the mobilisation of the material and human resources for the varied tasks at hand. The APNU/AFC Coalition has always worked assiduously to invest in our Guyanese people's health as we endeavoured to mould a healthy nation. It is our wish that the Guyanese populace enjoy good health and wellbeing, thus fulfilling Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3). We focused on improving healthcare delivery, access, and cost-effectiveness. Lip service is being paid to the extending of universal primary healthcare to the Guyanese populace. The basic structural and functional unit of public health services is primary healthcare. This is the first point of contact for people and families in a continuing healthcare process, which entails accessible, comprehensive, continuing, coordinated and people-centred care in the context of the family and the community. The public health mantra is healthy people and healthy community.

11.44 a.m.

The APNU/AFC Coalition wants the Government to stay on course as it relates to primary health care, to advocate for the promotion of health and the prevention of diseases, to advocate for counselling services and the rollout of relevant programmes to drive lifestyle changes, to ensure that there is early diagnosis, early treatment interventions and care for persons with health problems and, of course, to be able to manage the long term Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) conditions. We must also turn our attention to managing risk factors, including poor diet, physical inactivity, smoking and the imbibing of alcohol.

Chronic diseases: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) kill 41 million people globally annually and account for 2.2 million people from the Americas. It was noted that people between the ages 30 and 69 years are mostly affected. In Guyana, NCDs account for approximately 70% of our health budget and 68% of our deaths. Cardiovascular disease accounts for 34% of NCDs, followed by diabetes mellitus and cancers, which account for 8%, and the chronic/respiratory diseases follow along with 3%. Cardiovascular disease is increasing in Guyana due to a high-risk burden of poverty and the presence of a higher number of risk factors, to which I alluded, such as high

cholesterol, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, physical inactivity and alcohol misuse. Our government-in-waiting welcomes any approach that will focus on the ramping up of screening of our citizens that will provide or promote physical activity and increased awareness in healthy eating for optimal health.

[Mr. Speaker left the Chair.]

[Mdm. Deputy Speaker assumed the Chair.]

The Ministry of Public Health will use a behavioural change pathway approach and cover the stages of NCD, namely through lifestyle and prevention, that is primary prevention – detection and monitoring; secondary prevention and, of course treatment and adherence – tertiary prevention. Primary prevention focuses on lifestyle and prevention through getting people to adopt healthier lifestyles, making healthier food purchases in the restaurants, in the cafeterias and supermarkets and engaging in physical activity. We certainly want there to be a paradigm shift to community health where people are empowered to take care of their health so that there can be less amputations following the complications of diabetes. Guyana will join the rest of the world and the Pan American Health Organization's (PAHO's) campaign to end cervical cancer so that our women and girls can live long and fulfilling lives. We embrace the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine to help prevent our young girls from being victims of this scourge. Of course, we on this side of divide welcome any allocation, especially of \$3.8 million, to detect and fight against cervical cancer.

Infectious diseases: Mr. Speaker, you must have been aware of the APNU/AFC Coalition's proactive approach to addressing sudden and unexpected outbreaks of communicable diseases, as we provided more hospital beds, improved protective gear for medical personnel and better disease surveillance when we commissioned Guyana's first infectious disease hospital to combat the communicable concern of COVID-19. It is our expectation that, very soon, Filaria, Leprosy, Chagas disease and Leishmaniasis will be eradicated, and even Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Tuberculosis by 2030. Malaria is endemic in Region 1. Apart from the distribution of insecticides and mosquito nets, there must be continued awareness and maybe edutainment on this subject as well as the procurement of adequate test kits for the health facilities and laboratories.

Mental health: Due to a paucity of data, *News Room* on November, 2022 reported that there are approximately 20,000 people battling several mental illnesses. The article

further stated that suicide among the country's youth appeared to be increasing. Though there are satellite clinics in the administrative regions, there has not been any strategy to formalise and to regularise these clinics, to offer quality care for our citizens. The former Ministry of Public Health, with its technical partner, PAHO, developed the National Mental Health Plan when we were in government from 2015 to 2020, to address urgent mental health needs. In 2016, with PAHO's technical cooperation, the country developed a roadmap for the introduction of community-based mental health services in Guyana. On evaluating our interventions during our term in office, we got full marks, as the PAHO report found that:

“The country was successful in establishing a governance structure for mental health at the national level, improved health promotion, increase health awareness in community and workplace settings...”

This article further stated that adequate human resource was built:

“...to improve the response capacity of mental health services and provide comprehensive, quality care in community-based settings through collaborations with government ministries, partnerships among government, civil society organisations (CSOs) and health-supporting religious organisations, particularly during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

It was noted that:

“There was also a gradual reduction in the annual death rates per 100,000 population for suicide.”

This was during our tenure in office. In terms of support for child and adolescent health, none of the 440 primary or 106 secondary schools have either part-time or full-time mental health professionals presently, and there are no formal school-based activities to promote health and prevent mental disorders. There is no mental health consumer or family associations in Guyana. There are two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the country involved in individual assistance activities such as counselling, housing, supporting groups of persons and we know them very well, the Salvation Army and I think Phoenix Recovery Project. We advise that a robust and comprehensive mental health programme be rolled out in the prisons and special provision and security measures also be made at hospitals and clinics where prisoners seek treatment. Additionally, we posit that a

correctional mental health conference be done in this regard to assist our prisoners and vulnerable persons to improve their mental health and coping mechanisms. This call is to set up public education and awareness campaigns on mental health.

Human resource: *More than 300 nurses resign from GPHC since January 2022*. This was according to *Kaieteur News* of 17th September, 2023

“Since January last year, more than 300 nurses have resigned from the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation (GPHC).

The country's primary medical institution has been hard hit by a high number of nurse resignations in recent years and according to well-placed sources at the GPHC, at the end of 2022, close to 215 nurses had resigned from the hospital.

By the end of August...”

last

“...year, more than 100 nurses had tendered their resignations from the GPHC, another source noted.

Last month, online news entity News Source, reported that some 1200 nurses should be manning the hospital since it is a 450-bed facility; however, the current staff roster is far below that figure grossly impacting the ratio of nurses manning the beds at the hospital.

Migration to greener pastures...”

seems to be the order of the day as there is:

“...mass exodus of healthcare professionals as many nurses have been taking up attractive packages offered by healthcare entities in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Several nurses who have moved to the United Kingdom this year...”

have indicated:

“...that their current salaries are double and triple the amount they were paid while working here.”

in Guyana.

“In addition, the relocation packages offered by foreign hiring firms also cater for the well-being of the nurses' families.”

The call by this Government to address this shortage of nurses by bringing foreign nurses is unacceptable. The expansion of postgraduate training at GPHC and developing a hybrid nursing programme to increase the training of nurses from about 150 to 200 per year to enable the training of 1000 to 1500 nurses alone will not cut it. One of my colleagues, Hon. Member, Mr. Forde, decried, in one of his articles, the move. Hon. Mr. Forde noted that the Government has failed:

“...to improve working condition of local health care providers but is ready to import nurses to fill the shortage in the system.”

Hon. Mr. Forde went on to say:

“...that the approach by government to address this extremely worrying shortage could only lead to a further diminished number of nurses causing a diminution of that important sector of our society.”

Nowhere was the Government’s behaviour disheartening as when it appealed a recent decision of the court, which granted nurses compensation for days they underwent industrial action. This Government has no respect for the judiciary and certainly no respect for the nurses. They are not on the side of our healthcare workers.

Capacity and infrastructure, facilities, equipment and drugs: the People’s Progressive Party/ Civic (PPP/C) has given us, in the budget, a narrative of a plethora of health facilities that will either be upgraded or expanded throughout the country, with the aim of improving health service delivery to the Guyanese populace. The Government boasts of some \$10.3 billion for the construction of a paediatric and maternal hospital in Ogle; a \$6.2 billion hospital at New Amsterdam; construction of regional hospitals in their strongholds to a tune of \$15.5 million; and the upgrading of hospitals at Bartica, Suddie, West Demerara, Kamarang, Kato, Moruca to a tune of \$10 billion and \$1.5 billion, respectively. Let us sensibly ask ourselves, where would the human resource come from to ensure that these spendings improve the health services deserving of our people? Development must be coordinated and integrated and is more than throwing of moneys at our problems or wishful thinking. The annual Auditor General’s report, as we look at modernisation of the primary healthcare, stated at paragraph 445:

“On 19 July 2017, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Government of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana and Exim Bank of India. The bank agreed to provide the Government

with an aggregated sum of US\$17.5M for financing the upgrade of three Regional Hospitals. The sum of \$450M was allocated in 2022 for the design, rehabilitation, and construction of primary health care facilities at West Demerara and Bartica Regional Hospitals. Amounts totalling \$47.778M were expended from the \$450M, leaving a balance of \$402.222M. As a result, the Ministry was unable to fully achieve the intended benefits of enhanced healthcare delivery and improved health facilities.”

Of course, the Ministry responded by saying:

“...that the sum of \$47.778M was expended on consultancy fees and the remaining balance was unspent due to a change in project scope that resulted in a delay.”

Mr. Speaker, having the improved infrastructure is commendable, but without adequate nurses and doctors to fill those hospitals, citizens will find themselves not better off, but worse off. In emergency situations, we cannot afford to have citizens rushing to hospitals which do not have the personnel to assist them. That is both a waste of money and a recipe for disaster. Each hospital must be adequately staffed to meet the needs of the community it serves. We recognise that building new hospitals increases access to care but that assumes that there are adequate nurses and doctors to administer that care. We know that Guyana has been going through a personnel crisis with nurses and doctors leaving in droves. Failing to acknowledge the root cause of this crisis, which is a need for competitive wages, the Government has imprudently announced six new hospital projects.

Drugs and medical supplies: on 31st December, 2023, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation had stated that, while 2023 saw numerous challenges, the hospital made strides in healthcare delivery and these challenges were not limited to staff shortages, but included infrastructure, unavailability of beds, and supply chain issues such as delivery of equipment. As I am on drugs, someone called me just the other day and said that a simple Gliclazide...Gliclazide is one of our drugs that we use to treat diabetes mellitus. When the patient went to our government facility, our pharmacy, it was nil. Let us call him ‘Patient B’. When he went to one of the private hospitals, which is very known to all of us, he was successful in collecting and receiving the required medication. So, it was not at the public pharmacy, but at a private pharmacy which is known to almost everyone. As I am on drugs and supplies, \$16 billion was given to let us say, ‘Brother B’ to

provide pharmaceuticals last year. Why not split that money among other businesspersons? Why one particular person, Mdm. Deputy Speaker?

11.59 a.m.

Capital purchases – equipment: The Auditor General also stated, at paragraph 449, that the sum of \$937.391 million was expended to procure medical equipment, which included portable ultrasounds, medical refrigerators, treadmills, and computerised radiography scanners. A physical inspection in August, 2023 revealed that suppliers had failed to deliver equipment valued at \$465.35 million. In September, 2023, the Ministry submitted stores received and delivered notes for equipment valued at \$138.692 million. The recommendation from the Auditor General's Office stated that the Ministry should monitor each contract to ensure strict compliance with contractual terms and ensure all outstanding equipment were received.

Maternal and Child Health: Every child deserves to have a healthy start in life and every mother should have access to quality care. The first thousand days of a child are very important. The nurses are well-positioned to have a positive impact on maternal health. With advanced education of healthcare personnel, the giving of relevant incentives to midwives and addressing the socioeconomic and structural maternal health factors, such as income inequality, shortages of healthcare providers, and lack of paid family leave should be considered. It is about time that fathers play a more pivotal role in the growth and development of their children. Hence, the obstetric ward must be father-friendly to ensure that they too bond with the child as they seek visits to the wards. I look forward, with great expectation, to school health programmes and policies taking a front seat in 2024. The continuous training of nannies could help in reducing maternal and infant mortality. The latter tells us about the life expectancy of our country. In addition, we expect the Government to redouble its efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goals, at least SDG1 and SDG2, by 2030 to reduce inequalities between the coastland and the hinterland and to ensure that no single Guyanese is left behind. As I conclude, I want to say that the trillion-dollar budget...

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, in order to conclude, you will need an extension.

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

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: It is granted.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Go ahead, Hon. Member.

Dr. Cummings: Thank you very much. As I conclude, I will say that this trillion-dollar budget, with so much fiscal space, is not stimulating or people-centred. It is anti-Guyanese. It is an intergenerational injustice and a moral failure. The country expected more in 2024, but what we were told amounted to a really bad cold. The negative impact of this budget is not only contagious, but it is full of pus, and it is not for us. Guyana has the fastest growing rate but a closed gate for young aspiring owners. How to get the capital needed to create wealth for Indigenous Guyanese is an issue that the Government is happy about. I cannot support *Budget 2024*, at least not in its current form and not unless an amendment is made to reflect the good life that Guyanese of all walks of life, all classes, and all creeds should begin to enjoy now.

As one author from an article entitled, *The Catalyst*, remarked, making a choice today to benefit family, friends, favourites, the flatterers, and the fawners at the expense of our own children and grandchildren is ludicrous as it is ridiculous and gives us on this side of the divide much political pain. I thank you, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. [Applause]

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Member. I now call on the Hon. Minister of Health, Dr. Frank Anthony.

Minister of Health [Dr. Anthony]: Thank you very much, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. Hon. Members, I want to first start by thanking Dr. Singh and his team for *Budget 2024*. The budget is not just a financial document. It is a road map that outlines the PPP/C Government's priorities, commitments and strategies for the fiscal year. It reflects our collective aspirations and the concrete steps we intend to take to achieve them. The PPP/C Government has presented a budget that focuses on ensuring continuous economic growth, social development and the welfare of every citizen of Guyana. Undoubtedly, the budget will prioritise the people and create opportunities, bringing in a new era of prosperity for the Guyanese people. It is no surprise that the theme of this budget is *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*.

As we continue to strive towards prosperity for all, there are individuals who are attempting to disrupt our progress. In recent days, we have listened to their arguments and have seen their best attempts to dissuade us. They have boldly, and sometimes barefacedly, manipulated facts to fit their

fictional beliefs. But let me be abundantly clear. None of these fake postures will exonerate them from the fraud and electoral rigging that they attempted. None of these fake postures will exonerate them from their atrocities against the sugar workers and other working people of this country. None of these fake postures will exonerate them from their racist advocacy. None of these fake postures will undo what they have done to the Guyanese people. I want to say to them that we remember them for who they are: yesterday's leaders with yesterday's thinking, unprepared and unfit for the 21st century Guyana. Yesterday, the Hon. Vinceroy Jordan suggested that I should follow the APNU/AFC's example and provide a river ambulance for the people of Moraikobai. First of all, I want to say to him that the people of Moraikobai actually have a river ambulance. He went on. In his presentation, he cited what the Coalition did for the people of Baracara. I want to thank the Hon. Member for this emblematic example of the APNU/AFC's stewardship of the health sector. On the day that the boat was commissioned and launched in the river, it never made it to Baracara, I was told. It broke down midstream and had to be towed back to the landing where it was left abandoned.

[The Hon. Member displayed photographs.]

Look at another example.

[The Hon. Member displayed a photograph.]

I will happily turn this over so that they could have an example of the ambulance that the Hon. Member is recommending to me... **[Dr. Singh:** That they are so proud of.] Very proud. If you are unable to launch a boat what makes you think that you can manage a trillion-dollar economy? I think we are all familiar with the spectacular failures of the APNU/AFC – the D'Urban Park eye sore, the bottom house drug bond, and the chronic drug shortages that we experienced.

I just heard the Hon. Member, Dr. Karen Cummings, praise the Ocean View Infectious Disease Hospital. You should not praise that. It was actually the ocean view scandal because when we went into that place, which was opened about two or three times by the then President and the then Ministers, it was a shell. There was not a single bed. Nothing was functioning. It did not have electricity. It did not have a sewerage system that was functioning. Water was not there. I remember calling the Hon. Collin Croal to assist me in getting water into that place. I remember talking to the Minister, Mr. Indar, to help us to get electricity in the place. There was not a single bed, and this was the infectious hospital that was supposed to save COVID-19 patients. Not

only did they not have the infrastructure in place, but they did also not have a single staff member there. We were told that it had bought ventilators. There were supposed to be 20 ventilators working in the place. When I visited, not a single ventilator was working. First of all, it was not even a proper ventilator. It was something that should be used on ambulances to give people some air. When we went there, none of the pieces of equipment had any battery in them and so they could not work. This was what we inherited. This Hon. Member came here to glorify this as their legacy. This is emblematic of their management of COVID-19. I could go on. I remember that when we had just come to Government in August, we were told that they were only giving five COVID-19 tests per region so that people could be tested. Obviously, that was inadequate. So, we did not even know how many cases we had. All of that we had to fix. **[An. Hon. Member:** *(inaudible)* results.]

12.14 p.m.

Of course, the result had to go to the Minister before it was released to the doctors. This is just a small part of the legacy of these political aspirants for power in 2025. Who, in their right mind, in this country, would want to be saddled with this lot ever again? Who in their right mind?

Mr. Speaker, when you compare what they did to what we are doing now there is a total difference. We are on the verge of a healthcare revolution driven by strategic initiatives, innovation and a collective commitment to the well-being of the citizens of this country. This level of transformation is unparalleled in the history of Guyana. Our objective is not only to build good health care, but as mandated by the President, we must strive to create a world-class healthcare system. This Budget is not about empty talk; it is a budget that transforms talk into action. This Budget will revolutionise every sector and uplift the entire nation. It is a budget all about the people of this country, their health, their well-being and their prosperity.

I have heard repeated lamentations that this Budget has nothing for the people of this country, and I want to debunk that notion. This Budget has something for everyone, but I would like to highlight a few examples so that the people of this country could understand the goodies that are contained in this Budget. Let us look at our children, what does this Budget have for the children of Guyana from birth to school age? Let us start with the youngest, our babies, how do we protect our neonates? That is, the first seven days of life. We need specialised neonatal units so that we can give them the care that they need. Most of these units are in the

Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation (GPHC) and a few are in some of our regional hospitals, but this Government, we decided that we want to expand neonatal care to all our regional hospitals, and starting from last year we expanded neonatal care at New Amsterdam, West Demerara, Public Hospital Suddie, Linden Hospital Complex, Mabaruma, Kumaka, Bartica and the Lethem Hospital. This year we will do another six set of neonatal units in the new six hospitals that we are building. These facilities would significantly improve the chances of survival for babies who are at high risk of premature death. This is what we call transformation in action.

Immunisation is a highly effective healthcare intervention, and it prevents the spread of infectious diseases. Our childhood immunisation programme has been successful in protecting our children against 19 different diseases. Last year the vaccination coverage ranged from 98% to 100% and this is one of the best coverage rates in the entire Caribbean. As part of our plan to prevent cancer in children and cancer in adults, we aim to increase human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine coverage for children of nine to fifteen years of age. We would like to increase this coverage to 90% and if we are able to accomplish this, then future generations of Guyanese will be HPV-free in terms of the cancers they produce, including cervical cancer. This is transformation in action.

In 2023, the Peoples Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) started a school health programme in collaboration with a global leader like Mount Sinai. Last year we did preventative check-ups, and when I said preventative check-ups, we were able to screen children to see whether they are seeing properly, they are hearing, we looked at their mouth to check if they have any rotten tooth. We did a general check-up for 12,000 children in this country. When we did that, we discovered that close to 1,500 of them had varying problems and we were able to bring them into the health sector and treat them so as to prevent further deterioration. This is what a caring Government looks like. We did not stop there. In this year's budget we are going to ensure that we continue this programme at the nursery level, but we are also going to extend it to primary schools so that every primary school child can benefit from screening. Furthermore, it is our Government's intention that every school-age child would be screened at least once in nursery, once in primary and once in secondary, meaning that they will get three screenings during their school life and any problem that we find, we will be able to fix it so that these children can grow up healthy. This is transformation in action.

Promoting eye care for children is crucial for the overall well-being and education success and future prospects of these children. This year the PPP/C Government will launch a special eye care programme for children and the elderly. For the children, we hope to detect conditions such as amblyopia which means lazy eye, strabismus which means cross-eye, and those with refractive errors such as those with near sightedness or far sightedness or astigmatism. [**Mr. Ramson:** *Whaa bout bad eye, can you fix bad eye?*] Those over there *bad eye* the Budget. With prompt intervention, we can prevent long-term vision impairment which may adversely affect children's academic performances and life opportunities. I want to encourage every parent to take this opportunity to ensure that their child's vision is checked, and I also want to encourage the elderly to make sure that they get these vouchers so that they can go and do eye check-ups. For the elderly, if when we check you have cataracts then we will be able to fix those cataracts for you so that you do not have to live life when you are not seeing properly. As I am on that, Mr. Speaker, I want to tell you that when we came into Government that the Port Mourant Hospital, where we were doing a lot of eye surgeries, none of the microscopes were working. [**An Hon. Member (Inaudible)**] I heard a faint echo in the corner there, 'this is another lie,' It is not a lie because when...

Mr. Speaker: You have been around long enough to know about parliamentary words.

Dr. Anthony: I heard an echo of someone claiming that they probably left the Ophthalmology Centre at Port Mourant in good condition. It was closed, none of the microscopes were working. The theatre had mould and we had to spend millions of dollars to fix it. Today, I am proud to say that we are able to send ophthalmologists to the various regions of our country so that they can screen the population there to see whether or not they have cataract, and if they have cataract we put them on a list, we fly them out, we bring them to Port Mourant, we operate on them, make sure they are seeing properly and then we take them back home; hundreds of Guyanese citizens have benefitted from this programme.

What about women's health? Women's health is of utmost importance, and cancer among women is a major concern. Breast cancer and cervical cancer are the most prevalent cancers among women. We want to make sure that we can prevent this in the first instance, and if not we must be able to detect it and then treat these diseases. The PPP/C Government has set a goal to meet the World Health Organisation's (WHO's) target by 2030 regarding cervical

cancer. The goal includes the following target: 90% of our girls should receive full HPV vaccine by the time they reach 15 years of age. The next target is 70% of our women should undergo a high-performance screening test by the time they reach 35 and, again, by 45 years of age. The third target is that 90% of individuals who are diagnosed with cervical cancer should receive appropriate treatment. For the first goal, this year we will target 41,539 girls between the ages of nine and 15 to ensure that they can get the HPV vaccine, and if we accomplish that, then we would accomplish the 90% that we are going after. We will also not stop there because the latest guidelines from the United States of America (USA) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and from the WHO, states that persons older than 15 years can also be vaccinated with the HPV vaccine. So between the ages of 16 and 25 we want to offer those women two doses of HPV, and we would be targeting 62,500 women in this age category.

12.29 p.m.

For those who are older, between 26 and 45 years, where we estimate that there are about 94,000 women, we want to offer them three doses of this vaccine so that we can prevent cervical cancer. To meet the second goal, we want to ensure that 70% of our women between 30 and 45 years old get the high-performance test. This Budget has allocated enough resources so that 52,000 women can benefit from visual inspection of the cervix with acetic acid (VIA), pap smears and HPV tests. This is one of the special measures that Dr. Ashni Singh spoke about. In addition to all this, if a woman is diagnosed with cancer during this screening process, we will provide a range of treatment options depending on the stage of the cancer. Treatment options range from cryotherapy to surgery, and we would be working to ensure that we can introduce brachytherapy services in Guyana. Right now, when people need brachytherapy, they have to go abroad for those services. We will be bringing that to Guyana. We are very confident that with these measures or a combination of them – vaccination, testing, and treatment – we will be certain that we will be able to reduce cervical cancer in Guyana.

This Budget also allows us to provide more mammograms so that those persons who want to screen, to see whether they have breast cancer, would be able to do so. During this year, we would like to introduce three more mammography machines to Guyana. One would be at the New Amsterdam Hospital, one would be at the Linden Hospital Complex, and another would be at West Demerara Regional Hospital. In addition to all of this, we would also be offering family

planning assistance to more than 16,000 women across this country. For pregnant women who need care packages, we have budgeted to provide these for at least 3,000 women. These are just some examples of how women would benefit from this Budget.

In terms of chronic non-communicable diseases, the last Government had no programme to address these. In fact, in 2021, when we came back to Government, we established a special programme to deal with chronic non-communicable diseases. You can check the budget because it is a programme now in the budget. I want to highlight a few things that we are doing under this programme. I want to touch a little bit on diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases. For diabetes, the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) estimates that we probably have close to 60,000 persons who are affected. One of the first things that we did was ensure that we develop new guidelines to manage diabetes. We did this with expert consultation from consultants from Mount Sinai. So, we now have new diabetes guidelines. To improve how we manage people, one of the things that we did was move away from using glucometers to using glycated haemoglobin (HbA1c) as the gold standard for testing. This is relatively new to Guyana although it has been around in the world for a long time.

In preparing for these new guidelines, last year we purchased more than 40 different HbA1c machines and distributed them to every region in Guyana so that people can have access to this testing. Yesterday, in one of the presentations, the Hon. Member, Ms. Beverly Alert, said that at the West Demerara Regional Hospital we do not have glucometer strips. I called the Regional Health Officer (RHO) to find out whether this is accurate or not. I can say to the Hon. Member that we have an abundance of testing strips, and anyone who needs to be tested can go there and get tested. In addition to that, we also have two HbA1c machines where people can be tested for diabetes. But we did not stop there. If we are going to manage and get better control of patients' glucose, we also need to update the medication options. Since last year, we have changed out a lot of the medication and we are using new medications for our diabetics. In this year's Budget, the Minister has adequately provided for us to buy more new medications so that we can effectively control diabetes in Guyana.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister. To hear more about this you will need an extension.

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

I am tempted, Mr. Speaker, to volunteer 30 minutes of my own time to the Hon. Member, but were you not so inclined, I move that the Hon. Minister be given five minutes to conclude his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Minister, Dr. Singh. Hon. Minister, Dr. Anthony, you may continue to conclude in five minutes.

Dr. Anthony: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There are quite a lot of things that I want to say. So, I will try to wrap up in these last couple of minutes. In this Budget, this Government has set aside money to make sure that we can improve the infrastructure of the healthcare system in Guyana. We have budgeted for 13 new hospitals. So, we have eight right now that are under construction, and we have the Bartica Regional Hospital that will be coming on stream. I want to say to the Hon. Member who spoke before me that, under the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC), they went to India and got a loan. It was supposed to be for the West Demerara Regional Hospital, the Public Hospital Suddie, and the Bartica Regional Hospital. When we came in, nothing was done. When we came in and went out we recognised, from doing the design, that the money would not be enough to do all three hospitals. So, we decided that we were going to spend the money to fix the Bartica Regional Hospital. In addition to the Bartica Regional Hospital, we will be doing the hospitals at Lethem, Moruca, Kamarang and Kato. This would change the infrastructure landscape for our hospitals in this country. We have also been using technology, and with this technology we have started telemedicine. Right now, we have 25 telehealth centres in this country, and we will be adding, from this Budget, another 25. Some of the things that we are doing in telemedicine are truly revolutionary. In the next week, the President will be opening a telepathology centre – the first in this region – where we would be able to take samples here, take high-resolution images, and send them abroad so that we could have a diagnosis done abroad.

Quite a number of things were raised by the last speaker, one of which was nursing and nursing training. I want to say to the Hon. Member that the migration of nurses is a global phenomenon; it is not only confined to Guyana. What is important is what we do. The capacity to train nurses in this country, with the three nursing schools, was about 200

nurses per year. Last year, we started a programme where we have 1,200 persons right now doing nursing. This year, we are taking in another 1,200. Next year, we are taking in another 1,200. The year after that, we will take in another 1,200, and we will employ every single one of them. Next month, we will also be taking in 1,000 persons to do the Nursing Assistant Programme. Next year, we will take some more. The year after that we will take some more. While we take in those persons... [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] Let me explain the payment to you.

Under the APNU/AFC from 2016 to 2020, the percentage change for a Staff Nurse was 35%. Under this Government, from 2020 to 2023, the percentage change in their salaries was 71%. For a Staff Nurse/Midwife, your change for the five years was 15% and this Government gave them 91% more on their salaries. That is the change. That is the change. So, there are lots of things that we can say. There are lots of things. We have lots more but as many of the Members over there have said, they are not supporting the Budget. Whether you support it or not, we are going to pass the Budget so that the people of this country can benefit from all the good things that we have in store for them. I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member Dr. Anthony. Hon. Members, before we suspend for lunch, as soon as we return the speaker will be the Hon. Minister of Public Works, Bishop Juan Edghill. This is a good time to take the suspension.

Sitting suspended at 12.42 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 2.18 p.m.

Thank you, Hon. Members. Please be seated. I notice that the Hon. Member Mr. Mahipaul is making noise out of his seat.

Mr. Mahipaul: [Inaudible]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, let us welcome the children from Marian Academy and their teacher this afternoon. I now invite the Hon. Minister of Public Works, the Hon. Bishop Juan Edghill to make his contribution.

2.20 p.m.

Minister of Public Works [Bishop Edghill]: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for the opportunity.

Mr. Speaker: Do not start as yet. Try one more time with the podium; I would like to get your presentation from the

podium. Give us a few moments to get a technician; hold on. I want you at the podium.

[**Hon. Members:** (*Inaudible*)]

Hon. Chief Whip for the Government, are you imputing?

Ms. Parag: No, Sir.

Bishop Edghill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: You are starting at 2.21.21 p.m.

Bishop Edghill: Thank you, Sir. Mr. Speaker, I rise this afternoon to join this debate on *Budget 2024*, and in doing so I must acknowledge the hard work, dedication, and commitment of my colleague, whom I have been working with for the past many years in Government, in the person of Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh. In doing so, I want to also acknowledge the hard work of his staff at the Ministry of Finance; and, in no lesser manner, I would also like to acknowledge the hard work of my staff at the Ministry of Public Works and all its agencies. May I say in this presentation that I am also recognising and acknowledging the partnership that I enjoy with my Minister, the Hon. Deodat Indar, the Minister within the Ministry of Public Works. There are seven statements that I want to make before I go into my presentation, and to deal with some rebuttals as well.

Statement of fact, number one: Guyana is experiencing a new paradigm of accelerating development. That is a statement of fact. All my colleagues on the other side will agree with me on that.

Secondly, statement of fact: The PPP/C is one of the most visible, transparent, efficient, sensitive and responsive governments that Guyana has ever seen. Statement of fact: In every region, in every community, the President, the Cabinet, and all their officers can be seen engaging people. When we come to this House to present things, it is because we listen and we respond.

Third statement of fact: Our actions and interventions are always people-centred. When we make decisions and interventions and there is policy formulation, we answer the question, how does this benefit the people? When we come here to debate and present our facts, projects, programmes, and policies for support, we answer the acid test, how does this benefit the people? I will spend some time this afternoon speaking about how *Budget 2024* benefits the people.

Statement of fact: What is happening in Guyana now is that the latent potentialities of our people are being discovered,

organised, and mobilised all across this country. We are not just talking about Guyana has the potential to do, we are not talking about what we have the potential to do. We have discovered, we are organising and mobilising those potentials for the development of Guyana.

Statement of fact, number five: Our goal and our mission of the team PPP/C is to modernise and transform Guyana. We cannot continue to refer to ourselves as, 'poor Guyana, old Guyana, poorest country in the Caribbean.' We are modernising and transforming Guyana.

Statement of fact, number six: We in the PPP/C are not splurging, we are catalysing. It is a statement of fact, and I will build that case this afternoon. We are not splurging. So, when I present to you what we are going to do with our money that has been allocated, you will see that it is not splurging, and I will make the case that if we do not do it now how much it would cost us five years and 10 years from now.

Statement of fact, number seven: We are utilising our current opportunities. We have current opportunities that exist because of the global environment, because of what is happening in Guyana, because of the reality that we are now engaging in petroleum, but we are utilising that opportunity to secure the future prosperity of Guyana. That is a statement of fact. Whatever we are doing is not just about now; we are securing the future prosperity of Guyana.

Since we have gone through that, I want to address a few things. My very good friend – and I believe that we get along quite well all these years that we have known each other – the Hon. Member Khemraj Ramjattan, stood up in this House and he made a very compelling statement that, if not properly examined and scrutinised, the people in Guyana could run away with the wrong impression, and I am going to correct that now. The Hon. Member said that this Budget caters for the 'contractor class'; 1,000 persons will benefit from this Budget. Basically, he was saying that in the Capital Budget or the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP)... For those who are listening, the PSIP, the Capital Budget, is about \$666 billion. It is a fact that in the preparation of bills and estimates for projects, there is always a profit margin close to 20%. What he did was to take out 20% of that and it will take you to just over \$120 billion and he said 1,000 persons are going to benefit from \$120 billion, and 54,000 public servants and 72,000 pensioners are going to benefit from \$121 billion – one thousand of the rich people and over 100,000 of the poor people at the bottom suffering – and he showed that there in

inequity in the distribution of resources. [Mr. Nandlall: An intoxicated analysis.] I would not want to say that, but I like the sound of it, an intoxicated analysis.

What is the reality? Number one, the 72,000 pensioners – I hope some of them are listening to me – do not get support from the budget line that Mr. Ramjattan is talking about of employment cost of \$121 billion. There is a separate budget line that I think is in this year's Budget of some \$43 billion plus allocated for pensioners. So you are wrong on that first point. He knows that he is wrong on the first point.

Secondly, let me start with the Ministry of Public Works. In the Ministry of Public Works alone, in 2023, we engaged almost 4,000 contractors. That is not the whole country. And do you know something? I will give a little break down because some people like to talk about the small contractors to the big contractors. In the category of \$15 million and under, 1,438 contractors were engaged. That is \$15 million and under, small contractors – one thousand, four hundred and fifty-eight across the length and breadth of Guyana.

Secondly... [Mr. Nandlall: (Inaudible)] I am coming to that. In the middle, \$15 million to 100 million, at the Ministry of Public Works, not in the whole country, 601 contractors. Hon. Member Mr. Ramjattan, at the Ministry of Public Works alone, \$100 million and over, 114 contractors. [Hon. Members: (Inaudible)] All right. Now, listen to this, at the National Procurement and Tender Administration Board (NPTAB) I have been advised Hon. Member, Mr. Jones – I notice you are looking at me – and my sister, Hon. Member Annette Ferguson, that for more than 6,003 projects, more than 54,740 contractors submitted bids. Do you understand what is happening here, Mr. Speaker? If the analysis starts on the wrong premise, the end result is on the wrong premise. I stand here today to correct this farce that *Budget 2024* is for a 'contractor class'; *Budget 2024* is for all Guyanese.

One of the things we have to do is explain to people how the Budget benefits them. Apart from the Capital Budget of \$666 billion plus, which is where people will get projects, awards of contracts for purchasing of capital, new contracts and businesses – some of them are rollovers. In the current Budget – I want the people to listen – Vehicles Spares and Maintenance, there is an allocation of \$2 billion. Do you know what that means? All the vulcanizing shops, tyre shops, mechanic shops, the men who have to sell the few car parts and so on, these are opportunities for them in this Budget. Under Other Transport, the man who rents his taxi, bus, boat and all the rest of it in the interior, \$2 billion. These are not the contractors that I just spoke about; these

are other suppliers. Under Security, where a number of our women are engaged, this Opposition which likes to say that they are championing the cause of women, you must explain to them why you are not supporting a budget where employment for them, the security, in the recurring budget, is almost \$12.1 billion. Hundreds, if not thousands of persons, are benefitting from this in all 10 regions. In the budget line of Equipment Maintenance \$2.9 billion. In the budget line of Refreshment and Meals, the caterers and all the people who will provide for meetings and all the rest of it, there is money that is available there, some \$541 million commutatively, across the whole country, all the agencies and ministries. The purchase of Other Goods and Services under line items 6284 and 6294 – \$19 billion; \$8 billion.

2.35 p.m.

Hon. Member, when you do the mathematics, you have almost \$70 billion of opportunities; taxi driver, minibus driver, boat man, mechanic, printer, stationery supplier, plumber... I have not gone with the maintenance of roads, maintenance of infrastructure, and maintenance of drainage and irrigation. We have not gone into that. This is just the ordinary. I am here to tell the people of Guyana, do not be fooled by people who told you that 34 is the majority of 65 and not 33. They are just doing it again in a different form. Do not let us mix it up. [Mr. Mahipaul: (inaudible)] It is 33 and you are not qualified to correct ...

In the Ministry of Public Works, where there seems to be a very aggressive attack that the budget is heavy on infrastructure, its total capital budget is \$225 billion. The total budget of the Ministry is \$236 billion. My honourable friend and colleague, the Minister of Culture Youth and Sport, Mr. Charles Ramson, when the Hon. Member debated said, please explain to us which project you want us to drop. If you would not like me to build the Demerara Harbour Bridge, stand and say so now. Do you know why, Mr. Speaker? I was having a conversation... Just let me explain to the people of Guyana who are listening, let us say the minimum wage is \$80,000, which is the lowest salary somebody can be paid, a man is trapped in traffic for two hours or two and a half hours per day, it would cost that person a minimum wage value of about \$1,300 per day active/productive time. If the 23,000 to 25,000 vehicles – minibus, big bus, cantor, truck, taxi, private people bringing friends to work, school children – which exit cross the bridge daily is multiplied by four that would be \$92,000 to \$100,000 right there. If that is multiplied by the \$1,300, then multiplied by 300 days per year – numbers are getting too big. Tell me if you do not want it. All right, if you do not

want the hope like canals that are being built in Region 5 and Region 6, since you are saying that you represent farmers, stand and tell us that you want those places to be flooded when there is heavy rainfall and that you will provide them the subsidies to keep them going when they cannot plant; you will pay them for the cows, the sheep and everybody who is dying in those floodwaters. Stand now and tell us, you do not want us to spend on that. I call on the Hon. Members. I can give you some of my time to tell the people why you do not want to.

If they do not want us to bring gas-to-shore to produce electricity, to bring down our electricity cost by 50%, which means that everything that depends on electricity if the price rip is going to be manageable and go down. Tell us you do not want them because they are real cost of living measures that will affect every household in Guyana. If they do not want us to modernise the Cheddi Jagan International Airport; if you do not want us to bring in new airlines; if you do not want us to provide an opportunity in tourism, so that employment could go to your children and your children's children, stand and tell us now. If you cannot stand and tell us now, shut up and go home. If you do not want us to spend the money on navigational aids in our rivers, so that our ferries and our miners could move through safely in the day and night, stand and tell us – take the money out now. If you do not want us to buy the vessels so that we can carry the pilots out to bring in the big vessels that need to come to Guyana in our river channel, stand and tell us now. If you do not want us to maintain the current Demerara Harbour Bridge while we are building the new bridge, stand and tell us now. If you do not want the Community Roads programme, which has been allocated \$70 billion, to continue so that the letters that you have been writing me, I could respond to you and say we are going to do it because we have the money, stand and tell us now. I did not bring the letters to them, because I respect my Colleagues that they have the write to make representation for people. If you are going to write to me and ask me to fix the road, I have to have the money in the budget to respond to you to fix the road.

I heard an Hon. Member, who is not here and I do not know why, was talking about how we are not doing any road in Haslington. Listen, I want any of the Members or the society at large to take photographs of the roads in Melanie because all have been completed Melanie Damishana. I believe that the Hon. Member, Mr. Devin Sears, who spoke last night... I will spare Hon. Member, Mr. Figueira at this time. He has his own challenges. ...would like to be honest, I want him to take out the 62 concrete roads that is being built in Linden

and the several other asphaltic concrete roads that have been built in Linden, as we do not like the budget because they are spending the money on Linden. Do you know something, Mr. Speaker? This A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance for Change (APNU/AFC) Government is like an abusive husband.

I am making an analogy. In 2015, the girl fell in love with him. He promised her that he is going to buy her Diamonds; he will take her on vacations; and he will carry her to heaven. After five years of abuse, slap and beat down, he punished her father, he took away the water subsidy and electricity subsidy. [Mr. Ramson: He already got what he wanted.] Yes, he already got what he wanted. He turned around and punished her children. The school grants she was receiving, he took it away. The lady decides that she will take a new partner. The new partner that she has taken her to Kings Jewelry World and buys a Diamond (*inaudible*). I planned to buy that for you. When the current man is now buying, the ex-husband says I had planned to buy you a bigger one. This is all we have been hearing whole day; I had plans; I had plans; I had plans; it is our programme; it is our programme; I would have bought a bigger one; it is our thing you took. You had the opportunity to treat the Guyana people well and you did not. You blew it. Do not come here now as if you are the epitome of righteousness, to lecture us on this other side about how we run in the country. If you will make criticism, tell us what we could do better.

Mr. Speaker, I want to describe the Guyana that we are building, at the same time, tell you what is happening in every region and how everybody in Guyana will benefit from *Budget 2024*. We are going in order. Well, let us start with Region 1. We are building new stellingings at Port Kaituma, Mabaruma and Morawhanna. We have a new vessel that is flying the route the MV MA Lisha that means we now have three vessels that are going to Region 1. We have built up the concrete roads in Matthew's Ridge, continuing in Mabaruma continuing from Moruca all the way down to Kuribana. We are building all the infrastructure in Mabaruma. We are taking the road down to Hosororo. In Region 1, the people are happy.

Let us talk about Region 2. Where is Mr. Holder? The Hon. Member, Mr. Holder, is not here today and I apologise for his absence. The people of Region 2 are the happiest that they have ever been. The people in Region 2 are happy because the services that are being offered by the Transport & Harbours Department have significantly improved, more trips and better timings. The other day, I was making a trip

to Region 2 and a young boy was having his game, and he was sort of uncomfortable and upset. I said to him, what is the problem? He said, I do not have wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi). When I tell you the People's Progressive Party Civic (PPP/C) is sensitive and responsive... We have put Wi-Fi on the MV MA Lisha going to Region 1. Why can we not put Wi-Fi in the Sabanto and Kanawan, so that the people when they are going home, 90 minutes they could get their homework done and all the rest of it? We will continue to improve the service at Region 2.

Region 3, wow! A new center or I should say epicenter of development in Guyana at this time – housing, new malls, new development but look at the improvement of the road infrastructure, sea and river defenses. [Mr. Mahipaul: We did all of that.] You are just like the abusive man who said *we di plan fuh do that*. Parika Stelling is going to undergo major rehab, the building of the New Demerara Harbour bridge connectivity from Region 3 and Region 4 is going to be like never before, the man from Tuschen will be able to join a four-lane highway from Schoonard to Parika. He can get over the river and get to work in 20 minutes to reduce travel time – great accessibility.

Let us come to Region 4, I have to talk about Georgetown because sometimes people behave as if we frightened to do things in Georgetown. I heard the other day a big set of complaining about the delays of Cemetery Road and Conversation Tree.

2.50 p.m.

They are delayed but, under our watch, they will be completed. Look at what is happening in Georgetown, the most visited place in Georgetown right now is the Kingston Seawall. All of you who are prepared to say that you are representatives of the people of Georgetown must go through Independence Boulevard on Saturday and Sunday and see how the people are enjoying the new developed... Mr. Speaker, I happen to know that you have visited that area because of your own background of living in that area. [Mr. Ramson: Thousands of people out there.] Thousands of people out there.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, unfortunately, you do not have thousands of minutes. You will need an extension of five minutes to conclude.

Ms. Parag: I would like to ask for 30 minutes for the Hon. Member to share some more licks, I mean statements, in this honourable House to conclude his statement.

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Bishop Edghill: Thank you so graciously, Sir.

Region 5 – the farm-to-market access roads that are being developed and maintained.

Region 6 – the Palmyra development, the municipal airstrip that has to be delivered out there, the hotels, the stadiums, the housing development and the expansion of the road to four lanes from Palmyra all the way out to Moleson Creek. Do you want it or you do not want it?

Region 7 – the improvement of the airstrips in those areas, the building out of the roads and the Bartica Stelling that is being rehabilitated, which should have been done since under the APNU/AFC. [Mr. Seeraj: It was their plan.] Their plan? They started it and then we had to terminate it and start over.

Region 8 – the hundreds of people who are engaged in roads that are linking their communities and the more than \$300 million that we have injected in those communities every year in community contracts to maintain those roads.

Region 9 – the connecting of Region 8 and Region 9... I did not tell you as yet about the Linden to Lethem Road that will benefit all of them because that is Region 10. I am leaving it for the last.

Region 10 – the roads. Do you want the Wismar Bridge or you do not want it? You cannot say you are not supporting the Budget and you do not want the bridge because we have gotten a better deal. The sum of \$35 million for four lanes as against your \$30 million for two lanes. The documents were put out publicly by you. Do you want us to continue the road from Orealla to Kwakwani? Do you want us to continue the opening up of the Savannahs for soya and corn with a road from Ituni all the way to Takama? Do you want us to build a road from Millie's Hideout getting in to Takama? Do you want it or you do not want it? If you want it, support *Budget 2024*.

I know that we are running out of time but we have our soil and materials laboratories at the Ministry of Public Works and our designs department to improve the quality of what we are doing – the Government electrical inspectorate. Do you want us to develop our shipping capacity at the Guyana National Shipping Corporation Limited (GNSC) so that we could bring in the cement, the aggregates and all that is needed for Guyana's development? Do you want us to collapse the Canawaima Ferry Stelling while we are waiting

on the Corentyne River Bridge or do you want us to continue it? Do you want us to be able to start conceptualising a new high span bridge across the Berbice River? Do you want the Corentyne River Bridge? If you answer to that is yes, support *Budget 2024*. It is not just the fact that we are giving more money for pensions and more money for public assistance. It is not just the fact that we are cushioning the cost of fuel by ensuring we do not add any excise tax. Every family will benefit from that one measure. Let me show you, if we had to pay the excise tax on fuel, Mr. Ramjattan's electricity bill would have gone up. The Government is subsidising Mr. Ramjattan's electricity bill by ensuring the price of fuel remains stable just like they are doing for me and just like they are doing for Auntie Sally in Crabwood Creek and Uncle Joseph in Region 1.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my Guyanese brothers and sisters, I rest my case in saying, we must not come to the National Assembly and just oppose for opposing sake. You should come here to scrutinise and say you want the Government to do these things but we want them to do them better. We guarantee you, with the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarship and the training, we are doing and the exposure of our people, we will continue to deliver with efficiency and give the Guyanese people value for money. Thank you very much and God bless you. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister and now for the very gracious and honourable, Mr. Sherod Duncan. Sir, you have the floor.

Mr. Duncan: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you know when I hear the good Bishop, I am always reminded just before Paul's conversion when he was Saul, he heard good preaching and said:

“Almost thou persuadest me.”

If verbosity could persuade – almost. We cannot run from the facts because facts are persistent things. If the Bishop wants to be honest and true to his creed as a Christian – I think the Hon. Member is and I have no doubt the Hon. Member is – the Hon. Member will note that the gas we so depend on and the oil more so that we are dependent on, that contract was signed in 1999. [Mr. Ramson: (Inaudible)] Hold on; you have made some slips *bantilion*; you have made some slips. When sorrows come Mr. Ramson, they come not as single spies. They come not as single spies. It was in 1999. It was the inept and incompetence of the PPP/C's foreign policy that kept us from benefiting from that. It was the consistent incursions in our exclusive

economic zone out there by the Venezuelans that kept us from that *largesse*. It was the Brigadier (Ret'd) David Granger-Administration – was it not – that submitted in 2018 that matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Let us be fair, where you got one per cent royalty – was it not so – and that Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) of 1999, we got two per cent but we did not do anything.

We set the framework for the 2016 Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) from which the Hon. Member, Bishop Juan Edghill, can come and boast of all of those projects. If the moneys were there, Bishop Edghill, Hon. Member – let us be fair, these past three years have added to 26 years of the PPP/C in administration – why did you not deliver a new a Demerara Harbour Bridge? Why did you not deliver on the gas-to-shore project? Why did you not deliver that new access road to the East Bank Demerara, if the money was always there and the brilliance was always there? Let us be fair. You are benefiting from the brilliance of Brigadier (Ret'd) David Arthur Granger and those ministers who served with him – let us also be fair. Ministers, Bishop Juan Edghill and Mr. Anand Persaud, let us be fair, you promised in your extract of a campaign manifesto that you were going to amend that Production Sharing Agreement because we did not know about making deal. Three and a half years later, you have not changed a word and you have not change a dutch. Do you know why? The deal sweet to fund all of your projects – let us be fair.

Sanctity of contracts: You have now gone behind that sacred veil, and you have declared sanctity of contract. You cannot fulfil your promise that you said in your campaign manifesto. It was a bad deal because you were Mr. Donald Trump and you could get a better deal. You are the deal maker. Well, change the contract. Stand on your promises and fulfil your promises in that campaign manifesto and amend the contract. Get a better deal. Let us do that and do not hide behind the sanctity of contracts. When you got into Office, Bishop Juan Edghill, there were already studies on your desk for the gas-to-shore project far below the price all of you are prepared to pay for it. It is a perfect deal you have set up. You will get manure and you will get this and that. The only thing you cannot get is investors. Why has it not started as yet?

With regard to the Demerara Harbour Bridge, was the studies not already done? Let us be fair, Bishop Edghill. If we had no interest in putting a new harbour bridge there, were we just wasting time doing the studies? That is how projects are done. The money was there and the studies were already done. If we want to be fair, that area where, the new

access road now runs on the East Bank Demerara, since in the 1970s that was on the cards.

I have lived in South Ruimveldt for 30 years of my life in the shopping plaza and understood poverty. Do you know what is the building on the right as one approaches the *jumbie bird*? Do you know what is the building on the right, Hon. Member, Ms. Sonia Parag? Do you know what the building on the right is, Hon. Member, Mr. Deodat Indar? Some of you heard about South Ruimveldt for the first time on taking government. Do not come around us funny. Do not come around us funny. That area on the right, Bishop Juan Edghill, if you have lived in South, you know that there is the ranking. Do not come around me funny. On the left of that was a Chinese restaurant which is now a dwelling place. It was a Chinese restaurant at the corner of Greenheart Street and I have known all my life that road is dedicated to a highway and that is why that land was never occupied. We did not have the money to do it. Let us be fair. You did not just swoop down and build that road in three years. The plans were already there – let us be fair.

Do you know what is poverty? Do you know what is poverty in this House? Poverty is going to the shop in East Ruimveldt, under the PPP/C's Government, and when a person buys a tennis roll and the shop man sorry for him and puts a little butter in it. A person buys \$40 milk and the shop man gives the person a spoon of sugar. Do you know what is poverty in this country? Some of you learnt about East Ruimveldt, Back Circle and Zenith when you came into Government just now and never visited those areas before. Give us a break in this Government.

We sat and we crafted a plan for the oil sector in the Production Sharing Agreement. We had an enemy at the gate in Venezuela and we tried to fend them off by taking that matter to the ICJ with the signing bonus. Where were you in defence of this nation? Where were you? We have had that. I heard the Hon. Member talk about the boardwalk. Let us be fair. I sat in City Hall when the Ministry of Public Infrastructure came and did the consultation for that boardwalk. Hold on, to show you where we are that boardwalk was not the only project, that was part of the project.

3.05 p.m.

The boardwalk was to come from the back of Stabroek Market to the seawall. Give us a break; give us a break. You might not have seen the plan, you might not have heard anything but we were busy working, fending off a Government, foreign and domestic and trying to move this

country. I want us to be fair in the National Assembly. The 2024 Budget hits different because we have had four hard Budgets before and we thought this one was going to bring something to relieve the people who have to go and buy tennis rolls and gets a dab of butter, \$40 milk and they put a little sugar was going to bring some relief to them. Alas, Mr. Speaker, it is abundantly clear ... [An Hon. Member: You want bread.] When I say it hits different, it is not in a good way at all. After again listening to the Minister, the Hon. Member, Bishop Edghill I am reminded what Joel 2:28 says in the *Good Book*:

“Your old men will have dreams and your young men will see visions”.

The Hon. Member comes out here sells us dreams. That is what the Hon. Member came out here doing. I am also reminded that this is the Hon. Gentleman with all that energy and verbosity, who could not find six dead people on a boat, without an engine moving at six nautical miles out on the west direction. The Hon. Member wants to come and tell us about vision and all that the Hon. Member can do. Should I regale this National Assembly with what we found when we assumed Office, the work we did and the roads we built? The PPP/C stood on a road in Lethem and told the people in Lethem that they did not do anything for you, on the road that we built.

The health infrastructure, we put in. the piracy, we attacked. The blackout issues, we fixed. The persistent poverty, we engaged in various mitigation measures. Governments must work and each successive government work. You are not doing the people of this country a favour; you have to work. That is called progress, where each government is building on the efforts of the next. Are you not building on our progress? You have kept a wonderful man in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation. What is his name again? You have gone with the man you said did not do nothing at the Guyana Water Incorporation (GWI) who built hundreds of wells in this country. Is that not work? [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)]

You have been impressed but you went with him as an ambassador because you hope he can fix your mess on the border. Governments must work. Do not come here and try to tell us we did not do anything. Let me tell you what we met, Mr. Speaker. I refer to *Stabroek News* newspaper Editorial of 1st June, 2015. The editorial is titled: “Sugar crisis”. We had just come into Government. The Mayor of that year... Was it Mr. Deltoro Riehls? It states:

“While the party has remained silent on the virtual bankruptcy of GuySuCo declared last week by its handpicked CEO, Dr. Rajendra Singh, the sugar unions and the majority of workers in the industry will know that the problems of accreted over the last decade and have gathered a momentum that now threatens the survival of the heavy-indebted corporation”.

Stabroek News newspaper, the bankrupt GuySuCo. The editorial goes on to state:

“Instead of showing the leadership required over the last 10 years, the PPP/C opted for innumerable excuses and kept on returning to the same pool of its loyalists in a bid to return the sugar corporation to viability”.

Stabroek News newspaper declared GuySuCo bankrupt on 1st June, 2015. Yet, you come here and you preach that we failed the industry. We were cleaning up your mess; that is what we were doing. Let us be honest, Hon. Member, Mr. McCoy. Who closed the Diamond Sugar Estate? Where those houses stand in Diamond, there was lush green cane field. Who closed the Diamond Sugar Estate? We are bad for sugar – let us be honest. *Stabroek News* newspaper of Wednesday, 31st March, 2010. Listen to the article; who closed the estate.

“Over 400 sugar workers staged a protest early at Plantation Diamond after GuySuCo failed to respond to a letter seeking severance pay for workers who are to be transferred to other areas”.

In 2010, the PPP/C closed the Diamond Estate. Who closed the La Bonne Intention (LBI) Sugar Estate in 2011? Do not come to us funny as though you are saviours of the sugar industry, when you have been the undertakers of the sugar industry. Do not do it. Do not come around us funny like that. Who closed the LBI Sugar Estate? The facts are stubborn things. We know the rest. When the APNU/AFC were on a course to right-size the industry. The PPP/C acknowledged that by their own actions, the closing of the Diamond Sugar Estate and closing the LBI Sugar Estate. Let us be honest with the citizens of this country. *Budget 2024* hits different. In the words of the Hon. Member, Mr. Jordan, “everywhere the faces of Aunty Betty in Port Mourant, Uncle John in New Amsterdam, Brother John from Kamarang cannot *ketch demself* as yet because the 2024 Budget hits different. Stay calm Guyana, the APNU/AFC is here. My Colleagues laid out skilfully, articulately, methodically and with coherence, the arguments that should

give cause to any government who demonstrates care and concern and enjoys a one-seat majority in the National Assembly.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, demonstrating some care and concern, I will ask for five minutes for you.

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, I do request, like the Hon. Member, Ms. Parag, that the Hon. Member be given 30 minutes to complete his presentation, but we will accept five minutes, Sir.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, gracious Duncan, you have five minutes to conclude, from now.

Mr. Duncan: Gracious Speaker, thank you very much. If we continue on this course, this will be a runaway Constitutional government who continue in every stretch to break down the guardrails of democracy. The Government’s amendments to the Fiscal Management and Accountability Act (FMAA) were deemed unconstitutional. The Hon. Member, Ms. Walrond, initial appointment as a Minister in this House was deemed unconstitutional. The appointment of the Parliamentary Secretaries was deemed unconstitutional. The Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) power to direct Magistrates, the arbitrary imposition of Haitians from travelling to Guyana, that is the sort of government we have if we do not reign them in. We have a plethora of the litany of other cases of an unconstitutional government that cannot be set to be on the right course. We have to change course because we are heading in the wrong direction.

Let me turn my attention to housing and water quickly. In true PPP/C’s fashion, one waits until the last three minutes and then sticks in something. The Hon. Member, Mr. Sasenarine Kowlessar said he was the Minister within the Office of the President in 2000. He said that they had catapulting housing in relatively a very short space of time. They were aiming to revolutionise the housing industry with about 20,000 houses per year. Now, if you have been in Government for 23 years and gave 20,000 per year, do the mathematics. The PPP/C’s mathematics never *mathsing*. Do the mathematics and you will see where we are.

We travelled this country, in closing up, and we listen to the presentation for instance, of the Hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, we are frightened. What a beauty. We were there in Region 1, Imbotero. We had to look the citizens there in their eyes. The enemy is at the gate in Venezuela and they ask you, ‘what is happening’? We went to Imbotero and went to Yarrakita. There was not a

government minister in sight because everybody was so frightened. The Hon. Vice-President himself said it sounds as though Delcy is going to be in Georgetown next week. They were frightened. They are asking us in Imbotero what is happening because we joined with them in solidarity on the Venezuelan issue. We said the Government got this. They never showed up at Imbotero and the rest is history. They never had to look people in the eyes who are fearful for their lives. When we listened and hoped for a glimmer, a sliver of hope in the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation, we are still waiting.

No housing project is going on in Region 1, save Kokerite which was started under the APNU/AFC. At Five Miles the project there is stalled and, of course, the people of Five Mile asked us to deliver a message to the Hon. Member, Mr. Croal, who said in 2021, water was coming to Five Mile at the end of the month". They are still waiting. They said so long we have not seen you.

Region 8 – the Salbora is contaminated. People are taking water from the Salbora and selling it back to citizens. Do you know that right here in Georgetown that the Hon. Member, Bishop Edghill, pontificated so much about, the water that comes through your tap looks like the colour that A New and United Guyana (ANUG) uses as its Party colour? It is orange. We have a long way to go.

Region 9 is a sad case. I heard the Hon. Member talk about connectivity. In Region 9, in a village called Tiger Pond – a beautiful village with beautiful people – there is an information communications technology (ICT) hub there. There is equipment inside there and locked up. Do you know why? It is because the APNU/AFC built it. At Karasabai next door, there is an equal ICT hub there with equipment inside and it is locked up. They refused to touch it. Why is that? It is because it is the APNU/AFC who built it. The things they are building such as the Parara Bridge is installed. The Karasabai Secondary School, Minister of Education, installed. We want our children to go to school, to get the kind of education they desire.

This Budget could be a good budget, but you have to embrace the inputs from the Parliamentary Opposition and together we can move this country forward. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and thank you, Members of the National Assembly. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, gracious Mr. Duncan, Hon. Member. Hon. Members, I now invite the Hon. Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Water, the Hon. Member, Ms. Rodrigues to make her contribution.

Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Water [Ms. Rodrigues]: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I sat in this National Assembly, over the last four days, and I watched as Opposition Member after Opposition Member approached the podium and delivered theatrical performances, as though we are being scored on the delivery as opposed to the content of our presentations.

3.20 p.m.

I believe the Hon. Member confused, for a moment, where he was. I think he thought he was in the ring, but he is in the National Assembly. We were treated a few moments ago to a very vulgar presentation.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you cannot impute on the Minister. Please withdraw that.

Ms. Rodrigues: I withdraw, Mr. Speaker. A comical presentation would be comical if it was not so serious because it was laden with false information. Everybody in this country knows that oil was discovered in May, 2015, under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government. In 1999, under the exploration licence that was signed by the then President Janet Jagan...

[Mr. Nandlall: Exploration licence.] Exploration licence, not an agreement. When that licence was signed, we had no proven reserves. Exploration was risky business. In 2016, after oil was discovered in 2015, and, as a matter of fact, they said it was a gimmick, they said it was an election gimmick. That is what they said when oil was discovered, and the announcement was made in 2015. Nevertheless, in 2016, when they went to renegotiate the contract to sign the production sharing agreement for the 1% extra that he boasted and bragged about at this podium, for the 1% extra, we had three billion proven barrels of oil reserves. It was not risky business then. It was proven reserves, and they got a 1% increase. So, it was total rubbish what we were just exposed to from the Hon. Member.

Then, Mr. Speaker, how can we forget when they renegotiated this contract and renegotiated 1% for the Guyanese people? They also renegotiated \$18 million in a signing bonus for which they hid from the Guyanese public for over one year... **[Mr. Ramson:** And lied about it] ...and lied about it. They said it was a gift.

Mr. Speaker: Again, you know, do not follow some of your Colleagues, 'lie' is unparliamentary, please. You already imputed it.

Ms. Rodrigues: They concealed the truth from the Guyanese people about the \$18 million signing bonus and

then, in fact, said they thought it was a gift. The Hon. Mr. Duncan spoke about constitutionality. Imagine the APNU/AFC speaking about constitutionality when the Guyanese people saw constitutional violation after constitutional violation for the entire term of the APNU/AFC's term in Government. From the appointment of the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) Chairman to the elections petition, one after the other. In fact, the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) ruled that the then President violated the Constitution, Mr. David Arthur Granger. The first time ever in the history of our country.

I cannot waste this time that I have here because, if I go one point after the other that the Hon. Sherod Duncan made there, I will use up my 30 minutes or 35 minutes of this presentation. We will split up the response to the Hon. Duncan. This is because I believe we have a duty to the people who are watching us. They want to know: how does this budget impact their lives? What is in this budget for me? That is what the people expect to hear from us when they tune in to these debates. I want to spend a little bit of time on infrastructure.

It is convenient to say that infrastructure will benefit the private sector or benefit contractors. It is convenient to say that because there is no other criticism, and we are in here for four days now already and not a single constructive criticism of our infrastructure programme. None of these investments, Mr. Speaker, are consumption-based. All of this, majority of the investments we are making, is on capital expenditure, building infrastructure for the future, sustainable infrastructure. All of our spending is on things that add value to people's lives. The Hon. Khemraj Ramjattan, in his presentation, while he attempted to critique the infrastructure budget, I believe he went too far. This is because they used this argument before, Mr. Speaker. This is a recycled argument about slush funds and corruption and so on, from 2015. It was even in their manifesto in 2015 about reaping the democratic dividends, when they said that there was 28% to 35% procurement fraud and that they would be able to save this money. It is a recycled argument because they went into Government and they did not find any of this corruption that they said existed. As a matter of fact, they have members on their side who are now before the court charged with fraud for when they were in Office.

They never found this democratic dividend. It is a recycled argument and they have reworked the argument now and said that this is going to result in a caste system. Mr. Speaker, I want to speak to the facts. Now the fact is, take housing, for example, our infrastructure spending, in 2019,

the Central Housing & Planning Authority (CHPA) said they will deliver 5000 house lots per year. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) then, Mr. Lelon Saul, was giving an interview and he said, 'I want you to understand it costs approximately \$3 million to develop a House lot'. He was right, Mr. Speaker. He was right in 2019. In the year 2024, in our budget, the cost for infrastructure, for the first phase infrastructure is estimated at \$2.5 million per house lot and an additional \$1 million for when we do the upgrade to asphalt, put in the pure line distribution network for water, electricity and so on. We are working with an estimate of \$3.5 million per house lot. This is five years after the APNU/AFC Government said that they were spending \$3 million per house lot – just a \$500,000 increase.

The point I am making is that, there is no slush fund lying around the place that can be used to facilitate corruption. It is patently false, and the Hon. Member Khemraj Ramjattan knows that. It is false. We now have to struggle to find contractors to build houses in the housing sector because the cost is so low. Anybody who wants to construct a house now knows that if they have to construct that same home on their own, it will cost them more. It is costing less through the housing programme because we are utilising economies of scale. This is a lean budget, Mr. Speaker. It is a lean budget, and we are using it to add value to people's lives. It is convenient to say it is for corruption and all of that. That is very convenient, but it is not true. We have reports. We have the International Monetary Fund (IMF) representatives who came here in September, 2023. The staff commended the Authority's progress in strengthening the Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) governance anti-corruption frameworks and support further advances in their effective implementation. Mr. Speaker, the report said:

“Several pillars of the anticorruption framework have been further strengthened, including the Integrity and Public Procurement Commissions and the National Procurement and Tender Administration Board.”

Mr. Speaker, must we forget when, for three years, the Coalition Government Members did not submit to the Integrity Commission. They disbanded the Integrity Commission, so we were never able to establish a baseline. Who was pulling blinders over the eyes of the public? But they walk around with blinders on now.

Now, infrastructure is so much more than building roads and bridges, the Opposition would want you to believe that is the

beginning and the end of the story. It is not so. There has been a lot of research conducted and peer-reviewed academic papers... By the way, we were treated to a lot of presentations today with opinions, not today alone – the last four days of opinions. There has been a lot of research conducted and peer-reviewed academic papers, written on the link between investment in infrastructure and economic growth. There are also studies done on bridging the global infrastructure gap and studies on how developed countries have harnessed infrastructure and technology to propel development and reduce poverty. While developing countries have been unable to achieve similar levels of development and huge portions of their populations remain impoverished because of a lack of basic infrastructure, the evidence suggests that infrastructure is essential for a strong economy and has the potential to lift families out of poverty by reducing inequalities. One academic paper written by Cesar A. Calderon and Luis Servén, two leading World Bank economists, conducted a study in Latin America over 100 countries and provided an empirical evaluation of the impact of infrastructure development on economic growth and income distribution.

“The empirical strategy involves the estimation of simple equations for GDP growth and conventional inequality measures, augmented to include... infrastructure quantity and quality indicators in addition to standard controls.”

The results are, Mr. Speaker:

“(i) growth is positively affected by the stock of infrastructure assets, and (ii) income inequality declines with higher infrastructure quantity and quality.

These two results combined suggest that infrastructure development can be highly effective to combat poverty.”

And income inequality – that is what the people at home need to know. Then they will understand: how does this translate to my life? How so you might ask? Well, by providing jobs. Many of my Colleagues spoke at length about the impact that the infrastructure programme will have on our economy by ensuring people have access to safe drinking water, to food, building the farm to market roads, access to shelter or housing, quality healthcare, and schools for education.

3.35 p.m.

These are basic human rights. We have not gotten to other things like affordable electricity, internet connectivity and so on. What must we do also with the pleas of the residents who come to our community meetings? Are we supposed to ignore the pleas of residents at community meetings for better roads? All my Colleagues here are in the fields. Regardless of their portfolios, whenever they go to community meetings, the number one complaint is the state of the roads. Must we not respond to those people; must we not respond to the people of Region 3 who are punishing every day, spending hours in traffic, losing hours of productivity, time that could have been spent at work or with their families? Must we ignore them? Must we not build the bridge; must we not build the Wismar McKenzie bridge? My Friend and Colleague, the Hon. Figueira, spoke. He made several good contributions and suggestions about Region 10. But my Friend, many of the investments you spoke about depend heavily on the physical infrastructure. Private capital investment will not come to Region 10 if people have to wait to cross a one-lane bridge. All of these investments depend on the implementation of basic infrastructure. We will not be shamed. They came here to attempt to shame us into not spending this money on infrastructure. We will not be shamed into not investing in our people. We will show how this investment will benefit people and will improve the quality of life in the long term.

Let me turn to housing for a bit. We get a lot of criticism in the housing sector. We get a lot of undue criticism sometimes because we are a fruit-bearing tree. The Ministry of Housing and Water is a fruit-bearing tree and that is why we get criticism. Do you ever see anybody throwing sticks at a tree with no fruit? They throw sticks at a fruit-bearing tree. They are envious of the work in the housing sector because they never understood the housing sector. They do not know how to do it. It is hard work. It takes hard work. It takes a carefully crafted strategy to deliver affordable housing to every sector or every segment of our population across our 10 Administrative regions. To avoid criticism they say, say nothing, do nothing and be nothing. We are not a do-nothing Government. The housing programme under this PPP/C Government is the most successful ever in the history of our country. It is unparalleled anywhere in the world and certainly cannot be compared to the mediocrity offered by the APNU/AFC while they were in Government. The progress of the housing sector is visible for all to see. It is visible. You can see, you can feel, you can touch it, and you can measure. Just go on social media, hundreds of people have received their house lots over the last few weeks. There are happy faces of smiling people who received their house

lots and who received an asset for the very first time in their lives.

How could we forget the five years of neglect in the housing sector under the APNU/AFC Coalition? The APNU/AFC allocated 7,534 house lots from June, 2015, to August, 2020. As a matter of fact, it declined if you look at the pattern. In 2016, they delivered 2,020; in 2017 – 1,131; and in 2018 – 934. It was going down. If they did not lose the no confidence motion, I do not know what would have happened the next year in 2019. This is because they also made no capital investment for three years. There was no capital investment in its budget for infrastructure development in the housing scheme. [Dr. Singh: They want to know why they are sitting over there.] And they wonder why they are sitting over there. This is why. The only thing they offered the Guyanese people in the five years they were there was a jubilee discount of 50% on the last 50% of the cost for a house lot. You do not need to give a discount on something that is already 90% subsidised. Is that a strategy? Is that a plan? That is not a plan. That is not a strategy.

A total of 30,355 Guyanese are now land owners and homeowners; 13,834 women are empowered with ownership and can charter courses for their own lives; 16,094 young people are asset owners and now have their entire lives to build up their net worth. The Opposition said that we were talking in percentages, so I am not talking in percentages. I am giving real figures and numbers. The total of 28,016 people received low, moderate and middle-income house lots. Twenty-eight thousand low, moderate and middle-income families received their house lots in three years. As part of our programme, we have to spend money to acquire new land for housing. We have acquired 51 new areas for the Central Housing & Planning Authority for the period August, 2020 to 2023 for new housing development. For this year 2024, 10,000 house lots will be delivered to Guyanese of every income category.

Another common criticism made in this House is that we are using the oil money. [Mr. Duncan: Are you not using oil money?] That is not the point, Hon. Duncan. Wait for it. They used that to justify the expenditure, but, Mr. Speaker, let me tell you what they did in 2017. In 2017, they budgeted \$5.8 billion for housing development, not from the Consolidated Fund, but from the Housing Fund. They earmarked \$5.8 billion for housing development in the year 2016. Out of that \$5.8 billion, do you know what they spent? They spent 12% of \$5.8 billion. The Minister at the time, had to come to the National Assembly when she was

debating the 2017 Budget and explained why she only spent 12% of the budget in 2016 and they want money to spend. They do not know how to spend money because if one does not have a vision, one cannot spend the money. If one does not have a plan, one cannot spend the money. Your argument about oil money is null and void. You have to have sense to spend money. I questioned in this House already the qualifications of the Members on the opposite side of the House because if they are not qualified how can you trust them to run an oil economy? [Dr. Singh: They are clueless and incompetent.] They are clueless and incompetent.

[The Hon. Member displayed a document.]

This is pure incompetence. Twelve per cent of your budget and you want to spend oil money? We cannot allow that. The people of this country deserve better than that. We do not have any time to lose. The people need a government with a vision and a plan, with people who work hard and who know how to implement a budget. They have that with the People's Progressive Party/Civic. There are several other initiatives to support homeownership because our focus has been on making homeownership affordable. We reversed value-added tax (VAT) on locally produced building and construction materials. Value-added tax was subsequently removed from sheet rock and concrete boards and then, subsequently, cement was zero-rated as of April, 2022, to help with ensuring that homeownership becomes more affordable. To facilitate affordable financing for homeownership, we have collaborated with the commercial banks. This has resulted in reduced interest rates at mortgage institutions taking into context a global context where interest rates are rising. As a result of inflation in Guyana. Interest rates have reduced under this Government. This is credited to the Government's housing programme.

The Government raised the New Building Society (NBS) mortgage ceiling to \$20 million to give low and middle-income families access to more financing so they could build bigger homes or homes that are of a better quality. [Dr. Singh: They cut it by half.] They cut it in half when they were in Government – that is the mortgage interest relief (MIR). The mortgage interest relief ceiling was cut in half when the APNU/AFC was in Government. We raised it from \$15 million to \$30 million when we went back into Government.

We promote homeownership particularly among youths and young professionals through tax and other incentives such as the mortgage interest relief and the housing construction

programme. We did not promise to build houses in our manifesto but because we wanted to promote occupancy in our areas and promote homeownership. We started the construction of low, moderate and middle-income homes, including the young professional homes. We have offered the steel and cement subsidy programme so that we can help people get started with their foundation using the value of their land and the value of the steel and cement to cover their downpayment at the banks. In fact, the banks have been so responsive that NBS now does not require a downpayment. One is automatically qualified when he/she is given a piece of land to start building his/her home, compliments of the policies of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. We have promoted partnerships and incentivised private sector involvement in the sector such as through the Building Expo.

We have to talk about the impact of our housing programme. Let us look at the growth in the construction sector. The Hon. Minister, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, reported to this House that there has been growth in the construction sector by 26.8% and that mortgage and real estate loans have increased to 22.5%, more than double the figure for 2022. In 2022, it was 9.8%. It is now 22.5% for mortgage and real estate loans. This is ordinary Guyanese we are talking about, Mr. Speaker. Let us look at the housing portfolio at the commercial banks. I will use three. The total mortgage portfolio for the NBS, in 2020, was \$3.5 billion. Do you know what it is today, Mr. Speaker? It is \$19 billion. That is for NBS alone – one institution. For the Guyana Bank for Trade and Industry (GBTI) Limited, in July, 2020 – \$6.2 billion. In 2023, the total housing loans at GBTI valued \$15.8 billion.

3.50 p.m.

At Demerara Bank Limited, in 2020, \$9.7 billion – in July, 2020 you know. I am giving them the raw figures for when they were in Government. July 2020 – \$9.7 billion. December 2023 – \$21 billion. Do you think people would invest in an economy that is not doing well? Do you think people will not acquire assets in an economy that they do not have confidence in? These are ordinary people we are talking about, Hon. Khemraj Ramjattan; these are not contractors. These are ordinary mortgages, the values at the local banks...

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

Ms. Parag: Yes, Mr. Speaker I would love to give her the rest of the afternoon, if that is fine with you, but I will ask for the Hon. Member to conclude her presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you. Five minutes to conclude, Hon. Minister.

Ms. Rodrigues: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As usual, every debate I run out of time. There is so much to talk about, Mr. Speaker. Let me go over to water very quickly. Access to potable water currently stands at 97.3% on the coastland. More than 35,000 residents nationwide received first-time access to potable water in the past three years – 35,000 residents. We have ensured that water rates remain affordable – VAT was removed from water. You would recall that the APNU/AFC came here and talked about the love for people and poor people, they raised water tariffs twice, in 2018 and 2019, a 100% increase in water tariffs, plus they imposed a monthly fixed charge. They took away the pensioners' subsidy for water; we have restored the subsidy for the pensioners, and they claim to love the working-class people. We have reduced tariffs by 5% and we have been subsidising the cost of fuel to ensure that rates remain stable.

Mr. Speaker, we have expanded treated water. Our programme is that we will increase coverage on the coastland from 52% to 90% by 2025 and that work has started already. Seven water treatment plants are under construction, five are at the tender process right now and we will ensure that we increase our water coverage to 90%.

I want to move across quickly to the hinterland, Mr. Speaker, water supply increased in the hinterland from 46% in 2020 to 82% at the end of 2023. Through *Budget 2024* we will achieve 93% and by the end of 2025, we will have 100% access in the hinterland.

Mr. Speaker, let me give the per capita figures for water in the hinterland. Let me demonstrate their love and care for poor people. In Region 1, under the APNU/AFC Administration, the per capita investment was \$12,471 per person per capita. Do you know how much it is now? It is \$24,304 per person in Region 1.

In Region 7, they love Region 7, the per capita investment was \$6,140 during the APNU/AFC period. Today, Mr. Speaker, it is \$59,691 we are investing per person in Region 7. Who loves Region 7? Who loves the people?

In Region 9, it was \$8,847 per person. We are investing in one person in Region 9, in water alone \$65,918. A total of 75 new wells have been completed from 2020 to 2023, benefitting 30,000 people. In 2024, we proposed to drill 40 new wells with 15,100 beneficiaries. They say the people

cannot eat the roads, but they can certainly drink from the well. In closing, I want to reference a remark by the Opposition Leader at a rally recently. He said:

“When we get political power, we will use that political power to serve our people,”

When he said this Mr. Speaker, immediately preceding that comment, he told his supporters that, while the APNU/AFC was in Office between 2015 and 2020 many of the staff they inherited sabotaged them and so, when they get political power, they will use the power to serve ‘our’ people, their people, PNC people. Sounds familiar? ‘PNC people *gon get wuk*’ – sounds familiar? That is your nature, and the people have to recognise that this group of people will be a vengeful group of people. They will be vengeful. We cannot allow them. The people at home need to remember that we cannot allow them anywhere near the seat of Government again because they will rule with vengeance. They have demonstrated their incompetence, and they are incapable of generating wealth for this country. They are incapable of generating wealth and unfit to run an oil economy.

Mr. Speaker, I fully commend *Budget 2024* for passage in this honourable House. [Applause]

Ms. Ferguson: Mr. Speaker, a pleasant afternoon to you. Before I get into my presentation this afternoon, let me say to the Hon. Member who went just before me that, based on her ending not so long ago, it gave the impression that the Coalition Government or persons were fearful of the Coalition Government while in Office. But may I remind the Hon. Member that when we took Office, Guyanese were not fearful to do whatever they wanted to do. I just want to set the record straight.

Mr. Speaker, also, my Colleague on the opposite side, Cde. Sheila Veerasammy yesterday made reference about the Coalition stopping the Sheriff/Mandela Road Project. I would like to encourage the Hon. Member to read the article published by *Stabroek News* dated 19th November, 2019, which captioned:

“IDB suspends \$\$ for Sheriff St road project over violations.”

Once you read the article Hon. Member, you will have a true picture of what would have caused the project to cease at that time. Thanks for the acknowledgement, Mr. Speaker.

I rise from this side of the House to contribute to the debate for *Budget 2024* under the theme: *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. It is classified as an enormous

budget ever, pegged at \$1.146 trillion, wow, which is 46.6 more than Budget 2023. To express my disappointment and to say that the budget theme aptly describes the nature of the PPP/C and to ask a rhetorical question: Who are they staying the course for, and, at the same time, building prosperity for which all? I have listened to Members' presentations over the last 72 hours. I must admittedly state how extremely disappointed and embarrassed I am, to say the least – as Members of Parliament we are expected to act honourably and respectfully to one another. However, unsurprisingly, honour and respect are no longer displayed in this House. Unfortunately, I have grown accustomed to the fabrication by those on the opposite side. It has become ingrained in their deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and the only thing that manifest from them. It only shows how much people will do to maintain political dominance. This National Assembly has been with us long before our Independence and remains with us years after. Leaders gone before us have left an indelible mark of stalwartness which we should sustain. However, we are on a moral and professional decline.

I believe the time is now for us to mature, seek common grounds and build a cohesive National Assembly, where we agree to disagree with each other respectfully and responsibly. As current leaders, we must charter that course for future leaders. While listening to an almost six-hour presentation by the Hon. Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, several thoughts ran through my mind, which I have yet to come to grips with. I tried processing the theme and can only endorse what my Colleagues from this side have been saying that the friends of the PPP/C, the families of the PPP/C and the favourites of the PPP/C will ascend the ladder of affluence since they are geared to benefit tremendously from *Budget 2024*, to build their empire of prosperity on the backs of the vulnerable, the poor and the public servants. Sir, here is a quote from Proverbs 14:31:

“Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”

I use this scripture to make this analogy of what currently exists in our society today. That is, people experiencing poverty continue to be oppressed, while the Government’s modus operandi are to invest in infrastructure. I say pellucidly that I have absolutely no trouble with infrastructure development, I am not against infrastructure. I am an advocate for human development. However, I detest the neglect of the poor, where all Guyanese and the world are aware that the nefarious activities have become ingrained in the contracts associated with infrastructural development

and this seems to be acceptable in Guyana. I opined that the actions of the PPP/C are heartless, uncaring and brutal to its citizens. Guyana's current poverty rate stands at 48%, yet, *Budget 2024* has absolutely nothing to change their social status.

4.05 p.m.

[Mr. Speaker left the Chair.]

[Mdm. Deputy Speaker assumed the Chair.]

As I tear away the layers of this budget, I am convinced that the large sum of money touted is just to entice the population. I would only categorise it with these descriptives – an insult to Guyanese, a betrayal of Guyanese, and a deception for Guyanese. *Budget 2024* – borrowing from renowned writers such as G.H.K. Lall – is the autonomy of a crime against the people, and a three-card trick, borrowing from the renowned Economist, Dr. Rawle Lucas. Notwithstanding the flurry of descriptives, I am reminded of the famous quote by the United States of America's (USA's) 16th President, the Late Abraham Lincoln. These are the words that he had to say:

“You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.”

The population of this country will not allow themselves to be caught in the misinformation of and misguidance by the PPP/C regime where *Budget 2024* is concerned. Additionally, I wish to debunk the flawed utterances by Hon. Members of this House, those aligned to the PPP/C and the chief of all decision-makers, Dr. Jagdeo, who is never present in this House, who perpetuate that *Budget 2024* has positives for the ordinary citizens of my beloved nation. I have examined, from cover to cover, the 2024 Budget Speech and the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure to find these so-called positives. I have only identified the following – it is boneless; it is anti-poor; and it is geared towards creating extreme hardships for the ordinary people of this land. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, much has been said about the David Granger-led Administration and this People's Progressive Party/Civic. Let me do a comparison of the two governments.

From 2015 to 2019, the budgets of the Coalition were pegged at \$1.2 trillion, while the budgets of the People's Progressive Party/Civic, over the last three years, have been close to \$3 trillion. The difference between these budgets is that the Coalition had, as I said before, a cumulative budget of \$1.2 trillion without oil revenues and accomplished a

magnitude of things in less than five years. Let me remind my friends across the aisle of what we did. We increased the salaries of public servants by 77%. Is that not remarkable? We repaired many dilapidated structures; we addressed electricity woes; we improved the water supply to a 24-hour basis; we reduced the imposed 16% value-added tax (VAT) to 14%; and we also increased old age pension from \$13,000 to \$20,500. What else did we do? We increased the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) minimum wage from \$21,352 to \$35,000; we restored the rule of the law; minimised narcotic operations; non-politicised the disciplinary forces; and had a professional public service.

We frequently hear disposable income being talked up by the PPP/C. Well, let me share what the Coalition's disposable income was. This is what the Hon. Member, the former Minister of Finance, Mr. Winston Jordan, had to say during his budget presentation in 2017:

“If the dollar and cents test is applied the results are clear.

There can be no question that people, public servants ... have more ... in their pockets now than in 2014.

The minimum wage has been increased by 38% in May 2015. The minimum wage was, \$39,540. Today [that is then] it is \$55,000. That represents a considerable increase of \$15,460.”

What else did we do?

“The Income Tax Threshold has been increased from \$50,000 to \$60,000, (a 20% increase in less than two years).

There have been two Christmas bonuses in 2015 and 2016 totalling \$75,000 (\$50,000 in 2015 + \$25,000 in 2016). It was the first time that an across-the-board Christmas bonus was paid. The PPP administration limited Christmas bonuses to the security services, leaving all other public servants empty-handed at Christmas time.”

Earlier, I alluded to the fact that the VAT was reduced by us. What else did we do?

“The VAT-exempt threshold has been increased from \$10m to \$15m.

There has been a New Personal Income Tax ... (28%/40%), which allows for greater deductions versus the ...rate of 30% under the PPP government.”

On the other hand, the PPP/C regime's fifth budget thus far has surpassed the Coalition's, giving us a cumulative amount of some \$3 million. However, though two budgets were partly themed, *Prosperity for all*, Guyanese are tasting the bitter end of the stick every day. Many have complained that it is worse under the PPP/C than under the Coalition Government. The PPP/C regime has access to the nation's oil resources but rather than make all Guyanese happy, this is what they have endured for the last three years: the high cost of living; an unprofessional and highly politicised Disciplined Forces; corruption, malpractices by office holders at the peak; increase in domestic violence; defiance of the rule of law; an 21.5% increase in salaries for public servants from a promised elections campaign of 50%; no increase in the minimum wage for public servants; high road accidents; and a misdemeanour by a Minister in public office who subsequently tendered his resignation after public outcry. I am still waiting for Mr. Su to be found and served with documents by the frequently missing in-action Member, Hon. Dr. Jagdeo. They are still to account to the nation for the mysterious US\$211 million after a cost recovery audit. There is political victimisation; irregular parliamentary sittings; the non-convening of parliamentary Standing Committees; and the resuscitation of the narcotics trade in Guyana. This is what we have endured over the last three years. What prosperity for all?

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, did you just say, resuscitation of the narcotics trade in Guyana?

Ms. Ferguson: Yes.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Do you have evidence of this?

Ms. Ferguson: Do you not see the ships leaving the country and all kinds of things? The ships are leaving with the cocaine, Mdm. Deputy Speaker.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Kindly retract your statement.

Ms. Ferguson: I will bring the reports, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. I will lay over the State Department's report to the National Assembly.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Please do so, Hon. Member.

Ms. Ferguson: I will do so, Mdm. Deputy Speaker.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Ms. Ferguson: What prosperity for all when lands occupied by ordinary Guyanese, predominantly single women with children, were flooded in September, 2020? What prosperity for all when lands occupied by residents in the Cane View

area of Mocha were bulldozed and live animals buried on 23rd January, 2023? What prosperity for all when the Hill Foot, Soesdyke/Linden Highway's residents had their lands and personal belongings bulldozed in June, 2023? May I say to the Hon. Dr. Singh that Guyanese are tired of the worn-out chorus of "rigged elections," in these budget presentations since 2020? It will serve the Hon. Member well to desist from these utterances since a competent court of law is yet to pronounce on whether the General and Regional Elections of 2020 were rigged. Also, these matters are *sub judice* and should not be mentioned in this National Assembly.

As I prepare to focus my presentation on the sector for this debate, I wish to express my disquiet about the comments contained in Hon. Dr. Singh's speech at paragraph 4.227 on page 83 of 115, under the head, Procurement. In simple layman's context, the Hon. Member, in his failed attempt, tried to hoodwink Guyanese into believing that all is well at the National Procurement and Tender Administration Board (NPTAB) when the entire world is cognisant that contracts are being awarded to companies lately created and that lack experience. In many cases, these are awarded to persons who are closely aligned to the PPP/C or arrangements are privately made at a known residence on the East Coast Demerara (ECD). I join with my colleagues in expressing my gross displeasure, disappointment, and dissatisfaction with the PPP/C regime regarding the measures announced by Hon. Dr. Singh. Despite the regime's attempt to justify the figures through the post-budget presentation by their colleague, the Hon. Dr. Singh, the different commentaries by pro-PPP/C activists and the various letters published, these cannot erase the sentiments expressed to me, as a legislator, by ordinary Guyanese who felt cheated, disrespected and lesser as citizens.

[*Mr. Speaker assumed the Chair.*]

The questions I have become immune to every day are: Where is the oil money going? *We ain't gon* benefit from this trillion-dollar budget, Ms. Ferguson. The Opposition must fight for us. *What these people doing with we money?* There is no hope for the ghetto youths – this was one ghetto youth who addressed me. *What these people believe? Is only them and their families must get rich off our moneys? Is only them must live the prosperous life?* The only work these people want to have ghetto youths is for the cleaning of roads and gutters. Let them people know that we deserve the prosperous life. The oil money belongs to us, and this constant \$25,000 handout cannot cut it. It is a known fact that our nation's resources without oil were better managed

by the Granger-led Administration. Member of Parliament (MP), Ms. Ferguson, we were enjoying the start to a good life; and we could have saved after spending. These expressions were attributed to a mixture of Guyanese, predominantly women. When I examined these announced measures contained in the Hon. Member, Dr. Singh's Budget Speech on pages 99 to 105 of 115, empathy stepped in. I continue to question myself – how are ordinary Guyanese coping daily? *Stabroek News*.... We have heard all the reports over the last 72 hours of how Guyanese have been complaining bitterly.

I now turn our attention to the housing sector which is of interest to me since I believe much justice is not given to those who deserve to benefit in accordance with the Act of the Central Housing and Planning Authority (CHPA). It clearly defines that its core creation is to provide housing for the working class. There was a major deviation from the law pre-May, 2015, and it has become much more pervasive since August, 2020.

4.20 p.m.

We have been reading of the malpractices in the housing sector. Just a couple of weeks ago, the very Ministry of Housing and Water had to put out a press release. It was discovered that one woman had three house lots from the Central Housing and Planning Authority. When one listens to the propaganda promulgated by my colleagues on the Opposite side of the House, who have responsibilities for the housing and water sectors, one gets the impression that these sectors came into existence post-May, 2015 and the Coalition did nothing, which is far from the truth. However, Guyanese are aware of what existed pre-May, 2015. There was no housing policy since whatever mechanism the PPP/C Administration had failed to satisfy the demand in housing. I can safely say that the housing programme of the past two decades was bedeviled with problems. What are some of these problems, Mr. Speaker? Prohibitive cost, the high costs, for house lots, abysmal infrastructure within housing schemes, and instances of failures on the part of some private developers. Mr. Speaker, “*yuh know I is a girl that does do meh lil research and so with wah going on across this country*”. Right now, what is happening at the Ministry of Housing and Water is that there are developers... This is what is happening in the Providence community.

[*The Hon. Member displayed an image.*]

There is housing development by private developers and many of the developers are past staff of the Ministry of Housing who have now become private housing developers.

[*The Hon. Member displayed an image*]

This is a young professional house in the Prospect area. One year. This is what is evidence. This is \$14 million, and these people are paying loans. When you are coming here, do not come to talk as though I do not know what is happening on the ground. There is a slothfulness in the processing of land titles and shoddy construction – I have just exhibited a few – work on Government housing units.

Additionally, I will share with this National Assembly what the Coalition Government inherited in May, 2015 and what was done. I challenge the Hon. Member, Mr. Croal, who is coming after me, to prove me wrong. Sir, here are the facts at the end of 2016. There were 56,466 pending house lot applications on file. This figure comprised of some 44,425 applicants who were pre-qualified for house lots, but no offer was made. Perhaps, the Hon. Croal will provide reasons why. Some 12,041 applicants were issued allocation offer letters but did not take up the allocation. Some 32% of all pending applications were classified as low income and the remainder as middle income.

In 2016, the Coalition conducted a study on the challenges facing the government housing programme in Guyana. It was discovered that the high number of pending applications for low-income applicants could have been partially attributed to a crowding out effect due to the high provision of house lots, primarily, middle and ... income earners. This was between 2009 and 2014, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, and not under the Coalition Government. The findings also found that the overall backlog of applications could also have been because of cases where the applicant may have declined an offer, despite being offered house lots across several schemes by CHPA. The findings further showed that the reasons proffered for declining included a lack of affordability at the time of offer or a lack of desire to build a home at the locations offered, in part, was due to the insufficient public infrastructure services.

Mr. Speaker, I can parallel what is currently happening in the La Bonne Intention (LBI) Housing Scheme. This is what is happening. On the eastern side, they are building hundreds of professional houses by private developers. What is happening on the eastern side in that housing scheme is that there are lantern posts with transmission lines have been run. There is water and electricity. Construction is moving apace. For the lands to the east, when you go in, this is what is happening. People have started to construct but construction is not moving apace such as what is happening in the area where the young professional houses are being constructed.

Do you know why? The people are not getting water. They do not have light. When I asked what was happening and why construction was moving so slowly, the people said – and they did not know who I am – that every day they are paying \$3000 for a black tank full of water from the trench outside of the community. They have to be working generators to cut wood and all manner of things, while the opposite side has the lights, water and the transmission wires. Do you know what one developer said to me? The guy said, “*yuh ain't see wuh happening over deh? Duh is all wah de government care about. They ain't care about poor people.*” What I recognised too is that lantern posts – I will show you – were lately installed.

[*The Hon. Member displayed an image.*]

Perhaps, you all knew that Ferguson was heading there. They knew that Ferguson was going on the ground.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I care about you, and I recognise that you have to get an extension to conclude.

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

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Chief Whip for the Opposition. Hon. Member, you have five minutes from now to conclude.

Motion put and agreed to.

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There is so much to say on the housing sector, but time will not permit me. The speaker before me said we had \$5.8 billion, and we only spent 12% of that. What the Hon. Member failed to say to us was that the Coalition Government had to expend over \$2 billion to fix all the defects on the 1000 homes that they built in Perseverance. When you come to talk about housing, come with your facts, Mdm. Susan Rodrigues.

The disparity will continue, but I think I need to put this on record. We often come to this National Assembly, and we talk so nicely about caring for people and providing 30,000 house lots, as they would constantly say. The forensic report of the Sparendaam housing project on page 20 stated at 10.5 that at the material time, Mr. Bharrat Jagdeo was Executive President and Head of the Cabinet. He was previously an allottee of Land at Goedverwagting, popularly known as *Pradoville 1*. The point is that he was awarded this land in 1998. He built a house and never lived in it. He sold the property for \$120 million in 2010. They took a land from the

National Communications Network Inc. (NCN) at Sparendaam. What did he do? They ensured lights, they ensured water, they ensured drainage and four transformers, which he never paid for. The records are right here. When you all are coming to talk about you all having love and you all caring about poor people and building homes for poor people, you all are not ready yet to speak when it comes to the housing sector. Look at what they are building in an oil economy. Who are you building these houses to give to? Mr. Speaker, I took a drive. I took these photographs mid last year.

[*The Hon. Member displayed an image.*]

I went back last Saturday to see who are really living in these houses. No one is living in these houses in that area. Guyanese do not want to live in pigsty pens. You have the \$1.146 trillion. Build houses just like in Sparendaam, *Pradoville 2* and give Guyanese proper houses. What is happening now is that the area is overgrown with bushes. Do you know why? Guyanese do not want fowl coop or pig pens to live in. Guyanese need houses.

Mr. Speaker, I am now going to wrap up and I am really, really sorry that time has eluded me. I cannot even touch the water sector, but we have done a whole lot in the water sector. For the arguments advanced earlier, I conclude by saying that it is difficult for me, Annette Ferguson, to support *Budget 2024* in its current construct since it has failed the litmus test of our people's expectations by not addressing the *bread-and-butter* issues. I will be doing my people a disservice if I am to support this measly \$3000 for old-age pension and \$3000 for public assistance. There is no increase in the minimum wage for public servants and no substantial programmes for women and youths in *Budget 2024*. Therefore, *Budget 2024*, in my view, is for the bourgeoisie. That is my respectful submission. I thank you and may God continue to bless us all. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you. Hon Member. Now for the Hon. Minister of Housing and Water, Mr. Croal.

Minister of Housing and Water [Mr. Croal]: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it is my honour to stand this afternoon in support of *Budget 2024, Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. *Budget 2024* brings us on the verge of fulfilling our manifesto promises of 2020. Those promises were made when, in the middle of the pandemic and the fight to protect our democracy, following the successful no-confidence motion, we saw that the people of our beloved Guyana suffer because the then Government

lacked vision, leadership and above all empathy for the struggles of the people.

4.35 p.m.

Today, I am proud that, less than four years later we can, without a shadow of a doubt, say that we have stayed the course, and we are building prosperity for every Guyanese. Only a few weeks ago, the successes of our rapid development were overshadowed by the threatened bygone era. But we saw the leadership that came from this PPP/C Government, led by His Excellency, President Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali. The world saw that though we might be little in number, we are giants in spirit, and together we rallied for our nation. Today, we can boldly continue the path to prosperity for all. It is not by accident that we can boast a brand new four lane highway from Sheriff Street, Mandela Junction to Diamond. It is not by accident that we have started construction of the Ogle to Diamond four lane road, the Diamond to Busby Dam, Craig four lane highway, the new Demerara Harbour Bridge and the Linden to Mabura Road. It is not by accident that Guyana's real GDP is estimated to have grown by 33% overall in 2023, and it is certainly not by accident that the Ministry of Housing and Water has allocated over 30,000 house lots to date. It is because of astute leadership, vision, strong commitment to the betterment of the people of Guyana and math because 33 will always be greater than 32.

As I continue my support for the 2024 Budget, it is important that I put into context the development of the housing and water sector from 2020 to present. The sector, at that time, as we all know, was a dismal failure. Subsidising housing was trapped in a bureaucracy under the stewardship of the Coalition Government. Despite the housing and water sector seeing three ministers and a watered-down department, APNU/AFC could not create the conditions critical to the sustainability of the sector. So, starved of public/private partnership and burdened with punitive taxes, the distribution of titles and transport and the allocation of house lots declined dramatically between 2015 and 2020. There was a backlog of 68,000 house lot applicants in 2020.

The water sector did not fare better. Some 70% of the water produced during the 2015 to the 2020 period was wasted and, despite its bloated employment, there was no notable improvement in the delivery of water by Guyana Water Inc. (GWI) nor was there any significant increase in access to water, especially in the hinterland areas. Even before, we saw fully the gravity of the challenges left at that ministry by the APNU/AFC. We made several commitments to the

people of Guyana relevant to the housing and water sector. Chief among them was the reversal of VAT on building materials; our commitment to allocating 50,000 in five years; the reduction in the processing time for applicants; the construction of more main and access roads; building of a bypass road with connections to Mocha – Eccles; investment in support in infrastructure in new and existing housing schemes; providing affordable housing financing for home ownership through increased access to loans; promoting home ownerships among youth and young professionals; facilitating partnerships with the private sector; reinstating water subsidies for pensioners; expanding treated water to more areas and the entire coast land; upgrading the transmission and distribution of water in urban, rural and hinterland areas; and enhancing and expanding the hinterland housing programme among others.

As I stand before the honourable House today, I am pleased to see that we have already achieved more than 70% of these goals. We committed to 10,000 lots per year. We have, as I said, over 30,000. We have completed infrastructure works in more than 50 new housing schemes since August, 2020. More than 23 kilometres of four lane highways have been completed and works are in progress on the Schoonard to Crane four lane and the Great Diamond to Busby Dam, Craig. Where are the housing schemes and highways done by our friends on that side of the House? Shamelessly, only three housing schemes were developed by the APNU/AFC between 2015 to 2020. The Opposition expend a great deal of time chasing after scandals. They seem to relish the drama that surrounds progress. They act as if the gaps with the bureaucratic system are only present when they are not in power. How many scandals did this country not witness when they were in office? There was *D'Urban Park gate*, *parking meter gate*, *plane gate* and, of course, *rig gate*. While they are singing about family, friends and the favoured, they are conveniently forgetting that their own minister was removed when it was discovered that her husband was benefitting from contracts in her own ministry.

Our housing priorities are not just about wood and brick buildings. We are investing in our people. New financial interventions were developed to make the home ownership process easier and accessible. We were aware of the hardship some allottees experienced in trying to access loans to build their homes, and we were acutely aware that many of the young professionals wanted to own their own homes. But also, those had challenges. So, we collaborated, as a Government, with the Ministry of Finance and the banking sector to make access to loans easier and faster. This collaboration bore several fruits: reduction in residential

mortgage interest rates to all lending institutions; review of the New Building Society (NBS) Act to allow it to raise its mortgage ceiling from \$12 million to \$20 million; and offer of lower interest rate on mortgages. The Guyana Revenue Authority (GRA) has raised the mortgage interest relief ceiling from \$15 to \$30 million and there has been interest rate reduction at commercial banks. This, in turn, has made low-income mortgages more affordable. We have, in short – and may I say the Fs – facilitated faster financing for our people so that they can have their own homes.

Providing subsidised housing for the citizens of Guyana is a clear and present priority of this Government. It is the mandate that guides the Ministry of Housing and Water, as was obtained since the formation of the Central Housing and Planning Authority (CHPA) in 1948. The primary objective has been to provide lands to eligible Guyanese for residential purposes. But the CHPA has evolved to provide complete houses and commercial industrial lands. When we got in in 1992, there was no housing policy or department. In the early stages, the lands provided had rudimentary infrastructure. That is, a basic road that was mostly bricks. Utilities had to be accessed from individual companies by the landowner. There was no cohesive approach to developing the housing sector. Since 1992, we began to modify and improve the housing programme of 1948. Today, we are establishing well developed housing schemes that include roads, bridges, drainage, electricity and access to potable water.

The Opposition harps about preferential systems that exist with regard to allocations. But they know that house lot allocation, while not an exact and perfect science, is based on a few things – availability of land, development of the land and, of course, an application. The categories of lots range from low to moderate to middle to high income, and these are allocated based on the applicant's income and some other factors that are taken into consideration. The same applies to the houses. In some cases, applicants themselves have requested a change in the category assigned because their financial circumstances may have changed, and those requests were considered and facilitated as far as possible.

I want to share with this House the most recent cost for house lots according to their categories. For example, from 2015 to present, low income lots range from \$92,000 to \$150,000; moderate income house lots range from \$300,000 to \$700,000; middle income ranges from \$800,000 to \$2 million; and high income lots range from \$2 million to \$6 million. For example, for low-income houses, the two-bedroom flats range from \$3 million to \$5.5 million;

moderate income houses range from \$7.5 million to \$9.5 million; and the young professional houses range from \$15 million to \$20 million. Each category is further broken down by region. So, the cost of a low-income house lot on the East Bank of Demerara is more than one that you may find in Region 10. Similarly, a low-income two-bedroom flat you can find in Region 6 will be \$5.5 million, but one in Lethem is being done at \$3 million. The differences are not because of some arbitrary or manipulated system, as the Opposition likes to tout. The prices of lots are determined based on the infrastructure, the land size and market prices. But it is important to remember that these costs are also heavily subsidised by the Government, as was just outlined by my colleague Minister. What is interesting is that, despite the assumptions by the Opposition that citizens face financial constraints to acquire house lots, suggesting that the cost is too high, the demand for house lots in each of the categories far outweighs the supply. So, too, the demand for access to easy finance has skyrocketed.

As a solution to the demand for affordable loans, the Ministry of Housing and Water and CHPA have collaborated with the banks to expedite applications for mortgages, and President, Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, has engaged the banks to lower their interest rates. In 2020, interest rates were 4%, 5.9% and 6.25%. By the end of 2023, following intervention by this Government, rates were lowered to 3.5%, 3.75% and 5.7%.

Ms. Ferguson: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, I have the Hon. Member, Ms. Annette Ferguson, on her feet.

4.50 p.m.

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I stand on Standing Order 41(7). Earlier, you ruled that it is not appropriate to use the President's name to influence this House. The Hon. Member just made reference to His Excellency, Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, the President. I am asking that be expunged from the records, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: The Point of Order is upheld. Hon. Minister, Standing Order 41(7) states:

“The President's name shall not be used to influence the Assembly.”

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs [Mr. Nandlall]: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Attorney General (AG), you are not the judge here; you are an advocate.

Mr. Croal: May I resume, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: Yes, Hon. Member.

Mr. Croal: Thank you. Having outlined the lowering of the interest rates, for example, as was mentioned, in 2020, the New Building Society (NBS) while they disbursed over \$3.5 billion, they received over 669 applications, and by the end of last year, they received applications of over 3,000. This is the power of the PPP/C Government. We care about the people and we have considered the constraints that they might face. We did not bring a motion to the National Assembly or asked for a select committee. We knew what we had to do. The banks are now lending as much as 100% of the cost to build a house and the applicants can use their lot as equity. In 2020 and prior, applicants had to have both cash and land to be considered for a loan. That has changed. Our Government has made this happen. The investments that this Government has made in the housing sector is worth it, and no amount of nitpicking by the Opposition will stop us from realising the goal of 50,000 allocations by 2025.

There is unprecedented growth in the housing sector since our return to Office. This sector is energised, stakeholders are motivated, and the banks are committed to the support of a more flexible approach to the loan process. But we are not only focused on allottees, we are also ensuring that allottees can maximise their investment. In this regard, we have distributed close to 7,000 land titles and transports. Armed with their titles and transports, those homeowners can now approach the banks for new or additional loans which they can use to match and make their lives more comfortable. This year we will, at a minimum, distribute a further 5,000. We are also expected to complete a minimum of 2,000 houses in the year of 2024.

Mr. Speaker, much has been said about the Hinterland Housing Programme. The Hon. Member who is not here, Ms. Dawn Hastings, spoke about her village of Kako and that she was instrumental as the Minister then to have some houses constructed in her village. The records will show that the APNU/AFC Government built 21 hinterland houses. The additional houses for the hinterland was the completion of an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) loan-funded housing programme that was started under the then housing minister who happens to be the President.

Mr. Speaker, what is our plan for the Hinterland Housing Programme? We have already started the construction of

over 450 hinterland houses. As I speak, contracts to the tune of \$400 million... Let me give you a breakdown: Region 1 – Warapoka; Haimaruni; Five Miles, Kumaka in Moruca; Smith... The Hon. Member who is not here too, Mr. Sherod Duncan – and I challenge him – called the village of Kokerite. The Hon. Prime Minister who is here will tell you that the community of Kokerite was done under this PPP/C tenure. Do you know how we came up with that village? It was part of our plan to relocate persons who were living on the waterfront. It was a request that came from the Community Development Council (CDC). And he came here and being dishonest.

The villages of Smith Creek, Arukamai, Imbotero, Savannah, Black Water, Canal Bank, Port Kaituma, Arakaka and Baramita can speak about the intention to have hinterland housing. In Region 9, for example – and I am not speaking about the Lethem programme – Crash Water, Yakarinta, Tiger Pond, Yurongperu, Kwatata, Nappi, Shiriri, Rupunau, Sand Creek, Shea, and Parabarau can speak about hinterland housing under the PPP/C tenure. In Region 7, Kangaruma Isseneru, Ominike and Quebanang can speak about hinterland housing. The Hon. Member, Dawn-Hastings, said yesterday that nothing is being done for Region 7. I have here...

[The Hon. Member displayed a document.]

This happens to be the Minister of Housing and Water in the village of Quebanang, and the headline states:

“...\$40 million housing programme for Quebanang village.”

The Hon. Member said there is nothing for Region 7. I will continue to give some more areas for the hinterland: Kaibarupai, Tuseneng, Karisparu, Morewau and Campbelltown. Those are areas that can speak towards our hinterland programme.

Even as we are allocating our house lots and building houses, we have introduced complimentary interventions to help applicants such as the core home support programme in Sophia that saw the construction of roads and core houses, as well as at La Parfaite Harmonie. These houses will go to the very poor and vulnerable. Our 2020 to 2025 Manifesto sets out, in no uncertain terms, that one of our primary goals in these five years is the modernisation of Guyana, especially in terms of its physical infrastructure and transport system. Investments in these areas will help to ease the traffic congestion on the main thoroughfare, as well as establish more social service facilities like hospitals, *et cetera*. I am

very proud that within this very short period we have accomplished so many highways. Investments like these do not happen in a vacuum. We have to identify, clear the paths and design developments, such as for commercial and residential housing around them. Like other big bold investments, these are challenges. One of those is the matter of squatting. The Ministry of Housing has sought to ensure wherever there are irregular settlements, particularly those in the path of roads or housing areas, that we pursue amicable solutions. Our approach is not piecemeal. We have devised a workable strategy to make the regularisation of squatter settlements less combative.

May I use this opportunity to respond to two accusations. Let me start with what is referred to as the Mocha squatters alignment. For over five years all of those residents were aware and informed that they were required to be removed because they were part of the alignment for the future expansion of our country. They were all engaged; they were offered a compensatory package and they were given land free of cost by the State in return. Their titles were processed free of cost for all of them. We will not, therefore, allow, and we could not allow, seven of those that refused to cooperate for the development of our country. Let me make a similar update that has been touted for Hillfoot. Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if this is parliamentary language, but it is dishonest in this House...

Mr. Speaker: No. That is the second time you are using dishonest, and it is not...

Mr. Croal: All right. It is not being truthful for Members of the Opposition to come to this House and lay at the feet of this Government the removal of the squatters at Hillfoot. The land at Hillfoot is private ownership. That owner went to court and got a court ruling to remove the squatters on their land. It is this PPP/C Government that engaged with those squatters and offered them an alternative location right in Swan, in collaboration with the Guyana Lands and Survey Commission (GLSC). We have made land available for those squatters, but that matter was purely a private matter that had nothing to do with the Government.

The establishment of the highways have created thousands of jobs for unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled labourers. It has reduced traffic congestion on the East Bank Demerara Highway, it has improved roadway access for all existing and future communities along the East Bank Demerara corridor and it has improved accessibility for Guyanese seeking to establish housing and businesses in new lands

owned for residential, commercial, and industrial development adjacent to the highway route.

Since 2020, we have been ensuring that we find solutions to reduce wait times and to make processes and procedures employed by the Ministry less cumbersome. To this, we have even begun the implementation of the single-window platform which is almost completed. It is being tested as we speak. This platform will reduce wait time and operational cost for application permits. I use this opportunity to respond... I am glad the Hon. Member is holding that picture. Please hold it higher for me. As I speak, there are 30 persons who have been prequalified by the bank and on Monday they will be seeing their new houses for them to occupy. Those are two bedrooms houses that we have so much of demand for, that we cannot even respond to all the applicants.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Ferguson, speaks about La Bonne Intention (LBI). LBI will be an area or a location that will be the envy of many communities. When you are driving at the front, there is allocation for high income house lots; to the right, already, over 450 young professional houses are under construction for which the first 100 will be completed by the end of this first quarter. When you go further down to the left, there is the development of malls and other amenities. If the Hon. Member is honest, go now to LBI. I challenge the Hon. Member to tell me if she is driving to LBI now, if she would not see posts that are being put up at the front of LBI. I challenge the Hon. Member. Already the pipe network for the water infrastructure is in place. The Hon. Member is not being truthful.

Mr. Speaker: Again?

Mr. Croal: Is not being kind, which should be the right answer.

Mr. Speaker: Not being kind is very, very good. And I want to be very kind to you to give you enough time to conclude.

Mr. Croal: Sure. Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Not yet. Hold on.

Mr. Croal: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Hold on, again.

Ms. Parag: Mr. Speaker, I know that my friend and colleague is eager to carry on and very enthusiastic, and we would love for him to carry on. I will respectfully ask that he has time to conclude his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Croal: Mr. Speaker, when the Hon. Member comes and talk about the housing sector, she must be reminded that they only allocated 7,534 for which we had to put the infrastructure work in place to complete for those allocations done.

5.05 p.m.

When the Hon. Members come and talk about housing, they must come and tell this House that they left a backlog of 68,000 pending applicants. Although we have allocated 30,000 already in the system, we have 13,000 new applicants within this last three years. When the Hon. Members must come and speak on the housing sector, they must come and tell this House that we have allocated over 53% to the young people of this country. You must come and tell this House that over 45% are females who are interested in their own development. You must come and tell this House that for the low-income houses that we have constructed to date, over 43.3% are low-income houses; over 29.2% are moderate-income houses; over 20% are middle income houses. The point to note is that we are responding to the majority of the pending applicants.

I want to quote here. And there is always the talk when you have to regularise or have to deal with squatting as if we are doing something inhumane. It is a particular former Minister on that side of the House that said – and I have it here – on 24th June, 2017, in the *Stabroek News* newspaper:

“...that squatting is illegal and outside of government’s policy stating that ‘we will never encourage illegal activities. We’re not going to continue to encourage that, so we have to bring order... As a minister responsible for housing, I cannot continue to have or allow that kind of situation to continue in our garden city, we have to bring order, we have to clean it up and we have to really make our city look like one that we’re happy (about)...

‘...I want to appeal to the people of Guyana, stop this madness related to squatting. Stop taking advice from rebellious leaders who just want to have conflict and telling people to go and take the land and squat, you’re not going to get life easy because we cannot regularize you if you’re on the reserve and if people just go and take a plot and gone crazy

and squatting then when we’re ready to do the survey you’ll find a house in the path...”

It is a former Minister of the APNU/AFC Government that spoke those words about squatting. They do not come here and talk about... The Hon. Member, Mr. Figuera – Is he gone? – talking about Region 10... This is a picture from yesterday in Amelia’s Ward where the leadership of Linden encouraged persons to squat in Amelia’s Ward. This PPP/C Government will fix it before the year is out. Yesterday we started showing house lots for persons, over 470 house lots that were allocated in Region 10 since we got into Office. The APNU/AFC, that speaks so much that they love Region 10, in five years only 300 plus allocations, less than what we did in the first two years in Office.

Quickly, in terms of water, much has been said already in statistics. We are working on a five-year plan and one thing you can be rest assured of is, by 2025, 90% of the coastland will be receiving treated water. By 2025, 100% of the hinterland will be receiving water. By 2025, all persons on the coastland will have access to treated water. Before 2025, we will see the implementation of the first waste-water treatment plant for the City of Georgetown. That is our vision; that is our plan for the water sector.

In wrapping up, we have had in the housing and water sector what far out weights the challenges that have come up. We are confident that, like before, we will excel in our stewardship of our budgetary allocation, and we will continue to make the dreams of owning homes by our citizens come through. I wish to offer heartiest congratulations to my colleague, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh and his staff for another well devised budget. At the heart of this Budget are the needs of our citizens and our Government’s vision to make Guyana better. Therefore, I am honoured to give my unwavering support to *Budget 2024 – Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Minister of Housing and Water, Hon. Collin Croal. Hon. Members, we have three contributions remaining for the evening. The Hon. Members Mr. Dineshwar Jaiprakash, Ms. Oneidge Walrond and Mr. Richard Sinclair. We will go through. We would not take a break, but everything is available for you so you can ease in and out just to ensure that we have a quorum, as I hand over to the Deputy Speaker.

[Mr. Speaker left the Chair.]

[Mdm. Deputy Speaker assumed the Chair.]

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Thank you. Hon. Member, Mr. Jaiprashad, you can commence.

Mr. Jaiprashad: Thank you very much, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present my contribution to budget debate 2024. I wish to extend new year's greetings to all the Members of this honourable House and do look forward to us being able to work together to contribute to the betterment of the people of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I wish to firstly thank the members and the hard-working public servants of the 10 administrative regions, the programme heads and all the Regional Executive Officers (REOs) for compiling the needs of the administrative regions which were then forwarded to the Hon. Dr. Ashni Singh, Minister responsible for crafting and preparing *Budget 2024*. I wish to say thanks to those hardworking public servants for making the 2024 Budget a possibility. The theme for the Budget, *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All* is far from the truth. The theme for 2024 Budget is indeed timely for a few but chaotic for the rest.

Staying the Course is not applicable for the population of this country, at the moment, because we are seeing what is happening as it relates to the cost of living and the many hardships the people are experiencing throughout Guyana. This Budget will pave way for a few to stay the course and the majority will change course. We know that next year will be 2025, and a lot of courses will be changed next year. I wish to say that every time a representative from the PPP/C spoke over the past few days, that representative was making reference that from 2015 to 2020 nothing was done for the people of this country. But I wish to say that for 23 years, prior to 2015, I want to know if the same PPP/C was in government. Coming here for the past week and saying to the Guyanese population that nothing was done from 2015 to 2020, I want to pose the question, what was done from 1992 to 2014? The people know the answer, and there is no need for us to get into that.

I wish to present the following points that should be taken into consideration and be implemented before the final piece of the budget is approved. This is the largest budget ever and it will bring a wide range of good and bad with it. The main focus is that each budget must cause the people to be better off and improve their way of life. This Budget widens the gap between the rich and the poor. We know that only a few are given the pie; the crumbs are for the poor people. Since 2022, the people have been eagerly waiting to hear about the

distribution of subsidies and grants to the Guyanese people. To date, the people collecting the giveaways are closely associated and friends with the PPP/C. Every cash grant being distributed among the 10 administrative regions, the recipients were identified by operatives at the Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) and the Regional Democratic Councils (RDCs).

I turn my attention to East Berbice–Corentyne and I want to touch on the education sector. It is worthy to note that there is much need for the reform of the Education Act, Chapter 39:01. And I wish to draw the attention of the Hon. Minister of Education and the Minister of Legal Affairs, that in this country we have a system whereby compulsory education is from five years, nine months to fourteen years, nine months. I am suggesting and proposing that the Education Act be reviewed so that we can be able to keep our young people longer in schools. At the moment a child at 15 years can opt not to be present in school. I am suggesting that the relevant individuals put systems in place so that we can reform the Education Act and ensure that compulsory education be extended to age 16, so that all our children in secondary schools will have the opportunity to complete secondary education. At the moment, annually, 4,500 to 6,000 drop out of schools. This is because of the poor administrative policies that we have as it relates to compulsory education. If we extend from 14 years, nine months to 16 years, it means then that we will be able to capture and keep our young people for another two to three years in school so that the dropout rate will be reduced. I am suggesting that we work in collaboration to ensure that compulsory education moves to the age of 16. In moving that, we will ensure that four, five, or six thousand, of our children remain in school, making them eligible and marketable to change their lives and the lives of their families.

5.20 p.m.

I welcome the \$45,000 cash grant, but in a fastest growing nation, we can give more. A child travelling from Rose Hall to Berbice High School or New Amsterdam Secondary School pays \$3,000 per week to attend school. When we give handouts, when we give tokens to people, and when we give cash grants, we feel as if that is everything, but this is a child living at Rose Hall that travels to the Berbice High School on a daily basis. The family pays \$3,000 a week and the academic school year is 39 weeks; 39 X 3 is \$117,000 an academic year, and you are giving \$45,000 to say, take that.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I am proposing that we put systems in place so that all our children travelling to school must

have free transportation. If not, give them the money so that they can pay. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, a child travelling from Skeldon to New Amsterdam, Berbice High School or New Amsterdam Multilateral Secondary School, pays \$1,500 a day to go to school. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, \$292,500 a child pays from Skeldon to go to school for 39 weeks. People who sit in this honourable House do not feel that expense because they can call the taxi and they have pick ups and drop off, but the poor people living in Region 6, whose children were awarded a place at Berbice High School and New Amsterdam Multilateral Secondary School, have to dive down into their pockets to find \$292,500 a year to send their children to school if they want to maintain them at Berbice High School or New Amsterdam Multilateral Secondary School.

I wish to say that, from 2015 to 2020, the APNU/AFC, under the leadership of Mr. David Arthur Granger, implemented the Five B's programme without a trillion-dollar budget; we had five big buses running in Region 6. These were buses purchased by private citizens, donated to the region, so that our children can have access to education. Five budgets after 2020 and we only have six buses. So, without the trillion-dollar budget, we had five free buses transporting children across Region 6 and... [An Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*]

I am coming to that Hon. Member. Now we have five budgets and still we cannot transport our children. To the Hon. Minister, how many children fit in the buses? During Mr. David Granger's time the buses were 60-seaters. So we are replacing five 60-seaters with six 30-seaters. Are we going forward or are we going backward? You are replacing five 60-seater buses with six 30-seater buses. Are we improving?

Mdm. Speaker, on education, why is it that the children in Region 6 did not receive exercise books in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023? This is something that happened across the country. From 2015 to 2020 we had no trillion-dollar budget, but children received. It will be good, Hon. Mr. Sanjeev Datadin, if someone could have put a picture and given the children free books, but it seems as though that is not there.

I wish to turn my attention to the school feeding programme. Without a trillion-dollar budget, we were able to provide meals, juice and biscuits, for the Year 1 and Year 2 nursery, Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 6 primary. We are having the biggest budget ever, Mdm. Deputy Speaker, why cannot we put systems in place that all our nursery and primary children will have breakfast at school? We are proposing... [Ms. Parag: But Pandit, we are *(inaudible)*.] Then move quickly if you are moving, do not wait for another budget.

We are proposing that, as of now, all our children at the nursery and primary level be given a meal so that they will be in school. The nursery Year 1, Year 2, Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 6 the meals are very much appreciated; parents are very happy for it. What about the children in Grades 3, 4 and 5?

As it relates to health, I want to say to this honourable House that we have to be a bit more careful, things are happening in Region 6 as it relates to health. Region 6 is under tight pressure and we know that, customarily, the ambulance normally transports the sick and those who need medical attention, but not so long ago, under the PPP/C Administration, the ambulance was being used to transport chicken. I do not know if these were dying chickens or already dead, but imagine the level of operation that we are using our health facilities to transport chicken for sale. This is in the news; one official close with the PPP/C had to resign because of the situation. I must commend the doctors at the New Amsterdam, Port Mourant, Black Bush Polder, Skelton Hospitals and all the health centres for doing fairly good, despite the poor working conditions and meagre pay. Ask the Minister of Health, why is it that under five budget we have more than 120 nurses in Region 6 leaving the system, and more than 20 doctors in Region 6 leaving the system? Why is it that this is happening?

We will be having a three-storey state-of-the-art hospital in Fort Canje, but we know what happens when the big contract goes out. We cannot fix Port Mourant, Black Bush Polder, Skeldon and the existing New Amsterdam Hospitals to be up and running as state-of-the-art, but we want to build a three-storey, whereby we have a shortage of medical personnel and poor service in many of these facilities, to have more money for... [Hon. Members (Opposition): The boys.] Why cannot we use that money to put another storey at New Amsterdam Hospital, expand Port Mourant, expand Black Bush Polder, modernise all the existing hospitals? Why are we so much into having a three-storey...? We have New Amsterdam, Port Mourant, Skeldon and Black Bush Polder that when we have a blackout, pipe *nah* run, toilet cannot flush. *Yuh andastand?* Why cannot we up the standard of the system that we have instead of going to build a three-storey? If we fix Skeldon Hospital, we facilitate people in the Upper Corentyne and Suriname. We want to build New Amsterdam, a three-storey, put more cost on the people travelling from the Corentyne to go to New Amsterdam to join long lines. Are we moving forward? We need to bring the service to the people where they live, not to travel miles to get to the facilities.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker, the \$8,000 given to females to assist in tests for cervical cancer is very important and very appreciated, it is a good venture. We know that we need to take care of our females and not only our females but all Guyanese. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I am proposing that instead of having our individuals, our patients, our females, everyone travel to Georgetown to do a test for cervical cancer, why cannot we use some money to build a cancer institute in Berbice so that the people in Region 5 and Region 6 can have access there? Georgetown has... [An.

Hon. Member: (*Inaudible*) I am representing Region 6, so you can represent Essequibo. I am saying that we, the people in Region 6, need a cancer institute in Region 6. You are giving \$8,000 to help with the test but the people have to pay \$20,000 to travel to Georgetown. You are giving \$8,000 and taking \$20,000 to travel to Georgetown. Mdm. Deputy Speaker, are we bringing service to the people or are we putting the people in more expense? Mdm. Deputy Speaker, I am suggesting again, we need to have a cancer institute in Berbice so that thousands of our brothers and sisters who have to travel to Georgetown, at high costs, can have access and service right there.

I indicated about the blackout and the water. Imagine our public facilities, this includes our schools as well, we have our schools in Region 6, when there is a blackout the toilets do not flush. We have thousands of children using these education facilities. I am saying we need to have systems in place so that our children and those who are in need of the service can have access. Most of the systems that we have are automatic, so when there is a blackout, no water. I asked the Hon. Minister of Housing and Water when systems can be put in place so that we can still have water when...

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you will require an extension to continue.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Granted. Please conclude your speech.

Mr. Jaiprashad: Thank you very much, Mdm. Deputy Speaker. I turn my attention to the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Public Service. In Berbice there are many public servants who are not receiving their salaries according to their qualifications and years of service. I want to bring to the attention of this honourable House that we have public servants in different sectors having similar qualifications but

different salary scales. We have teachers with their trained teacher's certificate and their degrees having X scale and we have regular public servants, in the public service, with their qualifications and they are not having the same scale. Even though we have individuals who are far more qualified in one sector not having the benefits like the person in the other sector. A typical example is serving in the Education Department, the Education Officer supervises the head teacher, and the head teacher is receiving a higher salary than the Education Officer who is supervising the head teacher. We are saying that we need to have systems in place in the public service whereby the supervisor, once you have the prerequisite, the qualification and years of service, you have the capacity to serve and to manage and guide our head teachers, you ought to have a better scale and salary.

5.35 p.m.

As it relates to the human services, I want to say to this honourable House, the \$3,000 seems as though it is a big thing for us. But let me remind this honourable House that in 2013, the Old Age Pension was \$12,500. Do you know what happened in 2014? It was moved from 12,500 to \$13,125. Now, the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) come here to say That Old Age Pensions and Public Assistance... That is a big story for the PPP/C. I want to say that in 2015, under the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) Government, the Old Age Pension moved from \$13,125 to \$17,000 without a trillion-dollar budget. Let it be registered that it was without a trillion-dollar budget. In 2023, it was \$33,000 for the Old Age Pension. Now, with a trillion-dollar budget, it moves to \$36,000. We are literally giving our old folks \$100 per day. As the Hon. Member mentioned, we are giving them five sweeties/mints a day. Guyanese are receiving an Old Age Pension of \$1,000 a day to live, to pay their bills and to make ends meet. We are proposing that this money could reach \$40,000 with the surplus of cash that we have at the moment.

The PPP/C is always talking about the 200 taxes that were laid. To date, we have not seen a list with the 200 taxes. I want to say to this honourable House that it was the PPP/C who brought value-added tax (VAT) into this country; it was not the APNU/AFC. A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change reduced VAT and we are hoping with this trillion-dollar budget, the Government will put VAT to five per cent. It would not do that because it loves what VAT is doing to the poor people. We are suggesting lower VAT, but we know what will happen. As it relates to

support for the 2024 Budget, if it remains in the same manner, then I do not support it. *[Applause]*

Mdm. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Member. I would like to call on the Hon. Minister, Ms. Oneidge Walrond to make her presentation.

Minister Tourism, Industry and Commerce [Ms. Walrond]: I rise to support the Motion moved by my Colleague, the Hon. Dr. Ashni Singh, Senior Minister in the Office of the President with the Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service.

Before I deal with measures relating to tourism, industry and commerce, I would like to lend my prospective to some of the prevalent criticisms that have being persistently levelled by our Colleagues both in and outside of this honourable House. The first of those was raised by the Hon. Member, Mr. Jaipersaud... **[Mr. Mahipaul:** It is Jai-pra-shad.] Mr. Jai-pra-shad; I apologise. Who came here and raised the issue of the increase in the Old Age Pension. You hear things from the Hon. Member that preceded me and the Hon. Members before that the increase in the Old Age Pension is equivalent to only five mints a day, and that we are an oil-rich country now, so there are moneys in abundance and we have a surplus of money so the pensioners should be given more. Those are very vacuous and simplistic arguments. In order to treat with this, I find it necessary to restate two fundamental and indisputable facts that seem to be lost in the noise created in this House. The first of these facts is that oil is a finite resource. It is non-renewable. As night follows day, ... **[Mr. Mahipaul:** And?] Stick with me. ...there will come a time when it will be gone. It should go without saying that the revenues will disappear with it. This is the first of the facts that we need to bear in mind.

The second indisputable fact is that as Guyana went into the historical General Elections of 2020, we all knew we possessed massive oil reserves. The Liza 1 discovery was announced in May, 2015; Payara was announced in January, 2017; Snoek was announced in March of that year; Liza 3 and Turbo later in the same year and so on. By the time the PPP/C released its Manifesto in January, 2020, ExxonMobil had announced 16 strikes and all of us, now, in this honourable House knew or ought to have known that Guyana possessed millions of barrels of oil and oil equivalents. That is the second fundamental fact. We all knew about the oil in January, 2020. I am going through all of this because our Colleagues on the other side are behaving as though neither of these facts are true. One, they behave as though oil resources are infinite and so they call for all sort

of reckless spending and when faced with the reality that we are doing exactly what we promised to do with the Old Age Pension, they behave as though the PPP/C got into Office and then suddenly discovered previously unknown oil revenues so they say we have a windfall and should, therefore, programme increases over and above what we promised.

The reality is that when the PPP/C released its Manifesto in January, 2020, the measures contained in it were carefully considered, with full knowledge of what was coming with respect to oil. Our team includes several seasoned veterans of the Ministry of Finance. The President is one such, as is the Vice-President and as is the Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service. With that full knowledge of what was available, this team saw it fit, to make a promise to pensioners that we would double their pensions in our first term of Office, and we are well on our way to delivering that promise. That promise was a prudent promise because we view Old Age Pension as akin to an entitlement which we cannot withdraw when inevitably that day comes when the oil revenues are gone. Therefore, when treating with that entitlement, we have to ensure that we can sustain it and meet our obligations to pensioners and to the rest of our citizens whether we have oil or not. That is why we have to base our decisions on measures which creates structural increases in expenditure not on the temporary revenue stream from oil, but from revenues of an otherwise broad-based, resilient and diversified economy which is what we have been working on building since 2020.

I remind you, Mdm. Deputy Speaker, that Old Age Pension is just one measure from which our senior citizens benefits. Our Colleague, Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service has announced vouchers totalling \$20,000 for eyecare, that is \$3,000 for consultation and \$17,000 for spectacles if they are found to be needed. There are water and electricity subsidies. We should not forget that our Colleagues on the other side removed the pensioners' water subsidy and imposed VAT on water, electricity and data. Let us not forget that they pretend to be the greatest warriors for pensioners now. Many of our old age pensioners are also National Insurance Scheme (NIS) pensioners, so for many of our senior citizens, the Old Age Pension is actually a supplement to the pensions they receive from the National Insurance Scheme or indeed from any other private pension plans. Finally, our pensioners like the rest of us will benefit from free healthcare including free supplies of prescription drugs. It is misleading to look at the 2024 increase in old age pension in isolation. One has to

look at it, first of all, in the context of the overall increase of 75% since 2020, consistent with the promise that we made to our pensioners in our Manifesto. We also have to look at the increase in the context of a comprehensive social safety net that we have in place including but not limited to those measures that I have alluded to.

I wish to address another criticism that appears to be coordinated from the other side, which is the criticism of our emphasis on infrastructure. Indeed, Members from the other side have said, both in and outside the precincts of this honourable House, that people cannot eat concrete. We have been hearing that over these last four days. This is the same mentality that informs the criticism of our approach to pensions. This emphasis on consumption in the present. We agree that people cannot eat roads but what they can eat is the produce that is conveyed from farms to markets on those roads. With good roads, transportation costs are reduced so those items will eventually be more affordable to the average citizen. Those on the other side behave as though the roads build themselves. They fixate on the moneys paid to the contractors and for them that is the end of the story. It is the end of the story for them because continuing does not suit their narrative. Their narrative is that the infrastructure only benefits the contractor and the contractor is a friend of the Government. For the Opposition, this contractor does not employ people. For the Opposition, those people do not buy with the money they earn working on infrastructure projects. Neither by the reasoning of the Opposition, do they buy other goods and services in the rest of the economy. Finally, the Opposition does not see those roads, bridges, ferries, ports, hospitals, schools, aerodromes and other items of infrastructure as providing benefits for Guyanese for decades to come. For them, there is minimal, if any value, in infrastructural projects. What we have is an Opposition that is unwilling to and perhaps incapable of comprehending the role of infrastructure in economic development and this is never at the expense of taking care of the needs of the people. In fact, the needs of our Guyanese citizens are foremost and paramount when crafting our economic policies.

5.50 p.m.

If it was not for the fact that there are people out there in society who look to the Opposition for leadership, I would leave it there. There are such people – that is the nature of a democratic society. There are people who look to the Opposition for leadership and it is my contention that these people are ill-served by an opposition who oppose for the sake of opposing and do nothing to help or encourage their

supporters to seize the opportunities that exist and these opportunities do exist. This Government has made available to all without regard to race, gender, class or political persuasion. We have heard speaker after speaker on the other side coming to us with tales of woe from people whom they have supposedly met. I wish to suggest to you, Sir that if you are looking to someone for leadership, but that person tells you, day in and day out, that there is nothing in your country for you; that person tells you that there is no hope for you to get anything unless you put him in power; that it is no use that you bid for a contract, or start a business. If that is what you hear from the person to whom you look for leadership, it is not unlikely that this will colour the way you see things. There was a quote popularised in the early 20th century by one Napoleon Hill. It says:

“Whatever your mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.”

The Opposition is encouraging their supporters to perceive Guyana as having nothing for them. They are the ones who are oppressing their supporters. To use the words of the Hon. Member, Mr. Figueira, they are the ones who wish to confine their supporters to the working poor by not having them take advantage of all the opportunities of this Government. On the other hand, when we travel the length and breadth of this country, wherever we go, we continue to encourage Guyanese to seize the opportunities available. We encourage them to start a business, apply for a scholarship, get involved in agriculture, take up part-time jobs or enroll in a training programme, apply for a small business grant, apply for a house lot and go for the young professional's home. All of these opportunities and more are available to Guyanese in every town, every village, every region and every community across the length and breadth of this country. We are telling people, especially young people, that this is a country of bounty, a land of hope and one of opportunity.

That is why, I can tell Members of the young dynamic couple from South Ruimveldt who are growing a logistics company serving both government and private consumers; or of another enterprising couple from the East Bank of Demerara who are building a marketing company; or the barber in Lodge who has just expanded the capacity of his business by 50% with a small business grant which enabled him to outfit another station; or of a woman in Agricola who left her job as a domestic worker after she found that she could start a viable business catering meals for construction workers on one of those same roads we cannot eat. These are people, ordinary people – I dare say from the dwindling

Opposition dominated areas – who refuse to let anyone tell them that there is no place for them in their own country. Because we encourage them to conceive and believe that they are destined for prosperity, they are alive and alert to opportunity and are well on their way to achieving prosperity in the inclusive economy that is being delivered to them by the PPP/Civic Government.

I now turn to the sectors of tourism, industry and commerce. As we approach four years in Office, we are now in a position where we can begin to see some of the impact of the policies that we put in place. In this regard, Sir, permit me to remind this honourable House of some macro performances of these sectors as reported by my Honourable Colleague the Minister in of the Office of the President with Responsible for Finance and the Public Service.

In the realm of industry, other manufacturing grew by 31.8% in 2023. This is by any reading a creditable if not impressive performance. There is an even more interesting story to be revealed if you refer to Appendix II of the Budget Speech. The Appendix shows other manufacturing grew by 16 per cent during the years 2015–2019 but grew by 63 % between the years 2020–2023. We like to pay attention to the numbers because of what adage states, the numbers do not lie. The story is similar in the services sector. If we look at the period 2015 to 2019, we can see that the services sector grew 12% in those five years. In comparison, that sector grew by 34% during the period 2020 to 2023. In fact, the one-year growth rate for the services sector in 2023 was 12%, which was almost equal to the five-year growth rate under their Administration. Wholesale and retail trade grew by just over 18% under the stewardship of the Coalition Government, compared to a growth of 70% since we returned to Office and started implementing our development agenda.

Finally, I will point out the accommodation and food services subsector which grew by 13% in 2023. During the period 2015 to 2019, this sector grew by 24% but during 2020 to 2023 growth was 130%. Mr. Speaker, you may appreciate that this accommodation and food sector are closely related to the tourism sector. You would appreciate Sir, what a growth of 130% in accommodation and food services implies with respect to growth in tourism. To continue with the sector's performances, I wish to again make the point that these developments have not appeared by magic. It should not be too hard to recognise that there is a linkage between the expansion in the construction sector and Government's progressive measures such as: providing cement subsidies for homeowners and removal/reduction of taxes on certain building materials. Nor should it be difficult

to perceive and understand that there is a linkage between the execution of The Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) and growth in employment. The local content legislation has provided the space for our manufacturing and service sectors to exhibit these strong growth rates and should not be a proposition that invites serious debate.

As we approach the four-year mark of our administration, we are beginning to see the benefits of those strategic measures that we started to implement in 2020 and which we continue to implement in pursuit of a sustainably prosperous future for our people. We are seeing the realisation of a vision. Who would have thought in 2020 that today we would have a shore base on reclaimed land in West Demerara; or that we would have a Guyanese company involved in providing cutting edge subsea engineering services; or that young people would be cultivating broccoli, cauliflower, roses and other high value crops. We are now seeing the vision of our administration is beginning to manifest and that is where the difference between us and our friends on the other side is starkest.

Four years ago, they could not see what is manifesting today. Just as today, they cannot see what will manifest four or five years hence. They think and speak only for today. That is why they will say “you cannot eat road” and they will say “pay out the oil money now”. Also, that is why two years ago the Hon. Member, Ms. Hughes, said in this House that our approach to tourism was pedestrian. They say those things because they operate in the moment. We on the other hand are planning and executing based on a development trajectory that extends years and decades into the future. Two years ago, I sat and I listened while the Hon. Member, Ms. Hughes, boasted about JetBlue saying that this Government has brought in no major airlines. What the Honourable Member did not know then was that even as she use the honourable senior words ‘bloviation’ and ‘grandstanding’ on the floor of the House we were quietly in discussions with British Airways. We travelled to London a few weeks thereafter and by August, 2022, we had announced with British Airways the imminent start of the service. That service commenced in March of last year and has already transported more than 20,000 passengers under the Guyana/London route. That is how we work, quietly with no premature fanfare but letting the results speak for themselves.

With respect to tourism, one of the primary metrics that we pay attention to is visitor arrivals. The Hon. Member, Ms. Hughes, spoke outside of this honourable House and took issue with us over the report that visitor arrivals exceeded

319,000 in the year 2023. The Honourable says that this increase is negligible when compared with 2019 but the Hon. Member; the Opposition's expert on tourism, totally ignored the fact that in 2020 the world faced the most momentous public health challenge it has ever seen in over a hundred years in form of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. With COVID-19, the world went into lockdown and international travel ground to a virtual standstill. The United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that global tourism suffered its worst year ever on record with arrival rates dropping on an average by 74%. Guyana was no exception. In 2020, in the face of the pandemic, our visitor arrivals plummeted by 73% to 86,000. That really is the base that we should be looking at. If we consider the effect of the pandemic, then we might better appreciate the magnitude of our achievement as regards visitor arrivals. Arrivals increased in 2021 by 83% over 2020 moving from 86,000 to 158,000 over that period. In the following year, 2022, arrivals increased by 82% to 288,000 and, last year, 2023, we returned to just over pandemic levels with arrivals of 319,000. This is the record with which the Honourable Member takes issue.

When we look at the context of our recovery from the pandemic, visitor arrivals increased by close to 270% in the three years since we took Office. In fact, we were in the upper half of the league tables in the Caribbean as regard to the rate of recovery as at the end of 2022 and we were well above the world average in the year before. Once again, this recovery did not happen by accident. It did not happen just naturally and with the effluxion of time. Mr. Speaker, you may recall that in the early days of the pandemic, one of the measures we took was to procure safe vaccines from wherever we could get them. Our intention was to get our population as close as we could to full vaccination so that we could safely re-open. Were it not for the courage and resolve on the part of our administration to defy geopolitics and to place paramount the interests of our citizens, our country could not have recovered as rapidly and as robustly as it did from the pandemic. That recovery includes the 270% growth in visitor arrivals that we have recorded over the period 2020 to 2023.

Arrivals for 2023 surpassed the previous highest recorded in 2029 by about 5,000 persons. Notwithstanding that modest amount, the fact is that arrivals reached a record-breaking total of 319,056 which stands as Guyana's highest recorded number of visitors to date. In fact, 2023 was a record-breaking year, with five months of that year seeing the highest arrivals on record, those months being March, April, July, September and November. I would note that the

Cricket Carnival coupled with the finals of the Caribbean Premier League (CPL) which we worked hard on securing the rights for, boosted arrivals in the month of September in each year that it was held.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Hughes, speaking outside of this Honourable House, also asserted earnestly and with considerable confidence, that the increase in visitor arrivals was mainly attributable to the oil and gas sector. I do not know where the Honourable Member gets her information from but the reports, I received from the Guyana Tourism Authority paint a far different picture. Mr. Speaker for the year 2022, business visitors numbered 47,000 while those coming for holiday and leisure numbered 143,000.

6.05 p.m.

For 2023, business travellers numbered just over 53,000 while those arriving for holidays and leisure travel numbered 177,000. In both cases, the number of people who indicated that they came to Guyana for holidays almost tripled those who reported being here for business-related travel, which of course, we would associate with oil and gas. In fact, if we add in those who indicated that they came to see friends and relatives, then the numbers are on the order, four times those business visitors who, once again, we will associate with the oil and gas sector. The number of people coming here on business grew just over 12% from 2022 to 2023 while the number of people visiting on holiday grew 23%. For good measure, I might add that those coming from meetings and conferences grew by almost 30% from 2022 to 2023. The growth in this last category reflects a deliberate strategy of our Government to bring meetings, conferences, exhibitions and like events to Guyana. The numbers speak for themselves. This is what we mean in the theme of the Budget when we say, we are 'Staying the Course'.

We could have been distracted by the naysayers who could not or rather would not see the vision. Instead, we buckled down, did the work and now we will let that work and the results do the talking. We continue to promote Guyana's tourism products on the international stage. In 2023, Guyana's submission placed third in the Caribbean Tourism Organization's – Caribbean Sustainable Tourism Awards for Tourism Education and Training. Karanambu Lodge was featured among the Green Destination Top 100 worldwide in the Internationale Tourismus Börse (ITB) Berlin Awards. Our tourism product has been featured in prominent international publications including, Forbes Magazine, The Times, The Telegraph, Daily Mail and Worldly Adventurer.

Guyana was also ranked 13 out of 35 best destinations for 2023 and beyond, by National Geographic.

We continue to work on infrastructure to support the tourism sector. Of course, one of the critical areas in which we have concentrated our effort is the airlift capacity. Last year, we welcomed British Airways to serve the Guyana route with direct flights to London. It joined the InterCaribbean Airlines which commenced operations in 2022 and JetBlue Airways which started in December, 2021. My Colleagues have informed the House that American Airlines will add another daily flight on the Georgetown to Miami route while United Airlines Incorporated will be introducing a Georgetown to Houston route with four flights weekly in 2024. Regionally, Surinam Airways added a service linking Georgetown to Bridgetown/Barbados and Paramaribo. The InterCaribbean airlines has probably signalled the desire to expand its operations into Ogle. We now have several direct flights a day to the regional hubs of Barbados, The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and Saint Lucia, from where our passengers can connect to major destinations in Europe, North America, and the Caribbean. We also have at least two and some days three direct flights daily into the major North American hubs of Miami and New York. We have, of course, the direct route to London which operates twice weekly, and flights to Panama City. With the addition of the Georgetown to Houston route, Guyana will have one-stop connections to somewhere between 250 and 300 destinations worldwide.

In all, airlift capacity rose from 226,000 seats in 2021 to just over 1,000,000 in 2022 and, again, to 1,200,000 seats in 2023. In short, we have doubled the airlift capacity in these three years. We have seen overall arrivals increase from 844,000 to 937,000 between 2019 and 2023. In so doing, we rebounded from a low of 231,000 in 2020 when we were caught by the pandemic. I say once again that these various developments have not come by chance. They have come because we have a vision and are putting in the work to realise it day in and day out.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, your time is out. We need an extension for you to conclude.

Ms. Parag: Mr. Speaker, may the Hon. Member and my Colleague be given five minutes or more to conclude? Thank you.

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Ms. Walrond: Sir, I am still on tourism. We have moved rapidly at the beginning of our term as we have invited expressions of interest for the construction of internationally branded hotels. Our intention was to add about 1200 rooms to the stock of higher-tier rooms by 2025. We are pleased to report that we are on track to have that target met on schedule. The developers of five internationally branded hotels expect to complete construction and start operations this year. I would point out that alongside this push to bring internationally branded hotels to Guyana, we are also facilitating the emergence of local facilities. One example of such is Guyana's first urban eco-lodge at Diamond where some 28 lodges have been built on two acres of land in close proximity to the Providence National Stadium. The entire property will be owned by women. This company has been registered and shares are available for purchase.

In the interest of time, I am turning to commerce and industry. I am pleased to report on our business processing outsourcing initiatives in 2023. We have completed rehabilitation works on the Enmore and Tuschen call centres. As a result, in 2024, 300 individuals will now benefit from employment opportunities in those facilities. Further, four new call centres were constructed in 2023 in Regions 2 and 6. This expansion will facilitate up to 1600 new jobs.

I will move to small business support. In the last year's Budget, we added \$300 million to the Small Business Development Fund with which 1500 small business owners benefited from access to grant financing. Looking ahead to 2024, our proposed budget underscores the Government's commitment to the small business community, evidenced by the replenishment of the fund with an additional \$450 million for support to the sector. Going forward, we plan to emphasise and expand our support measures for small businesses. One such measure is training and development, which we intend to deliver to 300 small business owners and operators in some priority sectors. Our aim is to maximise the sustainability of the sector by giving small business owners the tools by which they can build sustainable and resilient businesses.

This year, we intend to bring to the House, the Security Interest in Movable Property Bill. One of the principal objectives of this bill is to enable small business owners to collateralise moveable property so as to gain access to finance. For example, a small business owner could move more readily to use – let us say, – an excavator or other pieces of machinery as collateral for a loan. Turning to our modernisation of the business environment, work on the electronic single-window for trade is in its advanced stages.

It is projected to go live in just a few weeks in March of this year. The electronic single-window for trade will, to a large extent, automate the process of clearing items for import and export, thus delivering a substantial decrease in the time and expenses associated with the trade-related process.

The fact that the first phase of operation of the single-window is but a few weeks away, again, underscores the point that as we move into year four of this Administration, we are beginning to see results – whether it be the single windows, the visitor arrivals, the hotel completions, the operational call centres, the business incubators or the house lots distributions, these results stem from vision, foresight, industry and the tenacity to ‘Stay the Course’. Our approach has proven itself through the results. That is why I support *Budget 2024* and urge this entire honourable House to do likewise. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister of Tourism, Industry and Commerce, Ms. Walrond. Now it is time for contribution of the Hon. Member, Mr. Sinclair.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the Guyanese people as well as Region 8 for affording me the privilege to give my presentation on *Budget 2024*.

This Budget comes at a time when Guyana is adjusting to the prices of the tenth-highest income per capita in the entire world. It rises to over \$1 trillion. It is being read in a country that is regarded as the fastest-growing economy in the entire world. Rather than bring hope and joy to the Guyanese, this Budget has brought sadness and frustration. It seems so much worse because of its size and the circumstances under which it was read. Who among us agrees that pensioners should only receive a paltry \$100 per day? That is saying, in Georgetown, we have to wait three days to get two bottles of water; in Mahdia, it is five days to get one bottle of water; and I guess in Paramakatoi and other outlying areas, it is more expensive. Do my Colleagues across the aisle honestly agree with this or are they just afraid to tap their microphones and say – yes, it is true? They cannot admit that they do not believe pensioners should be mistreated; in fact, I pity them.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to focus now on some regional issues. We have already highlighted the decline in production by small to medium scale miners which the Government have been presiding over. There is an approximate 50% drop in only a few years. Some came during the highest gold prices on record, including the present soaring price of gold. Only a government who is fluent in mismanagement will oversee such a decline even in

that industry. This means that miners are keen to work but the Government’s mismanagement is holding them back. The people in my community depend on this extractive industry. They languish under a government who have no interest in their livelihoods. These small businesses benefit from loans to purchase equipment. They should at least benefit from loans to purchase equipment, for which we have advocated. The Small Business Bureau and the Government’s attitude towards small business in general is limited to both scope and vision. We also need to give some grants to help miners increase their capacity to purchase equipment. We need them to benefit as much as possible from the price of gold. We also need to ensure that these people benefit from the oil resources.

We believe that this emphasis on small business must extend into agriculture across our country. Farmers are small businessmen too. We should provide them with loans, grants and access to areas where they can do proper agricultural pursuits – grasslands for cattle owners. This will help them to improve their productivity and bring prices down for goods that can be imported into the region. We have repeatedly emphasised regional agriculture. We believe in the regions the increased production of food will lower its cost. It is well established that regions can produce food at lower costs. Therefore, they need the sort of support mechanisms.

6.20 p.m.

I do not have to say that the cost-of-living crisis is something that is a living memory. However, I want to highlight that Guyana’s hinterland suffers the most when prices soar. This is because, most of the people in the region will have to take food stuff on those dangerous roads. With the perpetual high cost of fuel, it must have its effect on these unbearable prices. The 2024 Budget is, if not the PPP/C last budget, it is the second to the last budget and Guyanese will welcome this change. We also believe that investing in regional infrastructure is vital. One of their elite campaigners had said that we cannot eat roads, right in Mahdia. Today, they are frantically building roads across the region. Quality roads will lower the cost of transportation but the type of roads that they build, they build today, and they are broken down tomorrow.

They also throw billions of dollars into education but achieve lower pass rates at the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) in Mathematics than the Coalition did with fewer resources. Huge sums are allocated for healthcare each year, but has Guyana’s life expectancy

improved substantially? The resounding answer is no. The PPP/C believes in output, in spending, but has little interest in outcomes.

I wish to remind this House that the Government of Guyana (GoG) earned approximately \$60 billion of unexpected revenue from the high price of oil that squeezed our gold industry. Why were those funds not put to use in keeping with bringing the prices of gasoline down, especially in Region 8 and the hinterland? For example, a loaf of bread in Georgetown may cost a couple hundred dollars, but in certain areas in Region 8, it will cost approximately \$1,000. This seems to me that there may have been some measure of gold in the bread, especially the 'Golden Harvest Bread'. This budget comes at a time when the country can boast how fast its economy is growing. However, despite all these resources, it cannot improve the lives of ordinary people. I am talking about teachers. I am talking about whatever the high cost of living is doing to ordinary people. It is widening the gap between those who have and those who do not have. The PPP/C talks about equality, but it likes inequality. It believes in its elite friends, family, and favourites and they believe that they are the only ones who should matter in this country.

The PPP/C likes to say that it is a fair party, one that does not discriminate on the award of contracts. Mr. President, we have forgotten the famous Sue Sue (*inaudible*). Where is Mr. Su today? We still want to hear the people in law enforcement and the Vice President provide some form of assistance on the basis of friendship. That is what they do. Most Guyanese are friends of that special person and only through that special person... I guess he is also a friend of the prominent Minister of Public Works, ever since I was there at the Guyana Post Office Corporation (GPOC). Nowhere is this attitude more prevalent than in Region 8 – this thing about friends, families and favourites. In my last year's speech, I alluded to the fact that there is something called Warner Bros. [An Hon. Member: What is that?] Warner Bros. I must stress that that is part of the elite group in Region 8 where wives get on the boards and so the husbands get contracts, and so the sons get contracts. It is selfishness. If not their friends, a part of the political hierarchy. It is selfishness. Only people of a certain group.

I carefully examined the 2024 Budget, and it offers nothing to our hardworking people who helped put together this 2024 Budget. I want to thank them for their hard work. I think they deserve more than 6.5%, and I want to suggest, at this forum, that they be given no less than 50%. My sympathy goes out to the families in the remote areas. It is talked about

a lot over there, on that side of the aisle, that they are going to get tax measures on fuel, water, *et cetera*, for the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. Most of our people do not use pipe water there. Secondly, I want to caution my people in Region 8, I have discovered that a metre was installed in a particular region in November of last year. [Mr. McCoy: Where? Which region?] In Region 6. By December, a bill was offered. With that, the bill had a date three days after, and by the second date, the water was cut.

When it comes to public works, we are proud of the Coalition's many stringent efforts throughout the region, during the three years that I was privileged to travel on those interconnected roadways in the interior. The sum of \$1.8 billion was invested and those roads stood the test of time. I travelled on them. One symbol of progress is that we moved from merely repairing wooden bridges to the construction of concrete bridges and culverts.

Similarly, the Coalition remedied the massive... When we speak about buildings, the Coalition remedied the massive, costly Kato Secondary School, which was started and was supposed to have been completed by the PPP/C, but it had massive defects. The building was unsafe and could not be occupied. Kato is a national embarrassment to our PPP/C Government. I am afraid that schools like the St. George's High School and Christ Church Secondary School may fall into a similar category. These projects are delayed, just the same as a long list of schools that the PPP/C could not have completed during their term of Office. I am still waiting to hear about the Mahdia school fire, especially the Mahdia Arcade fire. I did not hear anyone from over the other side talk about the Mahdia Arcade fire. What I know for a fact I will leave that for the purposes of a private conversation. This contrast with the advances we brought to the region, like introducing access to potable water – we are speaking about the history making Paramakatoi water catchment. [An Hon. Member: (*Inaudible*)] I was there when the fire took place. I am coming to the Mathematics of the day for last year's budget.

What happened to the Sundried Tomato Project in Paramakatoi? This created self-employment for farmers and further employment for processors. It was a landmark project that brought revenue to the village. Also, as a sitting member of the Tender Board, we guaranteed that every community had access to the completion of roads in the north so that the required funds and resources could have gone to the development of the communities. These roads are now unbearable. Our citizens and their goods can barely move throughout the region. Transportation is very costly. We are

out of Office for three years and they have not done anything good.

Before 2015, parcels of land were sold to citizens by Government functionaries at the regional level. However, even though my Friend, the Hon. Minister of Housing and Water, had gone to discuss water and housing, I have not heard him say anything about those lands or those parcels of land around the airstrip area that were sold to private citizens. I would be glad if he could do that quickly for us.

[An Hon. Member: *Inaudible*] That were sold before the 2015 Elections. Nothing has been done about the displacement of these families at the Mocha Arcadia. [An Hon. Member: Where?] At the Mahdia Arcadia, sorry. But we could hear in the press about Charity, Bush Lot, West Coast Berbice and all those other places where people had gone to do squatting – they were regularised. I would like this Hon. Minister to do some regularisation of the Mahdia Arcade vendors and what they were supposed to have gotten since then.

When it comes to education – the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) is good, I like that initiative. Last year, I spoke about equipping children with the necessary gadgets so they can complete their School Based Assessments (SBAs). Look at the condition of this one.

[The Hon. Member displayed a laptop.]

This was given to me by the National Assembly, but I made it available to ordinary poor people's children. I dare say, none of those Ministers over there have ever done something like that for any poor child from their community. Some Members of this House may recall that the APNU/AFC Coalition had commenced their Five B's Programme – a programme that was terminated by this ruling PPP/C Government. [An Hon. Member: *Inaudible*] It does not matter. I am interested in building communities, empowering young people, not destroying them.

Mining and logging, *et cetera* are done extensively in Region 8 and in other hinterland areas. There is only one tertiary institution and I alluded to that in my last presentation, for a teacher's training college in that area or a senior...

[An Hon. Member: *Inaudible*] Only a teacher's training college is there. We need a technical school to cater for the skills that can be associated with mining and logging. [An Hon. Member: *Inaudible*]

I will again, Sir.

6.35 p.m.

Finally, last year, I talked about budgetary allocation, and I had said then that, if we divided the budgetary allocation last year by the population, each family could receive \$1 million, and I was personally lambasted by the Hon. Attorney General. I have come to put that at rest. I was in the company of a special person of legal mind and there was where that discussion arose and that (*inaudible*). Those persons are from a strong family. He was referred to yesterday. Therefore, those people in the legal profession must have contributed more to the development of this country than many of us sitting in here. I am talking about a very special family. They are from a strong legal company of people. [Hon. Member (Government): Who?] Not you. But it is for you to find out who that special family is. They have contributed more to the development of the legal profession than many of us here, including the Hon. Minister of Public Works.

Finally, I want to encourage this Government and encourage the private sector to do much more for the people of Region 8. This is because we pay them with a Bank of Guyana cheque and, most times, these cheques, Hon. Member Dr. Ashni Singh, there is no bank in Mahdia or Region 8 to encash these people's cheques so they are left to the mercy of the private sector, who will make sure that they take some money from that cheque. If I work for \$20, I must get \$20. They have to buy goods from the shop before the cheque can be encashed. Or, if it is a contractor, he has to come to Georgetown to encash his cheque.

Mr. Speaker, I am saying, and I am encouraging this honourable House for us to put measures in place to alleviate that kind of suffering from ordinary people, including teachers, nurses and all other workers in Region 8. With those things in mind, I have difficulty, like my Colleague, in endorsing this budget, unless we do some adjustments to it. Thank you very much. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member Mr. Richard Sinclair, for that uninterrupted presentation. Hon. Members, we have exhausted the list of contributors for today. Tomorrow, we approach the final day of the debates. Hon. Acting Chief whip for the Government. Sorry Hon. Prime Minister.

ADJOURNMENT

BE IT RESOLVED:

“That the Assembly now adjourn to 10 a.m. on 26th January, 2024.”

[Brigadier (Ret'd) Prime Minister]

Prime Minister [Brigadier (Ret'd) Phillips]: Mr. speaker, with your permission, we adjourn until 10.00 a.m. tomorrow.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members the Assembly stands adjourned to 10 a.m. tomorrow, 26th January, 2024.

Adjourned accordingly at 6.38 p.m.