



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 (2020-2025) 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

93RD Sitting

Monday, 27TH January, 2025

**PARLIAMENT OFFICE
HANSARD DIVISION**

The Assembly convened at 10.30 a.m.

Prayers

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

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Speaker (1)

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+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Speaker**

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ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE SPEAKER

Efficient Use of Time

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, just a reminder. We will ring the first bell 15 minutes before our session starts. If we take a break at 12.30 p.m. and we say one hour, at 1.15 p.m., we will ring the first bell; 10 minutes after, the second bell; and the third bell just preceding the entrance of the Speaker. I have asked the staff to get a school bell. That will be the town crier's bell. After the first bell, I will ask the Sergeant-at-Arms to go around the Arthur Chung Conference Centre (ACCC) and ring that bell because it takes us half an hour to get a quorum, in spite of the fact that people are in the vicinity. This is just so that we can continue with the efficient use of our time. Thank you very much. Minister of Education, maybe we can borrow a school bell. We have been looking for the last week and there are no school bells around.

Minister of Education [Ms. Manickchand]: You might be looking in the wrong place, but we will see if we can lend you one, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much.

PUBLIC BUSINESS

GOVERNMENT'S BUSINESS

Motion

MOTION FOR THE APPROVAL OF THE ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2025

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 2025 have been prepared and laid before the Assembly on January 17, 2025, 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 2025 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 2025 of a total sum of one trillion, two hundred and ninety-eight billion, three hundred and forty-six million, nine hundred and eighty thousand, and one hundred and eighty-one dollars (\$1,298,346,980,181), excluding eighty three billion, eight hundred and three million, five hundred and fifteen thousand, six hundred and seventy-six dollars (\$83,803,515,676) 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 2025 as stated in Schedule 2, amounting to a total sum of eighteen billion, nine hundred and forty six million, five hundred and sixty-two thousand, and one hundred and seventy-three dollars (\$18,946,562,173) 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 2025.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly approves the sum of \$512,436,702,092 equivalent to US\$2,463,889,710 to be withdrawn from the Natural Resource Fund for the financial year 2025 in accordance with the Natural Resource Fund Act 2021.

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

Assembly resumed budget debate.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we will resume the debate on the Motion for the Approval of the Estimates of Expenditure for the Financial Year 2025. Today, our first speaker is the Hon. former Vice-President, Mr. Ramjattan.

10.35 a.m.

Mr. Ramjattan: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have risen here with a sense of duty after approximately 34 years – it might be even more – to do the honours of debating another budget, this time as Opposition, but in any case, as a Member of Parliament (MP), who wants to express certain sentiments about this budget, presented under the theme, *A Secure, Prosperous, and Sustainable Guyana*.

I want to immediately state that while this theme aims to convey an optimistic vision, there are quite a bit of glaring deficiencies, certain missed opportunities, and misallocations, as I would put it, especially within the security sector on which I would be speaking. Mr. Speaker, I recall that the last time I spoke, you indicated to me that I had to stick to my shadow Ministry. I, indeed, was galloping into certain directions of a general critique. However, I rather suspect that this occasion will be for me to ensure that I do a critique of national security in the context of wanting a broader vision, in view of the moneys that we have now.

[Mr. Mahipaul: Mr. Hickens must go home.]
Certainly.

The President often speaks of a ‘One Guyana’, but this budget presentation belies that rhetoric. The \$108.7 billion – I will call it \$109 billion to round it off – allocated for security may appear to be robust on the surface, but, on a closer examination, it reveals troubling misallocations, unaddressed systemic issues, and an overreliance on what I call superficial solutions. Security is not merely about infrastructure or technology that will be utilised in those infrastructures, but it encompasses the safety and dignity of every citizen, our borders’ integrity, the capacities of our personnel in those infrastructures, and our justice system’s

resilience. I say that not to denounce the fact that we are going to build more police stations but to say that the misallocation occurs as a result of not training enough people since there must be human development with infrastructural development.

This increase in the security sector, from \$94 billion last year to \$109 billion this year, reflects a 14.5% increase. This increase, based on the policies I noticed in the speech of the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service and in the speech that will certainly follow mine – that is the speech of Mr. Benn, Hon. Minister – based on what we have heard for the past four years, is far from being transformative. It remains skewed to infrastructure rather than institutional improvement and the broader framework required for national safety and security. Take, for example, that we are going to reconstruct the Brickdam Police Station at \$1.7 billion. I think I have it correct. That accounts for a staggering 36% of the police’s infrastructure budget. This is what I call a disproportionate allocation, which raises critical questions about whether the resources are being strategically utilised and more properly allocated to address our security needs, both in the coastal and hinterland regions.

It is good to have one of the finer state-of-the-art institutions at Brickdam, but it is also important that we have that in the hinterland regions and other coastal areas to complete a balance between the human side and the infrastructural side. I want to indicate, too, that we must not leave the hinterland area, where we are going to have security issues, especially in Essequibo, critically underserved. This is a ‘One Guyana’, in accordance with the President, and ‘One Guyana’ means not putting all the money in Georgetown necessarily and marginalising the regions under the guise of development. The \$6.2 billion Safe Country Initiative aims to expand surveillance, too, with an additional 320 sites across six regions. I want to say, that being so, it fails to address systemic vulnerabilities, such as the absence, up to today of a robust data protection protocol, although we tried it in 2015 and started the process through the Coombe set of recommendations. That is the person that came from England. The other thing is a minimal cybersecurity framework. We have tried, as best as possible, to work that out, but it seems some people can get charged and convicted and others cannot, and it is somewhat imbalanced in that regard.

Limited interagency integration and oversight: As you know, from my readings and even the expert advice that I had gotten from Mr. Coombe and Dr. Sittlington and all of them,

technology without a supportive ecosystem is akin to constructing a house on quicksand. We can make a 16-storey or 12-storey Brickdam Police Station, but if we do not have the personnel, the framework, and the protocols that go with all of those, it is building a house on sand. Then, there is what I call human resource development. We can never leave out the human element, as I have emphasised, or neglect it from the whole concept of the larger framework of infrastructure.

This budget, under security, allocates \$250 million to train 1700 security personnel in crime scene management, forensic analysis, and cyber security. This provision is necessary but it is also a provision that requires the recommendations that have come from the Coombe Report – specialised career pathways for certain personnel inside of that police force. This is so that we can have units therein that can know, very profoundly, matters regarding cybersecurity, crime scene management, and so on. It is one thing to say we are going to train them at the elementary level of security and crime scene management, but we do not have a set of policemen who can be relied on in relation to certain pathways, especially in the context of the new crimes that the Caribbean report has indicated will happen in an oil economy, such as the marine section and what can happen and also due to the Venezuelan input and the intelligence that is required from the insecurities of those ungovernable spaces in and around those hinterland regions.

Although we have this \$250 million for training, we do not have any provisioning for performance matrix tied to outcomes. That was very important in the human resource report that Mr. Coombe did in connection with the British Security Sector Reform. What we in Guyana suffer – and I tell you that, indeed, I saw it for myself as Minister of Public Security – is that we do not do performance matrices so that you can know that this is a policeman that is doing well, or this is a unit that is doing well as against what we want of them. Then, there is the long-term professional development framework. That ties in with the specialised career pathways that I am talking about. We need to spend lots more money on that set of pathways. As a result of not doing that, I think we have failed our skilled, motivated workforce that is required for a modern security framework, one that will take care of the modern security challenges.

In a similar line, I want to make the point about what happened to our prison service realities. It is fundamental that we have to make budgetary allocations for prisons, but what I feel has to be prioritised at this time, in view of the much-touted talk of the reintegration and so on, is

rehabilitation over huge spending – I think it is \$6.2 billion – on further prison service infrastructure. We want to foster reintegration into society. Reintegration, as was said by our Hon. Attorney General, Mr. Anil Nandlall, when he did that legislation some time ago, is important. It is not as if we must have a situation where we jail people just for minor offences and so on. We have to start the process of ensuring that they do not commit the crimes again, what we call recidivism, and also the reintegration into society after they come out of prison. That must be coordinated, I must say, in a strengthened way with social services. We have to look after people with a multi network of the Ministries involved. I see, somewhat, misallocations occurring there.

I want to also indicate that there must be an allocation for border and maritime security, which remains woefully inadequate; it is not adequate. This was a big issue when we had that British Security Sector Reform in which there was a big report in relation to maritime security. Our limited coastal patrol capabilities can do damage to securing, as part of how we get a part of the theme for this budget, the safety of the people. There are too limited coastal patrol capabilities. Also, we have insufficient radar and aerial surveillance coverage. Interagency coordination is very weak right now. I had started a programme of trying to integrate all of the agencies involved in security and would have weekly meetings with them. I do not know if that is going on, but these deficiencies expose our nation's risks, ranging from illicit trafficking to territorial violations, which undermines national sovereignty.

10.50 a.m.

Then, there are the forensic capabilities, our forensic laboratory. I know that prior to 2015, we had a laboratory that was started, but somehow it seems that we still have to go overseas. I rather suspect that the challenges I faced are still being faced by the Hon. Minister. The technological upgrades and weak laboratory capacity we must not allow in a country that is the fastest-growing economy and all of that. This hampers effective crime solving and it also hampers judicial outcomes. That must be prioritised for the purpose of evidence-based policing. Something must be done, even if we have to ask regional governments for support. I remember we do have formidable experience and expertise out of Jamaica from the Jamaican Constabulary.

Now, I want to indicate that there are larger and broader issues that we must deal with in connection with the budgetary allocations. I feel that there are recommendations for reforms in the two reports that we had. One was the

Sittlington Report and the other was the Coombe Report. In those reports, we have additional recommendations that were made by other experts that these two experts had indicated ought to come on the scene. A lot of times I hear Government officials indicating, Mr. Ramjattan, you all like to *cuss*, but what do you propose? We have to start developing a national security strategy in view of the very big dollars we have now to spend on what I regard as a national security strategy. It seems that the Government officials only want to talk the talk. When they get from us what we want and which is provided for in the law to help, they do not do it. I come here with the point that in that robust constitutional period of 1999 to 2002, we created for this Parliament a parliamentary security committee. I cannot understand it, but the Hon. Minister, at the first meeting in 2020, we then constituted the parliamentary security committee but not a single meeting thereafter.

How could we go now and ask, like when they did under my administration, the Commissioner of Police to please come? There were 16 hours of cross-examination on all manner of things. We want to ask the present Commissioner about his Standing Orders in relation to collecting \$8.5 million for a wedding gift for a certain Brutus. We want to ask the Commissioner whether there is a certain rule that states one cannot be appointed after age 55, but no, we will never get that opportunity. It is with profound disappointment, I must tell you, that we do not have the implementation of what is called that which we have now as dealing with these issues. We have to establish comprehensive oversight mechanisms and that is one of them. This must not only happen in relation to the Guyana Police Force but the Guyana Fire Service. So many fires we have had, and notwithstanding so much moneys with which we have bought new equipment and all of that, the fires rage on. It is the same thing with the prison. Again, we would have to expand and deepen the training programmes and allocate lots more money. I think about 10% of this budget that is spent on security, we should advance and specialise training pathways, as I mentioned. We do have a set of recommendations. Implement anti-corruption safeguards by establishing oversight committees, which I talked about, even within the Guyana Police Force itself and the Police Complaints Authority. Let these things...the coroner's inquest. Lots of things have been happening and we are not having that and the reports on that. It is fundamental that all these oversight mechanisms be put in place as early as possible because we have the moneys to do so.

The history of the People's Progressive Party/Civic's (PPP/C's) directed investments of money is not one that inspires confidence. Their judgments have been frequently bad, and I know of it, even when they are not actually... to benefit someone or some group. Such Government failures include, as we know...and we have to get back to it because I noticed that is one of the things that your Members over the other side of this floor have been talking about. Such failures include the Skeldon factory, National Insurance Scheme (NIS) investments – a lot of the NIS moneys were badly spent – CLICO funds and the Amaila Falls Hydropower Project. They have so many things, but for the present day, this 10-hour-a-week, or whatever it is called, employment scheme for \$40,000 is another slush fund. It is a big slush fund. In my opinion and I have said this four times right here in this Parliament, the subsidisation of sugar to the extent of about \$40 billion today, over and above that which we normally expend on it, is a big slush fund. There are a couple of other things that I would have liked to state on that, but I am going to just bypass them.

I want to state that we must not chase this growth mirage that the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service spoke about. We must substitute it with delivering for the well-being of Guyanese. That is what is fundamental here, Mr. Minister. A lot of people get on *Facebook*, a lot of people get in the party groups and a lot of people get... [Mr.

Charlie: *In the Ring.*] *In the Ring* is countering it.

They are delivering this thing about how we are the fastest-growing economy and all of that, but when you talk to those people... Mr. Minister, I want to tell you that I have been talking to them. They are punishing. You go to the markets – Skeldon Market, Port Mourant Market, New Amsterdam Market and Parika Market – the people are suffering intensely.

[Mr. Mustapha: Does he go to the market?]

I do. I am the one who buys most of the 'greens' almost every time. They only recently talked to Mr. Mustapha about that, that they are struggling. They said it as much. Delivering well-being to Guyanese is fundamental. Pumpkin, bora, everything that is planted here, which the Minister of Agriculture proudly talks about, every price is going up and up.

[Mr. Mustapha: *(Inaudible)*]. You could talk about all these things when your time comes.

What about delivering the well-being to Guyanese? It does not require much. Guyanese, even at the very lower level, want to bring a halt to the mosquitoes that bite them every night. You can do something about that. You can also see the dirty streets in Georgetown now. When Hon. Mr. Patterson

and Hon. Ferguson were Ministers of Public Infrastructure, it was clean. What you see now is a lot of garbage all over the place. These little things matter. You do not have to spend big-time money on infrastructure and all of that. The well-being of Guyanese as against infrastructural work needs to be attended to. Make quality of life better with the resources it has. The quality of life of Guyanese now, notwithstanding this big set of moneys that we have...How much? It is \$3.8 trillion. What we have to do is to ensure that we improve our education. We are bad in mathematics; 50% cannot matriculate.

We have to do a lot better in health. You have a nurse shortage. You have a medicine shortage. These are things that could be simply done with the money that you have. **[Mr. Charlie:** There is no run shortage though.] That is why domestic violence in Port Mourant and in Berbice is so high. It is because you do not have any shortage of that – rum. The binge drinking in Guyana is the highest in the Caribbean. We did a survey on drinking in Guyana, and it is important to understand to understand that binge drinking is the highest in the Caribbean. Even marijuana and cocaine in schools are very high at that level. Now that you have the money, make sure that you use it in these policies.

The functioning of our courts. We noticed that the Attorney General indicated that we are going to have the appointment of the Chief Justice and Chancellor soon. A lot of pressure came from a number of international and regional people...

[Mr. Duncan: CCJ.] That Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) President and so on have been making these things. It is important too that not only those two big appointments, but I read in the newspaper, *Stabroek News*, about five days ago, that we have to make substantive certain judges who were appointed in 2018. It is fundamental. I hope that it is not because of their independent thinking that they are not getting appointed as substantive judges. **[Mr.**

Nandlall: They have been appointed. All of them have been appointed.] Well, I hope that is so, that all of them have been substantively appointed.

[Mr. Nandlall: That was in the news.] All right. I hope that you now go on for the Chief Justice and the Chancellor.

[Mr. Nandlall: We will appoint a Chief Justice and a Chancellor. What is your problem?]

My problem is, why after all this kind of thing you would have... Building quality infrastructure rather than the collapsible and substandard causing the President to go out at 5 o' clock in the morning and *cussing* up all the contractors...

Mr. Speaker: Okay. You just stepped over again. You are now accusing the President. Please, withdraw that for me and then I will ask someone to give you a five-minute extension to conclude.

11.05 a.m.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five minutes to continue and conclude the presentation, but you have to withdraw that reference you... Thank you.

Mr. Ramjattan: I am criticising at an unholy hour, 5 o' clock and even directing some of those criticisms to my good friend, Ms. Priya Manickchand. Moneys could be spent in some measure of getting life better for our Guyanese. In relation to traffic congestion, I now have to spend about 30 minutes from Delft Street to Hadfield Street to get to my new office.

[Mr. Duncan: Then, you pass about 30 sirens too.] Yeah, that is another thing; everybody get

sirens now. To bring my address, I want to talk about this slush fund mentality. This Government have that mentality about it whereby one can see in certain programmes and even line item heads a number of big sets of moneys being there and we are not getting accountabilities for them or, at least, the Auditor General making mention of them. Take, for example, in other in the Office of the Prime Minister, disaster preparedness, we have about \$40 billion now and we understand that is where they are going to get the cash grant from, but it comes up to about \$30 billion.

[Brigadier Ret'd Phillips: You collected your own.] I collect mine; that is true, but it is \$30 billion. It will come up. What is happening to that other \$10.5 billion?

[An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] No. Well, that is it.

We have the Amerindian Development Fund (ADF) WITH a number that is \$3.4 billion in the 2022 Budget. We saw that instead of the Amerindian Development Fund money going into, it was then transferred to the Amerindian Purpose Fund and \$3.4 billion cannot be accounted for. The Auditor General has indicated as much in the 2022 Report. I can hand it to you. That is why also in other very questionable sums which we get...I mentioned already, the slush funds with \$11 billion and the other \$5 billion. It is fundamental that these be accounted for. This Government have always talked about transparency and accountability, but we do not

get it. Even the committees and commissions that we institutionalised are not functioning as a result.

I want to end by stating that on the first day I recall two Ministers said that we are going to take care of the people from the cradle to grave. I want to say we have to do better. We have to take care of the people from the womb to the tomb and I do not want to tell you where further we can go. We could even go further. Is that right? From erection to resurrection – I hope that is not unparliamentary. I cannot, in my right mind support this Budget as it stands because of its misallocations; it is questionable spending; and the unaccountability that goes with so many large sums, especially, under line item Other and the various slush funds. I am going to ask that it is not supported. Thank you, very much. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much, Hon. Member. Now for the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Bindley Horatio Benn.

Minister of Home Affairs [Mr. Benn]: Mr. Speaker, thank you. Hon. Members, I rise to support the Budget for 2025 for Guyana, as presented by the Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh; the Cabinet; and President, Irfaan Ali. It is a budget intended to continue the dramatic transformation of Guyana in this special moment that Guyana is in.

For some of us who are older, the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, 54 years in Parliament and myself... [Mr.

Ramjattan: It is 34.] Oh, it is 34. For persons of our age, Mr. Ramjattan and us, this moment, should be special. It will not happen in our lifetimes again. This transformative moment in the history of our country, will not happen again. I recall that when we said we found the oil; it was called an election gimmick – an election gimmick. Now that this gimmick is on us; now that the money is flowing into the country, people are upset, people are angry, people are hapless and hopeless about the fact that this gimmick is a real thing. The people of Guyana could, for the first time in generations and in decades, be at a point where they could see their way forward to progress, peace and prosperity.

The Hon. Member stood here before me in this honourable House and talked about this development mirage. [An Hon. Member: Yes. He cannot see.] I cannot

expect him to see any better based on his infirmities otherwise. There are some people mostly on that side, some on social media and in some parts of the press, who walk on the roads, drive on the roads, go into the new schools, see new prisons, new police stations, new fire stations, all of

those things in reality but will come here and say, they are a mirage. I had hoped that the Hon. Member would have taken the high road in terms of speaking on the Budget. I want to compliment the Hon. Member, Ms. Geeta Chandan-Edmond, on her presentation. Perhaps, I know the Hon. Member does not have a place at Sophia anymore. I would have expected more depth and charity even from... [Mr. McCoy: An 84-year-old veteran.] Whatever number of years.

Simple things I think I have to respond to. The Hon. Member, who was a Vice-President in the previous Government, sat in on all the decisions, was party to them and was an advocate of those decisions which destroyed sugar on the Corentyne in Berbice. Seven thousand workers went home, and, by extension, 35,000 people did not have sustenance and livelihood. Then, they come here and talk about empty houses on the Corentyne and Berbice. The Hon. Member, Mr. Kemraj Ramjattan, was in on the decisions which... [Dr. Singh: Vice-President; Vice-President, the name only.] Vice-President, the Hon. Member did

nothing about them when they encouraged the blocking of the river at Berbice and killed the work in the bauxite at Hururu, at Kurubuka, at Kwakwani and at Ituni. The Hon. former Vice-President was in on those decisions. The Hon. Member, Mr. Kemraj Ramjattan, was in on the decisions and the discussions or maybe he was completely hapless. The Hon. Member was just somebody sitting there with no influence and power, but when they took out the Because We Care cash grant from the *pickney* mouth and hands; he was in on the decisions. The Hon. Member comes here and carries on and wants people to be ... I could go on and on. I could go on and on. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, and others of his ilk. When we speak of hypocrisy... [Ms. Ferguson: Hypocrisy is an unparliamentary word.] [Mr. Mahipaul: Hypocrisy is an unparliamentary word.]

Mr. Speaker: Yes, Hon. Member; you should know better.

Mr. Benn: Mr. Speaker, I want to withdraw the word hypocrite or hypocrisy. I was trying to characterise the fact that somehow, I still think that the Hon. Member knew when those things were happening that they were wrong, but the Hon. Member still went along with them and appealed to a constituency he thinks he has on the Corentyne Coast and tries to continue to confuse, and kerfuffle people with high-flown language and expressions. This Hon. Member met me downstairs when we had the long recount and said he knew nothing about the ballot statements; that he was not in on it; that the A Partnership for National Unity (APNU) knew everything about them. As a Leader of a party, knew nothing

about them as a significant Coalition partner told me downstairs there. I marked the spot. He said he knew nothing about it and up to today, he is sitting here as a Vice-President. Of course, others have flown the coop. **[Brigadier Ret'd Phillips: Former Vice-President.]** Former Vice-President. There is no apology from him and others about the attempted theft of our democracy. There is no apology from them. There are no apologies from them for the embarrassment and shame we had in relation to the elections of 2020.

I should not be attempting to reply to all of the things which the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, spoke of, but I want to tell him a personal story. There was a time when I was going to school when I used to plant bora, baigan, pakchoi and tomatoes and sold them at Border Market Green. I think the time has now come where the Hon. Member should do the same. If he is concerned about the price of bora and tomatoes in the market, he should encourage people to go and plant them, so the prices can come down gradually. I could show you a thing or two about planting and selling of those things.

11.20 a.m.

Plant more; grow more. The Hon. Gentleman has no real interest in encouraging Guyanese to develop themselves. The Hon. Member has no real interest in seeing people live better, safer and have more evolved lives. The Hon. Member, like others on that side, except for Ms. Chandan-Edmond, has no real interest. They want to spoil; they are spoilers. Mr. Ramjattan, the Hon. Member, snarls and scowls from that side. I think he must be mad.

I will call some numbers from the Guyana Revenue Authority (GRA) in relation to the mirage of development that the Hon. Member spoke of. I would like to point out to the Hon. Member that in 2014 6,347 cars registered with the GRA. In 2017 – in their time – the numbers dropped by minus 55% to 3,481 cars. In 2023, the most recent numbers we have shown – 15,864 cars are registered in Guyana. This is an increase of 455% from the 2017 numbers. For all significant types of vehicles, I want to display the mirage. In 2014, there were 12,934 vehicles of significant types – cars, lorries, excavators, graders, minibuses, pickups and tractors. I could give the details; there were 12,934 vehicles. In 2017, there were 8,810 of those vehicles registered – a decline of more than 60%. Today, the number of vehicles of similar sorts which I quoted is 31,266 – an increase of 355% over the 2017 numbers. That is the mirage; I want to clean your

eyes. This Budget which speaks to making safe Guyana, improving safety and security as a function of protecting our development and protecting our country is very significant, pivotal and transformative.

I want to speak to the purpose of the Parliament in relation to all of us being here again today. In many ways, we are joined at the hip in the effort of national development. We might even be married in the cause of developing Guyana. It could be thought of like that. We could even be considered cellmates in relation to figuring out, working out and entrapping ourselves, sometimes towards pushing the cause of Guyana's development – a development that is long overdue and being put into reality at the moment. I want to point out some of the issues that we have in relation to the question of development and security. We have – in terms of a specific issue – amongst the highest murder rate in the region. This rate is tied to the question of transnational-organised crime. We have no more challenges in relation to choke and robs, simply, but the nature of crime has changed. We are responding to issues that are mostly related to transnational-organised crime. Of course, there are the questions of youth crime. There are questions about poverty that still exist and we are working hard to overcome them. There are issues that we need to pay attention to when we talk about crime. With some specificity, we have a murder rate of 22 per 100,000. There are other countries where the murder rate is much higher. Jamaica, El Salvador, the Republic Trinidad and Tobago, and the Turks and Caicos Islands have significantly higher murder rates.

We are aware – if we refer to the Regional Symposium: Violence as a Public Health Issue which was held from 21st to 23rd November in Guyana – there was a discussion at the level of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat with the heads on how to work together on the question of transnational-organised crime. I hasten to say that the type of crime is not related to Guyana specifically but it comes about as a function of the drug trade. It results due to the trafficking of arms which relates to the matter. It has to do with money laundering, which is related to the matter. It has to do with trafficking-in-persons in respect of the matter. It behoves us to find together the type of consultations; discussions; responses; attitudes and, in some cases, stop the whispering which goes on in relation to what is happening on the question of crime. We have had, over the past year, a reduction in serious crime by 12.2%. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, speaks of the police stations that we are building. I would like to know how many were built in his time. Right now, tell us how many new police stations you built, the new

infrastructure for the police station that you built or the new vehicles that you got for the police with respect to improving crime and security.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, speaks of the prison. [Mr. Norton: That is where you should be.] I want to tell the Hon. Gentleman that I would be happy to accommodate him at one of the new prisons that we have – either Mazaruni; Lusignan; New Amsterdam, for emphasis; or Timehri. Under other circumstances, some of these people on the other side would not be here. They would be well ensconced in the prison. Mr. Ramjattan cannot say that he was not aware of the malignancy against our Constitution, which resulted in the attempted theft of our democracy in 2020. Let us keep that as an open issue and an open question. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, spoke about the prison. When Minister Dr. Anthony and I visited the prison, I asked him to come there. The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was on. We were very worried because men were sleeping under the tents in the open air – open to the weather and sleeping in shifts. They were sleeping double-decked – in hammocks above and on mattresses below – in shifts. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, I believe, never visited that prison – as far as I am aware. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, presided over the destruction of the prisons in Georgetown at Camp Street and Lusignan. He presided over that and built some things worse than chicken pens for the men to sleep under. The most jailbreaks; the most fires; the most depredation and the most rapes in the prisons occurred under his watch. The Hon. Member comes here to tell us about the prisons. That is shameless, not hypocrisy.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, your clock is running and you just used two words I do not allow, please.

Prime Minister [Brigadier (Ret'd) Phillips]: Mr. Speaker, I ask that the Hon. Member be granted an extension of five minutes.

Mr. Speaker: I am sorry, Prime Minister (PM), his clock is running, but he has not run out of time as yet.

Mr. Benn: The Hon. Member wants me to respond to every specific thing that he said here. The Hon. Member made infamous statements here in the National Assembly. I would like to point out to him that we are building new police stations. Yes, we have to build a new police station at Brickdam – a new, modern building, edifice. I would not describe how I found some of the police barracks when we took over. The Criminal Investigation Department's (CID's)

building was in a state of collapse – amongst many others. We had to move them out. We are moving and we are building a new Criminal Investigation Department. We are building a new police station at Brickdam. I am sure the police service intends to improve its efficiency and integrity and yes, of course, to deal with issues of corruption, which is public knowledge at various levels that.... [Hon.

Member (Opposition): That is unparliamentary.] It is unparliamentary; I withdraw. It is the lack of integrity.

11.35 a.m.

[Mr. Norton: Every time you say the word corruption, you are looking at a mirror.] The Hon. Member knows how to look at a mirror. I pointed out that we have had a decrease of 12.2% in relation to serious crimes and we have had 624 cases. The clear up rate is 50.5%, which is much larger than when we took over when the rates was at the level of 19% or so. The firearms that were seized by the Guyana Police Force (GPF) over the years and, particularly, over last year, were 178 making a big dent in relation to those who would want to carry on activities using firearms to commit crimes.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, spoke about domestic violence. We have had reports of 1,535 domestic violence cases in 2024; 911 cases were made; and there were 167 convictions, which is a steep increase from the previous years. In relation to narcotic seizure by the Guyana Police Force, there have been 1,463 seizures, 581 reports, 379 cases and 77 convictions. In relation to questions of trafficking in persons (TIP), there were 31 reports and six cases.

I want to speak on some of the supposedly mirage police stations and buildings which were completed in 2024 such as: the Den Amstel Police Station; Monkey Mountain Police Station, if you want to talk about the footprint and the hinterland; Vreed-en-Hoop Police Station; Mocha Police Station; Sparendam Police Station; Lethem Police Station; Annai Police Station; Baramita Police Station; Imbaimadai Police Station; Rose Hall Police Station; Tuschen Police Station; Eteringbang Police Station; Karasabai Police Station; Ruimveldt Police Station; Providence Police Station; Charity Police Station; Yarakita Police Station; Kamarang Police Station; Kurupung Police Station; and Kato Police Station. The Hon. Member stood here and talked about footprint, the hinterland and the interior locations.

There has also been a large expense in respect of vehicles. The sum of \$262 million has been invested. This includes

drones, Hilux vehicles, 15 all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and double shocks for the interior, Isuzu five tonnes Flatbeds, motorcycles and a long list of equipment delivered to the Guyana Police Force in relation to supporting crime fighting, interdiction in relation to fines, heightening responsiveness in relation to crime and those activities. The Hon. Member...

[**Mr. Norton:** This is a ten minutes-five minutes.]

[**Mr. Mahipaul:** No. He was not (*inaudible*) PM was not listening.] Thank you, Mr. Mahipaul for giving some insights there.

In relation to the Guyana Prison Service, there has been a tremendous increase in the facilities. There has been significant effort to enhance the security measures at the prison to prevent escapes. We have been working towards the modernisation of the operating procedures and at improving the training and psychological readiness of both the prisoners and the officers. The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan spoke about the prison. I could advise him that we have built a prison school at Lusignan. I could advise him that we have established vocational sections for prisoners at Lusignan. I could advise him that we have for prisoners a Fresh Start programme, whereby being trained in the prison according to their vocational interest, they will be able to leave the prison and be kitted out with equipment and the means to start businesses to support themselves and their families when they leave the prison.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I can now advise the Prime Minister to move your extension.

Brigadier (Ret'd) Phillips: Mr. Speaker, I ask that the Hon. Member be granted an extension of five minutes.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you may continue for five minutes to conclude.

Mr. Benn: For the Guyana Fire Service, we have reconstructed the Leonora Fire Station. We have constructed a new fire headquarters in Georgetown at Homestretch Avenue. We have constructed a new fire station at Wales. We have done the Eccles Fire Station. We have just bought and are distributing to the Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs) all over the country to deal with the issues of fire... We are acquiring more of the hydraulic platforms and we have acquired more water bowsters. We have worked with Angloco Limited to acquire more ambulances; minibuses; and to support the important work, not only of the fire service; but, also of its ambulance service, which has

done tremendous work. We are getting another fireboat and new water bowsters. We anticipate that the responsiveness and the capability, along with the fact that we have newly graduated firefighters, their performance will increase substantially. Along with the effort of bringing greater public awareness to the dangers of fires to persons, we should be able to see a reduction in the number of fires in the country. We continue to install hydrants, servicing those that are there and, bringing to schools and to facilities by way of inspections of governments and private businesses, the question of higher awareness in relation to the question of the dangers of fire.

I want to point out a particular interest which is the fight we have against drug trafficking. The Customs Anti-Narcotics Unit (CANU) made the significant seizure of over 4,000 kilogrammes (kgs), a significant or the highest signature of cocaine seized in our country over the years. The Guyana Police Force also seized – after discovering particular types of submersible vessels – three vessels which were intended to use for drug trafficking. We pointed out that we are victims of the overall drug question, we are not the users of drugs and we are not the marketplace for the drugs. We are the transit point. The fact that the drug trafficking activity and criminality bring tremendous pressures in relation to the security sphere, we will continue to fight. We are putting more money into this effort and we are working to continue to the bring down of planes and to make the necessary seizures to deal with this nefarious business.

Of course, we have the existential threat on the question of our sovereignty from Venezuela. We note the disruption and the other confusions, particularly recently in a place called Catatumbo in Venezuela/Colombia, between the Revolutionary Armed Forces in Colombia (Farc) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). We pay special note, and we do have border surveillance, not only at the level of the army and the police but, also at the level of the community policing groups. These are also being supported and beefed up in relation to the efforts, in terms of border surveillance, intelligence gathering and interdiction in relation to smuggling, trafficking in persons and other criminal activities. For the Guyana Police Force and for all of our services, we are speaking now of pushing forward the ideas encapsulated in the mission of the Ministry of increasing peace in Guyana and this may only come about when we have broad base parliamentary support on this issue.

Mr. Speaker: That would be a good point to start winding down. Thank you, Hon. Minister and now for the Hon. Member, Mr. Shurwayne Holder.

Mr. Holder: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Hon. Member, Mr. Robeson Benn spoke about Guyana having the highest murder rate due to transnational crime but failed to tell this House or the nation what he and his Government have been doing about it. Development in the Guyana Police Force is typically measured by a combination of factors, including crime rate, response time, community engagements, officer training, completion rate, complaint statistics, *et cetera*. We did not hear much about any of those factors. To be honest, the Hon. Member, Minister Benn, seems to believe that police cars and buildings solve crimes. I would not waste more time on such a poor presentation by the Hon. Minister.

I want to say thank you for giving me the floor, Mr. Speaker and let me thank all of the staff from the Ministry of Finance, staff from all the other ministries, including those at the regional and municipal level for their hard work done to prepare *Budget 2025*.

[**An. Hon. Member (Government):** Thank you very much.] I am not thanking you. Notwithstanding their efforts, the final document presented by the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service is based on the policy direction of the People's Progressive Party/Civic or lack thereof. As such, I will focus my attention on concerns with respect to the policies and programmes that exist and those that are absent and, also offer alternatives, as we are expected to do, as the government in waiting.

11.50 a.m.

Guyanese as a whole, whether they support the People's National Congress Reform (PNCR), the PPP/C, the Alliance For Change (AFC) or whichever political party, for decades, as far back as 1966, when we gained Independence, I have always known that our country possesses tremendous potential to transform from its poor status to a position that will ensure that every Guyanese can live a comfortable life. They also knew then, as we know now, and have come to realise, that in order for us to reach our full potential, and to realise the dream of a united Guyana, in which all of our citizens can benefit from a fair and equitable distribution of our national patrimony, our approach to governance has to be one in which all stakeholders are allowed to participate. I say this because, since the discovery of oil in 2015, significant investments by the oil companies has transformed

our country from its poor state into one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has surpassed all of our Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and South American neighbours. Notwithstanding this, over the past five years, we have heard the tens of thousands of voices of ordinary Guyanese who continued to struggle with the reality of this economy, in which their income does not allow them to take care of their most basic needs – needs like providing three square meals a day for the family, and paying the rent and utility bills. While the likes of Hon. Members Dr. Ashni Singh, Bishop Juan Edghill and others on the Government side, will harp gloriously about all the infrastructure, *et cetera*, being done, if we do not change our approach towards governance, and allow all stakeholders, including the Opposition and the other civil society groups and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), to contribute to the process in a significant way, a majority of Guyanese will continue to suffer the way they are.

The 2025 Budget, because of the oil industry, is larger than all of the APNU/AFC's budgets combined from 2015 to 2019. In fact, if we were to total up the yearly budgets prior to oil discovery, we will find that the last two PPP/C's budgets will be equivalent to more than 15 to 20 years of Guyana's total expenditure. As such, *Budget 2025* presented another opportunity for the Government to demonstrate its willingness to adopt a collaborative approach, ensuring the Opposition's suggestions, at minimum, are sought and included where necessary in the budget. The PPP/C's failure to engage the Opposition proves their so called 'One Guyana' mantra to be nothing more than an empty campaign slogan, orchestrated to deceive Guyanese while they conceal their quest for total domination and control of the country through one-party rule.

During the 2024 Budget debates, I had the painstaking task of highlighting the significant contribution of the... [**An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)**]

I will touch on natural resources. Mr. Speaker, I want to turn your attention to the Ministry of Natural Resources, and gold mining in particular, which I mentioned last year, does not escape the PPP/C's friends, families and favourites policy, nor the accompanying mismanagement and discrimination. During the 2024 Budget, I had the painstaking task of highlighting the significant contributions of the industry to the economy. I explained that the gold industry remained the key contributor to national economic performance, and hinterland settlement and development. In fact, gold accounts for about 6% to 8% of the non-oil GDP, and 60%

to 70% of non-oil exports. It is a crucial industry which we ought to pay keen attention to and to ensure that it is properly managed.

Despite record high prices in recent years, the industry continues to have a dismal performance, and the PPP/C Government seems quite content with treating the industry like a stepchild, while parroting the same excuses for the constant decline of the industry, year after year. Mr. Speaker, if you read the section of the Budget on gold, for the last five years, you will see that it not only confirms what I just said, but you will also recognise that, for every single year, rather than make realistic projections, they attempt to fool the people into believing that the next year gold will prosper. The PPP/C has now presented six budgets, five of which projected major increases in gold production – none of which were achieved. The production level by the APNU/AFC in 2019, was over 641,000 ounces. For five straight years under this PPP/C Government – that, by the way, continues to have access to hundreds of billions of dollars from oil resources; hundreds of billions from revenue collection; and hundreds of billions of dollars from access to loans and grants – gold has constantly plummeted by more than 30% down to 434,067 ounces. Interestingly, the reason for the decline, as stated in the 2020 to 2024 Budgets, is due to low declaration from small- and medium-scale miners.

While the Government seeks to indicate an increase in production by an insignificant 0.5% or 1,954 ounces, it is the low and large-scale companies that account for it. Production amongst small and medium-scale miners actually fell by more than 33,000 ounces. Mr. Speaker, because of the PPP/C's incompetence and mismanagement of the gold industry over the five-year period, the people of Guyana lost about \$300 billion. They did not need to increase production from the 2019 level left by the APNU/AFC. If they had just maintained it, we would have gained over 700,000 more ounces of gold. The revenue lost is equivalent to the entire 2019 Budget. Additionally, the gold industry cannot only be seen as a revenue base for the country, but it also aids in occupying and securing much of our territory, for which Venezuela has constantly attempted to claim. It provides much needed employment for the indigenous communities and generally props up the local economies in many rural communities. The fact that gold prices have been consistently high over the last five years, but yet, have not attracted significant investment, tells a story of neglect and poor management. I know the Minister of Natural Resources in his rebuttal will state that a second company – I believe the Oko West Gold Project – is coming with an annual projection of 353,000 ounces. Even if one was to add their

production to the current production level, it would struggle to match what existed under the APNU/AFC six years ago.

The focus has to be on small- and medium-scale mining. I suspect that the PPP/C's friends, families and favourites policy is what might be affecting the small and medium scale mining. In fact, over the last year, I received several complaints about the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC) favouring friends of the Government over the small miners. I had a particular case to deal with here today, but I will not deal with it, because I was advised by the small miner not to, and I respect his wishes. As the next government, we will conduct the necessary mineral mapping, as I stated last year, in a timely manner, to open up new lands for gold mining and other critical minerals – those minerals that are important to industry and new technology, but are of limited availability due to geology, economics, geopolitics, or environmental barriers, and are hard to substitute – thereby encouraging large investments in the industry but, at the same time, ensuring a level playing field for small- and medium-scale miners. We will also promote Guyana as a mineral investment destination.

Let me just touch on bauxite quickly. The Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service reported that in 2024 there was a 225% increase in production to 1,700,000 tonnes. This sounds like good news for the industry since, as we are aware, the bauxite industry has for decades presented many challenges, some seeming insurmountable. However, if one looks closer at the statistics, the increase is simply due to one of the existing companies expanding its operation with a new kiln. In fact, the APNU/AFC, through our five years in Office, from 2015 to 2019, saw an average yearly export of over 1,660,000 tonnes, with a peak production of 1,924,466 tonnes and 1,920,336 tonnes in 2018 and 2019 respectively. This exceeds the five-year average production under the PPP/C from 2020 to 2024. Their average is 828,000 tonnes over a five-year period, a significant decline by more than 50%. I am certain that both the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service and the Minister of Natural Resources will seek to defend their dismal performance by blaming the APNU/AFC for the bauxite company United Company Russian Aluminium's (RUSAL's) departure. The reality is, companies have their own internal challenges, as did RUSAL for many years prior to the APNU/AFC Government.

I will remind the Government that when the APNU/AFC came to power in 2015, we were faced with similar

situations. For example, the Venezuela-Guyana paddy-for-fuel deal had collapsed; certain markets for rice, which the PPP/C enjoyed, were gone; farmers took to the streets in protest because of the low paddy price. We did not complain and blamed the PPP/C for five years, but we rose to the occasion as any competent government would. We found new markets and rescued the rice industry, so much so – hold on, it gets better – that the two highest production levels ever recorded in the history of this country occurred in 2016 and 2019 under the APNU/AFC. They cannot come crying and blaming the APNU/AFC. They must *man up* I say. Be truthful and admit your incompetence. Guyana's bauxite deposits can produce, probably, the world's widest range of bauxite products such as metallurgic grade, refractory grade, cement grade, and chemical grade bauxite. The PPP/C in the last five years, with resources available, has failed to better leverage this global comparative advantage. As the next government, we will work to advance the industry, utilising the various qualities of our deposit, and to convert the raw bauxite into value-added products.

I would like to touch on oil and gas, natural resources and the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS). The Minister claimed in his Budget speech, that he intends to strike, and I quote:

“...an appropriate balance... between short term imperatives and long term considerations.”

How are they doing this whilst spending 95% of the Natural Resource Fund (NRF)? This approach suggests that all matters are short term imperatives. At the current rate of depletion, it will be years before significant funds will be available to invest so that we have funds to stabilise the economy and to ensure prosperity for future generations. By his own admission, global oil supply will surpass demand in 2025, leading to a 10.95 drop in oil price to just around \$71 per barrel. This drop has consequences for the GDP growth rate. The 2025 growth is expected to slow to 10.6%, down from 43.6% in 2024. This significant drop is *prima facie* evidence that Guyana is already oil dependent. This increases the risk inherent in spending essentially all of our oil revenues.

The second point I want to highlight is that the PPP/C Government is both lawless and disrespectful to the Guyanese people. On page 24 of the Budget speech, the Minister accounted for every dollar spent from the moneys received from Norway, through the Low Carbon Development Strategy, but refuses, in the same breath, to account for the spending of hundreds of billions of dollars of

our oil money. The Minister gave specific details on the LCDS spending. They accounted to the Norwegians for their LCDS money, but when it comes to our oil money, the PPP/C continues to violate their own law which they brought to this very House and approved by themselves in December, 2021. Clause 16(2) states, and I will read it:

12.05 p.m.

“All withdrawals from the Fund shall be deposited into the Consolidated Fund and shall be used only to finance -

- (a) national development priorities ...; and
- (b) essential projects that are directly related to ameliorating the effect of a major natural disaster”.

There is a section in this Act which directs that the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service could face up to 10 years imprisonment if he fails to disclose the moneys received from oil. I suggest to this House today to extend this penalty to any Minister of Finance who fails to disclose how our oil money is spent and prohibits the National Assembly from further approving any oil money until that which was spent is properly accounted for. This lawlessness and disrespect shown by the People's Progressive Party/Civic to the people of Guyana must end now.

Arbitration and audits: we often speak about growing our natural resource revenues and production, but too little time is spent on the question of safeguarding those revenues and the future of these industries. The PPP/C has proven not to be the guardians of our patrimony, but a sleeping watchman, so deep is their sleep that Guyanese have heard virtually nothing about the various arbitration cases plaguing the nation. What are we doing to ensure the Guyanese people receive their fair due and to prevent sizable losses? The PPP/C's hands are so slippery from oil, from oil money, their eyes are so blinded by black gold, that they care little if hundreds of millions of United States of America (USA) dollars slide through the Government's fingers. Guyana's first oil audit erupted into controversy after the PPP/C claimed that a government functionary nearly signed away US\$214 million in recoverable moneys that the audit flagged as questionable cost. We have heard very little about these moneys, even though we argued in last year's budget that funds should be set aside to fight this case. Could the Government tell us where these moneys are? These moneys could easily finance the 20 billion in direct cost of living

mitigation we have advocated for, more than doubling the Government's paltry 2025 \$9 billion sum.

Irresponsible governance has real consequences and a runaway cost-of-living crisis is one of them. The Government must urgently update the nation and recover these moneys. It is these very loopholes and wastages that the APNU proposes to plug as part of the next government, and utilise these very funds to bring much needed cost-of-living relief to the poor and working-class people of this country. On the other hand, our natural gas is being similarly mismanaged. The gas-to-energy plant tethers on the brink of disaster, with multiple delays piling up and the Government going as far as removing value-added tax (VAT) on generators, a warning sign, if we ever saw one, that the project may be far from completion. If this were not concerning enough, there are not one but two arbitration claims by the contractor against the Government. The first is US\$50 million and the second is likely to be just as hefty a sum. Who knows what the final total will be after all these lawsuits, and whether they are even more on the way. Here, again, the Government has been silent, only acknowledging the first suit after an international newspaper broke the story.

Further, the Government selected a firm to explore opportunities to monetise our natural gas and build out infrastructure, but international media coverage has raised serious questions about the contractor's capabilities. What steward of our resources would name a company with no history of successful projects to oversee \$100 billion worth of natural gas reserves, as some experts have estimated. What responsible steward would overlook the long list of qualified companies that applied to fill this role? Only the PPP/C, which is fond of giving infant companies adult responsibilities. Now, the Government seems to be scrambling to address this gap in governance, still uncertain how Guyana can benefit fully from its natural gas wealth. I want to reassure the Guyanese people that not only are we very much aware of the opportunities to benefit from the natural gas production, but as the next government the APNU/AFC intends to deploy resources for the required feasibility studies. After all, unlike the PPP/C, we are not prepared to play games with US\$100 billion. We will focus on providing low cooking gas and free fertiliser, as well as work towards clay brick manufacturing, metal smelting and fabrication, transportation, fuel development, gas production and ceramic manufacturing, among other industries. Natural gas can power all of these opportunities, and we look forward to generating high paying jobs, tax revenue, and economic growth across several sectors.

There are boundless opportunities available, for a sensible government to evaluate and pursue. Sadly, after five years, the PPP/C has not demonstrated that they have the intellectual capacity or the focus to make prudent use of US\$100 billion in natural gas. The APNU has outlined a comprehensive set of policies, strategies and principles that will guide our management of the oil and gas sector as the next government. Here are some of the things we will do as the next government. One: within 90 days of taking office, our administration will constitute a distinguished advisory team of professionals to advise the government on the upstream, midstream, and downstream planning, development and administration of Guyana's oil and gas sector. Two: we will review the existing drafts of the Petroleum Commission legislation, and restructure, as necessary, to finalise the establishment of an independent, autonomous petroleum commission equipped with the highest calibre of fit-for-purpose professionals, to manage the oil and gas sector, from application for license through auction, exploration, production, sales, refining and gas utilisation for energy.

The PPP/C has betrayed the trust of the Guyanese people on this very matter. In Opposition, and even in the first few months after 2020, both the Minister of Natural Resources, Mr. Bharrat, and the Vice-President... He is not here today to hear this. [Mr. Mahipaul: He is never here.] He is never here. After becoming ...

Mr. Speaker: Do you want to withdraw that? Because I keep a register here of the attendance of every single [inaudible] and he might be hearing you.

Mr. Holder: Thank you, Cde. Speaker. He is not here today and sometimes he is absent very often, but he is here at times; very often absent. No respect. They promised to set up the Petroleum Commission, but after becoming comfortable and with their hands on the oil money, they turned their backs on the Guyanese people. Three: to eradicate corruption – I cannot say corruption, but to eradicate the *runnings*; the *runnings* we can say – and unethical conduct by any government or any contractor official; we will institute an independent inspector general's office with a 24/7 anonymous hotline to involve the public in reporting any knowledge or appearance of the *runnings*. Four: we will immediately reinstate the coalition government's requirements for full liability coverage. This includes the appropriate insurance, as well as a parent company guarantee to cover the full cost of an oil spill. Five: this is the last point I will make. We have about 20 points on the oil and gas, but this is the last one I will make here today.

We will undertake a complete review of the Stabroek Block's Production Sharing Agreement (PSA). Again, the PPP/C betrayed the people, campaigned on renegotiating the oil contract, but when they took Office they deserted the Guyanese people.

Transformational infrastructure: I want to speak on that a little. Energy expansion and diversification: in paragraphs 4.82 and 4.83 of the Budget Speech, as presented by the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, the Minister, and by extension PPP/C Government, admitted to the challenges faced by our energy sector, stating clearly that they are long standing and well known. They went on to blame the Opposition for dismantling the Amelia Falls Hydropower Project. The problem surrounding our energy crisis does not lie only in power generation or lack of capacity to satisfy the demand, but major issues also exist in the transmission and delivery of power and the overall management of the sector, neither of which would have been addressed through the Amelia Falls Hydropower Project.

The APNU/AFC on various occasions, sought to educate and warn the PPP/C about these issues. We warned them about the power ships, the same way we warned them about the Amelia Falls Hydropower Project. After \$16 billion of investment, thousands of households...

[An Hon.

Member: And *runnings*.] And *runnings*.

...thousands of households and businesses continue to suffer from significant levels of blackout. To mask their incompetence and mismanagement of the sector, they resort to blaming the APNU/AFC for five straight years. The reality is, the APNU/AFC kept people's lights on. We kept them on, and we reduced blackouts significantly. When PPP/C came to power, once again in 2020, the dark days and nights returned with them. The stark reality of the 2025 Budget is that it does not guarantee energy security for all of Guyana but, rather, places a majority of its focus on a single project, the gas to energy project, as a sole solution to our energy crisis and the removal of VAT on backup electricity generators. Clearly, the Minister has no faith in the ability of his own Government to fix the power crisis.

As the next government in waiting, I would like the Guyanese people to know that we understand the discomfort and disruption to their lives and the losses they suffer due to blackouts. In the APNU/AFC, we have thoroughly analysed the situation and understand fully that supply of energy to households and businesses is short on accessibility, affordability, availability and dependability, which are key performance requirements. Here is how we will fix the

sector, as the next government. We will implement an energy security strategy to ensure that all households and businesses receive reliable and affordable power, and our power supply and infrastructure are not vulnerable to natural and other threats. In particular, we will focus on six key areas. One: more effective management of the development of our natural gas resources. Two: we will upgrade the heavy fuel generation system to back up an energy emergency purposes. Three: invest massively in solar, hydropower and other renewable energy sources, with specific emphasis on remote communities in Regions 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10. This is to ensure both short-term and long-term energy security, as our gas supply dwindles. Four: we will maintain high levels of redundancy and diversity in energy source and generation capacity.

Mr. Speaker: Five: you will need an extra extension of five minutes.

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

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

Motion put and agreed to

Mr. Holder: Thank you, Cde. Speaker. Five: we will more rapidly overhaul the entire transmission and distribution system. And six: explore the possibility of making our electricity system modular to reduce the geographic scale of blackout. With proper management of the sector and the implementation of these and other measures, we guarantee real transformational change in the energy sector, and that will redound to major improvements in the lives and livelihoods of all Guyanese.

The transportation sector – transportation infrastructure: while the PPP/C with oil money in hand, boasts about new infrastructural development to come on stream shortly, many questions remain unanswered. For example, a second bridge over the Berbice River, what informed the Government's decision on this? How can Vice-President Jagdeo tell this nation that a feasibility study is not necessary? What informed the Government's decision to repair the Linden/Soesdyke Highway, rather than expand it into a major four-lane highway since it is a section of the main artery connecting Brazil to Georgetown. I will leave further critique of this poorly developed PPP/C infrastructure plan to my other colleagues.

Let me share with you and all of Guyana what to expect from an APNU/AFC-led government after the next election.

Infrastructure development will be geared towards improving productivity, livability and sustainability. To achieve these objectives, our transformational infrastructure plan focuses on two distinct areas. One: an inter-town connection road network or intercity highways. This aspect will see the construction of paved roads, linking Linden and New Amsterdam, Linden and Lethem, Linden and Mahdia, and Mahdia and Bartica as notable examples.

12.20 p.m.

There is presently no road link between New Amsterdam and Linden, Linden and Lethem, Linden and Mahdia, and Mahdia and Bartica as notable examples. There is presently no road link between New Amsterdam and Linden although these two major towns are roughly 55 miles apart and serve vast catchment areas. We will build a New Amsterdam-Linden highway. Two: a coast to hinterland road network. With regard to the coast to hinterland network, we will focus on replanning, upgrading or creating routes that connect, for example, Bartica to Upper Mazaruni and Essequibo Coast to Middle Cuyuni and the North West District. These projects will involve bridging the Essequibo River at several points. Work will be undertaken only after detailed feasibility studies, impact assessments, and public consultations. Unlike our political rivals in the PPP/C, as the next government, we will spend the people's money responsibly and sensibly.

I will jump to, because of time, the people-centred approach to governance. As the next government we will put people first and at the centre of our development agenda. We will put oil money... [Ms. Ferguson: As we did before.]

As we did before. Correct. We will put money in the hands of the Guyanese people and guarantee a high quality of life. We will make Guyana one of the best countries to live in. In our first budget, an APNU-led government will do the following: one, introduce a 35% increase for all public servants including our teachers, doctors, nurses, disciplined forces and all other government workers. Compare this with the paltry 8% the PPP/C will be giving next year. Two: we will increase the tax-free threshold. Is it eight or nine? Anyway, it is paltry. [Mr. Mahipaul: This year.]

This year and next year they *gat* something too. Next year, but *yuh* out, so we would not consider that. We will increase the tax-free threshold to \$400,000. It therefore means that the majority of public servants who work for \$400,000 or less will pay no taxes. Compare that with the PPP/C's paltry \$130,000 tax-free threshold. Three: households will benefit from \$100,000 every month in cash, subsidies and other benefits. This adds up to over \$1 million in cash and other benefits yearly. No payment on household electricity bills of

\$10,000 or less, no payment on household water bills \$5,000 or less, cost of cooking gas will be reduced by more than 50%, rent and mortgage assistance will also be introduced.

Point four: we will give a good governance cash grant of at least \$100,000, maybe once or twice a year to every adult. Point number five: we will give a childcare allowance of \$10,000 for every child from birth up to sixteen years old and an additional nutritional voucher of \$2,500 for every child up to five years old. Point number six: we will not only offer free university education but also introduce a \$50,000 stipend for those poor and low-income students. For the current students, we will reimburse your loans and cash payments immediately. For graduates we will write off the payments and reimbursements as long as you satisfy certain criteria, for example like working in the country for five years. Point number seven: we will introduce an old age pension of no less than \$80,000. Point number eight: let us be very clear, the APNU government will not stop the part-time job scheme but, instead, we will train all such workers so that they can get full-time employment benefits at higher full-time rate. We will pay a training stipend of \$50,000 per month, which is \$10,000 more than what the PPP/C is currently giving them. Too many people and households are poor in Guyana; in addition, many households are economically insecure. The high prices for food, rent, electricity, travel, *et cetera*, continue to burden Guyanese families as prices continue to rise due to high inflation rate and PPP/C mismanagement of our economy...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I gave you an extra minute because I wanted to hear what you were going to give a pensioner like me. Unfortunately, I will now have to cut you off on this time. Thank you very much. [Applause]

Minister of Natural Resources [Mr. Bharrat]: Mr. Speaker, it was the very tone and promises made by the APNU/AFC in their 2015 campaign, and what did the people of Guyana get? What did the people of Guyana enjoy? [Bishop Edghill: Nothing.] Nothing.

In this House, and in this country, it is no crime to pluck figures out of thin air, to make fake promises and to seemingly make recommendations that are being implemented by the government of the day. For some reason or the other, the Hon. Mr. Sherwin Holder and the Hon. Mr. Ramsaroop seem to be locked away in a cocoon. When I listen to their recommendations, these are the very projects that are being implemented by the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government. So I am wondering if they are really following what is happening in this country or not.

However, as I said, it is easy to make fake promises like they did in 2015, and then, from 2015 to 2020, we went backwards instead of moving forward. Again in 2025 they will come with those fake promises; they will come with those fake promises of \$400,000 threshold, of \$80,000 pension, but these are the people who took away the cash grant from the students. These are the people who added VAT on light and water in this country. These are the people who added VAT on education and health services in this country, but, yet, you come to the National Assembly with all these lofty promises and recommendations that we will manage this sector and that we will ensure that the oil money reaches down to the people. We are doing that; the People's Progressive Party/Civic is doing that, and we will continue to do that in President Ali's second term in office, after the 2025 Election.

In these debates, it is fair for both sides to compare track records, to compare and to contrast track records like the Hon. Member did. He spoke very glowingly of the achievements under the APNU/AFC Government, but he stopped short; he stopped short *on many fronts*. Bauxite for example, the production in 2024, 1.7 million tonnes. Then he said, *oh*, the production in 2019 and 2018 was very high; it could have been higher. It could have been higher if they did not mismanage the situation with RUSAL in the Berbice River, which cost almost 1,000 Guyanese – mostly in Kwakwani, Ituni, the Berbice River and New Amsterdam – their jobs and the livelihoods of their families. That is what he stopped short to say.

He spoke a lot on gold, but what he did not say – he said five years – is that the highest production for gold was in 2016. However, if you truly understood how the sector works, the work was done before 2016; the work was done by the People's Progressive Party/Civic Administration so that production could have been high in 2016, in 2017 and in 2018. It was the work of the People's Progressive Party/Civic in ensuring that the Aurora Gold Mine was established and started to produce. It was the work of the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government to ensure that Troy Resources invested and they started to produce, and that is what he is boasting of. It was the work of the People's Progressive Party/Civic Administration.

I too, today, would like to compare and contrast, based on our track records, based on the experiences, so that the Guyanese people can be the judge for themselves, so that the people looking at these debates would be able to analyse and would be able to ascertain for themselves whether the People's Progressive Party/Civic is good for this country or

whether we are going back to the fake promises from the APNU/AFC –, fake promises from a group of people who all want to be president or presidential candidates, whose relationship is on life support. How would you vote for a political coalition that is on life support? And before that switch is turned off the People's Progressive Party/Civic will be back in government for another term in office. So, you can continue to be on life support because the people will be the judge. Let us compare and let us contrast and let me say to the Guyanese people, who deserve to know, how the revenue garnered from the natural resources sector is being spent and managed in this country, because they have a right to know. I would not go too far back, because when we speak about the 70s, the 80s, and the early 90s we often hear, *oh* I was not born then; I did not know about that. Just like how the Opposition are creating Artificial Intelligence (AI) speeches, they can use the internet to go on *Google* and see what happened in the 60s, the 70s and the 80s, and the hardship imposed on Guyanese by the Peoples' National Congress (PNC). Whether it is AFC, whether it is APNU, whether it is whatever name, it is the PNC; it is the PNC, and the leader of the PNC is indeed a very hard-core, die-hard, PNC leader. Those who were trying to be presidential candidates from other parties, they came out of that very PNC, and they are trying to do the same too.

I will not go too far back; I will just go to 2015. I will just go to 2015 since the young electorates were born then. I will not go back to the 60s and the 70s and the 80s. Even though we fail to realise that the PNC, regardless of what they call themselves, they had governed this country for 32 years in office, plus one year squatting; plus one year squatting, which takes you to 33. The PPP/C is 23 plus four. [An

Hon. Member: *(Inaudible)*] We have not done as yet. It is 32 plus one year of squatting after the No Confidence Motion and trying to rig the elections in 2020. So, I will not go too far back. I will go to 2015; and I will not even go to the old Manifesto because all the stars and the moon will disappear from the sky because that is what they promised.

I will go to the 100-day plan. I will go to the 100-day plan of the APNU/AFC just like how the Hon. Mr. Holder read from his properly prepared artificial intelligence (AI) – I do not know if it is an AI speech – from his properly prepared AI speech. Fanciful recommendations and fake promises, that is what they will come to the electorates with – \$400,000 threshold; \$1,000,000 cash grant from the Hon. Cox. Good luck my brother. Apparently, you do not have any idea as to the revenue earnings of our country, because you would simply make our country bankrupt, and we will be unable to do anything regardless of whether it is infrastructure,

whether it is healthcare, whether it is education that you are in, or any other service. We will be a bankrupt country once we follow your policy, Hon. Cox, and the policy of the APNU/AFC. The 100-day plan: this is 2015, nine years ago; only nine years ago by this Opposition that comes to the National Assembly with the fanciful, the fanciful promises and recommendations. Number one, and they are so many I may need some assistance here. They are so many but, yet, none was achieved. The first one, reduction in the Berbice Bridge toll. What they should say is, who built the Berbice River Bridge? Under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government.

12.35 p.m.

I said this before, in one of my budget presentations while we were in the Opposition, that, yes, the Berbice Bridge toll was reduced from \$2,200 to \$1,900 – because I am a Berbician – I know. From \$2,200 to \$1,900 under the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC). What did they do? Most of the vehicles leaving Region 6 are going to the Cheddi Jagan International Airport (CJIA)... so while they were reducing there by \$300, the parking fees at the airport increased from \$200 to \$500 almost simultaneously. That is what you did. You know that most of the Berbicians go to the airport, and you took it back from them.

“Significant salary increases for government workers...”

All the categories, but whose salaries increased by 50%? Thirdly,

“Immediately implement a phased reduction of VAT and the removal of VAT from food and other essential items.”

What did you do? Value added tax (VAT) on light, VAT on water, VAT on education, VAT on health services... [An Hon. Member: Data.]VAT on data. Man, you almost VAT dead people too. We move on.

“Waiving of duties on fuel, tools and small scale mining equipment.”

Waiving of taxes on small-scale mining equipment. What did they do? Value added taxes on machinery for mining, VAT on machinery for agriculture and VAT on machinery for logging – failed. I go on.

“Establishment of a National Cane Workers and Cane Farmers Conference.”

Conference, not an association, a conference. Imagine that in a 100-day plan by this serious government. You want Guyanese people to vote for you and you are promising them a conference. Man, we could do that in a day. We could do that in a half day. You needed 100 days and you still could not do it. They still could not do it. I continue.

“Establishment of a National Rice Farmers and Rice Millers Conference.”

Conference again. Apparently, these conferences were to use the taxpayers' money to fatten the APNU/AFC. I continue with these recommendations. I will only go through a few.

“Liberalization of the Telecommunications ... sectors.”

This is another failed promise. It was done by the Hon. Prime Minister, Brigadier (Ret'd) Mark Phillips.

“Adoption of a long-term sustainable ... development plan to [revitalise] the vast potential of [our] country.”

What a plan. Where is the plan? If there was not a plan, we did not even see any implementation. This is what the APNU/AFC was so good at. They were so good at organising conferences. They were so good at doing feasibility studies, a study for this and a study for that. They were so good about plans, but they failed on implementation. They failed badly on implementation and that is where the People's Progressive Party (PPP) is doing and implementing the plans and the programmes to ensure that Guyanese and Guyanese businesses prosper.

Mr. Speaker, you cannot speak about mismanagement in one way and then in the other way, ‘Oh, we have a lot of revenue now. Oh, you have oil money now’. It simply means that we are managing our economy properly. It simply means that the natural resources sector is bringing revenue into our country. The Hon. Mr. Ramjattan spoke at length about the new revenue and the amount of revenue there is. He failed to realise it was because of the prudent management of the resources and the economy that we are in the position we are in today. That is what he did not say. It is not how much you have; it is how well you manage it. That is what the APNU/AFC could not do. That is what you could not do. It is not how much you have but it is how well you manage it.

Look at the countries around the world. There are many countries with more oil reserves than Guyana and they are in turmoil. People are fleeing these countries because of starvation and turmoil, and they are coming to our country because it is being managed properly. Our resources are being managed properly, and the revenue is being used to ensure that Guyanese have a better life.

That is why the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, could complain about traffic. There was no traffic under the APNU/AFC because you could not afford to buy a motor vehicle. What is the problem with the Hon. Member with having young people owning a motor vehicle? What is wrong with that? You heard the figures from the Hon. Robeson Benn, the number of vehicles that are being registered in this country. That is not by mistake. It is by design. It is by prudent management of the economy. It is ensuring that our people benefit from the resources of our country. It is ensuring that our people have more disposable income so that they can afford these amenities, needs and wants. That is what we are doing.

While I spoke of the APNU/AFC 100-day promises, it is only fair too that I look at the accomplishment of the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) in Government so that the people of this country can be the judge. [Mr.

Henry: Talk about the 23 years.] We can talk about the 28 years too. We can talk about the 28 years post-independence. We can talk about the rigged elections. We can talk about the underdevelopment in the hinterland communities. We can talk about when Amerindian citizens were second-class citizens in this country under the People's National Congress (PNC) Government. We can talk about it. We can talk about the rundown infrastructure. We can talk about the high debts. We can talk about the fleeing of people from our country because they lost hope in the PNC and their country because of the dictatorship that existed. We can talk about that, but I choose to speak about 2015 in all fairness Hon. Member Vincent Henry.

Let us talk about our achievements and where our revenue is being channelled. It is being channelled and directed to ensure that our people benefit. That is why we can complain here about traffic. Let the people buy the vehicle. We will deal with that. We are building new highways. We are building new roads. Everyone deserves a better life. What are our achievements? Fifty thousand jobs – a promise fulfilled. Yet, the Hon. Member Ramjattan will come to this National Assembly with 34 years of experience, and he was so proud of it, it is a good achievement but why would you

come here and say that 15,000 Guyanese who are earning from the pathway workers programme is a slush fund? Why would you be so inconsiderate as a leader in this country to say that 15 ordinary Guyanese, mostly women, who are benefiting from the pathway programme is a slush fund? It is an insult to those women. It is an insult to those 15,000 Guyanese that you can come here and say that it is a slush fund. This is unacceptable coming from a man who just boasted of 34 years in Parliament. It is reckless.

Mr. Speaker, 50,000 house lots – promise delivered; 20,000 scholarships – promise delivered; double the old age pension in our first term in Office – promise fulfilled; reinstate the Because We Care cash grant and increase it to \$50,000 – promise fulfilled; removing VAT on electricity and water that the APNU/AFC Government instituted against our ordinary Guyanese people, the removal of VAT – promise fulfilled; new hospitals, new schools, new roadways and new highways – promise fulfilled. Yet, we hear leaders and want to be presidents saying we cannot eat roads. That is a reckless statement. That is very inconsiderate for a man who wants to be the president in 2025. Can you tell the people in Berbice, Linden or Essequibo that their road is not important, that we should not build their road, that we should follow Hon. Member Cox and give them the million-dollar cash grant and they are going to walk in the mud dam as they used to do all the years? The people of this country are benefiting from our infrastructure programme, and we will continue to build out our infrastructure programme.

The 2025 Budget, as presented by our Hon. Minister Dr. Singh and his hard-working staff at the Ministry of Finance with guidance from the President, Vice President and Prime Minister, is a budget that balances infrastructure development with pro-people measures. We need to continue building out our infrastructure because none existed. Imagine we are doing so many roads in Linden and you were in power from 2015 to 2020. Linden is known to be your strong support base. How many roads did you build in Linden? How many roads did you build in New Amsterdam? Then the Hon. Member Ramjattan said this morning that, from 2015 to 2020, the streets of Georgetown were so clean and beautiful and there were no mosquitoes. A Berbician said that. That now the streets of Georgetown are filthy and there are so many mosquitoes. The Hon. Member failed to realise that the APNU/AFC is controlling the City Council. We do not run the City Council. Give us and we can run it. You are controlling the City Council, so it is a direct sabotage. It is a sabotage by the PNC at the City Council. Why is it that the roads could have been cleaned from 2015

to 2020, but you cannot clean them now? I want the citizens of Georgetown to know that it is a sabotage by the City Council. You are playing politics with the lives of people. You are playing politics with the citizens of this country. It will not be tolerated by the people, and we will see that in the 2025 General Elections.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to continue with our grade sheet here. Free university education – promise fulfilled; toll-free bridges – promise fulfilled; if you are a Berbician, and some of you are Berbicians and you will know that one of the best things that ever happened to Berbicians, like my friend, the Hon. Member Jaiprashad, will tell you if he is honest enough is that the best thing that ever happened to Berbice was the Berbice Bridge. If you experienced, like I did, the hardship of crossing with the MV Torani and MV Makouria you would know that it was a blessing, like my friend, Ms. Natasha Singh-Lewis knows. You would understand, like my classmate, Ms. Geeta Chandan-Edmond. You would understand the hardship. It is a further blessing that this year the Berbice River Bridge will be toll-free. This will boost economic activities in Region 6.

The Hon. Member spoke about migration in Region 6. Why do he not give us the figures of where they are migrating to? They are coming right here too. They are going to Region 6. They are going to Region 10. Sorry Region 10 and Region 2. They are going to work in the hinterland communities. His policy or his thinking of migration is the United States of America (USA). Once you leave Berbice you have gone to the United States of America. That is not the only form of migration. Many of them are in Georgetown. [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] They are coming back. Many of them are in Georgetown and many of them are returning too.

12.50 p.m.

That is what he needs to do a survey on as well. How many of them are returning and how many more will come? Having a toll-free Berbice Bridge will bring significant benefits to the people in Region 6 and Guyana at large. Who would have thought we would have seen that magnificent structure across the Demerara River going up? Who would have thought that we would have seen that in our lifetime? We are seeing a brand-new high-rise four-lane Demerara River Harbour Bridge soon to be completed – promise fulfilled; I continue, new stadium and sports facilities – promise fulfilled; reopening of sugar estates to create employment for our people – promise fulfilled. It is not about right-sizing as you say it or whatever, it is about the

lives of people and that is what is important. You will come here, and you will criticise the money that we are using to recapitalise the sugar industry, but it is more than that. It is about people. It is about their children. It is about their livelihood. That is what we are talking about. Sometimes it hurts to listen to the achievements especially if you are on the opposing side.

The revival of the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC) and the forestry sector – promise fulfilled. The Hon. Member Deonarine Ramsaroop will tell you because he was a board member, that the state of the Forestry Commission was basically bankrupt in 2020. The staff were not paid. The National Insurance Scheme (NIS) dues were not paid. The insurance was not paid. The light bill was not paid. The phone bill was not paid. You would know that Hon. Member, you were a board member at that time. You were a board member at that time. Today, we have transformed the forestry sector, and Guyana is recognised as having one of the best forest management systems in the world, with one of the lowest deforestation rates in the world. The Hon. Members spoke glowingly about the Low Carbon Development Strategy, but he needs to read that document properly. You need to read that document properly, and you will realise that we are well ahead. We are well ahead of many countries. What is important to note is that Guyana has become a model country in this world, a model country in terms of economic development versus environmental sustainability, Guyana is recognised for that worldwide. As all Guyanese, regardless of where we sit, we must be proud of that achievement. Regardless of political affiliation, it is about patriotism. We have one of the best models among developing countries with regard to balancing economic development with environmental sustainability.

Even though the forestry sector employs over 25,000 Guyanese and we are actively involved in harvesting and production, we still have one of the lowest deforestation rates in the world. We have one of the most pristine forests in the world which is an asset to us. Guyana is the only country that has signed on to the voluntary partnership agreement with the European Union (EU) so that we can be the second country in the world that will be Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade (FLEGT) certified. We are one of the few countries in the world where our forest is Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) certified. That is to show sustainability, legality and traceability for wood and wood products. That is what we have returned the Forestry Commission to under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Administration in just four years. We might

come and say, 'Yes in 2020 or 2021 production was low', but we failed to realise that we were going through a major global pandemic when we took over Government. Why did we not move on and say that in 2022 it increased, in 2023 it increased and in 2024 production increased in the forestry sector? We might come and say the export revenue has declined. We have a massive developmental agenda in this country, both public and private. We need to satisfy the local demand first and foremost before we seek external markets. That is what the Forestry Commission has been doing. As I continue – the revival of the bauxite sector...

Mr. Speaker: For you to continue you will need an extension, Hon. Minister.

Brigadier Ret'd Phillips: Mr. Speaker, I ask that the Hon. Member be granted an extension of five minutes to complete his presentation.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Prime Minister (PM). Hon. Minister, you have five minutes to continue and conclude.

Mr. Bharrat: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, PM. I continue our report card so that the people of this country can know what the achievements are. Reduction in electricity rates through the gas-to-energy project – promise fulfilled. The Opposition will come here...[*interruption*]. This is a 2025 budget and it will be fulfilled in 2025. We are debating a 2025 budget and these achievements will be fulfilled in the year 2025. It is easy to come and criticise a project that will transform the lives of the people of this country. It is easy to come here and ask for studies and studies. Go, we can take you and you will see the implementation of the project. We can show you the pipeline coming in. We can show you the turbines that are already in the country while you are still looking for a feasibility study. I can continue but I know my time is running short, so I will just stop at the last one and I am sure my friend, Mr. Mahipaul, will laugh. Another achievement under the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government was the Cricket Premier League (CPL) trophy, and we won it. I see you got excited about that.

We would have listened to many speakers before us speaking glowingly of their recommendations and their fake promises. Sometimes when we come to the House we need to be honest. When the Hon. Robeson Benn was speaking, he said that many of the Members sitting in the Opposition, I think you are about five or six now, who were in the last Cabinet,

sat there when the Government made decisions to remove the cash grant for children, to add VAT on electricity, and, importantly, you sat there when the PSA, the Production Sharing Agreement, for the Stabroek Block was being discussed and agreed on. You sat there and you agreed to it. You agreed that the oil company would not pay any tax. You agreed to that. Yet, we have politicians in the Opposition who are trying to play Tom and Jerry, Mr. Speaker – cat and mouse game. I listened to Hon. Shurwayne Holder, even though he was going at such a rapid pace, reading out his AI-generated speech. He never said and he never committed to the renegotiation of the Stabroek Block. If you did not listen, you can check with the Hansard. He said that we shall review the PSA of the Stabroek Block. He never said that they were going to renegotiate the agreement of the Stabroek Block. I listened, and again you are trying to fool the Guyanese people. Again, you are trying to hoodwink the Guyanese people. People... [An Hon. Member: (*Inaudible*)] Again, you are trying to mislead the Guyanese people.

When we took over in 2020, we sought to build out a framework to manage the oil and gas sector and to manage the oil and gas sector in such a manner that Guyanese and Guyanese businesses can benefit, and today we are seeing that. We took a bold step as a small oil-producing country, as a small developing nation, to pass a local content legislation when many countries would have stopped at a local content policy. We took that brave step. Why did we do it? To ensure that Guyanese and Guyanese businesses can benefit from the sector. So much today that we have over 1,500 small Guyanese businesses registered at the Local Content Secretariat. We have almost 7,000 Guyanese directly employed in the oil and gas sector. We are building out the training centre in Port Mourant to ensure that young Guyanese can be trained and employed in the oil and gas sector directly. We talked about revenue, but we can remember the 29th December, 2021, when the mace was under threat, when this House was in a ruckus because we did not want the Natural Resource Fund which speaks to proper accountability and transparency in the oil and gas sector and to ensure that we manage it so that people can benefit.

I know my time is running short and I will have another opportunity next week to go further into the sector. In closing, again I want to thank the Hon. Minister, Dr. Ashni Singh, for year after year producing budgets that balance infrastructural development and economic development with environmental sustainability and pro-poor measures so that

our people can benefit from the revenue in our country. I want to thank the Minister and his staff for guidance, as I mentioned, from His Excellency, from the Vice President, from the Prime Minister, and it would be unjust for me if I leave without thanking my very own staff from the Ministry of Natural Resources and its agencies. I wish to commend *Budget 2025* for unanimous passage through this House. Thank you. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister. Hon. Members, at 1.02 p.m. this is a good time to take the suspension for one hour for lunch.

Sitting suspended at 1.02 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 2.13 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Members. Please be seated. We will resume with the Hon. Member, Ms. Amanza Walton-Desir. You may start, Hon. Member.

Ms. Walton-Desir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I was a high school student, my favourite subject was Geography. The Hon. Member on the other side says she is not hearing me. I need to make sure that she is hearing me. Is this the better, Hon. Member Westford? **[Dr. Westford: (Inaudible)]** All right. I was saying that as a young student in high school, one of my favourite subjects was Geography. I had a wonderful teacher by the name of Sonia Daniels. She has since left, of course, in pursuit of greener pastures.

In Geography, we learned about the trade winds. We learned that the trade winds blew from the Southeast and that they played a very important role in cooling the earth's temperature around the equator, but these winds also brought tropical storms. They brought hurricanes that brought serious damage across our region. These were the winds that facilitated early trade and commerce. These were also the winds that brought the transatlantic slave trade, which the United Nations (UN) has called one of the greatest crimes against humanity we have ever known. I guess my point is that trade winds serve both good and bad purposes. When I cast my mind to our country, I am reminded of the song sung by one of my favourite singers, Lou Rawls, when he sang about being caught in the trade winds of our times. It occurs to me that Guyana is a nation that is indeed caught in the trade wind of our times. On our shores, strong geopolitical currents are converging, forces that are beyond our borders, and they are shifting in ways we are not able to anticipate. From the rising influence of global superpowers to the

realignment of regional alliances, the winds are changing, and the stakes are high. We are positioned at a crossroads where strategic partnerships and economic opportunities collide but so do the risks of exploitation and manipulation.

2.16 p.m.

In this time of geopolitical flux, it is important that we remain vigilant, that we discern the motivations of foreign interests while we safeguard our sovereignty and ensure that the benefits of our global engagements reach every Guyanese citizen. Our foreign policy serves as the rudder of our national ship, and just as the rudder is a small yet critical part of the ship, foreign policy, though often understated, is critical to the development of foreign policy and to the development of our nation. It is what shapes our position on the global stage. It is what safeguards the future of our people. When the Hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation came to this House and said when the PPP/C took Office in 2020 – and I quote:

“We did not inherit a foreign policy from the APNU/AFC.”

We all know that it is patently untrue. Do you know what? They want to draw us into this backward-looking game. We are not going to be like them and be drawn into the backward-looking game. We will not move backwards. Instead, we had hoped that the Hon. Minister would come to tell this House that since they have been in Office for the last 53 months, they are now requesting funding somewhere close to \$10 billion. What we expected the Hon. Member to tell this House was how the proposed PPP/C's foreign policy has evolved. He has failed in his address to say anything to this House about how the foreign policy has evolved. I am going to choose just three areas in the interest of time to show just how irresponsible this PPP/C Administration has been in the stewardship of Guyana's foreign policy.

Let us talk about migration. We know that the issue of migration is one of the single, most troublesome issues for Guyanese out there. If you go into the street and ask them, they are concerned about the unchecked migration into our country. They are concerned about this phenomenon. The Minister of Home Affairs, who is responsible for immigration, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, who should be playing a leading role in the development of a migration policy, came to this House and uttered nary a word on this pressing issue. It is crucial that we address the issues and challenges posed by

our porous borders because these continue to expose us to significant risks and undermine our national security and territorial integrity. The Minister with responsibility for immigration, the Hon. Minister, Mr Benn, is quoted in the *Stabroek News* of 20th January, 2025, as saying that it is anticipated the migrant population in Guyana will increase, but they have not laid out a roadmap to address this issue. To date, the Government is unable to provide a realistic estimate of the number of, particularly, Venezuelan migrants in our country. The reason is clear, it is because they do not know. It is obvious – painfully obvious. The fact that the Members had nothing to offer us as to how they would manage migration into this country is that they have lost control of the migrant situation. They have put our country resultingly, in clear and present danger, jeopardising our security and sovereignty.

To mitigate these risks and to protect the integrity of our nation, we must immediately establish a mandatory migrant registration system. This system will allow us to effectively monitor the movement of individuals entering our country, track the duration of their stay, and ensure that migration, particularly across our porous borders, is monitored to ensure that the migration is done in a more orderly fashion. It will enable us to prevent illegal entries and track potential threats, including foreign agents and fifth columnists. You know when we say this, the PPP/C Government likes to say that we are invoking fear in the people of Guyana. No less a person than their National Security Advisor is on record expressing the concern that we do not know who we are letting into the country, that there are military men of age in our country, and we have no way of tracking them and no way of knowing their whereabouts. This is not what we have said, this is what their National Security Advisor said. Further, refugees and migrants must only be granted temporary status until they can return to their homelands with a clear and explicit provision against voting rights. I repeat – with a clear and explicit provision against voting rights. Guyanese citizenship must remain a privilege and not a pathway to manipulation or long-term instability. It is unacceptable that the Migration Profile that the Hon. Member, Mr. Todd, launched in December, 2021, is to date incomplete. He comes here and does not offer any explanation to us for this untenable state of affairs.

A Migration Profile is the cornerstone, it is the foundation upon which we will build a sound migration policy. Why are we harping on this? Why is it that it is so important that we have a migration policy? It was the Argentine Diplomat, Juan Bautista Alberdi, who coined a particular phrase:

“To govern is to populate.”

We, as a nation, have to be mindful that this paradigm is not being used against us to our detriment by the deliberate injection of population into our Essequibo. We must place emphasis on enhancing our military presence along the border, much as the Coalition did with Operation Armadillo, instead of having our military men and women in blue T-shirts cleaning the drains in the City. We must address our minds to increase Government-led investment in the Essequibo to incentivise the settlement of Guyanese in that region, even as we combat the effects of climate change, *et cetera*, along our low coastal plain. We in the Coalition have a vision for the development of the Essequibo. It is not by accident that the townships of Bartica, Lethem, Mabaruma and Mahdia were established between 2015 and 2018. We just did not wake up one day and decided that we were going to do it. It was part of a deliberate strategy to ensure that we establish economic and administrative hubs for the development and population of the Essequibo. This is what national development requires – carefully thought-out plans, carefully thought-out policies, and the capacity to implement and execute.

When you travel the length and breadth of this nation, as I said before, people are concerned about the abysmal handling of the migration crisis by this Government. There is no policy in place, and they intend to put none. You know, we are in the age of abbreviations and mnemonics, and I am tempted to say that this is the PPP/C postponing practical policy continuously and placing politics over the people's concerns. That is who they are. We, on this side of the House, will implement a Guyana and Guyanese-first migration policy. I repeat – we will implement a Guyana and Guyanese-first migration policy. Our policy will put the needs and interests of Guyanese first, unapologetically, while we responsibly manage migration to benefit national development, including the supply of labour, while we emphasise protecting our local opportunities, preserving our cultural identity and ensuring sustainable growth.

Directly related to this ongoing migration is the issue of the Guyana/Venezuela controversy. We in the Parliamentary Opposition have been unequivocal in our condemnation of the recent actions by the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, which include, the completion of a bridge to Ankoko Island and the announcement of plans to elect a Governor to administer over the Essequibo region. These actions constitute a dangerous escalation of aggression that cannot go unchallenged. We must now move beyond the lodging of

formal protest to more proactive and decisive action. We, on this side of the House, are on record as making a number of recommendations to the PPP/C Administration, including the full mobilisation of our diplomatic apparatus to secure continued international support. That apparatus will emphasise the justness and the rightness of our cause. We continue to stress the importance of a robust international public relations campaign, and, of course, the engagement of the Guyanese diaspora in advocating for our sovereignty.

We have called for the establishment of a Border Security Commission and a Foreign Relations Council. Our calls, including calls for the convening of regular meetings of the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on Foreign Relations, continue to fall on deaf ears. Despite the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation having the temerity to stand in this House and say they did not inherit any foreign policy from the APNU/AFC Coalition, we see foreign policy in action. It is a fact, Sir, that it was under the David Granger-led Administration this Guyana/Venezuela controversy was elevated to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with the full concurrence of the United Nations (UN). The one diplomatic endeavour that this Government engaged in this regard, the Argyle Declaration, turned out to be a complete colossal disaster, with an entire Government being duped – duped, Mr. Speaker. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker, may I continue? I was reiterating the fact that the Argyle Declaration turned out to be a colossal diplomatic failure. Do you know what? I expect that the Hon. Members will come to say, 'Oh, you know on this issue we must stand united. I will say to them, 'If they come to this House and you tell the truth, we will support them. If they do not, we will answer them accordingly'. As we are on failures, the ban on catfish is still yet to be lifted. Guyanese fisherfolk, – Hon. Member – are still waiting on the 150 shallow offshore concession (SC) Licence from Suriname. This is failure, upon failure, upon failure. This is the PPP/C. They parade as if they know policy, but they are proven clueless.

I want to talk to us about the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) I want to talk to us about CARICOM in relation to this. This is because the silence of CARICOM, in this regard, has been deafening. The silence is not just deafening, it is disappointing. It is dangerous. It sends the wrong signal, not only to Venezuela but to the world, that aggression could be met with apathy. Traditionally, CARICOM has been our first line of defence, and that line simply is not holding. After much fanfare about the now

obviously dead Argyle Declaration, the voices of key CARICOM leaders are deafeningly silent.

2.31 p.m.

I am sure that we will hear from them again at the elections time, but they appear muted now, in the face of Venezuela's ongoing aggression. I want to be clear. The CARICOM's inaction undermines its credibility, and it fails to uphold its collective commitment to upholding the sovereignty of its member states. Essequibo is not just a Guyanese issue; it is a CARICOM issue. It is time that CARICOM steps up, speaks out, and demonstrates that it will not tolerate the violation of our sovereignty and our territorial integrity. Anything less is an abdication of its responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk about our diplomatic representation because the key to our foreign policy thrust is our diplomatic representation overseas. The Hon. Member should have been able to tell this House how he and his Government would ensure that Guyana is represented by a professional *cadre* of diplomats. He should have been able to tell this House what plans are in place to appoint younger career diplomats in our embassies in Brasília, Caracas, Paramaribo, and Washington. **[Mr. Todd: (Inaudible)**

What are you talking about?] I repeat that you should be able to tell us what plans are in place to appoint younger career diplomats to these posts that I have called. I am by no means ageist, but we must have a plan to ensure continuity and competence. Guyana remains seriously underrepresented in Africa, with one diplomatic mission in South Africa. By comparison, Venezuela has 20. I heard the Ministers boast that this year, Guyana will be hosting a retreat of the African group. Well, I expect that for this \$10 billion that we are giving him this year, we will have an announcement of cooperation agreements; that we will hear about the establishment of more embassies and missions in Africa; and that they will be honest with the Africans about the number of Nigerians and other African students who have difficulty getting visas on arrival here and whose work permits they have refused to renew. We are going to be here, and we will let them know.

Minister Todd must tell us how much of this \$10 billion he is putting into the Foreign Services Institute (FSI). I apologise to the people of Guyana that I have to shout, but my colleague on the other side has descended this august House into a fish market. I want Mr. Todd to know, that you cannot outshout me, you cannot intimidate me, and I will speak, and you will listen. He must tell us how much of this \$10 billion that he wants would be going to the Foreign

Services Institute to train young diplomats and what arrangements he has put in place to mentor the next generation of diplomats. I suspect the reality is that he has very little money put aside for that. Do you know why? Traditionally, this PPP/C Government has always been about jobs for their cronies. Diplomatic postings have always been a reward for favours granted. It has always been jobs for the boys. This is the classic PPP/C when it comes to representing our country. I could say that they are placing patrons in prestigious capitals. I could say that they are only promising posts to party connections. That is the name and nature of the PPP/C.

The foreign policy failure of the PPP/C Administration leaves us more vulnerable than we have ever been before. I will say this: They have left us more vulnerable than ever before to these raging foreign policy winds and these raging geopolitical winds. The PPP/C believes that diplomacy looks a certain way, but I want them to understand that diplomacy is more than two-minute calls between Heads of State, and it is more than convenient photo ops and the revelling in feel-good photo ops. It is more than that. I stood in this spot last year and I outlined five developmental priorities for our foreign relations. He took none of them on board. I will once again ask, in the interest of the people of Guyana and in the interest of time because time is of the essence, that the Hon. Member take those five urgent priorities and begin to implement them in the short time he has left. We will continue it when we assume office.

I will now move to my general comments on the budget. I believe I have given the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation enough homework for the day. I will now move to making some general comments on this 2025 Budget. When I read the budget, I was like, here we go again. My first thought was, here we go again – budgeting more than we need, spending more than we have, and short-changing the next generation by raiding the Natural Resource Fund (NRF). Here we are again – not managing the efficiency gap and not developing our capacity to execute projects. It is the same old story – not learning from the lessons of states that have gone before us and not intent on helping our people and this nation avoid the Dutch disease. I want to be clear, Mr. Speaker. We are always happy when the people of Guyana receive increases for the old age pension. We are always happy when they receive increases in public assistance, disability allowances, and education cash grants. Let us be clear. Those handouts tackle the symptoms of the problem and not the problem itself. Reducing poverty will require long-term structural economic reforms. It is hard work that the PPP/C refuses to do. The

Government comes to this National Assembly, and they tell us, year after year, about the astronomical sums it has expended. Let us ask the Guyanese public: how has your life improved?

Let us look at the sectors. Let us look at health. Billions upon billions of dollars are expended and yet there is no Panadol in the local clinics, there are still two expectant mothers sharing beds and there are still rats, roaches, snakes, and caiman infesting our hospitals. You wonder if it is a hospital or if it is being converted into a zoo.

Let us talk about education. We spend billions and billions on education, yet when you check the statistics, we still have one of the lowest literacy rates and our performances in Mathematics and English continue to decline. They boast about spending billions on school feeding programmes, but the numbers are showing an increase in malnourished children.

Let us talk about water. It is no secret that the supply of water has degenerated, both in terms of supply and quality. One only has to go on social media to see the graphics and the videos of people, the stink water, and the organic material coming out of the taps in their yards. Then, perhaps the biggest admission of failure, Ms. Ferguson, is that a certain Minister was in the media handing out black tanks because the water is coming but it is not going in. [**Mr. Duncan:** Yes. That is (*inaudible*) water coming but not going in.] The water is coming, but it is not going in.

Let us look at electricity. Two power ships, 17 generators from Honduras, one stalled gas-to-energy project, and more than \$100 billion later, Guyanese still have blackouts every day. Based on the fact that the Hon. Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh stood in this House and told us that he is taking value-added tax (VAT) off of generators, it means that we could expect more blackouts.

Let us talk about these billions. Let us talk about agriculture. My dear friend and the Hon. Member, Mr. Zulfikar Mustapha, over \$300 billion has been expended, yet the studies are showing that over 40% of Guyanese are still food insecure. And he who will not be named parades himself as the champion of food security in the region. We keep saying, *you got to dance a yard before you dance abroad*. Ensure that your people are first food secure and then you could worry about everybody else. Something is wrong, Mr. Speaker. Something is wrong when the Government comes to this House, tells us that it is spending more money every year but yet, year after year, the lives of Guyanese are getting harder. How can a country be earning US\$7.6 million

per day, yet our children are going to bed hungry? Parents have to think about how they are going to make ends meet, the capital city is filthy, our roads are chaotic, we cannot get a full day of electricity supply without blackouts plaguing us and our health centres lack the most basic drugs and medical equipment. Mr. Speaker, something is wrong.

I heard my colleagues on the other side making *a big to do* about peace, prosperity, progress, and commitment. The truth is that the only people who are progressing are the friends, family, and favourites of the PPP/C. The only peace that the people of Guyana know is the peace that passes all understanding that they get from on high and certainly not from the Hon. Member, Mr. Robeson Benn, and the Guyana Police Force that is in shambles. The only things that are prospering are the weapons of incompetence and mismanagement that this PPP/C Government continues to form against the people of Guyana. The only commitment that they have is to pilfer the patrimony of our people continuously. The Hon. Member, Ms. Rodrigues, challenged us and asked what project they should cut. Any member of the public who follows the news will hear the announcement of all kinds of projects coming out of Freedom House on a Thursday. So, Hon. Member, how about we do not, right now, build a second bridge over the Berbice River when the first one is not even operating at half of its capacity? How about we hold off on another airport terminal when we have not yet completed this one and we have not yet exceeded its capacity? How about we *nix* this second gas-to-energy project that the Vice-President seems very *gung-ho* about, and we make sure that we get the first one right?

2.46 p.m.

How about we stop pouring concrete into every median on every public road that we could find, when any developing country with any government with any type of foresight knows that properly landscaped medians help in flood control, they help in controlling noise pollution, and they help in reducing...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I allowed you to go three minutes more because I did not want to interrupt. Hon. Member, Mr. Mahipaul?

Ms. Ferguson: No. Ms. Ferguson.

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

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like my colleague to be given five minutes more to conclude her presentation. Thank you very much.

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Ms. Walton-Desir: Mr. Speaker, I thank you. I want the Hon. Minister Rodrigues, to tell us, how about we *nix* these things? Then, I cannot leave out my friend, the Hon. Attorney General, who said to us that we only need feasibility studies when the...Let me quote him correctly, 'that feasibility studies are not needed when something appears obviously feasible'. The Hon. Attorney General should know that is the approach one takes when he/she is doing a project in his/her backyard. This is not your backyard. This is the nation of Guyana, and we require that projects have feasibility studies. In keeping with the mnemonics, this is the PPP/C – poorly planned projects, continuously. There is so much to say, but I will close by speaking to the people of Guyana because I want to be clear. Any government has a duty to provide infrastructure for its people. We must provide housing; we must provide roads for them to travel on; we must provide hospitals and clinics; we must provide schools; we must provide water; and we must provide electricity. It is the duty of government, and Guyanese should not have to beg for any of those things. It is our right.

For far too long, Guyanese have been trapped in a game of survival that demands that they trade their dignity for survival. It is a game where venality thrives, where incompetence is rewarded over competence, and where untruthfulness is the currency of power. It is a game of winner-takes-all politics, where power is hoarded, and power hoards resources. They entrench division and they exploit their provisions and connections, whilst the other citizens must struggle to make ends meet. It is a game where nepotism, brain drain, and distraction politics have become the norm, and they are now forcing citizens to turn a blind eye to injustice and excesses just so that they could survive. In the end, it is up to us as a nation and as a people to decide, look at ourselves, and ask ourselves whether we want meaningful change. Do we want change, or do we just want our turn? Those are the questions that we have to ask ourselves as Guyanese. Do we dare to dismantle this broken system, or are we content to replace it with a different set of beneficiaries? Do we strive to build a nation that prioritises equity, transparency, and inclusion or do we perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and division? This is not just about ending the game. It is about rewriting this game and restoring dignity. One of my favourite artists, Drake, said something.

He said that the game needs change and we must be the cashiers.

In closing, I will say we must make constitutional reform a top priority if we are going to change this broken game to one of fairness, integrity, and hope. We must build a nation where competence is rewarded, and where nepotism and venality are no longer tolerated. We must build it into a game of inclusivity where every citizen, regardless of class, race, political affiliation, or gender, feels empowered to thrive. This new game must champion innovation, and it must invest in our people, especially our youths, to prevent the brain drain and to inspire those who are abroad to return home. It must foster leadership that serves rather than exploits. It must prioritise national unity over division and truth over propaganda.

Finally, I will say that, ultimately, we must transform this game into a covenant – one built on trust, one built on accountability, and one built on a shared vision for Guyana where our dignity is restored; where we do not have to be sycophants to thrive; and where a brighter future is not just a dream. That is what we are committed to on this side of the House because we understand – in keeping with the mnemonics of the day – that people need care. We understand that we must protect our nation's communities. We understand that we must build a Guyana for all Guyanese, not for some. Therefore, in spite of the hard work of the members of staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I cannot lend my support to this budget in its current iteration. I thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Now for the Hon. Minister of Tourism, Industry and Commerce, the Hon. Oneidge Walrond.

Minister of Tourism, Industry and Commerce [Ms. Walrond]: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I please take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service and his team for their dedication and hard work in preparing this Budget. It sees Guyanese securing a prosperous and sustainable future.

Budget 2025 comes as we approach the five-year anniversary of the ascension of our Government to office, and one cannot help but contrast the performance of the PPP/C Administration with that of our predecessors, who now occupy the other side of this honourable House. Unlike that of the other side, our record has been one of delivery, it has been a record of achievement, a record of competency and execution, and promises kept. I listened in bemusement to

our previous speaker, Ms. Amanza Walton-Desir... [**Ms. Ferguson:** Hon. Member.] Hon. Member, who has left. She has decided not to give us the courtesy after standing on her soapbox, throwing everything at the Guyanese people, everything onto the wall, to see what will stick – stoking xenophobic sentiments, trying to create fear in the people with allegations that have no solution, and offering solutions to imagined ghosts and fears. The truth is that most of the Venezuelans who are here are of Guyanese descent. That is the truth.

I wish to speak to the undercurrent of the Hon. Member's presentation, the sounding brass and tinkling cymbals – vacuous, empty. I wish for the people of Guyana, when they take it down a notch...and there was a reason I came and started with a level tone. It is because we need to take down the rhetoric a notch and listen to the substance. It is empty, vacuous; nothing there. Nothing of substance. Some of these criticisms that the Hon. Member, Walton-Desir, has raised in the House and outside the House, tell us a story of who they are. There is a reason they have to come here and flay their hands, jump up on the table, and do all of that. They have to create a mirage as if they are doing something because they have done nothing. They are trying to move themselves out of inertia, but that is not going to happen. They have done nothing. They have no solutions – nothing.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Amanza Walton-Desir, argued, like most of her colleagues did, that it is not reasonable to compare their performance under APNU/AFC from 2015 to 2020 without oil resources to our performance in the context of oil resources. I want us to take the time to delve into these kinds of arguments because the Guyanese people deserve to hear the truth; they deserve to hear well-thought-out arguments; and they deserve to hear... [**Mr. McCoy:** Substance.] substance. The Hon. Member, Walton-Desir, said outside of the House, that how much a government gives to its people is directly related to how much it has to give. She went on to say that our Government has unprecedented fiscal space.

[**Mr. Mahipaul:** Fiscal space.] Fiscal space. This sounds plausible enough on its face but let us examine this argument a little more closely. Before 2015, even without the prospect of oil resources within the fiscal space available, the PPP/C Government found the money to pay cash grants of \$15,000 per year to school children. The APNU/AFC came into Office, riding the wave of the first oil discovery in 2015, and took that grant away. Without oil money or the anticipation of oil money, the PPP/C Government found the money to pay a one-month bonus to the Disciplined Services. The APNU/AFC came into office and took that bonus away.

Without oil resources, the PPP/C instituted subsidies on water bills for pensioners. The APNU/AFC took those subsidies away. Without oil resources, we found the money to subsidise electricity for pensioners – \$30,000 per year. The APNU/AFC took that subsidy away. To add insult to injury, the APNU/AFC, after removing all of those benefits, gave themselves a 50% rise in salary and told the people of Guyana that they had no apologies to make.

While the argument they make, which is we have oil and they did not, may appear plausible on the surface, we did all these things without oil. Hence, the examination of their record tells a different story. Know them by their deeds. So, when the Hon. Member, such as Ms. Walton-Desir, comes and flays and pretends to be virtuous, and they have all the answers, know them by their deeds. They have no credibility. The Hon. Member, Ms. Amanza Walton-Desir, tilted at the \$10,000 healthcare voucher, which, as the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service said, is intended to cover a basic menu of medical tests. The Hon. Member said that this is nothing but a transfer to the private sector because one has to take the voucher to a private institution. For the life of me, try as I might, I could not comprehend the logic in their criticism. Given that tests are free in the public health system, where else would a citizen take such a voucher? As far as I understand it, no one has to do anything in respect of the medical care voucher.

3.01 p.m.

A member of the public can choose to have the test done in the public health system, in which case, as I said, it is free and no voucher is needed. If, however, a citizen chooses to access the private health care system for whatever reason, we are saying to that citizen, here, we will defray some of that cost for you. It is the same way that the 'Because We Care' cash grant is extended to every child, regardless of whether that child is in the public or private education system. But we do not hear the same criticism about the education grant. Is it because they have a different perception of who education providers are than they have of medical service providers? In any case, the Opposition never concedes, or maybe they do not understand, that businesses have costs. They carry on as though every dollar of revenue constitutes a profit. For them, the medical service provider does not have to use supplies to conduct tests, they do not have to pay rent, they do not have overhead, and they do not have to pay staff who work. If you listen to the Opposition, every dollar of revenue that goes to the private sector goes straight into the pocket of some businessman or woman, but the goods and

services are provided to the customer by magic. This is the mentality of the Opposition. It is a zero-sum mentality. They cannot conceive a public and private healthcare system complementing each other, with each occupying an appropriate place in the national fabric. They want to take us back to the days when there was no private sector, when the state, according to them, controlled the commanding heights of the economy, when the state dominated all aspects of people's lives, and when the state (their state) did everything and did it badly.

I also wish to thank the Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, who opened the debate for the Opposition last Friday. I think the Hon. Member did the nation a great service in her presentation as well. I say that in this context. The Hon. Member is amongst the new guard in the ranks of the Opposition. She, like the Hon. Member, Ms. Walton-Desir, is of their new generation and represents the future of their party. So, it is instructive for us to have a demonstration, Sir, of where our friends in the Opposition are headed, as illustrated by their best and brightest. There is a Yiddish word, which I think aptly describes the presentation of the Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes. That word is *hutzpah*. Translated to English, it means audacity or temerity. That word comes to mind because it is the height of audacity for someone who is part and parcel of a party that told people to go on the street corner and sell plantain chips and dog food to make a living, to come here and say in this honourable House that service jobs in the hospitality industry are beneath the dignity of Guyanese. Let me hasten to say that on this side of the House, we have absolutely no problem with people who sell dog food on the corner. They are doing honest work, and honest work is dignified work. We do not have a problem with those hard-working people. What we have a problem with is the temerity of people like the Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, whose Government not only told Guyanese to go make their living by selling on the street corner but imposed a tax on top of them in the bargain.

You, Sir, will remember the huckster's tax as one of the more than 200 regressive taxes that this Administration has removed. Then, they come to this House disparaging jobs, which offer steady employment, offer opportunities for advancement, as well as inclusion in the social safety net through the National Insurance Scheme (NIS). The Hon. Member, who is in the vanguard of the Opposition's new generation, told us that tourism makes us a nation of servants. This is the voice of the Opposition's future, giving us the identical argument of the People's National Congress (PNC) from days past. It appears that, notwithstanding the new look, the new people, this new day, it is the same old,

tired philosophy on the other side. We must thank the Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, for reminding us of who they are, because Guyanese will be making an important choice this year. The Hon. Member's presentation last Friday was emblematic of the particularly insidious way in which the Opposition tries to demonise the Government and the private sector. What they do is focus on the biggest and most visible businesses, those businesses which, by their very nature, are in a position to make major investments. They then claim that the private sector only comprises these businesses and they then say to their supporters that the Government is giving all of the money to the private sector. Again, they represent the situation as though private sector revenues are one and the same as private sector profits.

The Hon. Member, Ms. Fernandes, gave us a master class in this type of subterfuge last Friday. The Hon. Member, in attempting to ridicule the thousands of jobs created in the hospitality sector, said that we are telling people to work in hotels in which they cannot afford to stay. After she was done in here, the Hon. Member took to social media and posted the nightly rates of the top three hotels, as if to make her point. Yes, the hashtag was "I said, what I said". She doubled down. It moved me to make the point that the Hon. Member appears to have no understanding of the scope of the hospitality sector. I would invite the Hon. Member to take a trip to her hometown of Bartica and visit the 13 hotels operating there, one of which recently undertook an expansion. I would invite the Hon. Member to speak with those hotel owners and reconsider whether she wants to come to this House to disparage the hotel business. As part of our evaluation of the hospitality sector, the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) monitors 95 hotels located in almost every region of this country. They talk about comparing oil and non-oil, but they do not find it utterly ridiculous to select the top three of almost 100 and hold them out as characterising the sector. Of the 92 hotels that were surveyed in our monitoring programme for 2024, 14 were in Region 2, four were in Region 3, 31 were in Region 4, 11 were in Region 6, 13 of them are in Region 7, from where the Hon. Member hails, eight were in Region 9 and another eight in Region 10.

The hospitality sector is much more diverse than the Hon. Member imagines. For good measure, I would say that the average rates of hotels outside of the business sector are as low as \$15 per night in Region 1, with a national average in 2024 of \$25,000 per night, a fraction of the rates that the Hon. Member chose to use to drive her narrative. For the Hon. Member's information, Guyanese can and do patronise these establishments. By the way, many of these are small

businesses, establishments with less than 25 rooms. I mention this because they also seem to have a coordinated message that we are doing nothing for small businesses. I have to remind them that we brought into law the 20% window for small businesses in government procurement. That is how we could award over \$25 billion to almost 2,500 small contractors, many of them first-time awardees, and 30% of them are women or women owned.

To return to the hospitality sector, I wish to make this final point. Close to five years ago, at the height of the worst pandemic the world has seen in a century, when global travel was at a virtual standstill, we had the vision to see beyond the horizon and recognise what Guyana could be in the future and what we would need to realise that potential. That is why back in 2020, even in those circumstances and in the context where we did not have a history and culture of tourism, like our Caribbean States, we invited expressions of interest for the construction of hotels to carry major, globally recognised brands. If you recall, Sir, we were roundly criticised for doing so. We were criticised for facilitating investment in hotels when no one was travelling. The criticism then was that we were building hotels in which no one would stay. Predictably, the naysayers were proven wrong, because in 2023, occupancy in the business segment was 85%, and in 2024, the occupancy level in that segment was 88%. In the smaller segment of the sector, occupancy levels also increased. At these occupancy levels and average room rates reported for 2024, an estimate of the sector revenues approached US\$65 million in 2024. That is over \$13.6 billion. Collectively, almost 22,000 people are employed, directly or indirectly, in the hospitality sector across the country. Having been proven wrong in their dire predictions regarding the economic viability of the industry, their position has now shifted, and their new argument, as the Hon. (*inaudible*) said, the work in the industry is unfit for Guyanese. There is no principle and no consistency in their argument.

Nevertheless, because of our policies, the private sector has gained confidence and is responding with investment. For hotels, we have seen close to \$35 billion of investment. Lodges have seen \$21 million in investment; resorts – \$200 million; local airlines – \$600 million; malls – \$12 billion, with a total investment by the private sector of over \$50 billion in the hospitality sector alone. Between 2020 and 2024, the industry added four new hotels and a total of 561 rooms to the national room stock. When I say private sector, I mean the private sector, including those small and medium businesses that the Opposition does not see because their existence does not suit their narrative. Of the 561 new

rooms, 81 were in the segment of small operators – 35 in Henrietta, Region 2; 34 in Linden, Region 10; and six in Bartica, Region 7, home of the Hon. Member who said that hotel work is unworthy of Guyanese. I should point out that these hotels employ people. They have managerial and supervisory staff. They have clerical staff, and they have operational staff. Many of these roles require 24-hour coverage. Thus, you may find three persons employed in eight-hour shifts to cover a role. When you include ancillary service, I repeat, almost 22,000 people are employed in the hospitality sector. This employment follows the more than 1,500 jobs that were created during the construction phase of these various facilities. We promised to create jobs, and we have surpassed our promise of 50,000 jobs for our people. In so doing, we restored hope and dignity to the thousands of our Guyanese brothers and sisters whom the APNU/AFC placed on the bread line. That is our record – competence and delivery.

We see the same playbook when it comes to the construction sector. They pick out the major contracts, designate those contractors as the private sector, and allege that all the money is awarded to them. However, just over three months ago, on 11th October, on these very premises, I was here when we awarded 673 contracts to small contractors, with a total value of \$11.5 billion, for building community roads and other infrastructure in Region 4. That exercise was preceded by one on 8th October, 2024, in Berbice, where we awarded just about \$7 billion for community works to 389 small contractors in Region 6. In Region 5, 108 small contractors were awarded \$1.5 billion in contracts for the upgrade of community roads. In April, 2024, we awarded \$1 billion in contracts in Sophia, right here in Georgetown, to persons from the community to upgrade roads and infrastructure. In Linden, 325 contracts, totalling \$4.2 billion, were issued on 23rd November, 2024, to small contractors for the upgrade of community roads in that municipality. We followed up on 3rd December, with an additional 94 contracts in Linden, again issued to small contractors for road works and another 46 contracts for drainage works.

3.16 p.m.

In total in 2024, well over 2,000 small contractors who are ordinary people all over this country were awarded over \$27 billion in contracts to upgrade and enhance infrastructure in their communities. I speak only of the small business contracts that were awarded through the sector of public works. Many of these people are first time contractors and if our deliberate policy of facilitation and community

empowerment had been absent, they would not have their opportunities today. It is incomprehensible that Members on the other side can have the temerity to come to this honourable House with a straight face to say that our Budget has nothing in it for the ordinary, average Guyanese. I have made this point before but it dares to be made again. Every child who attends a public school and receives instruction gets to benefit from \$175 billion that is programmed for education in this Budget. The thousands of people who go to public hospital or a community health centre benefit from free care and treatment from the \$143 billion allocated to health in the Budget.

For small businesses who they say we do nothing for, the accelerated depreciation schedule for capital investments made by poultry farmers is nothing because small farmers mean nothing to them. The removal of value-added tax (VAT) on agricultural machinery means nothing for them. I suppose they do not consider small farms to be small businesses. Do small businesses not benefit from our maintaining the zero rating of excise tax and petroleum products? This measure removes an estimated \$90 billion in cost throughout the supply chain and this benefits not only small businesses but it benefits everyone. It lowers fuel cost; lowers inland freight to reduce prices in shops and markets. It lowers direct cost for consumers who own motor vehicles. Our taxi fares remain low in part because of that measure and it lowers electricity costs, which every consumer and business benefits from in terms of lower light bills. It is easy to do as the Opposition does – to criticize these measures – because they know that the true effect of these measures will only be felt if those subsidies are removed and that will never be done by this Government. Make no mistake, they will remove those subsidies and place the burden on the citizens' back if they ever get their hands on the labours of power again. Just look at their record.

There are 800 million programmes for small businesses in the agro-processing sector. This is in addition to the 3 billion programme for facilities in Regions 2, 3, 4 and 10 for small businesses operating in the light medium and processing industries. In Region 2, Onderneeming Industrial Estate is 95% completed and it will be ready for roll out in the first quarter of 2025, which would offer 90 plots for perspective businesses. Development at the York Industrial Estate in Region 10 is progressing and is scheduled for completion in 2025. These initiatives build upon our successes with the business incubators in Lethem and Belvedere which give me another chance to address the oil versus non-oil comparison argument. You might recall that in August, 2020, both locations, Lethem and Belvedere, were mere shells, despite

representation by the A Partnership for National Unity / Alliance For Change that they were in a position to begin operations. There were public launch in Belvedere and an extensive media tour in Lethem, which included several businesspeople from neighbouring Brazil but they were all a mirage and a pretence; the sort of subterfuge that the APNU/AFC excel in. Despite the fanfare, there were no equipment installed, not a pod occupied and nothing produced.

Today, residents of Regions 6 and 9 have access to state-of-the-art agro-processing facilities which provide a direct benefit to the agro-processing sector. As a result, we have real production of value-added items which benefit the respective communities. Last year, more than 8,000 pounds of Indigenous flours, powders and almost 70,000 chasses of herbal teas were produced at the Berbice incubators. Almost 5,000 chasses of tea along with large quantities of dried peppers and dried fruits were produced at the Lethem Business Incubator Centre. Especially in the Lethem area, without those facilities much of those produce will go to waste. With the successful completion of this project, the small farmers from the Lethem environs can preserve their produce and earn more revenue from the resulting value-added products that are placed in retail outlets throughout the country. That is the difference between the PPP/C and the APNU/AFC. Here there are the same projects in different administration with different results. This has nothing to do with access to oil revenues versus lack of oil revenues. It is a matter of the contrast of competence and ineptitude. No amount of oil money can buy them competence.

Moving on with small business, I have to make the point that support to small business is not merely grants and loans. A critical important support measure is training to build capacity. This year we plan to train an additional 3,000 small business owners which would add to the 10,000 who have already benefitted from training in areas such as marketing fundamentals, business planning and financial management. I already have alluded to the fact that in the construction sector over close to 2,500 contractors received over \$25 billion in small contracts. It is this sort of training especially in planning and financial management that enhance the capabilities of small businesses to allow them to benefit from these larger government contracts that we have been awarding in the construction and other sectors. Mr. Speaker, you can see that our interventions are integrated into a cohesive whole that is designed to bring about inclusive sustainable growth and development. Our support is not just limited to small grants. We are also facilitating alternative sources of financing and revenue for small businesses. For

these businesses, access to finance has been enhanced with the Security Interests in Movable Property Bill. An enhancement of revenue drove the institution of legal framework such as the 20% procurement set aside and the Local Content Act. The Local Content Act, because of constraints of time does not allow me to elaborate on its successes. Suffice it to say, in procurement alone in the oil and gas sector, we have over 1,000 Guyanese small businesses actively participating.

Turning to the wider tourism sector – our performance continues to improve substantially as our policies continue to place Guyana on the map as a sought after travel destination. A sum of \$719 million is budgeted for 2025 to build on this progress. With recognition in the media and travel magazines too numerous to mention, please permit me to list a few highlights. In 2024, Guyana received the International Travel Award for destination of the year and ecological tourism from the Pacific Area Travel Writers Association. The Guyana Tourism Authority received silver place in the Fourth Edition of the World Trade Market (WTM) Latin America Responsible Tourism Awards 2024 in the category of Best Initiatives for Indigenous Tourism. Of Traditional Communities, Guyana was nominated as Green Destination of the Year at the Caribbean Green Awards and for the World Travel Awards South America's Responsible Tourism Award in 2024. The Iwokrama River Lodge earned a nomination as South America's Leading Ecolodge at the WTM Responsible Awards 2024. These awards and nominations constitute growing international recognition of our credentials for sustainable ecofriendly tourism, our commitment to our Indigenous communities and our capacity to provide world class experiences in harmony with nature.

Our air connectivity has seen a significant boost with multiple new routes and airlines entering the market. The launch of direct flights between Guyana and Grenada by Inter-Caribbean Airways and Caribbean Airlines introducing direct flights to the Republic of Suriname have made regional travel more accessible. International connectivity has also improved with United Airlines launching a four times weekly service from Houston, Texas to Georgetown and Avianca Airlines commencing direct flights between Guyana to Bogota, Columbia. We...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you will need an extension for you to continue to conclude.

Government Chief Whip or Opposition Chief Whip [Ms.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Ms. Walrond: Our coordinated and purposeful work have resulted in visitor arrivals setting an all-time record of 371,000 in the year 2024. This is more than four times the level of 82,000 recorded in 2020. It exceeds by over 16% last year's record setting performance of 319,000. In total visitor arrivals increased by more than 50,000 persons in 2024 as compared to 2023. This exemplifies what we mean when we say we have a record of competence and delivery. We have \$1.2 billion allocated to standardisation and standards development for 2025. These activities have an integral role in developing our competitiveness. In this regard, the Guyana National Bureau of Standards (GNBS) is one of those organisations who has an unobtrusive but critical role to play. It may not be widely known but GNBS also plays a critical role in the petroleum sector.

The oil and gas department of the Bureau monitors operations on the Floating Production Storage and Offloading (FPSO). The GNBS inspectors are stationed to oversee the custody transfer process and to ensure precision and accuracy of the transaction records relating to oil production and lifts. The GNBS is also responsible for sampling crude stored in cargo tanks to determine quality. You would no doubt readily appreciate that the quality of a lift will influence its price. Altogether, our inspector aboard the FPSOs conduct more than 3,000 hyper precessions tests each year as they work on the front line to safeguard our oil revenues. They are our first line of assurance with respect to the integrity of these revenues and it is not inappropriate to recognise their otherwise unseen and unsung role in protecting our patrimony. Such is the capability of the Bureau that now provide testing and technical assistance services not only to local and foreign owned businesses here in Guyana but also to entities in several countries of the Caribbean community (CARICOM) region.

We can speak proudly of these things because our record is one of competence and delivery. In every sector, our approach is purposeful and result oriented. The contrast with the record of our Friends on the other side could not be starker. I had cause on a previous occasion to go through in detail, a number of promises made on the other side in their 2015 manifesto, none of which they kept. This year, as we

approach elections, we are going to hear them promising Guyanese the moon, the stars and the skies again. They have already started with a pamphlet containing a slew of promises. Then the Hon. Member, Mr. Holder, mouthed off a few of them in the House today. Once again you have to marvel at the audacity. Imagine, they imposed value-added tax on electricity and are now promising subsidies on electricity. They imposed VAT on water are now promising the Guyanese people subsidies on water. They took away the bonus from the discipline services and are now promising 35% increase in salaries for the discipline services. They took away the \$15,000 a year cash grant for schoolchildren and are now promising \$150,000 per year. The height of audacity. They promised to double old age pension in 2015 and did not do it but they are promising again to double the old age pension.

You have to marvel at the audacity. In the face of their record, they come to the Guyanese people with a straight face repeating these promises. I did note that all of the Members on the other side were laughing when Mr. Holder was giving out the list of promises and some did appear to be shocked. Then, for good measure they promised free university, which we have already announced last year. They have some vague promise of mortgage assistance but since 2013 the PPP/C Government introduced the Mortgage Interest Relief Programme. After ridiculing the part-time worker scheme from its inception in this year, the Opposition suddenly declares their support for the programme and they are promising to raise the part-time workers stipend by 25% from \$40,000 to \$50,000 a month. They are promising to cut taxes and increase spending. They criticise our payment of \$100,000 for every newborn but they are promising \$150,000 every year for every child under 16. They are promising subsidies and almost everything under the sun.

3.31 p.m.

On top of all that extra expenditure, they are promising to cut taxes, but the Guyanese people know better. They know that the A Partnership for National Unity/ Alliance For Change never met a tax they would not raise. They never met a benefit that they would not remove or an election that they would not rig. It is easy to make promises when you do not intend to keep them. It is their modus operandi (MO) to raise taxes, snatch the benefits from the hard-working Guyanese and then when the people reject them, try to steal their votes.

In conclusion, the achievements and measures I have outlined today are at the heart of the transformation that is taking place in Guyana under the stewardship of our People's Progressive Party/Civic Government. We have worked tirelessly to create an environment where all our people thrive and prosper from Region 1 to Region 10. Guyana's economic future looks incredibly bright as we continue to make strategic investments in infrastructure, human capital, tourism development and support for local businesses, among other areas. As we continue to work towards that future, we are committed to build on our successes and ensuring that every citizen of Guyana benefits from the opportunities created in our new economy. *Budget 2025* maintains the platform for continued growth, resilience and prosperity. I wholeheartedly commend it to this honourable House and to the Guyanese people. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister Ms. Walrond. Now for the Hon. Member, Mr. Henry.

Mr. Henry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Guyana Action Party and a member of the Coalition, I rise to critique the 2025 Budget as presented by the Hon. Dr. Singh, Member of Parliament (MP), Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service.

We have to respond to some of the wrong statements made by a few of the speakers before. For example, the Hon. Member, Mr. Bharrat, announced, with pride, the promises that were fulfilled. The Hon. Member said the gas-to-energy project – promise fulfilled. The whole of Guyana must have looked around to see where that promise is or where it *deh*. Is it here? Also, the Hon. Member did not mention that we are supposed to be having Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on Natural Resources meetings regularly to discuss the problems and issues affecting the natural resource sector. I am a Member of that Committee. Hon. Member Mr. Bharrat has never held a meeting with us since they became the installed Government. We had one year when our Hon. Member Ms. Hastings-Williams was in charge and had over 11 meetings. What is the problem? Are you afraid of meetings? Come to meetings and let us discuss the people's welfare, especially the Indigenous people's welfare.

Promise fulfilled – lightning-speed fibre optic to the Rupununi and everywhere – promise fulfilled. It ended up halfway down the road in the savannahs with a little piece of wire hanging down to the ground – promise fulfilled. The

Skeldon Sugar Factory, oh my – promise fulfilled. Sugar prices have gone down and we are getting lots of sugar to sweeten the Guyanese people's pockets and everything else – promise fulfilled. It is something that is gone. Thrown away. Kanaima gone with it. Where is the Hon. Member, Ms. Rodrigues - Competence versus ineptitude? Those projects tell you where the ineptitude is. Power ships to make sure that we have light all day, all night. Blackout in we... What do Guyanese say? **[Mr. Mahipaul: (Inaudible)]** I cannot say that. I see the Speaker jumping up there. They are trying to promote themselves, that is over there, as being of competence. What competence versus ineptitude, like what the Hon. Member, Ms. Rodrigues, said? The man in the street and the people of the hinterland are voicing that this is the last budget of the People's Progressive Party/Civic since they have failed miserably to look after the interests of the majority of the people in Guyana. Further, the man in the street is saying that the PPP/C, knowing this, are making final moves to stuff their already filled pockets, while the majority of Guyanese are struggling daily to put three meals on their tables.

I heard the Hon. Member, Dr. Singh, and others from the Government's side repeating an untruth. In 2020, under the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change, the Hinterland Employment Youth Services (HEYS) Programme, also known as the HEYS Programme, had some 2,500 hinterland youths actively involved in training in multiple life skills, plus a component that allowed the youths to be trained in entrepreneurship. Youths were also granted entrepreneurial grants to conduct small businesses for themselves. On the ascension of the PPP/C into Office in 2020, they dismantled the HEYS Programme and placed the 2,500 Indigenous youths on the breadline. In other words, the PPP/C fired the 2,500 Indigenous youths and later replaced the HEYS Programme with the Community Support Officers (CSOs) Programme. Nothing is wrong with replacing a programme but you are firing our Indigenous youths and then you come every time to National Assembly and repeat that we fired them. You were the one...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, we have a contention as to who did the firing. There is a document that was circulated. We are going to be circulating that to clarify, once and for all, who did what.

Mr. Henry: Hon. Speaker, I think you heard me wrongly *[inaudible]*.

Mr. Speaker: Go ahead.

Mr. Henry: Thank you, Sir. I was talking about 2020 and not 2015. The 2025 Budget was awaited by the Guyanese people, holding their breaths with high expectations. The people of Guyana saw that their welfare and livelihoods were not on the front burner for the past four years of the PPP/C in Government, who year-after-year produced budgets that focused on infrastructural work that fattened the rich, the friends and families of the PPP/C at the expense of most Guyanese. Many people felt that because 2025 is the year of elections the PPP/C would have seen the folly of their ways and finally allocate an acceptable portion of the national pie to most Guyanese who are in dire need. If any felt that the PPP/C would have redeemed themselves by placing the welfare of the majority of Guyanese first, that feeling evaporated on the day the Hon. Member, Dr. Singh, made his 2025 budget presentation. Quite frankly, the budget was like a balloon that burst and has left most Guyanese totally disappointed. Yes, the PPP/C's 2025 Budget is like a burst balloon.

In Region 9 popularly known as the Rupununi, there were certain transformational projects that were expected by the people. One of these includes the extension of the bridge over the Rupununi River to allow persons to travel even when the periodic floods cover the bank of the Rupununi River. This project would have served all nine communities of the South Rupununi, including the Wai Wais of Masakanari in the deep south of Guyana. Mr. Speaker, because of limited time please allow me to list a few more transformational projects that any caring Government who have the money would have hastened to complete during the five years in Office, especially with oil resources that were made possible by the APNU/ AFC. One, bridge over the Rupununi River to Sand Creek. This crossing has already taken lives, people died there, and it continues to be a threat to life. Moneys were there. Why was this not done? A bridge linking St. Ignatius to central Lethem – currently, the bridge that exists floods periodically. This bridge will also connect 20 South Rupununi villages to Lethem during the floods. This crossing is also a threat to life. Further, bridges to Katoka, Potarinau, Parabara and Rewa villages and others.

The PPP/C fools no one by suddenly launching projects such as the building of secondary schools in their last year of being in Government. The PPP/C had oil moneys and five years to complete these crucial projects but did not feel it important to do so. However, the Coalition will undertake to complete these crucial projects to a standard that could compete internationally. Plus, the construction and activation of secondary schools will be done in Nappi; Lethem;

Katoka; Yupukari; and, if a feasibility study supports, one in Karaudarnau. I must admit that some have begun and when we become the Government next, we will continue them. It must be noted that it was the Coalition who started and supported secondary schools in Karasabai, Nappi and Maruranau. We did the classes there in preparation for the schools. The Coalition will work towards the satisfactory completion of these projects in their entirety.

The Coalition plans to massively improve the hinterland roads that will see improvements of all-weather roads with bitumen concrete roads in strategic and populated hinterland communities thus making hinterland travel more comfortable and safer. Hinterland people will be able to improve their livelihoods utilising the improved road networks. The Coalition in its limited time in Government was very visionary. One project that stands out is the Linden to Lethem Road and the Kurupukari Bridge. Had there not been a no confidence vote against the APNU/AFC orchestrated by the PPP/C, the Linden to Mabura Hill leg of the road would have already been completed and the Kurupukari Bridge would have been progressing well. I understand that... The Coalition will continue the building of the Kurupukari Bridge. Seemingly, the PPP/C is considering omitting this bridge from the project. The Kurupukari Bridge when completed by the Coalition will not only be a plus for the transportation of people and goods but will be designed to facilitate tourism. It will become a tourist hotspot creating real jobs, high-paying jobs and opportunities for service providers to earn money.

The Coalition's three-and-a-half-year track record for the development in the hinterland is very impressive when compared to the PPP/C's 23 years in Government. The Coalition in Government did not have oil resources to prop it up, yet one can safely say that the Coalition of the APNU/AFC had the interests at heart of the people of the hinterland and all Guyanese. The Coalition introduced townships in Lethem, Mabaruma, Bartica and Mahdia. Today, these new towns provide vital services to the people in their regions and are showing signs of becoming thriving townships. However, through a lack of vision by the PPP/C, the impetus for the creation of unique townships in the hinterland that reflect the history and the culture of the areas have been put on the back burner. The Coalition completed several roads and bridges that set examples for others to follow. Lethem's Main Road is an example of excellence. The Manari concrete and steel bridge is another example. These and others too many to mention now were done without oil moneys. The people of Lethem through the 23

years of the PPP/C's administration suffered by inhaling red dust.

3.46 p.m.

During the PPP/C's 23 years, biscuit roads were the norm. These PPP/C roads lasted for a short while and then deteriorated into potholes. In the South Rupununi, the Coalition worked with the army of Brazil to provide potable water to communities. Each village had a trained local technician employed to ensure that the facilities functioned to their maximum potential. This necessary decision based on common sense was changed by the PPP/C Government. Today, the supply of potable water now functions in a sloppy and ad hoc manner. Just imagine that the PPP/C installed a water distribution system in Aishalton that is expected to supply water to houses that are higher than the source of water and have no visible valve to regulate the movement of the water. As a result, the system is now a white elephant. Guess what? It is just more enrichment for the PPP/C friends and families while the poor people suffer.

During the 23 years of the PPP/C Government, information dissemination and communication were kept in the dark. The Coalition on ascending to the Office immediately activated radio stations in Lethem, Aishalton, Orella, Mahdia and Bartica. Also, internet was installed in hinterland villages thus linking the remote hinterland communities to the rest of Guyana and the world at large. That brings me to the point that yesterday I was sent a message by someone in the hinterland who voiced his concern. He said, why is he only hearing the presentations made by the Government Ministers on NCN radio? Why? Why is he not hearing when the Opposition parliamentarians speak? Why are they not hearing when I am speaking now as a representative of the hinterland? Why are we being blocked out? Is this democracy? Is this what we want from any Government? The PPP/C did not facilitate local Government for over 20 years, yet they speak as if they love democracy. The Coalition on ascension to Government brought back Local Government Elections.

[An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] I will warn you; I can shout loudly. The Coalition on ascension to Government brought back Local Government Elections; thanks to President Brigadier (Ret'd) David Granger. It was the Coalition who brought back democracy to Guyana. The Coalition brought light that overcame the darkness of the PPP/C 23 years of mismanagement.

The Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, spent a large amount of time during his Budget speech comparing the performance of the Coalition's Government pre-oil term of three years for the development that happened from the PPP/C 2020 to 2024, a period that was and continues to be flushed with trillions of dollars prepared and provided for by the APNU/AFC. Every schoolchild knows that it was the Coalition that brought oil and its massive wealth to Guyana. Every schoolchild also knows that the wealth is not trickling down to most of the Guyanese people. It was the Coalition who signed the agreement for the oil industry to come on stream. One would remember the PPP/C shouting at the top of their voices that they would change the contract. Today, the PPP/C are wallowing in the proceeds and enriching themselves from the top, with their friends and their families while neglecting the majority of the Guyanese people. It must be noted that the man in the engine room who is the *de-facto* boss man of the PPP/C recently said that he has no apology for fattening the PPP/C friends and families.

We heard the PPP/C telling a lot of Anansi stories about the \$18 million signing bonus. At that time, we, as a nation, were on hot coals with regard to safeguarding our territorial integrity. The \$18 million signing bonus was deposited in the Bank of Guyana and used largely to cover our expenses accrued in the wholesome defence of our sovereignty and territorial integrity. We, in the hinterland and as a nation, are thankful for the wise handling of our resources to keep us safe. Now, we continue to experience the bungling inaction of the PPP/C who does not make us feel safe as a nation. Instead of safeguarding our nation, they are busy filling their pockets. That is what they are doing. I recall when Venezuela had its referendum, all the top officials of the PPP/C including the Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh who is not here found a reason to run out of Guyana. They left. All of them left. They left back some. Oh, he is not here; he is gone.

The Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, said that the Government had committed to grant 15% of carbon credit inflows to the Indigenous villages. It must be noted that to date the PPP/C cannot prove that the Indigenous peoples of Guyana were allowed to participate and give their free prior and informed consent in all decisions made with regard to carbon credits. The Coalition Government on assuming Office will facilitate a process that allows free prior and informed consent by the Indigenous peoples of Guyana. Key in the discussions will be the reworking of the formula to allow the Indigenous communities and peoples to get a large percentage of the carbon credit inflows. We will further

propose to the Indigenous peoples of Guyana that a two-third system be used in the dissemination of the carbon credit grant in which a percentage to be decided on will be allocated to family units in the villages and the balance will be allocated to fund priorities of their annual community development plans. The families will decide how they will spend their grants. This will see the quality of personal life improve in multiple ways such as in education, health, housing, transportation, entrepreneurship, power generation, *et cetera*. Thus, the families could decide that their priority for a year would be X and they would do it.

According to a DGB Group article titled *Guyana Approves \$148 million for Indigenous communities on climate resilience*, dated 27th July, 2024: a sum of \$22.4 million will be directly distributed among 242 Indigenous communities nationwide, while US \$126.5 million was dedicated to climatic adaptations initiative including constructing major canals, sluice rehabilitation, and procuring pumps and excavators across multiple regions. A question being asked by the Indigenous peoples and local and foreign observers is what was the project expenses that the \$125.5 million was spent on in 2023? We read in the news that an amount of \$865 million was awarded to a contractor who had no experience in the construction of the Belle Vue pumping station and, to date, this entity is not completed. Also, another contract was awarded to a similarly unqualified contractor to the tune of more than \$981 million for the construction of a pump station at Pouderoyen, West Demerara. According to one news outlet little work was done on these projects at the end of 2024. The Indigenous people want answers. Are the moneys just mentioned taken from the sale of our carbon credits and are they being misused? Are these moneys being placed in the hands of the PPP/C friends, families and favourites?

It is apposite to note that the PPP/C's methodology of distributing cash grants is murky and has facilitated more moneys for themselves, their friends and their families. Also, when the PPP/C distributed cash grants in their strongholds, they basically shared money to their supporters. In a recent distribution of business grants in Rupununi, I was informed by an influential PPP/C supporter that top PPP/C officials received cash grants at every opportunity. It was said that the villagers, travelling long distances, hoping to get grants but after paying for bus, boat and other fees and expenses, went back home empty-handed. However, the report stated that all members of certain families – PPP/C families – including the maid, the children and even babies, received cash grants. The PPP/C person who gave me the information said that he or

she, I will say, was sure that the PPP/C would lose the next election because of this C word that cannot be mentioned in the National Assembly.

The distribution of the recent \$100,000 cash grant was and continues to be a fiasco. Untold suffering, disgusting and degrading treatment were meted out to our pensioners and other Guyanese. One wonders why the PPP/C did not use existing databases to develop a humane methodology to pay out the cash grants. Is it that the PPP/C wanted to propagandise the cash grant distribution to gain political points? Well, this certainly backfired and has proven to the Guyanese people that we have an incompetent and uncaring PPP/C Government. According to many people, the PPP/C are not ready yet. The Coalition, in line with this people-centred development strategy, will give cash transfers to the people of Guyana but the system will be humane, organised and stress-free.

The recently held National Toshias Council (NTC) conference was stage-managed by the PPP/C. Firstly, the main keynote speech by the PPP/C was riddled with inaccuracies. An attempt was made to rewrite the history of the Indigenous people and we cannot allow that. According to the PPP/C, the history of the Indigenous people started or began in 1992. It was said that prior to 1992, there were no scholarships for hinterland students to attend institutions of higher learning. This is a blatant untruth. The honourable Ms. Shirley Melville, former Member of Parliament, posted a picture of hinterland students who were on scholarship during the pre-1992 era and there were many more hinterland scholars on scholarship during the pre-1992 era. One outstanding scholar was Dr. Jamila Rose who went to Queen's College.

The PPP/C also pronounced that land titling was not done by the People's National Congress (PNC) prior to 1992. It was the PNC who agreed to and worked towards the facilitation of land titles in Guyana. It was the PNC who facilitated the formation and activities of the Amerindian Land Commission. Further, land title of Indigenous communities began in 1974, long before 1992. According to a study titled *Mid-term Evaluation of Amerindian Indigenous Land Titled Project and Guyana* by Carlos Camacho-Nassar in 2014, in 1974 the PNC Government of Guyana granted land titles among it to 6,125.6 square miles and then titled seven villages of Region 7 in 1991, covering an additional 1,596.1 square miles. This amounted to 7,721.7 square miles granted by the PNC Indigenous Village prior to 1992. Our history did not start in 1992. We were the First People in Guyana.

[Mr. Bharrat: (Inaudible)] Now, do not make me get on like that now. We were the First People in Guyana. We started the history in Guyana and I will tell all of those who come to say 1992 history started for us. The PNC facilitated some 90 grants to Indigenous communities, during the last Coalition Government. Absolute grants were given to Tasserene, Kangaruma, Asura, Yupukari, St. Monica and Mainstay/Whyaka. One must note that a lot of work was done by the Coalition with regard to land titling and related matters but due to the No Confidence Motion orchestrated by the PPP/C many of the villages were not finalised. However, the institutional memory of the work was left with the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and should have been continued if the PPP/C had any care for the Indigenous peoples. I heard the Minister saying that no paperwork on land titling was left by the Coalition, but this untruth is nullified by the fact that the head of the Amerindian Land Titling Unit of the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs continued in his position after the change of Government and was eventually promoted to the position of Commissioner of Land and Services Commission.

I personally know that many villages were on the verge of getting their titles and extensions, one of which is St. Ignatius which has a very large population of Indigenous peoples. Currently, St. Ignatius only has a few square miles of titled land. At a recent meeting the Hon. Member, Ms. Campbell-Sukhai, when questioned on the St. Ignatius extension that was applied for, said and I quote in her words: "Land do not grow." For the Hon. Member, Ms. Campbell-Sukhai, who holds the possession as Minister of Amerindian Affairs to say that 'land do not grow', when asked about extensions for Indigenous villages, it shows her inability to empathise with the First People of Guyana. One wonders if the Hon. Member, Ms. Campbell-Sukhai, sees herself as an Indigenous person. Somebody said sometime that it could be Chinese.

4.01 p.m.

For us, the First Peoples, land is our mother. It is our sustenance. It is our wealth. Without adequate lands, we will be forced to live *like fish out of water*. We call on the Hon. Campbell-Sukhai to withdraw the statement that land does not grow and apologise to the Indigenous people of Guyana. We call for an apology. When you say land does not grow, it is an insult to our livelihoods. The PPP/C treats Indigenous organisations as if they were foreign enemies. At the last National Toshaos Conference (NTC), the Amerindian Peoples Association (APA) continued to be under attack by

top PPP/C leaders. The APA is well known for standing up for the rights of the Indigenous peoples of Guyana. We, the Indigenous peoples, are pleased and thankful for the advocacy on our behalf by the APA. Also, the newly formed district councils, such as the Upper Mazaruni District Council, and others, are under threat by the PPP/C. It must be noted that it was the APNU/AFC Coalition Government that formally recognised the South Rupununi District Council (SRDC) as a district council *via* section 35(1) of the Amerindian Act. The next coalition government will make it a priority to ratify the district councils that make the necessary applications and are qualified under the Amerindian Act of 2006.

The 2025 Budget does not cater for a liveable stipend for Toshaos and any form of remuneration for village councillors. The coalition government will increase Toshaos' stipend to an amount that compensates them for the hard work that they do and allow them to live in dignity.

[Hon. Members: (Inaudible)] I will not call the amount because *y'all guh wan fuh [inaudible]*. Councillors should also be paid an honorarium. Councillors should also be paid. I will leave this to the other speakers after me to announce the amount. Sorry *fuh y'all; y'all gunn* move out from *deh*, maybe not even *ova hay; yuh* going outside. Village councils will be given an administrative grant to hire an administrator and provide basic equipment and supplies for the improved performance of the councils' official duties.

Our coalition government will continue the payment of presidential grants to villages but will increase the amounts allocated to allow the villages to have enough funds to improve their lives, villages, buildings, vehicles, boats, engines and farms, *et cetera*. Community Support Officers (CSOs), part-time workers, and other such *ad hoc* programmes, will be paid an increased honorarium. Currently, these programmes are not well managed. The coalition government will increase the stipend to at least \$50,000 per month and facilitate the CSOs and part-time workers to get training in applicable skills. Business training will also be done, and those who are interested in entrepreneurship will be given an adequate business grant to start their own business. A monitoring and evaluation component will be put in place to assist youth entrepreneurs with advice and recommend youths who are evaluated as deserving to get an annual business continuation grant. That is what you call something that is going to be transformational for the Indigenous people. It must be noted that many youths who were given...

Mr. Speaker: To continue that transformation, you need an extension.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Henry: Thank you. Mr. Speaker. It must be noted that many youths who were given business grants under the APNU/AFC are now active in business enterprises. A number of those trained are now involved in managing their shops, farms, ranches, *et cetera*. There are many examples, but I will say one, at least one. There is one youth who came to me the other day and reported that he bought two cows using his business grant so many years ago; and today, he has twelve heads of cattle. He is on his way to becoming a rancher. The list of success stories is long and impressive. In one budget debate, I heard the Minister of Amerindian Affairs and others from the PPP/C saying that no business managed by youths could be found. These statements were not only highly offensive but highly disrespectful to our Indigenous youths who are using their skills and resources gained *via* the APNU/AFC's Youth Entrepreneurship and Apprenticeship Project (YEAP) to improve their livelihoods. Yet, after trying to destroy our Indigenous youths' self-confidence, the PPP/C will go to the Indigenous communities to beg the Indigenous youths for their votes. The Minister of Amerindian Affairs owes another apology, this time to the Indigenous youths of Guyana. I repeat, the Minister of Amerindian Affairs owes another apology, this time to the Indigenous youths of Guyana.

The PPP/C during the past four years has shown its determination to erode the rights of the Indigenous peoples of Guyana. Some examples of these are as follows: the people of the Isseneru were forced to petition the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) because they felt that their rights were being violated. The Commission, in response, ruled that the state of Guyana is responsible for the violation of the community's right to equality before the law, health, justice, participation, collective territorial property and due process. Regarding Chinese Landing, the residents petitioned the IACHR because they were facing threats, harassment, and acts of violence to their opposition to mining on their lands. The IACHR, in its wisdom, granted precautionary rights in favour of the Indigenous Carib community of Chinese Landing, who it said were currently at a serious, urgent risk

of suffering irreparable harm to their human rights as a result of mining and other activities. Instead of supporting the Indigenous peoples of Chinese Landing, the PPP/C decided to punish them and has put a ban on mining in Chinese Landing. However, according to reports, the ban only affects the Indigenous peoples and seems not to be applicable to the outside miners who are still causing problems in the first place. It must be noted that in the defence of the PPP/C's position to the IACHR, the PPP/C said that the people of Isseneru are not Indigenous because they practise a cash economy, do not have traditional houses and are Christians. Now the PPP/C is saying that most of us in the nine Indigenous nations of Guyana are not Amerindians or Indigenous – *wow*.

The PPP/C tried in the National Assembly to pass a Bill called the Planning and Development Single Window System, which would have seen the Indigenous people losing their rights to their lands. Luckily, the APNU/AFC stood against it and the Bill was sent to a special select committee for correction. The PPP/C passed a bill on petroleum activities called the Petroleum Activities Bill using a slim majority. This Bill gives the PPP/C legal rights to conduct the identification of areas of interest and the exploration and production of petroleum on areas including Indigenous lands that are ancestrally titled, land contiguous to Indigenous lands, without the Free, Prior And Informed Consent (FPIC) of Indigenous peoples. Recently, the Acquisition of Lands for Public Purposes Act was passed to allow the PPP/C to acquire lands, including lands owned by Amerindians or Indigenous peoples, without their free, prior and informed consent. The PPP/C, jaundiced with greed, has shown repeatedly that it wants to take away Amerindian or Indigenous lands. We, the Indigenous people, have to watch the PPP/C with *four eyes*.

Mr. Speaker, the People's Progressive Party/Civic continues to stymie the revision of the Amerindian Act. Although there are sections that are still of importance in this Act, there are some that have to be revised to serve the purpose of defending the rights of the Indigenous peoples. Also, some additional clauses will have to be added to allow the Act to serve its purpose. One of the many weaknesses of the Amerindian Act of 2006 is that it does not prevent the Guyana Geology and Mines from granting mining concessions that superimpose on Indigenous communities – even after the land request and the legal and administrative process had begun. There are reports of mining concessions and mining activities being done upriver to Indigenous communities thus creating health and environmental problems for the Indigenous peoples. At the last NTC

Conference, one Toshao reported that over 20 mining concessions were granted on the land that is allocated to be his extension. The coalition government will still facilitate the revision of the Amerindian Act and bring in line other legal acts such as the Mining Act, to bring about the strengthening of the rights of the Indigenous peoples using the FPIC methodology. Among these inclusions is, the Amerindian Act will be renamed to reflect its purpose. One of the changes would be the addition of a regulatory framework to enforce rights and mediate disputes. The Mining Act will be amended to enable the GGMC to issue a seize-work order for violation of the Amerindian Act, *et cetera*. Some of the other issues of concern for the Indigenous peoples that will be placed on the front burner by the Coalition...

Mr. Speaker: To continue with some of the other issues, you may have to wait until you return to Parliament next year. Thank you very much, Hon. Member.

Ms. Pearson-Fredericks: Mr. Speaker, I rise to make my contribution. It is not my contribution, but I can speak on behalf of the Indigenous peoples or the Amerindian peoples, as we are called, of Guyana. Therefore, I am proud to be standing here today representing the Amerindian peoples of Guyana and, also, the ordinary working peoples of Guyana – the farmers, the labourers, the hotel workers, whatever. I stand here proud as a representative of the ordinary people.

As I said, I stand here in support of *Budget 2025, A Secure, Prosperous, and Sustainable Guyana*. However, before I direct my attention to the Budget I wish to make some rebuttals. I would like to say to the Hon. Member Mr. Henry: he rose on behalf of the Guyana Action Party (GAP), but where is that party? As far as we know, there are two members of the party – two members. As I said, we, on this side of the House, reach out to the total population of Guyana. The People's Progressive Party/Civic reached to the utmost end of this country. I can say that because I have been there. I walked this land. From the rivers to the creeks, to the mountain tops, to the savannahs, to the swamps, I have been there as a representative of the People's Progressive Party/Civic. I have not met anyone who can say, I am from the Guyana Action Party. That leaves me to wonder because I only know two members. The Hon. Member said that he speaks to the man in the street and people are saying that the Budget has nothing. Who are you talking to, Hon. Member? You spoke about many things, and you said when you get back to Office. It is good to dream. You are in a slumber; you are dreaming. I urge you to wake up and see the reality of what is happening in this country, our country, Guyana –

your country, my country – because you are far off track, Sir. You are far off track.

I want to respond to you on the Hinterland Employment and Youth Service (HEYS) Programme. Nobody fired them. Some of them came over under the CSO programme. Most of them came over under the CSO programme. You said the Coalition has a good track record – *oh*, my. Hon. Member, if the Coalition has such a good record, what are you doing over there? What are you doing over there if your records were so good and you did so many things for the Guyanese people? How come you are over there? How come, and you have done so many things for the Guyanese people? Come on, wake up; you are dreaming. You are dreaming.

The Hon. Member spoke a lot about FPIC – Free Prior and Informed Consent. Hon. Member, I wonder if you used FPIC in the distribution of the \$165 for the Sustainable Livelihood and Entrepreneurial Development (SLED) project fund? [**Dr. Singh:** Millions, millions.] It was \$165 million, sorry. For the \$165 million for the SLED Project fund, did you use FPIC – Free Prior and Informed Consent?

The Hon. Member spoke about land titling. Yes, it is true that prior to 1992 Amerindian villages did receive land titles. That is true. You are correct. I think that is the only correct thing you said. You are correct. However, under the PPP/C land titling continued.

4.16 p.m.

The project and the programme continued. I am saying, when we left Office in 2015 the funds were there to continue that project. In May, 2018, a former Minister said, I was unable to title any village. That is public knowledge. I was unable; funds were there. In your Manifesto, in the APNU/AFC's Manifesto, they promised that they would address the issue of land titling and Amerindian land titling – they said it – according to international standards. Sir, you came here and talked about the FPIC and international standards. They promised that, and what happened? They failed. They failed although in their Manifesto that was one of their big promises, to address the Amerindian land titling and Amerindian land issue according to international standards. In May, 2018, the Minister said, I was unable to title any village. So, then, when was a village titled under that administration, under AFC/APNU or whatever they call themselves? When? Let me say Mr. Speaker, I can say this because I was part of the land titling team. In fact, I was the head of the land titling team. So all of the reports that were submitted were works that we had done, that we left there. All they had to do was to hand out the certificates. All the

works we had done. [An. Hon. Member (Opposition): (*Inaudible*)] So, what? Do not come and bring promises again, Hon. Member. Get your information straight.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to say that on day one, the Hon. Member, Ms. Juretha Fernandes, in her presentation said that people are poorer now. In her presentation she said that if you walk around the villages, talk to the people, and ask them if they have received funds, millions of dollars, the people are poorer. In her presentation she said that the Government is reckless in spending. I wish to say, I do not know where the Hon. Member visits, I do not know who she is talking to, but as we go around the villages and communities – and as I said before, I am representing the ordinary people because I talk to the ordinary people; I rub shoulders with the ordinary people – they have a smile on their faces. They are comfortable, they are happy, because what is happening is that the interests of the people are being met. So, I would like the Hon. Members to visit the local villages and communities and talk to the people. I do not know who they are talking to, but talk to the ordinary people. I would like to say, if addressing the issues and the needs and the things that are affecting the people, like providing better health services, construction of schools and roads, and assistance for farmers is reckless spending, and if that is recklessness, I think we would like to see more recklessness. If addressing the needs of the people is deemed as being a reckless government, then I would like the ordinary people to hear that the assistance being given to them is deemed as recklessness.

The Hon. Member, Mr. Holder, came with a nice plan; *wow*, a good plan. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? In 2015, they came with a 100-day plan, and my colleague, the Hon. Member, Mr. Bharrat, read some of the 100-day plan. They failed to deliver. They went out there and they promised in 100 days what would be done and they failed. But here is Mr. Holder coming now with a 90-day plan. [Mr.

Mahipaul: Hon. Member.] The Hon. Member. Yes, the Hon. Member is coming now with a 90-day plan, and guess what? With a bigger plan. If you could not deliver with your 100-day plan, how come now you are coming with 90 days? Who are you trying... I cannot say hoodwink. No. [Dr. Singh: Who are you trying to fool?] Who are you trying... I do not think I can say fool either. Who are you trying to what? Blackmail? No. *Oh*, my. [Dr. Singh:

Hoodwink.] Hoodwink. What stroke are you coming with now? You are going to tell the Guyanese people out there that within 90 days you could do this. Are you a magician? I did not know he is a magician. Then he said,

they are a government in waiting, coming with a 90-day plan, bigger than before; could not have delivered on your 100-day plan, now you are coming to tell me something. The government in waiting, you all have a long, long, long time to wait. Because guess what? You are all dreaming, and it is good to dream. So, continue to dream.

Mr. Speaker, we have seen many things. We know what the Coalition is all about, and the Guyanese people know what the Coalition is all about. They can see, because it is there for all to see, the development and the transformation that has taken place within the past four years. It is there. It is not anything that we can hide. Everyone can see and everyone knows. A lot of people listen to the budget. They are saying that nothing is in the 2025 Budget, but the ordinary people see benefits. The ordinary people have seen what has taken place from August, 2020 to today. The ordinary people see, and they remember. They remember what had happened before. It cannot be erased.

One presenter said that they, the APNU/AFC, brought back democracy to this country. That is untrue. That is untrue. Mr. Speaker, maybe I am one of the oldest persons in this House and I have lived the life for many years, and I know what it was before 1992. I know the suffering and I can talk about it. I can talk about it; I know the suffering. I know when democracy was brought back in this country. I know – 1992. I know, in 2018, when the Hon. Member, Ms. Ferguson, went to my village in Mainstay and said to the people, ‘do not to vote for Yvonne Person because we have the money now, we are the APNU/AFC.’ She told the residents of my village not to vote for me because the PPP/C is not in Office, and they do not have the money – the Hon. Member. Mr. Speaker, that is a fact; that is the truth. I know what happened and I know when democracy was brought back. I know when freedom of speech... [Mr. McCoy:

Returned.] ...returned to this country. I know because I was there for many years. There are many things I can say but I would not say it here; but I know, because I have lived.

As I said before, there is tremendous development. We have heard mention about the Low Carbon Development Strategy. We have heard of the many developments that have taken place within the Amerindian villages and communities. We have heard how people are poorer and how people are struggling to put meals on the table. That is not so.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you will need five minutes to continue to conclude.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask that the Hon. Member be given five minutes to continue. According to my record, she has [inaudible].

Motion out and agreed to.

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

Ms. Pearson-Fredericks: I wish to call figures, Sir. In Region 1, under the LCDS, \$35 million for Karaburi. I wish to say what the Senior Counsellor said, and I quote:

“Mr. Earl Rodrigues is the committed Senior Counsellor of Karaburi. He noted that his satellite village benefited tremendously from its 2023 LCDS carbon credit allocation. Mr. Rodrigues appreciates the democratic nature of the programme which empowers residents to take charge of the development. He is also thankful to all the actors throughout the various levels of government who work (tremendously) towards indigenous development.”

This is just one. I have many here from Regions 1 to 10. We have persons who are saying how they benefited. I wish to say even from Shulinab, where the Hon. Member comes from, they benefited from \$24 million. This is what two pensioners said, ‘My wife and I are benefiting from the carbon credit money. We use our allocation to do better farming. My wife and I, we live alone, and we are old. We depend on our farms.’ If I had the time to go through all that I have here –this is directly from the villages – this is what they benefited from. The Hon. Member, Ms. Juretha Fernandes said that the people are suffering, and the people are poorer, but here I have from Kartabo which is not far from Bartica, here I have from Agatash which is nearby to Bartica, and I wish to read what they said. In Region 7, Kartabo received \$18 million, and this is what one resident said:

“I did not have enough nets to do the amount of fishing that I wanted to, so the nets and other items I got from the LCDS was good to me and I am really happy about it. I catch double the number of fish because of the new nets, so I earn more... This let me buy a freezer...”

Imagine, this little fisherman since he extended his fishing, he is able to:

“...buy a freezer to store fish and improve my business. Later I will get a generator...”

These are ordinary people who benefited from the LCDS under this Government. In this very building, I remember the former Excellency, Dr. Jagdeo, promised us as Toshaos that any funds that come from the forest we will benefit. Here, today, I have evidence. This only happened under the People’s Progressive Party/Civic. I can go through all, Sir. I wish if I had the opportunity.

4.31 p.m.

We are talking about progress, and prosperity – that is what we are talking about. Even in the Bible, even in the good book which everyone knows, in the book of John 3, I think, 3 John 1:2, above all things the Lord wants us to prosper; and under the People’s Progressive Party/Civic, we are talking prosperity. Our motto, *A Secure, Prosperous, and Sustainable Guyana*, is for all Guyanese. I am sorry that I cannot even address what is there for us, the Amerindian people, in the 2025 Budget.

In closing, I want to say to the Hon. Member, Ms. Chandan-Edmond, I cannot remember the exact words, but I think she said something like this, she sees no reason why we should not support the Budget. I think that is good thinking. Put Guyana first, put our people first. I say thank you, Ms. Chandan-Edmond; yes, good thinking. Let us all put the people first. This is our country and we ought to look out for our people. I am saying, regards what is being said, the Hon. Members left because they do not want to hear the truth, and in my hands here I have facts. That is what I would like to present to this honourable House. On behalf of the Amerindian peoples of this country and the ordinary people, we support the 2025 Budget – securing the future for a prosperous Guyana. Thank you very much. [Applause]

Ms. Sarabo-Halley: Mr. Speaker, as I stand before you to give my perspective on *Budget 2025*, my presentation will focus on the several pressing issues that impact our nation’s future – issues of professionalism, issues of fairness, of economic planning and the wellbeing of our public servants, and workers in key industries. In doing so, I am reminded of a pertinent quote that says, ‘a fact gains meaning when created within a larger context’.

As I listened to the 2025 Budget presentation by the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, and his colleagues who spoke on Friday last, we heard what can only be deemed an expert seminar in deception. The intention appears to be to dissect subjective facts and entwine them with political jargon, all aiming to evoke emotional responses from our citizens. Yet, amid this political theatre, we must confront a

glaring reality, a persistent and blatant disregard for the truth. Yet, the reality remains that a fact gains meaning when placed within a larger context. It is troubling to observe this persistent and blatant disregard for the truth, which seeks to distort history in various facets of this budget presentation and its accompanying debates. We must ask ourselves, do the persons who put this Budget presentation together genuinely value truth and factual accuracy, or are they merely focused on gaining cheap political points at the expense of deceiving the very people they claim to serve?

As I listened to the Minister wax lyrical about this Budget, it was not difficult to recognise the validity of the statement made by former Minister, Mr. Winston Jordan, when he said quite recently, that the Budget, like all other PPP/C budgets, were not grounded in any medium- or long-term plan. It befuddles my mind as to how people who claim to be learnt cannot appreciate the necessity of things like a robust strategic plan. How could you run an entire country without a blueprint for growth and prosperity? It is simply laughable to come to this august House and say to us, or all the citizens tuned in, that your Manifesto is your strategic plan for growth and development. We cannot be seriously saying this. A strategic development plan provides a framework for decision-making, ensuring that every budgetary allocation aligns with your long-term vision. Without this foundation, we risk creating budgets that may respond to immediate needs but fail to prepare us for future challenges.

Mr. Speaker, just to elaborate, to help those of us who simply cannot grasp what I am trying to say. If you were to consider some of the works being done by contractors who are building our roads all across this country, and a few weeks after the ribbon cutting, they begin falling apart, the exterior looked perfect at the inception upon completion, but an obvious weak foundation meant that the construction was fated to fail. Similarly, a budget devoid of strategic direction is destined to falter, leaving our economy vulnerable. If we believe our citizens deserve proactive governance, then we would invest in a strategic framework. As we try to wrap our minds around the need for a strategic plan, even after four years into this Administration, let us take a look at the title of this Budget: *A Secure, Prosperous, and Sustainable Guyana*. In all fairness, if we are to look at the Budget without putting it into context, one could say that there are significant investments in sectors such as education and health, because both sectors will receive more money than they did last year. It will be difficult to overlook the reality that certain measures will put extra moneys into the pocket of Guyanese, but as I said earlier, a fact gains meaning when placed within a larger context. You see, Mr. Speaker, nothing in this

document specifically addresses how the proposed measurements will directly contribute to security, to prosperity and sustainability.

Throughout the Budget presentation, there is an emphasis on increased public spending – yes – however, without clear implementation strategies, timelines or accountability mechanisms, these measures may not translate into tangible benefits for the population. The general commitments do not address crucial aspects such as equitable access to services, targeted interventions for vulnerable populations, or sustainable economic practices. The document does not sufficiently detail how these initiatives will collectively address the complex challenges facing the nation, including fluctuating economic conditions, environmental sustainability or social inequities. Without a comprehensive set of actual policies that explicitly recognise and respond to these issues, there is a significant risk that the proposed measures may fall short of achieving the desired outcome for all citizens. To give a specific example, the information in the Budget shows that the population growth rate in Guyana decreased from 0.4% in 2020 to 0.3% in 2024, suggesting a shift either towards stabilisation – maybe – or potential decline in the population size. This decline may stem from lower birth rate and changing societal norms. If this is the basis for the \$100,000 grant to every newborn, then more has to be done.

The comments on social media alone from Guyanese should signal to this Government that \$100,000 in isolation, without other concrete beneficial measures – such as access to proper schooling; making the basic nutritional and medicinal needs of the child free, especially in those cases where the public hospitals do not have the necessary or required medicines up to the age of five; or access to food that will ensure that children or the child have a balanced diet up to the age of ten; or secured housing and a liveable wage, unless some sort of substantive policy or programme of the aforementioned nature is put in place – Guyanese will not be inclined to increase our current birth rate. These measures cannot be one-off.

Along with those measures, to ensure the citizens of Guyana live in a more secure, prosperous and sustainable environment, several targeted policies and measures must be considered. First, we note the one-off \$100,000 cash grant that began last year, and persons are still waiting for them this year. No one would deny themselves an extra \$100,000, but we must be fair to ourselves and to the Guyanese population. A one-off \$100,000 cannot be seen as a substantive amount of money to alleviate the current high

rise in our cost of living over the last four years. Second, while there are some current measures that attempt to diversify the economy, I believe that more concrete policies and programmes catered to seriously diversifying the economy beyond the oil sector is necessary. Third, we must see the importance of establishing partnership with industries, or apprenticeship and internship programmes, giving students real world experience and facilitating smoother transitions into the workforce. Though I am aware that this is happening on a small scale, I do believe that this should be expanded. Fourth, implementing policies that enhance educational and vocational training – ensuring access to quality education at all levels, focusing on critical thinking, on technology and vocational skills that align with labour market needs – must be a priority. The importance of financial literacy and inclusion programmes cannot be overlooked.

Educational programmes aimed at improving financial literacy amongst citizens, enabling better personal financial management and investment practices, have to be on the agenda of any government that wants to seriously ensure that there is such a thing as accumulation of generational wealth. This along with facilitating access to banking services and financial products for unbanked populations, to promote savings and economic stability, is necessary at this time. By implementing these policies and measures Guyana can create a more secure, prosperous and sustainable environment for its citizens, ensuring that they benefit from both current and future economic opportunities. These initiatives would not only address immediate needs but also lay the foundation for long term resilience and growth. I am not the shadow Minister of Education and I know my colleague will speak to these matters, but my burden for education would not allow me to pass this by without highlighting the fact that our education system is not what it should be. We cannot be wining and dining ourselves at gold, diamond and platinum balls, celebrating how much money we have access to as a Government, and be content with the negative trend that is currently permeating the education sector. Over the past four years, our matriculation rate has plummeted from 49% to a mere 26%. This decline is alarming, especially in light of the Government's claim of progress, building new schools and increasing the percentage of trained teachers from 71% to 86%. While these efforts are commendable – and I must commend the Minister of Education for focusing on training our teachers – they are overshadowed by the reality that fewer students are completing their education. An educated society is the cornerstone of our future and this drop in matriculation threatens our collective progress.

As I continue to reiterate that a fact gains meaning when placed within a larger context, I turn my attention to the budgetary allocation of the education sector. Though at first glance the dollar amount given to education is more than last year, or the year before, the fact in context is that compounding the issue of matriculation is the reduction in our investment in education which has decreased as a percentage of the National Budget from 15.6 to 12.4%. This decline in funding directly impacts our ability to provide quality education and resources to our children, hindering their chances of success. We must consider the rising rates of severe and moderate malnutrition in our country. Severe malnutrition has escalated from a rate of 0.1% to 0.5% from 2020 to 2024. Just to give us some context on what has taken place over the last 10 years on this issue of malnutrition, when APNU/AFC got into Government in 2015, severe malnutrition was at a rate of 0.6%. We did the necessary work, created and implemented the right policies, and the malnutrition rate was reduced to a rate of 0.1% by 2020. What this means is that the policies and programmes that we implemented effectively targeted the problem of severe malnutrition. However, since the return of the PPP/C, both our severe and moderate malnutrition rates have both gone back up from 0.1% to 0.5%, and from 0.5% to 1.4% respectively. When the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service... and I am sure the Minister of Education will come to tell us of how they have expanded the breakfast programme across the country. Malnutrition directly affects cognitive development and learning capacity, further exacerbating the challenges our students face.

4.46 p.m.

This, when there is so much chatter about the amount of food that is dumped after these myriads of events that happen throughout the year, due to excessive ordering of food and a need to flaunt and brag, putting on a show for people, while our children are going to bed hungry, must be recognised for the tragedy it is. It is imperative that we not only build schools and train teachers but also address the underlying issues affecting our youth, including adequate funding for education and the nutritional health of our students. Efforts must be made to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive academically and physically, reversing this struggling trend and contributing to a more educated society.

As I turn my attention to the hard-working individuals who contribute to our national growth, specifically at this point

our oil rig workers, it is imperative that we also prioritise the welfare of the individuals who make this industry thrive. Many of these dedicated individuals endure gruelling work schedules, often working weeks at a time on the job only to return home for the same number of days without any financial compensation for their time off. This is not just a statistic; it is a harsh reality for the Guyanese who sacrifice their physical well-being for the benefit of our economy. The back-breaking work they do on the rigs deserves recognition and more importantly, proper compensation. The weight of this reality bears down on them, causing anxiety and preventing them from recuperating fully during their well-deserved time away from labour. They should not have to scramble for jobs during their day off days to survive. Instead, they deserve appropriate benefits, health benefits, paid time off and fair compensation, that reflect their valuable contribution to our economic landscape. They should receive compensation not only for the hours they toil but also for the time they spend recuperating at home. We must ensure that they can live with dignity and without the stress of financial instability. Their days of rest ought to be just that, days to recuperate, to reconnect with their family and to recharge for another rigorous stretch on the rig.

It may be difficult for some of us to understand because if we are told the amount they make, it sounds like a lot, a lot more than other Guyanese are making, but when you divide it by the amount of time they spend on and off the rig, it would become clear that it is not as large as it appears. As we navigate the oil industry, it is alarming to hear reports that Guyanese workers who are integral to our nation's progress may be subject to arbitrary salary limits. This not only undermines their contributions but also raises serious questions about commitment to equitable economic growth. Each of our workers, regardless of nationality, deserves to be compensated fairly for their skills, dedication and hard work. What compounds this issue is the unsettling reality that, for the same roles, some non-Guyanese are reportedly being paid more than their local counterparts. This stark disparity creates divisions in our workplaces and a sense of injustice that resonates through our communities.

It is not just about wages. It is about respect. It is about acknowledgement and valuing the labour of our own citizens. Guyanese workers have invested years of training, education and experience to contribute to our oil sector. They embody the spirit of our nation and its potential. To impose a cap on their salaries while allowing others to earn more for the same work is not only unfair but detrimental to our unity and collective progress as a nation. It is crucial for us to

demand transparency, fairness and accountability from both our Government and the oil companies. We need to ask, why should there be a ceiling on what a Guyanese can earn within their own land? Why should the measure of work be dictated by nationality rather than skill and dedication? I stand here today to implore the PPP/C Government and the Minister of Labour to enact comprehensive policies that ensure fair pay without discrimination, allowing every worker, Guyanese or otherwise, to thrive in a just environment. Our shared prosperity depends on the dignity and respect we afford to all who work in the oil industry.

I would like to now address a cornerstone of our governance system, the Public Service. It is a pillar that holds our society together. I have spoken year in and year out about the need for our public servants to be treated more fairly, impacting everything from infrastructure development to essential services that our citizens rely on daily. The effectiveness of our public service hinges on a simple yet profound principle, the importance of professionalism in every role within it. As we stand at the crossroads of progress, we must recognise the plight we face when unprofessional individuals are placed in positions of authority, when these individuals lack the knowledge, experience and competency necessary for their roles. It creates a ripple effect throughout the entire system. It places our dedicated professionals in a frustrating position, as they are expected to report to those who may be ill-equipped to lead or understand the complexities of our operations. This dynamic not only hampers productivity but also contributes to increased government wage bills without any tangible return on investment. When we fill our public service with individuals who do not have the requisite skills or understanding, we see projects stalled, deadlines missed, and an alarming lack of accountability. It becomes increasingly evident that the Government's inability to complete projects on time is directly linked to a lack of professional management and oversight.

Even when projects and programmes are completed, we often find that they do not have the substantive impact needed to benefit our communities. It is not enough to simply check off boxes. We need initiatives that resonate with and uplift our citizens. We need solutions that address real challenges and improve the quality of life for all. To foster a truly effective public service, we must prioritise professionalism and meritocracy in our hiring practices. The public service should be a space where competence is valued above all else, where individuals are chosen based on their knowledge, experience and leadership qualities, not their connections or affiliations. Only then can we ensure a

productive and efficient public service that can fully meet the needs of our citizens. The public service must no longer be seen as just a job for the sake of employment, but a sector that leads by example, a sector that drives innovation and a sector that demonstrates accountability. What we need from the Ministry of the Public Service are reforms that elevate our public service, resulting in timely project completions and impactful programmes that deliver real benefits to our communities.

We owe it to ourselves; we owe it to the citizens of this country and future generations to demand excellence within our public service. As we address the compensation of our public servants, it is essential to reflect on the historical context of pay increases. Between 2015 and 2019, the APNU/AFC Government managed to provide an impressive 77% salary increase, despite grappling with significant fiscal challenges, including the revitalisation of a struggling Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo), cash-strapped National Insurance Scheme (NIS) and the issues within the rice industry. In contrast, we find ourselves now under the PPP/C Government that projects an expenditure of over \$1.3 trillion this year and yet has provided our public servants with a mere 39%. This includes the 8% adjustment this year through the Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU) agreement. This discrepancy is nothing short of a travesty. Our public servants, who have faced soaring costs of living alongside the rest of the Guyanese population, deserve far more than what is currently being offered. The reality is, under the current Government's watch, our economy has grown. We said that the economy has grown. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is large, we have the highest economy in this hemisphere and all of that and we have projected a balance of payment surplus at US\$113 million at the end of 2024.

Given these circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand why public servants are being undervalued. If former administrations, despite facing significant financial obstacles, could extend generous increases to public workers, what justification can be given for the lack of support from the current Administration? Our public servants faithfully serve the communities. They faithfully serve the same Ministers that are in here... and only suggesting that they get 8%. They often go above and beyond the call of duty and they deserve to be compensated fairly and justly. This PPP/C Government should reconsider its stance and demonstrate real commitment to the welfare of our public servants. Our society thrives when those who serve it are adequately supported and appreciated. They are the

backbone of our nation, and it is high time they receive a compensation package that reflects their contributions to our society.

As I conclude, I would like to end us off with a paraphrase of a statement made by the late Myles Munroe, as we find ourselves in the beginnings of another election season, I believe we find ourselves grappling with the following as a nation, "politics without principles". Politics without principle leads to a political culture that fails to produce true leaders. Instead, it nurtures deal-makers who compromise their principles to please others, resulting in a loss of authentic leadership and the erosion of true influence. In this environment, we encounter pleasure without conscience, wealth without work, knowledge without character, where many intelligent individuals misuse their knowledge for destruction, business without morality and science without humanity, worship is devoid of sacrifice. When assessing whether we are leaders or whether someone qualifies as a leader, we should measure them against these six criteria.

We have enough politicians, but what we need is leadership within politics. Many politicians, upon honest self-reflection, would realise that they are not genuine leaders. Rather, they are power-hungry individuals grappling with low self-esteem and poor self-concepts, attempting to compensate through their pursuit of power. There are too many politicians who fail to grasp the true essence of leadership, leaving the public searching for leaders among those who generally do not adhere to their own convictions. Politicians often focus on programmes, rather than a compelling vision, prioritise securing the next election over the welfare of future generations, and are preoccupied with promises, rather than purpose. Consequently, they seldom discuss the concept of purpose, leaving the impression that politics is available for sale, rather than emphasising authentic leadership. I pray that we understand what is at stake, and individually and collectively, we make the best decision for our people and future generations. I thank you. [*Applause*]

Dr. Westford: Allow me to lend my support to this 2025 Budget. Redemption is at hand in this honourable House. I was appalled to hear the Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley, former Minister of the Public Service, standing here and saying that our Public Servants need to be treated better. This very former Minister, after just barely three weeks of being appointed a Minister, dismissed, without giving any reason, the Personnel and the Accounts staff. How good they love our public servants; how they love the Public Servants. Do you know what the investigation unearthed? That the Hon.

Member acted without due process, and it was an overuse of power. Our Public Servants have always been treated with respect and regard by the PPP/C.

5.01 p.m.

Since we came in 1992, we have never disrespected the public servants, nor have we dismissed anyone. In 2020, many of our public servants cried bitter tears when they were dismissed, dismissed without even saying why. They were just told, and I am not sure, Sir, I cannot recall. Sir, can you please advise me if the word 'thugs' is on that list that you would have placed there? Is it Sir? No, it is not

Mr. Speaker: I would advise you not to use it.

Dr. Westford: I am not referring to anyone in this honourable House as a thug. They were just dragged out of some of the ministries by the thugs that are associated or were associated with the Administration which was the APNU Administration. Some of them could not even remove their properties...

Ms. Ferguson: Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Dr. Westford, we have the Hon. Ms. Annette Ferguson on her feet.

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I stand on Standing Order 40 (a). It is saying here that,

“(a) by rising on a Point of Order, when the Member speaking shall resume his or her seat and the Member interrupting shall simply direct attention to the point which...

[*Interruption*]

[*Mr. Speaker hit the gavel*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Dr. Westford, you may continue.

Dr. Westford: Mr. Speaker, I think that was meant as a little distraction, but I am not being distracted. I think it was very disrespectful. The Hon. Member, Mr. Henry, had asked for the Minister of Amerindian Affairs to apologise to the Amerindian youths. I want to ask the Hon. Member who spoke before me to apologise to our public servants. How can the Hon. Member stand in this House and accuse our public servants of being placed in positions and they are not qualified? It is disrespectful to our hard-working Public Servants and I think an apology should be made to those

public servants or the Minister must bring proof to show who are those unqualified public servants that we have in positions. You know there is a saying that when you tell a lot of untruths, you start believing it is the truth. This is because this attitude of placing persons, unqualified persons, in positions is not a PPP trend, it is not. During the period 2015–2020, it was appalling, the number of unqualified persons who were placed within the public service. Do you know what happened? Do you know what they did? They placed those people on the pensionable establishment knowing it was difficult to remove a pensionable worker. The evidence is there.

We have the qualifications of those persons, who, some of them today, it is difficult for us to get out of the public service. What we have been doing is that we have given a lot of them the opportunity of upgrading themselves and I must say kudos to a lot of them, they have taken up the challenge and have upgraded themselves or are currently upgrading themselves. Thanks to the programmes implemented under the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) by the PPP/C. The Hon. Member spoke about the public servants and their salaries and allowances. I think the Member needs to be updated a bit. Yes, there were salary increases under the APNU, over the period of 2015–2020, but there was nothing done for allowances. On the 10th December, 2024, a landmark agreement was signed between the Government and the Guyana Public Servants' Union. That agreement was spearheaded by none other than the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and Public Service, Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh.

May I say at this forum that there was no... I am thinking because I do not want to say any word that you will stop me on. There were no promises as happened with the teachers' negotiation a few years before that in 2019. There were no promises by the Government to any of the Public Service Union's representatives to come to Parliament. There were no proposals, otherwise, to any of them from any Member of the Government. We negotiated in good faith and that negotiation has yielded results that are beneficial to the public servants. It is not only the salary increases that this agreement speaks to. There have been increases in travelling allowances, increases in housing allowances, increases in car allowances...

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

You were not going to work; you had to go to work. You were skiving. You were malingering. That is the word. Risk allowances, allowances that our public servants have been clamouring for changes in. I daresay, all of our public servants are not a category that is placed in a bunch, and they

do not benefit. They benefit from every other method that is mentioned in this budget. The public servants benefit. Like each and every one of us. They will also benefit. Their children will benefit from the 'Because We Care' grants. They will benefit from the cash grants. They will benefit from the free toll system. They will benefit from the \$10,000 that you will get for each child's rebate. They will benefit from the \$100,000 when they have a child. All of that they stand to benefit from.

Moreso, today, our public service is probably one of the most qualified. I can stand here and tell you, today we have persons who are clerks who are studying for their master's degree as I speak. This is not randomly. Right at the Parliament you know how many persons are studying there all because the opportunities have been created by this PPP/C Government. We have created the opportunities, the levelled playing field that anyone... How we do it, if you want to get to higher education, we will start you from the lowest level that you are capable of starting from and we guide you and we bring you up to whatever level. The skies are the limit where we are concerned now. When the Hon. Member stood there and spoke about education, we are educating our nation. Do you know why? We want them to work with us. We do not want people who would not understand when we are... Is *kerfuffling* a word that you have there on your list, Sir, I do not think so. We do not want people when we *kerfuffle* them with those 'graspomatics' figures that we heard from our very first speaker in this House. We want them to understand and must know that we are trying to make them look stupid. That is why we want an educated nation.

There is another issue – health. The Hon. Member, Ms. Tabitha Sarabo-Halley, spoke and went to the health sector. I think she was just parroting a word I heard from higher up, from Members who are supposed to be higher up in the APNU/AFC. I cannot say the word 'cocal' – hierarchy. The word 'malnutrition'. First of all, and the good thing is that, on the opposite side, we have a colleague medical doctor of mine who is aptly qualified. She is a public health professional and I think maybe she should give some lessons over there about the word 'malnutrition'. What it means. In our sense of the word, when a Guyanese or you hear someone here says 'malnutrition', they are speaking about those ravishing photographs that we see emanating from around the world with some children with two fine legs, a big stomach, two big eyes and some of them can barely stand. That is what we think about – extreme. Malnutrition denotes either undernutrition or overnutrition. Both are

deemed malnutrition. We have an issue of overnutrition in this country, it is actually becoming an epidemic in this country right now. We have an issue where we cannot get our parents and our guardians to stop overfeeding children. I am not going to deny that they may be sporadic here and there because this is a large country and maybe within the health sector, you may find some child who is suffering with some other condition and would display malnourishment. Just looking at figures, my dear, you need to interpret. Interpretation is an art, and it is not something. Education does not mean interpretation; it is very difficult for some people.

Mr. Speaker, let me tell you, there are very few people in this room today, who know what malnutrition is and what it was in this country. I have Dr. Frank Anthony here, Dr. Vishwa Mahadeo, we have the Hon. Member Ms. Gail Teixeira and maybe there are some others who might know.

5.16 p.m.

[**Mr. Mahipaul:** Dr. Bheri Ramsaran is a Doctor.] Oh, we have Hon. Dr. Ramsaran. Sorry, yes. I can stand here and speak about it. I worked in every single region of this country of ours and we had those issues in every single region. Worst of all, it was so bad, Sir, it was... not under the PPP/C... [**Mr. Mahipaul:** People's Progressive Party (PPP) alone] ...It was not under PPP either because we never had... It was so bad in Georgetown, in Region 4, that you had a special children's ward for malnutrition. Anybody with a conscience, who was not a medical practitioner and was accustomed to seeing those things, would have cried and fallen down. This lasted from the 1980s until that ward was abolished in the latter half of 1993.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I can agree with you because I did Cerex to deal with that. We will need to give you an extension to continue to complete.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Dr. Westford: Mr. Speaker, do not be afraid, some of my other Colleagues will continue where I will leave off. I have to speak on this malnutrition thing. It is something that continues to rear its head every single budget and no one is

taking... I think they know exactly what they are saying but they are just being... Is 'facetious' a bad word, Sir? No, it is not. You do not have that on your list. Mr. Speaker, I am telling you, it was very bad. We, the PPP/C, diminished the malnutrition levels to such a level that there was no need for that ward any longer. We had special nurses as malnutrition nurses. Do you know what, Sir? I think the time has gone for us to see *them white mouth pickney wuh them accustomed to seeing*. That was the terminology that used to be used. They were looked at as not human. It was very bad. I would ask my Colleagues on the opposite side and their associates to stop trying to land and put it as if we created malnutrition.

We have such good programmes now. We have our Maternal and Child Health Integrated Programme (MCHIP) and our vaccination programme. Look at our figures, they are second to none in this region. We have nutritional programmes, not only for our babies, but it starts from the mother. From the pregnant mother, we start our nutrition because we want to ensure that we have healthy persons – healthy people – in this country because we want a healthy nation. All of our policies are geared towards a healthy, prosperous nation. When people stand here and speak about no education, no food... I heard the Hon. Member, Mr. Henry, he spoke about people hungry and people walking. I do not know if where he is living people are hungry, but he does not seem to be hungry, so we have to be careful he is not eating all the food from the others.

I want to say that in this Government, our policies are geared at ensuring that this country, that every single man, woman and child, have a prosperous, healthy life. No amount of misinformation, as is being peddled by my friends on the opposite benches and their... [Mr. Jones:

Surrogates.] No, I would not say surrogates. I think that is on the list. And their associates. No amount of that will deter us from what our aims are. We will continue this trend of development. We will continue moving forward and this country will be a country. As the Hon. Mia Mottley said, we are going to be little Dubai or big Dubai one day. We are going to ensure that. We love our people. They are our people. We are in the Government, and we are going to be here to implement such policies and better policies for the next two decades. Those who are dreaming about being here after this year, keep dreaming. Probably we will give you some pillows and some blankets. Thank you. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member. Hon. Members, let us take a break for another 40 minutes for some nourishment.

Sitting suspended at 5.22 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 6.06 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you. Hon. Members, please be seated. It is now the turn of the Hon. Member, Mr. Jermaine Figueira, to make his contribution. Hon. Member, you may commence.

Mr. Figueira: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, from the outset, if I happen to speak any word you deem unparliamentary, I withdraw it so that I will not be interrupted if you accommodate...

Mr. Speaker: Okay, from the outset, please do not speak any unparliamentary words.

Mr. Figueira: There are so many, and my humanness will allow me to make mishaps, but I trust Sir if...

Mr. Speaker: My alertness will allow me to beep you every time. You may start now.

Mr. Figueira: Nevertheless, I am so disappointed that my Hon. friend, who just finished making her presentation, the Hon. Dr. Westford, is not in the House. We all can agree that, certainly, she is not malnourished. Secondly, she made mention of the fact that when the Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley, took office, in three weeks, some public servants were fired. Truth be told, we have Members on this side of the House, who, when the other side took office, were fired in the first week. Additionally, consummate professionals, not political appointees, who worked under the PPP Administration and the Coalition Government were fired in the first week. The Hon. Member spoke of a landmark decision that the GPSU made with the Hon. Dr. Singh, the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service – a landmark decision. This landmark decision failed to address the most pressing need of the public servants, which is a liveable wage.

It is with a deep sense of responsibility and a duty to the people of Guyana, particularly the constituents of Region 10, that I rise to contribute to this important debate on *Budget 2025*. While I acknowledge the efforts of the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service and his dedicated team, it is incumbent upon me to raise concerns about the manner in which this budget reflects the needs and priorities of the Guyanese people. A balanced, inclusive and forward-

thinking budget should be one that meets the aspirations of all Guyanese, addresses their immediate and long-term challenges and sets a course for sustainable development. Unfortunately, I am compelled to assert that this budget falls short in many areas and it fails to address the core issues facing the majority of our citizens. It is no secret that I do have an appreciation for the Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service for his eloquence, swift wit and wordplay in presenting, which is indicative and a true testament to the good quality of free education delivery he received under the People's National Congress Administration, which is a far cry from what exists today in education. There is a silver lining, and I am happy to take this opportunity to extend congratulations to the Vice Chancellor, Dr. Paloma Mohamed, and her team for taking our nation's most elite learning institution to higher heights. Very commendable.

Mr. Speaker, I put it to you, and we must acknowledge that the Hon. Minister's sharp oratory skills cannot mask the undeniable fact that the priorities in this budget need readjusting to achieve a secure, prosperous and sustainable Guyana. First, I would like to express my concern about the lack of fresh and innovative measures in this budget. While there may be some incremental adjustments and some cosmetic proposals, there is no bold vision to address the structural challenges facing our economy, the public sector and social services. Many of the so-called new measures were, in fact, announced months in advance, raising questions about whether the Government has truly exhausted all options for innovation or if they have become comfortable with an old familiar narrative. For instance, the one-off \$100,000 cash grant for pregnant women, which is being touted as a grand gesture, is nothing more than a political manoeuvre. This policy fails to address the root causes of the real challenges facing women and families in Guyana, such as access to quality healthcare, nutrition and comprehensive maternal support.

It is disheartening to know that the Government's focus continues to be on physical infrastructure projects, while the primary and fundamental needs of our citizens are left unaddressed. The Government's emphasis on new roads, while necessary, will not address the immediate struggles of families who cannot afford basic necessities. The policies in this budget do not reflect the nuanced understanding of the multifaceted issues that people face. Instead of symbolic gestures, we need a comprehensive policy that directly impacts the lives of our people, policies that focus on the delivery of quality healthcare, improved nutrition, job

creation, food security and poverty alleviation in a safe Guyana.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to draw your attention to the deplorable state of sports and youth development in this country.

[**Mr. Hamilton:** Are you responsible for sports?] I am responsible for Region 10, which also has sports as a feature of the region. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport has received significant funding, approximately \$22 billion from 2020 to 2025 with a notable \$4.662 billion allocated for ground enhancement. Yes, Mr. Speaker. As of January, this very month, 2025, there is not a single community in Linden with a playable football field. Linden of all places, the bastion of athletic prowess in this country, does not have a football field that is playable. This reflects the Government's failure to follow through on its promises and to prioritise youth development in a meaningful way. It raises serious questions about the prudent allocation and management of these funds.

6.14 p.m.

This pattern of neglect reflects a deeper issue of ineffective governance, gross incompetence, and a lack of commitment to the development of our youth. Moreover, the Government's efforts to engage youth through youth employment and skills training programmes have been insufficient at best, with only 350 youths trained in 2024. This is an abysmally low number, given the size of the youth population and the increasing demand for job-ready skills in today's economy.

This budget fails to articulate a comprehensive strategy to engage our youth in meaningful sustainable employment. The Minister to come just after me, the Hon. Joseph Hamilton, will come and boast about how much training his Ministry has provided for the young people of Guyana, and I am happy about that. What I would be equally happy about is for him to tell this House how many of the very youths trained are benefitting from their businesses and have permanent employment. Some of the students this Ministry has trained are some of my past students, and I am happy they are skilled at construction, operating excavators and such. The sad reality is that Linden Enterprise Network (LEN), with millions of dollars, is inaccessible. In 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, or 2024 not one of the youths you would have trained was able to access the resources so that they could have utilised the skills that you would have given them to start their businesses, employ themselves and their families and create employment opportunities for others.

That is the failure of what is going on with regard to our youth. The fact is we need an updated, inclusive policy direction that focuses on youth empowerment and offers real opportunities for personal and professional growth. *Budget 2025* needs readjusting.

On a positive note, I have long advocated, in several budget speeches in the past, for the creation of a national music studio to support our talented artistes. I am pleased to see this initiative in *Budget 2025*. However, I also urge that this investment be complemented and underpinned by the introduction of copyright legislation to protect the intellectual property of our artistes. It is time for Guyana to promote and empower a creative community and ensure that they can benefit financially from their work. Further, in Region 10, we welcome the allocation for the long-awaited construction of a new administrative building for the Regional Democratic Council (RDC). We have been fighting for this since 2020. This, I must say, is a step in the right direction, but it is only one small part of the broader development needs of the region. We also see the long-delayed completion of the Mackenzie Stadium and the Synthetic Track at Wismar in this budget. These facilities, when completed, will provide significant benefits to our athletes, and we certainly hope that when they are completed in 2025, they will be furnished with all of the amenities for their optimal use. Sports in Linden need to be emancipated from its impotent state due to the failure of the Ministry.

The completion of the Wismar Mackenzie four-lane bridge, a concept of the Coalition Government, is another critical project for Region 10, and we welcome it. Given the increased traffic, including the anticipated flow from the Linden to Lethem corridor, the Government must act now rather than later in eliminating tolls for this bridge which will facilitate the enhancement of trade and commerce and, moreover, provide greater ease to the commuters, especially the transportation providers.

[An Hon. Member: *Inaudible*]
Yes, you have said it. You said that you will do it later and I am saying to you to do it now because if you do it now, the people will reap the benefits now. Additionally, I propose that the revenues currently collected from the tolls be redirected to the annual subvention of the Linden Municipality to support local development projects. I would like to thank Ms. Parag for addressing the issue that plagued our workers during the Christmas season so that they could have gotten their money.

In addition to the failure of youth development identified, the performance of key sectors such as gold, bauxite, and

sugar remains a point of contention. The Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, in his speech, placed blame on the previous Coalition Government for allegedly undermining these industries. However, a closer examination of the facts in the 2024 half-year report from the Bank of Guyana reveals that the previous Government oversaw greater production of gold, bauxite, and sugar, without the benefits of oil revenue. This is in stark contrast to the Government's narrative, and it highlights the growing disconnection between the claims made by the Administration and the realities on the ground. Additionally, the Minister's repeated assertions of inflation being 3% contradicts the lived experience of the Guyanese people. Household essentials, food, medicines, and basic goods are all priced at levels far beyond what they were just a few years ago. The cost of living continues to rise unabated, making it nearly impossible for the average Guyanese to maintain a decent standard of living. The inflation numbers presented in this budget are not reflective of the economic realities faced by the people and this misrepresentation undermines the credibility of the Government's claim.

The performance of the state-owned entities, such as the Guyana Power and Light (GPL) Inc. that the Hon. Prime Minister overlooks, and Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) is another cause for concern. The management of these institutions has been politicised to the detriment of their efficiency and performance. Under the current leadership, GPL produces less electricity than it did in 2019, and GuySuCo, despite having more factories in operation and billions and billions of taxpayers' money, has seen a decrease in sugar production. I recognise that when the name GuySuCo is raised a lot of emotions erupt. We operate as if GuySuCo is some sacred entity that we should not speak on. I will speak on the issue of GuySuCo. Billions of taxpayers' dollars are being poured into GuySuCo to produce sugar way beyond the selling price. The reality is there are many substitutes in the world today as sweeteners and we are not in a position, as a small country, to be competitive with the sale of sugar. We cannot compete with India, Thailand, China, or the United States of America (USA).

The fact of the matter is our neighbour, Brazil, right next to us, produces 25% of the world's sugar. Brazil is right next to us. How are we going to compete in a market like that? Brazil produces over 45 trillion metric tonnes of sugar. When we speak of GuySuCo, we are not talking about firing workers. We are saying, look at the industry and the amount of moneys we are plugging into it and produce a new crop. I

suggest that the Government take one of the plantations that are being utilised for the growing of sugar and plant another crop. Plant pepper, for example. Mr. Speaker, do you know that the largest importer of pepper is the United States of America, and they import the same pepper from Mexico? Over half a billion of imports of pepper – a product that reaches the maximum for production in three months. Besides the United States, Canada, Germany, and France and all of these countries are big importers of pepper. Why can we not plant scotch bonnet, and black pepper as a trial? Mr. Speaker, do you know that right here in CARICOM the biggest producers of pepper are little Trinidad and Jamaica? All two countries combined could fit in Region 9. I say to us, let us relook at our investment in GuySuCo because if we try another product, workers will have the benefit of learning a new skill, and will be in a position to make more money. We have to be responsible leaders in this country. I know they are very sensitive when it comes to GuySuCo.

Further, the education system, while receiving considerable allocation, continues to experience declining outcomes. The matriculation rate is falling, and fewer students are passing five subjects or more at the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination. This is a direct result of the Government's failure to invest adequately in the quality of education. Simply building new schools and training more teachers are not enough. We need to invest in improving the quality of education, supporting teachers with professional development and exposure, and ensuring that our students are well equipped and skilled with the necessary skills to thrive in a modern, technological, artificial intelligence (AI) economy. As we look to the future of our country, it is clear that the Government needs a sustainable strategy to achieve food security and reduce the cost of living. Region 10 has significant agricultural potential and the Government knows this. The Hon. Minister knows the potential of Region 10 when it comes to agriculture. The country's largest crops, being supported by this Government, soya and corn, are being grown in Region 10. So, I say to this Government, that it is very disappointing that they will allocate to the region such a paltry sum to the agricultural development in Region 10. We need the Government to support our local farmers to ensure that they have access to all of the land at Millie's Hideout. Provide them with the necessary infrastructure.

The issue of cost of living is not a very difficult issue. It requires basic economics. If we plant more, we increase the supply, and the demand decreases and the price decreases. There are so many cash crops that we can grow in less than three months and six weeks to solve the issue of the high

cost of living, giving the people of our communities where we live an opportunity to gain regional food security. Give the region the resources to invest in livestock, poultry, and aquafarming. Region 10 has people and it has the skills, but it needs the opportunity. We call on the Hon. Minister... [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)]

I will get the people for you; I will get the young people. Give them an opportunity to get involved in poultry farming and aquafarming, so that they can produce and satisfy the demand for food security in the region. [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)]

Yes, get emotional. I have listened attentively and paid close attention to the Government's promises of decentralising services through community-focused development initiatives in *Budget 2025*. If these plans are executed with the local leadership, such as the Community Development Councils (CDCs), Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs), Municipal Councils, Regional Democratic Councils (RDCs), then there is potential for transformative change that can directly benefit the people.

6.29 p.m.

Mr. Figueira: I urge the Government to ensure that these community programmes they endeavour to do will genuinely have the participation of the local leadership. They are intimately connected to the realities on the ground and can help bring the ...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, the reality on the ground is that you need an extension.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Figueira: Thank you so much for your graciousness, Mr. Speaker. Despite all of the rabble-rousers, I will not be distracted from bringing transformative ideas to this budget that will benefit the people of Guyana and the people of Region 10. I urge the Government to reconsider its approach to this budget. While there are some positive aspects, such as the investment in infrastructure and the commitment to developing new schools, health centres and hospitals, these measures alone are insufficient to address the real needs, the primary needs, of the Guyanese people. This budget... [Ms. Manickchand: What is the primary need?] It is

food security, Mdm. This budget must be realigned to focus on the pressing needs of education – Hon. Member, Ms. Manickchand – healthcare, food security and sustainable economic development. The people of Guyana deserve a budget that truly reflects their needs and aspirations and one that will ensure a brighter future for all. I trust that the Government would summon the courage to rise above after these days, refashion and realign the offerings in this budget to encapsulate the ideas that we on this side have provided and will continue to provide so that the collective benefit can be for the people.

We need to see, feel and hear our people. This budget certainly has the potential to do so. I wish this budget debate will not continue down the path of a sterile exercise of what your words captured so eloquently – you will have your say, and we will have our way. That is the epitome of arrogance that we do not wish to continue in this country. The people of Guyana should not have to settle for the little good in *Budget 2025*, when good is arguably the enemy of what is best. Sir, we, on this side, have provided ideas which this budget could finance. It has the zeros to achieve all that is being proposed by us on this side. We believe if this is done, much more will be achieved for the greater collective and the greater benefit for all our people. I believe if this is done, we will have a greater appreciation for *Budget 2025*. Mr. Speaker, I so oblige. Thank you very much. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member, Mr. Figueira. It is now time for the Hon. Minister of Labour, Mr. Hamilton.

Minister of Labour [Mr. Hamilton]: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On 17th January, the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service presented a budget to this National Assembly. Since then, when you listen to the utterances of the Members of the Opposition, within and outside of this Parliament, these can be characterised by three words – hollow utterances, shallow utterances and banalities.

Listen to what they have said. Let me address, right away, the Hon. Mr. Figueira, who stood just now and spoke about the LEN programme but failed to make the point that the programme was destroyed and bankrupted because the People's National Congress (PNC) loaned money to itself, which it never replenished. That is the reality of the LEN programme. Many of the PNC Members of Region 10 – Mr. Figueira knows – borrowed from the fund and never replenished it. The fund was bankrupt. The other thing he

spoke about was the RDC building. The RDC building is well documented in the Report of the Auditor General. They made available to one of their favourite contractors far in excess of what the contract stated they must give him. When we came into Government, the building was left there. It is the People's Progressive Party/Civic that has to finish that building. The other thing the Hon. Member, Mr. Figueira, just spoke about is that he now loves the farmers of Linden. He said, Minister, why do you not give them plots to plant pepper? When they were in power, they gave 200 acres to a man who they hoped would have rigged the elections for them. How many little farmers... Did you not know they wanted the plot? Why did you not give the little farmers to plant pepper? Why did you make available the 200 acres?

Let me go back to Friday. Friday morning, the lead speaker for the Opposition stood there and spoke for 28 minutes. The Member could not complete 35 minutes because she only had 28 minutes to rely on artificial intelligence (AI). Let me say this: AI is not a substitute for RI – real intelligence. Artificial intelligence is to support RI. If you do not have RI, you could use how much AI you want and end up making no sense. After the 28 minutes were finished, the Member could not have strung two words on her own to speak to the budget. She then could not have asked for a five-minute extension. You then had the Hon Mr. Duncan. He stood in this House and his grand moment from his 20 minutes was to tell us that he studied law at the University of Guyana (UG). The reality is, Mr. Attorney General, 15 years ago he studied law, but 15 years later, he is yet to be a lawyer. The Attorney General has presented many young people to the Bar who were in third form at the time he was studying law. Today, they are lawyers. These are the type of people who come to this House and want to speak to the Guyanese people to offer leadership.

Young Mr. Cox said he has been a teacher for 13 years. He stood and spoke... [An. Hon. Member: The man said 21 years.] He said 21 years. There was not a word about education delivery and how we can help the educational system. His grand moment...

[Mr. Jordan: Talk about labour.] I will come to labour in a moment. You will not direct how I speak to you. The Hon. Mr. Cox's grand moment was this: You all gave \$100,000; we will give \$1 million – add another zero and a comma. He could not say and none of them can say, where the money would come from. How will they finance his other zero and comma? That is the kind of hollow and shallow conversation. I happened to go through two minutes of agony and pain looking at the Hon. Leader of the Opposition attempting to decipher and

analyse – not the budget – just the tax measures, Hon. Dr. Singh. Bishop Edghill, when I heard the gentleman, the only thing that came to my mind was the shortest scripture in the Bible – Jesus wept. Hon. Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader did not analyse the budget; he just analysed the tax measures in it and there was convolution and confusion. This is what we have to deal with.

My colleague, Ms. Walrond, spoke about their deeds. They said, Ms. Walrond, why do you have to say that? Last week, Dr. Singh said it. We have to say it consistently because we would not allow you to rewrite the history of this country. All of us would say that you all tried to rig an election. All of us will say that you all took away children's money. All of us will say that you deprived old people of their subsidies. All of us will say that you took away the bonus from the Disciplined Forces. All of us will say that you put VAT (Value Added Tax) on educational and medical items. We will not allow you to rewrite the history of this country. Let me say this to you. When the children are born, at the same time that we are giving them the \$100,000, we will tell them about your sordid deeds. So, every generation would understand who and what you are. From birth, we will tell them who and what you are.

6.44 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, they say that they love the workers, yet they disbanded the Ministry of Labour. For the first time in the history of this country, since our Independence in 1966, the people over there, in their wisdom, love the workers but disbanded the Ministry of Labour. How would people believe you? [Mr. McCoy: Your sordid deeds.] Your deeds. That is what we are speaking about. The Hon. Sarabo-Halley, who spoke earlier, delved into all of the conversations about oil and gas. When we found oil, they came into government. Under them, the production of oil started and all the fancy things she was talking about – how the labour sector must supervise oil and gas – they trained nobody to do them. Could you believe these people? They did not train any Occupational, Safety and Health (OSH) officer who could go out and inspect a Floating Production Storage and Offloading (FPSO) vessel or a drill ship. Not one. She talked about the woes of the workers. They did not train one labour officer who could go and do inspection on the FPSOs and drill ships. They come here with their pretence. I can report to this National Assembly that, presently, under the People's Progressive Party/Civic, we have nine officers who can visit those drill ships – five OSH officers and four labour officers. In 2024, those officers

made nine visits to the FPSOs and the drill ships out there and already a plan is in place for them to do eight such visits in 2025. Ms. Sarabo-Halley came with *crocodile tears* crying about the workers. [Ms. Ferguson: Was she crying?]

Yes. She was crying. Every time she speaks about me, she cries. I do not know why.

Then she went into... [Ms. Ferguson: The Hon. Member.]

The Hon. Member, Ms. Sarabo-Halley, spoke about the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Imagine, you have to be brazen and brass-faced to speak about that matter. Let us check the record. In five years, the people over there, excluding the Hon. Member, Ms. Chandan-Edmond ...

[Ms. Ferguson: (Inaudible)] ...Yes. We are excluding her...

[Mr. Ramson: And Asha.] ...and the Deputy Speaker. In anything I say, they are excluded from my comments. In five years, under the APNU/AFC, even when they knew they found oil and even when they knew they had to build more houses, they only trained, *via* the Board of Industrial Training (BIT), an average of 1,300 to 1,500 persons *per* year. If we give them the higher number of 1,500 and multiply that by five, they will only be at 7,500. I can report to this National Assembly that in the four years under the People's Progressive Party/Civic, we have trained 12,765 – and you all care about young people – in 653 programmes across the length and breadth of this country.

They like to speak about friends and families. Let me speak about my friends, families and favourites: in Region 1, we trained 564 of our friends, families and favourites; in Region 2, we trained 1,310 friends, families and favourites; in Region 3, we trained 1,135 friends, families and favourites; in Region 4, we trained 3,692 friends, families and favourites; in Region 5, we trained 930 friends, families and favourites; in Region 6, we trained 2,571 friends, families and favourites; in Region 7, we trained 367; in Region 8, we trained 287; in Region 9, we trained 716 and in Region 10, we trained 1,193 friends, families and favourites. This was to the tune of nearly \$1.2 billion. Out of that number, there were 5,077 males and 7,688 females, which gives 60%. I can speak about the testimonials of persons whose lives have been changed and whose lives have been transformed by the intervention of the Board of Industrial Training. Let me quickly say that because of the work the Board of Industrial Training has been doing, we have had collaboration with the Guyana Energy Agency (GEA) and programmes paid for by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). As I speak to this National Assembly, there is a collaboration to train 20 women, two from each region, paid for by the World Bank.

We have had collaboration with the Basic Needs Trust Fund (BNTF) – Minister Singh and me. We have trained over 300 heavy-duty equipment operators. As I speak to you, when Minister Zulfikar Mustapha was looking for operators in Regions 5 and 6, all of them that he employed in the National Drainage and Irrigation Authority (NDIA) were female heavy-duty equipment operators. Do you want our record? One woman testified that she was a security guard. Today, she is meaningfully employed and making good money. In 2025, because of the track record set by BIT under the People's Progressive Party/Civic, without obstruction and with financial intervention – and that is an important ingredient – every year, BIT's money is going up. [Mr. McCoy: Upward.] Upward. This year, we plan on training 4,000 persons throughout the length and breadth of this country. The G Mining Ventures Corporation (GMIN) and the Reunion Gold Corporation (RGD) mines have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Labour, Board of Industrial Training to train all the people who would work on the Oko West Project mines. It would be 1,200 in the first instance for the preparation of the mine and 1,000 after.

What is happening now the APNU/AFC denied the Guyanese people that in five years. Those people on the other side denied the Guyanese people what is happening now. We have programmes also geared to reskill retirees so that they can go back into the world of work. I can say to this National Assembly that the highest point where people live in this country, Kurukubaru, we have executed training programmes there and also for Kato, Paramakatoi, Upper Mazaruni – Hon. Dawn Hastings-Williams – Jawalla, Waramadong, Leeds Village and I could go on and on. So, today, wherever people reside, whether it is in the rivers, on the mountains, in the valleys or on the coast, the People's Progressive Party/Civic is changing their lives. That is the contrast. What did you do? What can you speak about?

Mr. Speaker, let me go back to Occupation, Safety and Health which is very important in the scheme of things in this national development drive. When we went back into Government in 2020, even though we were an oil and gas economy, the Ministry of Labour, OSH Department had only nine OSH officers to supervise this whole country. [Ms. Ferguson: Tell us about the industrious accidents.] It

is not industrious. It is industrial. Oh my God! I will get to the industrial accidents and not the industrious ones. My God! The Occupational, Safety and Health Department now has the authority, from the Public Service Ministry, to employ 32 staff members from nine. In every region, except

for Region 8, The Ministry of Labour has offices established there. Going back to BIT, we did not stop at just training. We presented to the Ministry of Finance a programme to ensure that we could start constructing our training buildings and I could report that in Unity, Mahaica, we have a training building.

6.59 p.m.

We have a building at Mongrippa Hill, Bartica, that will train people for the Oko Gold Mines Project. We will commission a brand-new building in New Amsterdam in two weeks' time. We have one that will be ready in two months' time in Corriverton. We have three contracts signed this year to build three buildings – one at Port Kaituma, one at Tuschen and one in Mahdia.

The Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Department continues to give free service *via* lecturing and speaking to the private sector and public sector. We have trained and ensured that companies now have health and safety committees, both in the private sector and public sector. We have several collaborations with stakeholders in both the public sector and private sector. We have done 1,381 inspections for the year 2024. As I have said earlier, we did the inspections. For workplace accidents, 543 accident reports were received and 176 were investigated, including 32 fatalities. We are concerned that we had a decrease in three years but, by 2024, there has been an increase. That is why we will try to ensure that those numbers go down in 2025. Whilst we have had 32 fatalities, there was a 5% decline in the number of non-fatal accidents. If I go to the labour front, in 2024, we have recouped \$31.7 million for workers from employers. In four years, we have recouped over \$200 million for workers. The Labour Department conducted 3,131 inspections in various industrial, Hon. Member Ms. Annette Ferguson, establishments across Guyana. We surpassed our target by 15% and also increased inspection activities by 25% when compared to 2023. It is important to note that the Department of Labour, the Chief Labour Officer (CLO) has countersigned some 34 collective labour agreements, including one with the Guyana's Teachers Union (GTU) and the Ministry of Education – even though all of you created political obstruction and destruction.

We have just signed a three-year agreement with the Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU) – even though you over there would want to utilise the workers to create destruction on your behalf, hoping that somehow that could aid and help you to get back into power, but the people see you all now.

You will not be able to kerfuffle them anymore. The people you are looking for now, hope to put a green jersey on them and a placard in their hands, many are constructing roads in Sophia, Minister Indar. They are busy buying their houses, buying their cars and buying their buses. Do you think that they have time for you? That is the reason when you go to Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) to work on the Chairman as the Opposition Leader said, Prime Minister (PM), he said he is going to work with her. That is why nobody but you go out there. That is why nobody... People are busy. To answer the People's Progressive Party/Civic, they are busy with their lives. They have no time for you. You are a byword. They have no time for you. Many of you cannot even go back into those villages you used to go to once upon a time. The People's Progressive Party/Civic could walk in any village and any municipality, through the length and breadth of this country. Regarding the Central Recruitment and Manpower Agency— and let me just say quickly, Hon. Member, Mr. Jermaine Figueira — of the 12,742 persons we have trained, our tracer study informed us that 73% of those persons are meaningfully engaged. They are employed.

Mr. Speaker: At this point, Minister, we will need an extension.

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

Motion put and agreed to.

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

Mr. Hamilton: Thank you, very much, Mr. Speaker. The Central Recruitment and Manpower Agency has been going through the length and breadth of this country to ensure we engage young people in job readiness programmes. When you disbanded the Ministry, nothing like that happened. Through our National Job Bank application, we have been able to employ several hundred persons. We have over 300 employers who are on that platform. We give all of that service for free. We train them in proper resume preparation, curriculum vitae (CV) writing and interview techniques.

At the level of the Cooperative (Co-Ops) Department, there is a project executed by the Attorney General's Chambers, the Ministry of Housing and Water's Central Housing & Planning Authority (CH&PA) and the Ministry of Labour, where we have committed to ensuring that every citizen who lives in a co-ops scheme will get their title and their

transport. When I spoke about that the last time, many of the people here said that Hamilton is using this methodology to take away — what is the word they normally use — ancestral lands from people of African descent. Yes. Let me say this to all of you, the reality is, people who live in co-ops schemes are unable to utilise their property, Minister Singh. Some of them have a \$100 million house. They cannot go to the bank to get a loan to send their children to school. They cannot go to the bank to borrow money to set up a business because they have a one-block lease. We are changing that. We have already started to change that.

In many regions, you would have seen the Attorney General (AG) and his people; Minister Croal and Minister Rodrigues handing out titles, which is a method of empowerment. You would not understand that. Just a couple of weeks ago, we went to — you would say those people are your people but you did nothing for them — Dazzle Housing Scheme. My Colleague, Ms. Susan Rodrigues handed out... Paradise Multi-purpose Cooperative Society. We went to Melanie Damishana/Vigalstra Housing Scheme and handed out... You love them, but you do nothing for them. We love them and we do everything for them.

[**Mr. McCoy:** Our friends, families and favourites.] Yes. They are. The people of Vigalstra are our friends, families and favourites. The people of Paradise, Dazzle Housing Scheme are our friends, family and favourites. The people in Region 2, Region 3 and Region 6, where we are empowering them by putting transports and titles in their hands are friends, families and favourites. This one — friends, families and favourites.

As I started, I will end. When we listen on this side, we present programmes and plans for the development of this country. When you listen on the other side, their utterances and their presentations are characterised by three words — hollow, shallow and banal. Mr. Speaker, I was not sure, I was looking for your paper. I was trying to see if the word 'dullard' is there. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Actually, what is here is your time is up. Thank you, very much. Now for the Hon. Member, Ms. Maureen Philadelphia.

Ms. Philadelphia: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today as a representative of Region 4, a region that is both the economic engine of our nation and the microcosm of the challenges faced by ordinary Guyanese. While I will acknowledge the Government's effort in presenting this Budget, I must with a heavy heart highlight the areas where

it falls short to address the pressing needs of my constituent and the nation as a whole.

From the onset, it is clear that the gap between the affluent and the underprivileged has significantly widened. This Budget, while ambitious in its scale, lacks the vision, inclusivity and equitable resources allocation required to truly uplift its citizens –I mean every citizen. It is a Budget that speaks of progress in numbers but fails to translate those numbers into tangible improvements in the lives of the people in this dear land of ours. Today, I stand here not to oppose for the sake of Opposition but to advocate for fairness, justice and accountability. The passion of my critique is rooted in hard facts, supported by evidence and aimed at fostering constructive dialogue for the betterment of our people. The legendary Buju Banton once sung:

“Who can afford to run will run

But what about those who can't

They will have to stay”

These words resonate deeply with the people of Region 4 and Guyana at large. They remind us that progress is not just about grand projects and record-breaking figures.

7.14 p.m.

It is about ensuring that every citizen, regardless of where they live or the socio-economic status has access to the basic necessities of life, quality healthcare, education and opportunities to thrive in this glowing oil producing Republic of Guyana, little Dubai. My Colleague, the Hon. Member, Ms. Lawrence, reminded us that the cover of this book tells us its content. When I look at the cover, I see what appears to be a fan. A fan does two things. It provides a person with cool air and blows away everything in his/her path. To secure prosperous and sustainable Guyana, is to continue along the glaring path of enriching the triple-F mafias, according to my Colleague, Ms. Walton-Desir. It is clear evidence that there is a stark disparity between the Government's rhetoric and the lived experiences of the ordinary citizens, while the headlines boast of economic growth and grand infrastructure project. The reality for many Guyanese is one of struggle – struggle to access basic services and struggle to make ends meet in the face of rising cost of living. This Budget falls short of delivering that promise. It is a budget that prioritises the few at the expense of many, leaving behind the very poor who need support the most. Today, I will shine a light on the critical areas of health, education, youth and administration, with particular focus on Region 4.

The allocation for health services in Region 4 has increased from \$26.65 million in 2024 to \$349 million in 2025. While one may argue this increases a step in the right direction, it is woefully inadequate to address the systematic issues plaguing our healthcare system. There is an elephant in the room that this Government continue to ignore. The alarming exodus of our healthcare workers, nurses, doctors and other medical professionals are leaving Guyana in drove, learn by a better opportunity abroad. Reports have highlighted the growing shortage of nurses with facilities operating at less than 50% of their required staffing level. This is a situation the present Government continue to ignore. Let me tell you this, let me be clear, this crisis will not disappear on its own. The consequences of this neglect are dire. Overworked and underpaid healthcare workers are struggling to meet the demands of an already strained system. Patients are suffering as a result, with longer waiting time, reduced access to care and a decline in the quality of services and of course, significantly, shortage of drugs. Multiple reports have highlighted the challenges faced by our citizens at healthcare facilities. The Dr. C.C. Nicholson's Hospital has shortage of basic drugs, no doctor on a 24- hour system and inadequate ambulance services. The Diamond Diagnostic Centre has a shortage of porters and dilapidated wheelchairs. I can go on. This is not just a healthcare crisis; it is a national emergency that requires immediate attention. I am reminded in my Sarah Browne voice that 592 is not Georgetown and Georgetown is not Guyana. Even though 12 new hospitals were built, they did not solve the health crisis.

Education - the education budget for Region 4 has grown to \$494.03 million in 2025. I must say, the issues plaguing our schools remain persistent. Millions of dollars was spent to construct Non-Pariel Nursery School last year, for September opening, but it is not yet operable. Overcrowded classrooms, broken furniture, dilapidated sanitary facilities and inadequate technological resources are depriving our children of quality education. There is even an outdated non-academic standard. As a lifelong educator, this matter is particularly close to my heart. I have dedicated more than 32 years nurturing young minds and ensuring that every child had the opportunity to reach his/her full potential. That is why it pains me to see our education system falling short of its promise. A recent study conducted by the Ministry of Education revealed that the matriculation rate for a secondary school student in Guyana stands at 62%. This means that nearly four out of every 10 students are leaving school without the qualifications needed to pursue higher education or secure meaningful employment. This must be changed now. Our young people are crying out for

opportunities, such opportunities to learn, to grow and to contribute to their communities; yet this Government have turned a deaf ear to their plea.

Youth development and sports are the cornerstone of our thriving society. While the national allocation for youth programmes is \$123.4 billion, the lack of targeted investment in grassroot initiative for Region 4 is a glaring omission. I know that the former Director of Sports has been given a promotion and now sits in this august Assembly. While I congratulate him and wish him well, let us not pretend that his tenure as Director of Youth was anything but underwhelming. If his performance in this role is any indication of what we can expect in this House, then we have little reason to hope for progress. This is not an exaggeration. Take a walk through any of the communities on the East Coast, whether they are aligned with the Government or the Opposition and ask the young people about the opportunities for training and development that have been provided to them over the last four years, you will be met with blank stares.

The harsh reality is that our young people in Region 4 and, by extension, across Guyana have been neglected. I spoke about Paradise and Belfield Housing Scheme playfield in my 2024 presentation. Belfield playfield was fenced and sand filled. Do you know what? The Hon. Member, Mr. Ramson, came like Nicodemus on 26th October in a circus handover. It was a picture moment, as usual. The facility is without water, light, sanitary and change facilities. As a matter of fact, it is once again overgrown with vegetation and permanently locked. The youths cannot have access to the playfield, Hon. Member Mr. Ramson and that is the PPP/C for you. This is not how we build a future for our young people. This is not how we empower the next generation to lead our nation forward and, certainly, this is not how we secure a prosperous and sustainable Guyana. Our youth deserves more than photo opportunities and empty promises. They deserve real opportunities for training, development, empowerment and employment. They deserve a government who prioritise their needs and invest in their potential. The time for half measures and empty gestures is over. Our youth are watching and they deserve better. Let us not fail them.

Administration – I must lend my voice to highlight what I believe is a tragic situation playing out at the regional and the municipal levels across our country. Far too often we are confronted with the tensions between Regional Executive Officers and Democratic Councils, Regional Executive Officers and Regional Chairmen and tensions between Mayors and Town Clerks. These conflicts are not

coincidental. They are the direct result of a system that prevents Councils from functioning as they should. It is a classic case of the letter of the law being used to undermine the spirit of the law. These tensions are not just administrative hiccups, they are systematic failures that hinder progress and development. The root cause is simple. Councils are being saddled with administrative staff who are not aligned with their mandate, instead of serving the will of the people who elected these Councils, these officials are often beholden to central government carrying out their agenda, rather than the wishes of the communities they are meant to serve. This is not just a matter of inefficiency. It is a matter of democracy. When Councils are stripped of their ability to function independently, the people lose faith in the system, development slows, projects stall and the needs of communities go unmet.

This is not governance. This is political short-sightedness at its worst. I firmly believe that these issues have a simple fix. We must have political and legislative will to address it. The current practice of imposing administrative staff and councils, especially those filled with political opponents, is not only counterproductive, but also deeply unfair to our people. As the saying goes, *when elephants and lions fight, it is the grass that feels the squeeze*. Likewise, when those in leadership fight, it is the ordinary people who suffer, the very people who were elected to serve. If we are serious about development and if we are serious about the good of our people, then we must act now. Our children deserve an education system that equips them with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in this 21st Century, regardless of them being differently able. Little Rondell, who is on the autism spectrum was placed on the home programme and three years later, only once his status was checked. As a matter of fact, he has to attend therapy twice per week at a cost of \$20,000 per week. As if this is not enough, his mom was boldly told when she visited to query about his permanent disability (PD) payment: “Mom, you do not need this”. This service is needed and it is not offered by the Government. This is just one of the many stories told. A hard fact, differently abled children are left to the mercies in every region outside of Georgetown, yet the slogan is “Because we Care”. Hon. Member Ms. Manickchand, central programme will not suffice. Hon. Member Dr. Persaud it will not suffice. We must fix it and fix it now.

Before I go, I would like to make a few recommendations in which a coalition government with a people-centred strategy will put in place. I propose that the Government establish transparent and accountable mechanisms to ensure that youth programmes are properly implemented and monitored.

Secondly, we need to invest in long-term training initiatives that provide young people with the skills needed for the modern workforce, particularly in areas such as technology, renewable energy and creative industries. Finally, we must create partnerships with the Private Sector to provide internships, apprenticeship and jobs placement for young people.

The Government must invest in energy, healthcare infrastructure, and emergency healthcare infrastructure such as mobile health units to serve rural and underserved communities. These units can provide essential services such as vaccinations, maternal care and chronic diseases management. Secondly, we must prioritise funding for preventative care programmes targeting chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, which disproportionately affect our citizens. Finally, there should be enhanced training and recruitment for healthcare professionals, particularly in specialised fields to address the critical shortage of doctors and nurses.

Launch an E- Learning pilot programme in underserved schools, leveraging technology to bridge the digital divide. This programme could provide tablets, internet access and digital curricula to students in rural areas. Secondly, we must expand teachers training programmes to equip educators with the skills needed to integrate digital tools into the classroom. Finally, there is a need for equitable funding for special needs education with dedicated resources for staff training and infrastructure development in every region. There must also be packaged with home community programmes. With my good conscience and the peoples' representative of Region 4, I cannot support this Budget as it is. I thank you. *[Applause]*

7.29 a.m.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, very much, Hon. Member. Now let us welcome to the podium the Hon. Member, Mr. Suresh Singh, on his maiden presentation and to remind us that on a person's first address we give that Member of Parliament (MP) silence. Hon. Member, you may start now.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, very much, Mr. Speaker. It is very important on the onset of my presentation that I must say and for the record, thank you to the People's Progressive Party/Civic for selecting me and for having confidence in me to be at the highest forum to represent Guyanese. From the onset again, another point, I must extend congratulations to no lesser a man than His Excellency, Dr. Mohammed Irfan Ali, for his dynamic, for his youthful and excellent leadership across this country, across the Caribbean and

across the globe. I must say thank you on behalf of all Guyanese also to the Hon. Member, Dr. Ashni Singh, and his staff at the Ministry of Finance for working with dedication and providing a Budget, producing a Budget, compiling a Budget for all Guyanese – for all Guyanese.

It is appropriate for me now to speak on a topic that is on debate right now. A topic that none of the Hon. Members on that one side will ever understand. Do you know why? They are merciless and the PPP/C is merciful. I came, I am from and I was born in Region 4, East Coast Demerara, Enterprise, which is a sugar producing community. When you shut down the sugar estate it did not only affect 7,000 sugar workers across this country; you affected my village. You affected my family. You have affected me. My father went home because of your callous heartless attack and that is on you. You are merciless. You are merciless. On an average, 7,000 sugar workers, a regular family will have about four members of that family. Directly, you have affected 28,000 Guyanese. You placed 28,000 Guyanese on the bread line; you did that. Let me tell you something, again I am telling you that your side is merciless and we are merciful. I will give the nation examples of what we are doing to ensure we work for every Guyanese. We work to nurture; we work for upliftment; we work for empowerment of every Guyanese. At the end of it, I am charging you to do the right thing which is to apologise sincerely to all Guyanese who were affected during your term in Office.

The previous speaker spoke of neglect and spoke of deprived. That word, if we had a mirror here, it would have bounced back right over that one side. They revoked callously the Because We Care, cash grant. Is that merciful? Is that caring? You have neglected the young people of this country. You have deprived the young people of this country. When we returned to Office, we did not only reinstate it but we also increase it. We have now moved it to \$50,000 per child. Your favourite words are friends, families and favourites. I want to tell all young Guyanese – the more than 205,000 young Guyanese – who will be benefitting from the cash grant and their parents, indeed the PPP/C are their friends, their families and we are your favourites. We care for you; not the other side. Since we have returned to Office our Government have worked tirelessly to bring benefits, to empower and to work for all Guyanese. Let me give you some facts, at the University of Guyana (UG), my Friends, since we have returned to Office, 9,200 Guyanese have graduated from the University of Guyana as of 2024. While we did that for 9,200 Guyanese, you brought sadness to 7,000 households across the country when you shut down the sugar estate. Is that not merciful, merciless?

When it comes to another important programme that our President... Many of your children and many of your relatives benefitted from the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarship. To date, we have trained over 29,000 while you directly affected 28,000 persons when you closed the sugar estates. Do you understand the message here? You are merciless and we are merciful. Another programme, I want you to listen to this programme carefully. The name of this programme is Get Ready for Opportunities to Work (GROW). Let me give you the meaning of the word 'GROW'. It means, Get Ready for Opportunities... [Ms. Manickchand: ...To Work.] To Work. Get Ready for Opportunities to Work. We have trained more than 6,900 Guyanese, while you brought sadness to 7,000 households across this country. You did that. It is on your record. When you heard the other speakers from the other side and if you listen to them alone you would want to know if the PPP/C are really doing anything for Guyanese. They are painting this picture as if they are the most caring, the most loving group of people and that is an untruth that is an untruth, especially when it comes to young people in this country. I will give you a record just now; do not worry, I have it right here.

Let me go to the housing sector to tell you what we have done for young people. We have distributed/allotted over 41,000 house lots in this country – over 41,000 house lots in this country. More than half – 53% – went to young people in this country. We are talking about over 21,000 young people who benefitted from house allocation for the Government of Guyana under the stewardship of our dynamic and youthful leader Dr. Mohammed Irfan Ali. Let me put the record in the public record...

Mr. Holder: Mr. Speaker, Point of Order 41 Content of Speech. I have noticed the Hon. Member using the President's name over and over again. Please, enlighten him.

Mr. Speaker: I am giving him the benefit of a first Speaker where we all stay silent.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, very much, Mr. Speaker. There is a programme at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The programme is called – listen carefully my Friends on the other side – the 'President's Youth Award'. Listen to the name and to the first word – the President's Youth Award, Republic of Guyana. Whoever is the President of the day for Guyana, that person is a patron to the programme. You on the other side have failed yourself and have failed your former President because, in 2017, you killed the programme. It is on the public record you killed the

programme. The PPP/C relaunched the programme and revived it. Let me tell you the records of what we have done. For 2024 alone, we have trained 5,028 young Guyanese in the programme.

[Mr. Ramson: Tell them in the four years.] In the four years.

[An Hon. Member: Friends and family] Friends and families, they are all our friend and families.

I want to give a little context here. This particular programme has roots in England, Duke of Edinburgh, an international programme which you have robbed young Guyanese of; you have deprived Guyanese of. You did that; not me. You are merciless and we have restored this programme. We have now for the first time, after almost 67 years, brought back the expedition part of it, the bronze, silver and gold expedition. We are proud to say, we have sent 219 young Guyanese on the expedition. They are all proud of the PPP/C. They are our friends. They are our families. They are our favourites. [Dr. Singh: That is correct, tell them.] That is correct.

Let me tell you one more thing again, for young people, our robotics and coding programme, a massive programme that we have established rather, 66 training hubs across this country in the last three years because we know of the COVID-19 period. We are proud of our record at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport. Last year alone, we have trained 17,097 young Guyanese across this country for robotic and coding. How many APNU trained? [Dr. Singh: How many did you train?]

How many did you train? You cannot answer the question. You are silent. Out of the more than 17,000, we are proud to report that for the first time, we have a pool of trainers attached to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, of 70 young Guyanese, educated young Guyanese, well trained young Guyanese are our trainers for these programmes. In addition to that, for the first time, we have now launched a programme within the same programme, and we have labelled it Advanced Robotics Training. Let me tell you about that because the word is alien over that one side. Advanced Robotics Training means that a young person who is desirous of being enrolled in this part of the training must be in his/her second year at least at the University of Guyana pursuing Information Technology, Computer Science or at the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) level pursuing Computer Science. That is how advanced this programme is.

7.44 p.m.

We are going to train more young Guyanese. So we are making a public call, no secret call: any young Guyanese who are in the field of information technology and want to be part of our programme contact us and we will get you on our programme. You hear? A public call for all our friends, families and favourites. They will be calling my phone and we are going to enrol them. That is what is our record.

Earlier my friend, the previous speaker, said that she represents Region 4, especially on the East Coast of Demerara. Based on the parliamentary records, I think the Opposition has about four or five Members of Parliament (MPs) who are representing Region 4. Many of them are living on the East Coast of Demerara. My question to them is, from the time you took Office here in this House, how many times have you visited your base? You go to your base and ask them, without me being here, without me taking this office... I was in their communities weekly and monthly talking to them, engaging them and ensuring that the People's Progressive Party/Civic's policies, programmes and development reach those communities. I did that. If you forgot where your base or communities are, let me help remind you. Guess why? When you go for the votes now they will tell you no, you have done nothing for them. In their base on the East Coast of Demerara, the public record will prove – Minister Edghill is here and Minister Indar will tell you – we have done over 250 roads, Minister, in their base only.

Hon. Minister Edghill walked into Buxton and fixed 25 bridges and gave the contractors in that village the work. Public! Then you are on the public record telling the Guyanese that we cannot eat bridges and roads. Now go and tell your base that we cannot eat bridges and roads. Go and tell them and let us hear what they will tell you. [Dr. Singh: That is why they do not have a base anymore.] You do not have a base anymore? *Yuh* eat out *yuh* base? Let me tell the communities: Melanie, Victoria, Paradise, Bare Root, Plaisance, Buxton, Beterverwagting/Triumph, Vigilance, Haslington, and I can go on. The entire East Coast there is your base, and you have failed them miserably. Do you know why? If you *wudda* fixed their roads when you were in Office, we *nah* had to go fix their roads. Do you understand that? We did that because you failed to do that. That is on the public record; we did that. When Hon. Minister Edghill went in 2022...

Mr. Speaker: On the parliamentary record, your time is up.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask for the Hon. Member to be able to have five minutes to continue.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, we will give you some latitude so that you can continue and conclude.

Mr. Singh: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When Minister Edghill went into Buxton in 2022, two years after we took office – not one, not two, not three, not 10 Mr. Jones – 25 bridges needed repairs. No one can tell us that in two years 25 bridges were damaged in Buxton. You neglected them. You deprived them of infrastructure development, and we went and rescued them. We did that. That is on the public record. I must remind Guyanese, it is my duty to remind Guyanese that in 2015, when we were all in the campaign mode, the APNU/AFC went with a manifesto. I have it here.

[Hon. Member displayed a document.]

My honourable friend, Minister Vickram Bharrat, went through your 100-day plan and now you started a 90-day plan. You could not deliver on the 100-day plan now you cut it to less, titled 90-day plan. I am sure the list is longer. Mr. Speaker, let me give you... Let me remind, rather, the public of a few points in their plan that they have failed to deliver. That is the truth – failed to deliver. On page 10, listen to the heading.

“THE APNU+AFC COALITION IS RESOLUTELY...”

Do you hear the word? A nice big word they put there.

“...RESOLUTELY COMMITTED TO:”

Listen what they are committed to.

“Setting Guyana on a path where all Guyanese regardless of ethnicity and geography can feel fully motivated to be proud of our nation and afforded the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to the society while successfully caring for themselves and family.”

Yuh hear *wha yuh* get in *yuh* book *hey*? And you, with the strike of a pen, sent home almost 2,000 Amerindians and 7,000 sugar workers. How is that related to this point? [Dr. Singh: A thousand bauxite workers.] And 1,000 bauxite workers. [Dr. Singh: Shame.] Shame. Listen to this one, Mr. Speaker. Page 11. [Hon.

Members (Government): Merciless.] Merciless. Listen to this heading now, Mr. Speaker.

“Transforming the Economy
APNU+AFC aspire to...”

Lots of aspirations are here.

“APNU+AFC aspire to achieve rapid... growth and development. This will involve a strategy for meaningful job creation, with adequate wages and remuneration,”

Eenah done yet.

“...in pursuit of a dynamic and modern economy.”

Sending home people is part of it – job creation? Mr. Speaker, is sending home people part of job creation? You understand. *Me ent* finished yet. [An Hon. Member (Government): What page?] We *deh* page 40 now. Check page 40. Listen to the caption now. When you spoke earlier and you talked about youth being deprived and neglected; let me tell the public what you promised and what you failed to deliver. The caption is, the heading rather:

“YOUTH POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT”

Listen to your words. Let me remind you of your words.

“Spare no effort...”

Let me repeat for Guyanese, for the public and for the world to hear your words, not my words.

“Spare no effort to establish and nurture a vibrant diversified, skill-intensive and natural resource based modern economy capable of satisfying to needs, hopes...”

Again,

“... aspirations for employment and development of young men and women.”

[Dr. Singh: What did they do?] What did they do? Nothing. They sent home people, closed down sugar estates, and deprived youth of a future in this country. This is your record. I can continue on and on; I can read the whole Manifesto, but I am telling Guyanese, you go and read the APNU/AFC Manifesto, cross-check their record and when they come to you ask them what they have done for you. The

thousands, the tens of thousands rather, of Guyanese in this, particularly the young Guyanese who have benefited from the People’s Progressive Party/ Civic, when they come to your door ask them what they have done for you and tell them the People’s Progressive Party/Civic has helped to uplift my life, empower my life and made me a better Guyanese – because they are now educated and will make a wiser decision. We are going to be back in office after the November, 2025 election. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. [Applause]

Mr. Speaker: Congratulations, Hon. Member, on your maiden presentation, and we thank you for it. Now to close off with the contributions for today, the Hon. Dr. Vishwa Mahadeo.

Dr. Mahadeo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to congratulate my colleague MP on a very vibrant presentation, and I am sure he has a long way to go. In fact, he reminded me of someone who used to sit next to me in another Parliament. I want to start with a quote.

“There is no worse blind man than the one who doesn’t want to see. There is no worse deaf man than the one who doesn’t want to hear. And there is no worse madman than the one who doesn’t want to understand.”

That encapsulated what I heard today. I am proud to contribute to the 2025 Budget debate, a budget that was so eloquently presented by our Hon. Minister Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, under the theme of *A Secure, Prosperous, and Sustainable Guyana*. A theme that speaks directly to the aspirations of our people and the responsibility of our Government under the leadership of President Dr. Irfaan Ali to deliver meaningful and, more importantly, sustainable progress to every citizen in every corner of our great country. I state here and now, that I support this 2025 Budget wholeheartedly. I take this opportunity to thank Hon. Dr. Ashni Singh and all the hard-working staff at the Ministry of Finance for their dedicated effort to produce this, the largest budget ever – \$1.382 trillion – this Budget that will be wrapping up on the promises made by us in our last Manifesto. The numbers and allocations in this Budget are not just financial figures. They are actually symbols of hope and opportunity for families, communities and future generations. This Budget builds on the foundation of inclusivity, equity, and sustainability, and ensures that every Guyanese has access to tools and resources that they need to be healthy, to grow and to thrive.

Before I go into my substantial presentation, I need to answer a couple of issues that were raised. Just before me, a speaker mentioned that there is a shortage of wheelchairs in a particular facility. In actual fact we distributed, from the Ministry of Health alone, over 900 wheelchairs last year. It was also mentioned that we have shortages of nurses and doctors... [*inaudible*]. Migration sorry. Mr. Speaker, just to let you know, just to let everyone know, that migration has been a challenge, but the number of physicians per 10,000 population in 2020 was 11.2. Compare that to what we left in 2015, 14.1 per 10,000 population; so it reduced. Remember, doctors were forced to either go on the pensionable establishment or their contracts are not going to be renewed. Very many of them opted not to have their contracts renewed. Last year, it was 20.6 per 10,000 population. With the advent of the new hospitals that we are building, these numbers are definitely going to increase. [**Mr. Mahipaul:** Talk about the nurses now.] To answer my good colleague over there on nurses: this year alone we will be graduating 800 nurses. We recognise that there are shortages of nurses, but what did you do when you were in Office? What did you do to meet the shortages that were there?

7.59 p.m.

Currently, we have over 3,000 nurses in training, and this year we are going to take in another over 3,000 persons. We have a plan, and we are working towards the plan. The only thing that the APNU/AFC Government did better than us – and they did something better than us – over four years, they had three Ministers of Health; we only have one who is doing a far better job than all three put together. The number of Ministers of Health that they had in their term was definitely bigger.

Last Friday, a Member raised an issue about Port Kaituma Hospital. Port Kaituma Hospital, they claimed that they built it. That Hon. Member claimed that they built it. I have here, Port Kaituma District Hospital, Ministry of Public Health, officially commissioned by the Hon. Volda Lawrence, MP, on 24th May, 2020, and about \$1 billion was spent here. I spoke to the Regional Health Officer (RHO), who was then RHO also, and all that they were offering was the services of a health centre. They had no electromagnetic radiation (X-ray), no functioning laboratory and no functioning theatre. Within the first year, the Hon. Minister of Health commissioned the brand-new X-ray, the functioning laboratory and we now have a fully functional theatre that will go into operation. So, part of the truth does not hold water; we have to tell the whole truth.

Guyana is going through a phase of development never seen before, a literal revolution. There are vast new possibilities for farming, trade, travel and community development. Due to major investments in roads, bridges and transportation networks, jobs are open and opportunities are created. The Corentyne River Bridge will not only strengthen ties with Suriname but also position Guyana as a hub for regional trade, fostering economic growth and job creation. Similarly, the Linden to Mabura Road would open areas that were historically isolated. These flagship projects, investing heavily in upgrading rural roads, drainage systems and bridges, particularly in flood-prone areas, will make a major difference in the development of our country. Every family deserves a safe and comfortable home and a roof over their head. Through this Budget, the Government will distribute titles to 10,000 homes and another 25,000 house lots will be allocated. Housing schemes are developed with water, electricity and modern infrastructure, which will create vibrant communities where children can study and play safely, and families can flourish. I am one of three geographic MPs for Region 6 and Region 6 holds a special place in my heart since I worked there as a doctor for over 21 years. The transformative investments outlined in this Budget will address long-standing challenges that we have there.

Agriculture, under the watch of our Hon. Zulfikar Mustapha, who is also from Region 6... Agriculture is not just an economic pillar, it is the heartbeat of Region 6; it is the heartbeat of several rural communities. This Budget strengthens Guyana's position of becoming the breadbasket of the Caribbean through investments in modern irrigation systems, flood resilience measures and support for farmers to set up shade houses and the introduction of aquaculture. New agro-processing facilities enable farmers to create value-added products, increasing incomes and creating jobs. These initiatives will particularly benefit regions like East Berbice-Corentyne, where agriculture is a way of life for families. Let us not forget that Region 6 depends heavily on rice cultivation and the sugar industry, and I have to say it: the APNU/AFC closed Skeldon and Rose Hall Estates, sending home thousands of workers, putting thousands of families on the breadline with no attempt, no attempt to alleviate their suffering. They had a philosophy that they put in action, profits before people's welfare, causing immense suffering. The rice farmers, when they reached out for help from the APNU/AFC Government, were callously told that rice is not Government business. In 2024, agriculture in Region 6: construction of the Adventure Pump Station and drainage and irrigation improvements, and advancement of

works on the Hope-like canals that we will be building at Number 52 and Lancaster Villages to avoid flooding. There are 79 shade houses... [An Hon. Member: (*Inaudible*)] Thank you, Minister. ...79 shade houses constructed and distribution of planting materials to farmers; establishment of agro-processing facilities at Crabwood Creek and Orealla. For this year, for drainage and irrigation (D&I), the region has another \$88.5 million to spend.

Education: the Budget allocates unprecedented resources to improve access, quality, and inclusivity in education. Smart classrooms are being created, and the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarship programme ensures that every child from Georgetown to the most hinterland and far-to-reach villages has access to quality learning opportunities. Much has already been said in this House about fees being abolished at the University of Guyana, but I would like to add that approximately 700 Berbicians attending the Tain campus will now be getting free tuition at that campus, in addition to the thousands that are at Turkeyen. Education is definitely a priority for Region 6. From 2020 to now, every single educational facility in Region 6 was either fixed, upgraded, or rebuilt. The 'Because We Care' grant and School Uniform Assistance programme were reinstated in 2021 and 22,422 students benefited. In 2024, 22,768 students received \$45,000 per child, and between 2020 and 2024, \$3.045 billion was shared in Region 6 and injected into this region through these programmes. Five hundred and fifty-one teachers were trained in the four years, to compare with 2,015 trained teachers in 2024 for 1,408 in 2020. Three new schools are being constructed at Albion, Mibikuri and Orealla.

The commencement of the Palmyra to Moleson Creek highway has begun. Negotiations for the new bridges across the Berbice and Corentyne Rivers are ongoing; 1,485 contracts were executed at a cost of \$37.9 billion for community roads across Region 6. Again, going to what my colleague said, these are all our friends and favourites. Completion of the recreational enhancement programme at Brothers Village, Corriverton, Lonsdale and New Amsterdam; the riprap sea defences, where necessary, were fixed.

I turn to health. The health of our nation is our top priority. *Budget 2025* allocates significant resources to modernise healthcare infrastructure – training of health workers, expanding services and improving access for all citizens. The construction of new hospitals, new training facilities for health personnel, and upgrades to existing facilities ensures

that Guyanese, regardless of their location, have access to world-class healthcare, including training opportunities. Public health campaigns focusing on chronic illnesses, maternal health, and vaccination, save lives and improve the quality of life for our citizens. The Government's commitment to establishing a world-class healthcare system is evident in its focus on modernising facilities, expanding services and ensuring equitable access to quality care for all citizens. Region 6 is also set to benefit from transformative projects that will enhance the health and well-being of its residents. Going back to the issue of the training for nurses, the Hon. Minister of Health, in his wisdom, along with His Excellency the President and the Cabinet, they have started something that is unique in Guyana – never done before – hybrid training. Because of this we could take in thousands of students at the same time. With hybrid training, students study at their own pace using the Coursera platform and they are working at the same time. So, they could study in the evenings and do their examinations (exams).

Simulation centres have been set up in regions so that the students, when necessary to do the practical, could go to the simulation centres and they could also go the hospitals to get their practical. We are catering for the future; the old system, where we are training a couple of hundred persons every year or every other year, that can no longer meet our needs. With this new system in place, we are sure that in a few years we will be able to have enough staff, enough nurses to meet our needs. In addition to this, we are training nurses in two hinterland communities, Mabaruma and Lethem. These two communities are training and have already trained their own batches of nursing assistants.

In Region 6, over the last four years, all health facilities were upgraded, expanded, and repaired or rebuilt, with new facilities constructed at Mara, Schepmoed, Chestney, Cane Field and Fort Ordance; dental services were expanded in Region 6, with new clinics at No. 64 Health Centre, Cumberland and Brothers Health Centres; digital X-rays were set up in New Amsterdam, Mibicuri and Port Mourant Hospitals. Work has already started for a new state-of-the-art \$162.7 million New Amsterdam Regional Hospital. We are near the completion of construction of the US \$30 million No. 75 Hospital, which will become operational later this year. This new hospital will have a 75 inpatient-bed capacity, three fully functioning, fully-equipped operating theatres, modern laboratory facilities, a computed tomography (CT) and other diagnostic capacity that we do not currently have. This hospital will serve residents in the East Berbice-Corentyne and also persons who have been accessing

services from across the border. Works are advancing on the New Amsterdam Health Sciences Training Facility for nurses and other personnel. We have started offering telemedicine services at all three of our riverine communities – Orealla, Siparuta and Baracara. I pause to remind this House that successful health programmes that were in place in Region 6, such as the home-based care programme, which took care of the incapacitated and the bedridden, the men's health programme and the care of the elderly programme, among others, were stopped as soon as APNU/AFC took Office in 2015. These programmes are very successful, so much so that the elderly care programme was recognised as one of the 60 best practices in the world and was written up and published in a book. This book here.

[The Hon. Member displayed a book.]

Health Systems Improvement Across the Globe, Success Stories from 60 Countries. The title of the chapter was, *Holistic Geriatric Mega Clinics for Care of the Elderly in Guyana.* We have reintroduced this programme, and now they are bigger and better. This time it is not only in Region 6, it is across the country, and the Minister of Health, Dr. Frank Anthony, Hon. Member, is paying particular attention to this. I will utilise this opportunity to tell you about some other achievements in Region 6. At the New Amsterdam Hospital, in 2021, we started a gastroenterology clinic; in 2022, a cardiology clinic, and the cardiology clinic has over 900 patients of which 300 were referred from Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation to Region 6.

Mr. Speaker: You need an extension, Hon. Member, to complete today's presentation.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask for five minutes for the Hon. Member to conclude his speech.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you may continue and conclude.

Dr. Mahadeo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have also started nephrology, spirometry and pain management clinics at the New Amsterdam Hospital. The Hon. Mr. Jones said that New Amsterdam Hospital was not offering dialysis. In 2020, only thirteen patients required dialysis or were accessing dialysis in Region 6; now, with the Government giving \$600,000 per year for every dialysis patient, 47 Berbicians are now accessing dialysis at a provider of their choice. They do not have to come to where we want them to go. They have the

choice. Additionally, if a person is admitted and needs urgent dialysis, we pick up the cost. I really do not understand the issues about the \$10,000 voucher per person for screening tests. This is just a common-sense issue. Is it not better for persons to have a choice to go to whichever licensed provider they may want to go to for the service? Whether it is a health check-up, an eye test or an HPV screening, this Government supports that. We have done a good job. Is everything perfect? No. We are still striving to be better, to improve. That is what this Budget is all about. This country was totally in shambles after the APNU/AFC took Office. Like a hurricane it swept through and destroyed everything.

8.14 p.m.

The theatres at the National Ophthalmology Hospital were non-functional when we took Office. For five years they did not do surgeries. Yet, I have here another... National Ophthalmology Hospital, Port Mourant, Berbice, recommissioned on Thursday 4th April, 2019, by the Hon. Senior Minister of Public Health, the Hon. Ms. Lawrence, MP, for the residents of the Berbice community. It is a national facility, and it caters to all of Guyana. We spent hundreds of millions of dollars to get it going again. So far we have done over 3,700 surgeries at that facility from all the regions in Guyana. This Budget represents just one phase of a broader vision for transforming Guyana. These advancements align with Guyana's broader goal of achieving universal health coverage. The transformative power of this Budget extends beyond individual sectors and regions. It represents a vision of a Guyana where families in the hinterland have the same opportunities as those on the coast, children grow up in safe nurturing environments with access to quality education and quality health care, and farmers, entrepreneurs, and workers, can achieve their full potential.

In closing I would like to refer to what the Hon. Member, Mr. Christopher Jones, mentioned – our party song, *Oh Fighting Men*. That is the title. Our song also states, 'now is a call for bravery, we will break the bonds of slavery. We will set our Guyana free, not halfway slave and halfway free.' The People's Progressive Party has been since its inception fighting for the freedom of Guyana, fighting for the emancipation of Guyanese. We led the fight against colonialism. Then we had to lead the fight again against the 28 years of dictatorship. Then up to just a few years ago we had to fight against serious efforts to rig and steal our elections and our democracy. We have overcome them all. I am proud to say that we, on this side of the House, are all brave fighting men – fighting men and women. It is sad to

say, on the opposite side, they seemed to be scared even when they were in power – scared of walking the streets, scared of meeting the people, even scared of allowing Guyanese to get live photographs, and now they are scared of the next elections. Over here we have the fighting men and women, over there we have the frightened men and women.

I call on all Guyanese to work together for the greater good. Together, we can build a nation that is secure prosperous and sustainable, a nation that leaves no one behind – ‘One Guyana.’ Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Hon. Member Dr. Mahadeo. As we leave on that note of fighting people, not frightened people, let me call on the Hon. Prime Minister to move the adjournment.

ADJOURNMENT

BE IT RESOLVED:

“That the Assembly do now adjourn to 10.00 a.m. on Tuesday 28th January, 2025.”

[*Prime Minister*]

Brigadier (Ret’d) Phillips: Mr. Speaker, I ask that we adjourn the sitting of the House of Assembly to Tuesday, 28th of January, 2025 at 10 a.m. – that is tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we stand adjourned to 10 a.m., tomorrow, 28th January.

Adjourned accordingly at 8.18 p.m.