



Opposition Leader Kamla Persad-Bisessar alongside UNC MPs, from left, David Lee, Khadija Ameen, Dr Roodal Moonilal and Barry Padarath during her response to the 2024/2025 budget in Parliament on October 4. PHOTO BY ROGER JACOB

Kamla: Imbert's budget gave us 'zip, nada, zilch'

Minister Imbert spoke for five hours and 13 minutes to announce a \$2 per hour minimum wage increase to some workers and a 5 per cent new offer to public servants.

The Minister joked about doubling his time to 10 hours. I would have preferred it if he had doubled the minimum wage increase to \$4 per hour and the offer to public servants to 10 per cent instead.

I take note, Minister—it takes a resolute disposition and steadfast dedication to be that tedious for five hours.

The Minister spent over five hours reading the PNM's eulogy, fighting to convince the population but failing to convince them of

anything worthwhile the PNM did or is going to do!

Imagine:

- 5 hours of talk and nothing about lowering food prices
- 5 hours of talk and nothing about senior citizens
- 5 hours of talk and nothing about generating more revenue
- 5 hours of talk and nothing credible about fighting crime and murders
- 5 hours of talk and nothing about job creation for the thousands of unemployed citizens.
- 5 hours of talk and nothing, nothing. Absolutely nothing, zip, nada, zilch about the \$3 billion missing from the Auditor General's Report.

Scraping the bottom of the barrel for over five hours to find some

achievement that the PNM could claim as its own, but the best the Minister could find was that they changed 1,000 light bulbs.

MATHS NOT MATHSING AGAIN

This is the tenth consecutive budget delivered by Finance Minister Colm Imbert under the direction of the same Prime Minister. The fact is that in every budget since taking office, every year, Minister Imbert's projections have been historically wrong on revenue and expenditure, deficit and debt.

In this year's Budget Statement, page 150, the Minister estimated revenue of \$ 4.224 billion, broken down into:

- Oil revenue – \$14.174 billion
- Non-oil revenue – \$35.039 billion
- Capital revenue – \$4.011 billion
- These figures add up to \$53.224 billion in revenue, not \$54.224 billion, as the Minister stated. This is \$1 billion in revenue less than his budget statement.

The Minister can't account for \$3 billion to the Auditor General and now can't account for another billion dollars in revenue.

According to these revenue numbers, the deficit for 2025 would be \$6.517 billion, not \$5.517 billion.

Further, if we look at the 2024/25 Draft Estimates of Revenue for fiscal 2025, (pg. v), we see estimated revenue for 2025 of \$52.619 billion, which is \$1.605 billion less than the

\$54.224 billion in the Minister's budget statement. This would mean a deficit of \$7.122 billion for fiscal 2025.

Which are the correct revenue figures and projected deficit, Minister? Those in your Budget Statement or those in the Draft Revenue Estimates?

The Minister failed to mention that the same table in the Draft Estimates of Revenue shows that he plans to borrow \$12.887 billion in fiscal 2025. Therefore, the revenue in 2025 would be \$65.506 billion before adding other financing amounts, eg, capital and extraordinary receipts.

The Minister also failed to tell the country that in fiscal 2023/24, he accessed financing of \$18.554 billion to supplement revenue. (Draft estimates of Revenue 2025, pg.v)

Of this, \$ 2.496 billion was from extraordinary receipts, and \$16.058 billion was from borrowing. (Draft estimates of Revenue 2025, pg.v)

Of this \$16.058 billion in borrowings in fiscal 2024, approximately \$8 billion were domestic, and \$8 billion were foreign borrowings. (Review of the Economy 2024, Appx 25 pg

217) Why didn't the Minister or commentators speak of these facts?

The Minister also failed to say that he has borrowed \$107 billion in nine years from 2015 to the end of fiscal 2023/24. When we add the \$12.887 billion the Minister intends to borrow in 2025 (Draft estimates of Revenue 2025, pg. v), he would have borrowed \$119.887 billion in ten years from 2015 to the end of fiscal 2025.

If we were to add the approximately \$17 billion drawn down from HSF, we would see that he has accessed financing of \$136.887 billion to finance spending. Remember that additional financing from capital and extraordinary receipts are still to be added.

The Minister has also failed to tell the country that in fiscal 2025, he will spend \$9.926 billion on debt servicing (Draft Estimates of Expenditure for 2025 pg ix).

Silence from the elites

Nowhere in commentary since Monday from government representatives, business chambers, pseudo-intellectuals and the eat-a-food elites has any of these figures been discussed.

Instead, it was the same old story of glibness, intellectual laziness, shallow commentary and shameless pandering from sections of the business community. At the same time, they continue waiting with their begging bowls for contracts. Greed has no shame.

You see, some enjoy the fat of the land and will do everything in their power to ensure the average citizen never enjoys it as they do.

We live in times where the bravest amongst us are now standing up for one another, speaking up against fake elitist greed and oppression of the average citizen, lobbying for the rights of the differently-abled, the abused, the people suffering in silence and those wanting a better life for themselves and their children right here in TT.

This PNM government likes to talk about patriotism and who is patriotic and who is not when it suits their agenda.

Patriotism does not mean pandering to the government for favours. Patriotism does not mean sinking with the PNM ship if you see it going down for freeness.

Patriotism doesn't mean allowing others to suffer while you do better and better. Patriotism doesn't mean staying silent to eat-a-food while others are being abused or taken advantage of.

We must press on to the mark of the higher calling, which sees everyone being treated fairly. The average citizen was not told of these numbers by the Minister and his surrogates because the children and grandchildren of the average citizen will have to work and pay these debts. This government and the minister have pushed us all, including future generations, into a debt trap. They keep spending



UNC supporters cheering for Opposition Leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar outside the Parliament before she began the budget debate on October 3. PHOTO BY ROGER JACOB

excessively more while creating nothing to generate additional income.

Nine years and nothing

Where is the Prime Minister's plywood factory? Where is the Prime Minister's Sandals? Where is the Prime Minister's Toco Highway? Where is the not-so-insignificant sum of money from Bill Gates that the Prime Minister said he was getting? Why are we not hearing about Dragon Gas, the Toco port and La Brea dry docks the Prime Minister promised?

Has the Prime Minister got 'pip'? Where is Niquan, which the Prime Minister boasted about? He cut the opening ribbon with great fanfare, and the next week, the plant blew up in a ball of fire! But that is common with his tragic history as a minister. Remember when he built a housing development on a hill, Las Alturas, which fell and slid down the hill? So, he built a housing development in the flatland named Greenvale, and it flooded out. Now he builds one halfway between the hill and the flat, Trestrail Development, and they must break it down because the units failed. You can't make this up!

Where are the VAT refunds and workers' back pay? The businesspeople and workers of this country want their money now. They don't like their money to sleep out. Where is the Roadmap to Recovery where they outsmarted eat-a-food fake elites and pseudo intellectuals?

Maybe in the same place as

reports from cabinet-appointed bodies. In Fiscal 2023/24, \$32.589 million was spent on cabinet-appointed bodies. What is there to show for this money? (Draft estimates of expenditure 2025, pg. 55-56) For fiscal 2024/25, \$35.789 million has been allocated under the Office of the Prime Minister for cabinet-appointed bodies. What will there be to show for this money? (Draft estimates of expenditure 2025, pg. 55-56) Trinidad's number one salesman who hasn't made a single sale in nine years to benefit the citizens. But maybe he is the greatest salesman after all because, as seen in successive budget documents, he has sold out this country's future to financiers and special interests, resulting in about \$134.887 billion in debt. (Central Bank Data Centre)

Never forget such a salesman he is, who, together with the chosen one, Minister Young, negotiated gas prices with multinational executives in Houston, where they were outsmarted, tied up like hairy-legged crabs, and sent back home. Page 14 of 133 Today, the Point Lisas Industrial estate is half shut, and our citizens are being forced to pay higher electricity rates because of their disastrous gas price negotiations.

Madam Speaker, the facts are that since this government came to power in 2015, the energy sector, measured in real GDP, has contracted by 32.5%. (Review of the Economy)

After nine years, besides golfing, we have a prime minister with no

achievement to his name. Both on the golf course and on the job, it's only bogey, double bogey, triple bogey, and quadruple bogey on his scorecard. Children abroad are warned about the boogeyman, B.O.O.G.E.Y. Well, we in Trinidad have the perennial boogeyman.

Since 2015, this Prime Minister has been complaining about difficult times ahead, like a persistent national ghoul, but doing nothing to improve the situation.

In the last nine years, the PM has spent 391 days out of the country, more than one year with nothing to show. Nine years and nothing.

Only last weekend, there was an article in the Saturday Express (September 28 2024) in which the Prime Minister told this country to "hold strain" and prepare for difficult times ahead until 2027.

I certainly would never call the Prime Minister the national town crier, although he has been known to have said things that were later proven to be untrue. However, Minister Imbert insinuated it on Monday when he claimed the economy was doing well.

Different messages from both men who sit in the same Cabinet. One who used to act as prime minister and the current Prime Minister. Who is the country to believe?

Now, while the Prime Minister tells the country to hold strain for difficult times ahead, we see in the Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure under Head 13, the Office of the Prime Minister, Page 58, subhead 02, item 19, that official entertainment was

allocated \$30 million, an increase of \$29.76 million from 23/24 when it was \$240,000.

We also see Item 66 on the same page, Hosting of Functions, an allocation of \$20 million, an of \$19.35 million over last year's allocation of \$650,000. These two items were allocated \$890,000 combined in 23/24, but in 2025, an election year, a whopping \$50 million is allocated, an increase of \$49.11 million for entertainment and functions.

It's there in black and white in the budget documents. Fifty million dollars for feteing added to the previous \$70 million for a mansion in Tobago, \$3 million for paintings to watch, and \$10.6 million in foreign trips since 2020. Clearly, the economy is good for the Prime Minister.

In contrast, in the 2025 Draft Estimates of Development Programme Head 13, Office of the Prime Minister, page 20, Project No 119 –Strengthening of the Childcare and Child Protection Systems in TT—a measly \$1 million was allocated.

But we know that this PNM does not care about child protection systems because high PNM officials have been repeatedly accused of being involved in a paedophile ring.

Yet, to date, the authorities refuse to investigate this rampant paedophilia within the PNM hierarchy. Shame and scandal!

Fifty million for parties at OPM but \$1 million for strengthening child protection systems in the country to combat paedophiles. For this government, 'There ain't no

party like a Diddy party'.

The UNC has consistently brought legislation to protect our children.

- The Children's Authority Bill 1999
- The Children's (Amendment) Bill 1999
- The Adoption of Children Bill 1999
- The Miscellaneous provisions (children) Bill 1999
- The Children's Community Residences, Foster homes and Nurseries Bill, 1999
- The Children's Act 2012
- The Children's Life Fund Act
- While the country is told by the Prime Minister to hold strain till 2027, the office of the Prime Minister has been allocated \$50 million for dancing and feteing in 2025. Maybe he is the boogie man-B.O.O.G.I.E.

And you know who's invited to the \$50 million fetes? The same government representatives, paedophile bigwigs, pseudo-intellectuals and the eat-a-food fake elite who have never mentioned these figures since Monday. But you know I care for everyone, even for our Prime Minister. I urge him to be cautious and take it easy because the last time he feted too much, it was in a panyard, and he passed out flat on the ground. Thank God to the great men and women of the TTPS special branch who were there to rescue him and stretch him out?

When we go to the 2025 Development Programme Estimates for Head 701 IDF, subhead 13, Office of the Prime Minister: on page 187, item 039, a vague description of "construction of Buildings", there is an allocation of \$400 million. It does not say what buildings are to be constructed. What buildings are the Office of the Prime Minister constructing for \$400 million? In 2024, \$48 million was allocated in the IDF to the OPM. In 2025, an election year, this increased by \$403 million to \$452 million (pg187).

In comparison, if you go to page 121 of the draft estimates of the development programme for 2025 under head 48 –Ministry of Trade and Industry, you will see zero dollars allocated for the development of the music industry, zero dollars allocated for the development of the film industry, and zero dollars allocated for the development of the fashion industry.

These are industries that our young people are interested in. There are \$400 million for the Prime Minister to build unknown buildings but nothing, zero, zilch for our young people and the creative industries.

No achievement in nine years by this Prime Minister after spending \$530 billion – half a trillion of taxpayers' dollars? Zero, nada, zilch.

Today, former Prime Minister Manning must be looking down on the second seat of the government Parliament benches, grinning. You know what? Even former prime

minister George Chambers must be looking down at this Prime Minister and laughing.

SOME ACHIEVEMENTS OF MY UNC GOVERNMENT: SUCCESS

I'm sure the government speakers will want to ask about my government's achievements. So, I will answer that question and give you a very small sample. Because if I were to list all of my government's achievements, I would have to speak here for much longer than 10 hours in the period 2010 – 2015, there was:

- FDI totalling \$US10.38 billion or TT\$67.5 billion
- Highest GDP: \$187.5 billion (RoE)
- Highest Foreign reserves of US\$11.5 billion (CBTT)
- Increased public servants' wages by 5% in 2011 and 14% in 2015, ending a lengthy negotiation period.
- Settled over 130 collective agreements, most of which were left in limbo by the previous government.

The unemployment rate in TT reached a record low of 3.1 per cent in the first quarter of 2014. We had a historical high of 643,000 persons employed in the first quarter of 2014.

- 56 000 new jobs created under my government 2010-2015 without a single new tax.
- Largest economy in our modern history.
- 67 per cent tertiary education participation.
- Non-energy revenue increased by over TT\$13 billion between 2010 and 2014.
- GDP per capita increased from US\$16,000 in 2010 to US\$20,900 in 2014.
- Over 11,000 businesses were established in my administration's last two years alone.
- Half of the FDI inflows into the Caribbean reached TT. FDI inflows to TT increased by 21.5%.

In my government's five years, 21 production-sharing contracts/licences worth approximately US\$2 billion were signed. We distributed more than 100,000 laptops to students and teachers from 2010-2015.

My government was amongst the first in the world to achieve universal preschool education, amended the SEA to include a continuous assessment component.

- Expanded the GATE programme to include technical and vocational education and training.
- Established the Children's Life Fund.
- Established a nursing academy to fill vacancies in the public health sector.
- Increased old age pensions, the disability grant, and the public assistance grant.
- 5,000 lots distributed in three years under the Land for the Landless Programme.

THE LEGACY OF THIS PNM GOVERNMENT: FAILURE, DEATH, DESPAIR

What is the legacy of this PNM government after more than nine years, and more than half-a-trillion dollars spent?

- It is:
- Bloodstained streets and bloody red bedsheets.
 - Bloated bodies in bulging body bags.
 - Bullet busted heads and blown-out brains.
 - Beautiful babies blown to bits in their beds.
 - Buried bodies being ripped out of graves and burnt.
 - Bawling mothers and families.
 - Bursting balisier bank books.
 - Big bribe money built Balisier House painted blood red.
 - Broken promises because of bad budgets.
 - Betrayal and backstabbing in Cabinet because of bacchanal and backwardness.
 - Bullying, battering and brutalizing citizens to add burdens.
 - Billions of blue bills "bandited" by broken men.

What does this all mean? It means that bloodshed, bankruptcy, banditry, betrayal, butchery, brutality, and bawling are the wallpaper of our whereabouts under this government.

It's the landscape of our lives. It is a collage of carnage bonded with blood. Blood is the bond for this landscape of butchery and burdens. That is the legacy of this PNM government after nine years. Our country is utterly lawless, a land where chaos, destruction, sadistic brutality, and sick, violent torture reign. Citizens are terrified and living in their self-imposed states of emergency. One person is murdered every 16 hours, while 45 murders are the monthly average. There have been about 4.500 murders under this government in nine years. Today, the number of murders for this year is reported as 480. And the slaughter continues.

Since 2015, this government has allocated 60.83 billion to national security. How will the \$ 6.113 billion allocated in the 2025 budget fix the violent crime crisis in one year?

And the Prime Minister still arrogantly persists with his sleeping minister of national insecurity, perpetuating citizens' misery. Minister Hinds the "wrongeous" choice.

Imagine the member for St Joseph was robbed outside a rum shop at 5 pm on a Monday. Following his complaints of crime, members of the public who are fed up with nine years of violent crime are saying the minister should drink his rum and get out of their faces. I wouldn't say that. I would say the minister only knows 'this is where crime reach'.

After over 530 billion, ie, more than half-a-trillion dollars of taxpayers' money was spent, the

violent, unprecedented crime crisis continues to grow. That is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM – perpetuating national misery.

When machine gunfire exploded the body of the beautiful little angel Anika Guerra in Moruga, it was like taking a chainsaw to Jello. An innocent, tiny angel and her Daddy blasted to pieces.

Last year, the Peterkin children were blown to bits in their beds. These children who should be in school today were murdered in their homes. While this government and the education minister are forever bobbing and weaving through scandals and trying to beat out fires with Facebook posts, our schools have become gang recruitment zones, and academic failure is the norm.

On page 117 of the 2025 budget statement, we are told that an eBook platform will be integrated into the education system and operational by June 2025. But what device are students going to use to access these ebooks? This government took away students' laptops, so I hope the Minister of Education can enlighten the nation. The minister complains to the population about a lack of money but never mentions that \$69.55 billion was allocated for education since 2015.

Despite all that money, the minister has fostered out-of-control school violence and an ever-increasing academic failure rate. According to the education minister, after 530 billion...PNM – pressure no money: that is the legacy of this PNM government.

Over the past nine years, citizens have experienced numerous problems and horror stories when they seek healthcare. The Health Minister continues to govern through public relations stunts, gimmickry, buffoonery, and deflections from the issues.

The 5,000 deaths from the covid19 pandemic, the recent spate of 21 neonatal deaths at the PoS NICU, and the poor response to the current dengue outbreak have all exposed the gross incompetence of this government in healthcare.

This Health Minister has been allocated \$56.89b billion since 2015. Yet the health sector continues to be plagued by:

- Long waiting times for clinic appointments,
- days spent waiting on chairs in the casualty department,
- Long waiting times for cataracts, joint replacement, and other surgeries,
- frequent shortages of drugs at the hospitals and health centres,
- scheduled surgeries are often postponed due to lack of supplies,
- Long waiting times for MRI, CT, ultrasound scans,
- no plan to promptly address the substantial number of unemployed doctors,
- no plan to stem the bleeding of nurses from our country.

The Health Minister is either weeping, shedding tears, or liming

outside rum shops while the Health Ministry has become a ministry of death. The minister should hide his face in shame for the poor state of healthcare. You know what he could do? He could take his own advice, get a piece of old cloth, and make a mask, or take an old jersey and make a mask to cover his face. That's the only man ever robbed and left with his wallet and cell phone to call the police.

After 530 billion..., that is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM – priorities never met.

The Minister of Finance paints a rosy picture of the energy sector on pages 58 to 65 of the Budget Statement, but the Prime Minister says there are difficult times ahead. This is a manifestation of the cognitive dissonance of this outgoing PNM administration.

From 2016 to 2023, the energy sector's real GDP contracted in seven of these eight years; we see 2024 is no different. The decline is predicated on a 34.9 per cent decline in natural gas production and a 37% decline in oil production from 2015 to 2024.

These negative trends ripple through our economy and manifest as economic contraction, lower revenue, falling foreign reserves and decreased supply of US dollars.

After nine going on ten years, the decline of our energy sector must be laid squarely at the feet of the Prime Minister and the chosen one, who somehow sees these declines as a thriving energy sector.

The chosen one, Minister Young, exhibits remarkably similar qualities to his leader and will, therefore, be most appropriate to succeed him. After nine years in office, both have no achievements to their name; both are very successful at failing. He was minister of communications – failed. Then, national security – failed. Now Minister of Energy – failed. And both seem to have a plan to make the government penniless.

After more than 530 billion... of taxpayers' money spent, that is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM – poor national management Every sector spirals uncontrollably downward into deepening failure, crisis, and collapse. The national security, health, education, and energy sectors are all in a mess. I am inclined to repeat the government's own words: You are in charge; deal with it. Nowhere in this budget's education section, between pages 114 and 123, does this minister address school violence frontally. Social media videos of school violence are widespread. Disgusted people are sharing disgusting images of violence. Disgusted people are explaining their disgust through a medium they feel comfortable with. After 530 billion, half a trillion dollars spent, that is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM – people's needs marginalised

Our children's bodies are being tattooed with pain, literally and figuratively. Look into the children's eyes, listen to their trembling

voices, and hear their rage building. See their mask of rebellion. After 530 billion...spent, that is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM - pain, neglect, misery. These images can be changed if the government listens to the people.

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS

Have they listened to the people? Have they listened to the people in their constituencies? Have they listened to how their policies affect our citizens? Have they listened to people's dreams, hopes, aspirations, and ideas? I can say with confidence that this government has not. That is why the country has gone backwards in every area except for the crime rate—the only growing industry!

Unlike the PNM, UNC has always maintained that we will not leave any citizen behind. Through us, they will always have a voice. So, every year, we undertake nationwide prebudget consultations, following our great party's founding principles and tenets, to be the people's voice and faithfully represent their interests and needs. They are the ones who put us here. Thanks to all who attended these consultations and shared their concerns and suggestions with us, including representatives from NGOs, labour unions, business organisations, and other groups. Thanks also to those who sent us emails, texts, and WhatsApp messages and those who sent written submissions. The people know the truth about what's happening in the country. They live it, and they feel it. Unfortunately, the PNM ministers live in a bubble and don't know what life is like for most Trinbagonians.

NINE YEARS OF PROPAGANDA BUDGETS

This government has presented propaganda budgets of or the past nine years, which have consistently failed the country. This 2024/25 budget is no different. What is the legacy of this PNM government's budget 2024? Budget Titles Exposed: 2015/16: "Restoring Confidence and Rebuilding Trust: Let us do this together."

Restoring confidence? Rebuilding trust? The people were betrayed. Together? The only ones 'together' are the ones reaping the benefits. 2016/17: "Shaping a Brighter Future - A Blueprint for Transformation and Growth." This blueprint was drawn up without the people in mind. The people are still stuck in the dark while the promises shine for a chosen few.

• 2017/18: "Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path." The people don't feel this 'sustainable path'—they're still stuck in the same economic rut.

• 2018/19: "Turnaround." The people haven't seen a turnaround—just more empty promises and the same struggles while a few profit. 2019/20: "Stability, Strength and



Members of the public listen to the Opposition Leader's reply to the 2024/2025 budget on October 4. PHOTO BY ROGER JACOB

Growth." The people are still asking: Stability, for whom? Strength for who? Certainly not for us.

• 2020/21: "Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation." The economy might have been reset for a few, but it's the same story for the majority: struggle with no innovation. Or pressure. No money!

• 2021/22: "Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic." Resilience for the few, but the many are left asking, If this is resilience, why do we feel abandoned?

• 2022/23: "Tenacity and Stability." Where's the tenacity or the stability? The people have seen none of it—they're still struggling while the promises never materialized.

• 2023/24: "Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth." No diversification of the economy. Only increased capacity and growth for the few, the people are still waiting to feel any of it—there's no growth where they stand.

• 2024/25- Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity - However, the economic indicators have been in steadfast decline since 2015 because of the minister's resolute incompetence. He mentioned no pathways to long-term prosperity besides waiting for gas production and prices to rebound. GDP contracted from 2014 to 2024 by approximately 20 per cent. The current economy is one-fifth smaller since 2015 when we demitted office. The Minister of Finance has also historically always based his budgets on overestimated prices of energy products. He has consistently been wrong on oil and gas prices, revenue, and expenditures, leading to deficits and increasing national debt.

Nine years of borrowing and HSF withdrawals calling into question his competence. Because of his consistent history of poor judgment, erroneous projections, and broken budget promises, we cannot trust any figure, growth projection, or new promise the minister has provided. That, coupled with the scandalous missing billions from the Auditor General's report, makes his numbers all the more questionable. Only the PNM could engineer a finance minister so incompetent. Indeed, the minister is on record as saying that he thought his own leader was mad for making him the finance minister. Look, I am not in their Cabinet room; the Prime Minister should have chosen his man for finance wisely. Clearly, he didn't.

Borrowings and HSF withdrawals are being masked as revenue to make deficits appear smaller and artificially present the illusion of growth, fooling no one except those who purposely choose to be blinded and the PNM's true believers.

What was the result after these nine propaganda budgets? GDP has contracted to 2006 levels, with record deficits, billions owed to suppliers and contractors, billions owed in VAT refunds, \$119.887 billion borrowed, and over 50,000 jobs lost. They are spending millions to lose jobs rather than create jobs.

This government has no idea how to grow the economy and create jobs and wealth for the people of this country. You see, my colleague from Diego Martin North East should know better. He should know what a beautiful economy should look like. A beautiful economy is like a golf course. You have to groom it every day; otherwise, the country turns into a wasteland. After 530 billion..., that is the legacy

of this PNM government. PNM - propaganda, not management.

COST OF LIVING

Instead of growing the economy and making citizens' lives easier, what have they done? They have sought to place burdens on ordinary citizens. The cost of living has skyrocketed. On page 28 of the budget statement, the minister boasted of having extracted \$91 million in taxes from homeowners.

Year after year, they come with taxes, fuel price hikes, traffic ticket fines, electricity and water rate increase while removing grants for single mothers, baby milk grants, laptops for our children, GATE for our university students, and so on. House and land prices are out of reach for the average person. Rents will increase because of property taxes and increases in utilities. Everybody in this country is lying on a bed of needles. For most, the needles are already inches into their flesh. And every day, the needles are forced deeper into their flesh because their cost-of-living burden gets heavier.

Every day, citizens are being burdened. This government and its ministers are effecting death by a thousand cuts. They add an ounce of burden, then an ounce of pain, then another ounce of horror, and repeat. They do this over and over again to the population until people have learned to be helpless and hopeless, till they are timid and terrorized, till they are crippled and paralysed because of the cost of living. Never once did the PNM government ask the people how they felt about the cost of living. They never asked you how their wage freezes, lockdowns, foreign exchange restrictions and

other oppressive measures have affected workers, fathers, mothers, children, heads of household, young people, the elderly, the retired, and the disabled. After 530 billion... that is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM—People never matter.

The UNC has a legacy of caring. Everything we do must always have a positive, direct, and tangible effect on the lives of everyday citizens. We work to make lives better. When citizens are experiencing hardship, we want to know and help. The citizens are asking for cost-of-living reform.

COUNTRY NEEDS COST OF LIVING REFORM

The cost of living has skyrocketed in the last nine years. Central bank data of consumer price index shows some percentage price increases from 2015 to 2023/2024 in major categories:

1. Housing - 14.5%
2. Rent - 10.1%
3. Transport - 26.8%
4. Health - 46.7%
5. Communication - 11.4%
6. Furnishings and Household equipment - 16%
7. Recreation and Culture - 21.2%
8. Hotels, Cafes, Restaurants - 35.1%
9. Bread and Cereals - 39.8%
10. Meats - 45.7%
11. Fish - 35%
12. Milk, Cheese and Eggs - 31.7%
13. Butter, Margarine and Edible Oils - 66%
14. Fruits - 46.2%
15. Vegetables - 58% Non-Alcoholic drinks - 44%. (CBTT Data Centre)

Premium gas increased by 35 per cent, super gas increased by 158, diesel increased by 227 per cent, kerosene increased by 193 per cent. Even the price of coals went up. The rise in fuel prices contributed to a 26.8 per cent increase in transport costs, except for Trinidad's most legendary cyclist from Port of Spain South, who peddles to Parliament in an SUV.

This, in turn, raised expenses for most businesses and thus consumer prices. Hundreds of thousands of citizens have been battered by higher living costs due to the government's higher fuel prices. When my government left office, super fuel was \$2.70 per litre; today, it is \$6.97 per litre. Diesel was \$1.50 per litre; today, it is \$4.91 per litre.

Cost-of-living increases have led to declining living standards for many citizens, significantly impacting the middle and working classes. One can only imagine what is happening to those least able to bear this increased burden, such as individuals on fixed incomes like pensioners or public assistance.

Due to deliberate government policy, the combined increases in transport, taxes, and soon-to-be-higher utility rates, land and house prices, rents, security, and healthcare costs will further erode citizens' purchasing power. While the cost of living has skyrocketed because of failed government policy decisions, this government's limiting of all negotiations for wage increases to four per cent previously and now five per cent means that it is deliberately facilitating the diminishing of employees' purchasing power. The government's decision to cap wage increases at 5 per cent means that employees in essential services—such as fire, police, and prison services, as well as teachers, medical personnel and other public servants—are facing a substantial drop in the value of their purchasing power.

What does this hike in the cost of living mean to households in the context of the low wage increase unions were forced into accepting? It means that households will have to re-prioritize and limit their spending. While PNM ministers enjoy almond milk and Ozempic, they tell you there is no macaroni pie, ham, or going to the movies with your children. Due to continuous price hikes, households already must spend a greater percentage of their salary on food, transport, and medical care. This means that the real value of household incomes has shrunk tremendously over the last nine years.

When one factors in the additional burden of property tax, which takes priority over many other bills as it fetches a high penalty, including loss of property, it is evident that the increased cost of living and drastically reduced standard of living will substantially impact most households. What are

the citizens of this country to do? The country needs cost-of-living reform. Lower—and middle-income households will likely have to dig into whatever savings they may still have to keep their heads above water. After 530 billion... that is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM – Priorities never met.

BILLIONS BANDITED IN BOBOL: WHERE THE MONEY GONE?

This latest budget follows the same tragic pattern the minister sets, devoid of ideas, imagination, substance, and accountability. It repeats previous broken promises. About 90 per cent of all his previous budget promises are broken. It pelts expenditure allocations in your face. It projects yet again unrealistic revenue projections. Word salad. Indeed, it is a buffet of word salads—the most unhealthy salad you could find! This budget is another chapter in their book of failed budget gimmicks. Nowhere in this budget can we find proof of the citizens getting value for the \$67.318 billion spent by this government in fiscal 2023/24. Since this government took office in 2015, I can say without fear of contradiction that every single sector in our nation—roads and infrastructure, healthcare, education, national security, agriculture, tourism, energy, public utilities, social services—is worse off than when we were in government. And more and more, Madame Speaker, the country's citizens are standing up and asking where the money went. PNM – Public needs mismanaged.

For the past nine years, we have consistently asked, "where the money gone?" This is where the money gone. I can tell you where some of the money went. Here is a brief list of how your tax dollars were lost under this government.

1. Paintings – \$3m; 2. Benz – \$2m; (for PM); 3. Trump phone call – \$16m; 4. Tarouba stadium \$210m; 5. Buccoo Estate – \$174m; 6. Toilet Paper Factory Loan – \$30m; 7. TSTT's bailout of Massy Communications \$255m; 8. Ernst and Young (audits) – \$20m; 9. PWC (audits) – \$10.5m; 10. San Fernando Waterfront destruction – \$500m; 11. Fake Oil – \$100m; 12. Cabo Star mobilisation fee – \$13m; 13. Ocean Flower 2 mobilisation fee – \$20m; 14. President's House Restoration \$89m; 15. \$1.2b for four boats (Austal / Incat); 16. Prime Minister's Residence \$70m (refurbishment, Tobago); 17. The family of Faris Al-Rawi \$250m in rent; 18. Stuart Young's brother finance deals with the state (Angus Young, NCB Global Finance) \$4b; 19. Carifesta 2019 \$28m; 20. \$120m loss at Trestrail HDC development; 21. \$8.9m ramp in Tobago to accommodate the Jean de la Valette; 22. \$45m to harass Moonilal; 23. Mosquito Creek collapses \$50m; 24. \$55m

on the DPP office; 25. \$3b missing Auditor General's report; 26. \$400m was wasted by NGC on train one; 27. \$120m owed by Niquan for gas; 28. \$140m on Galleons Passage; 29. \$100m to lease the Jean de Vallette ferry; 30. \$120m Balisier House; 31. \$5 billion in improperly awarded contracts as flagged by the procurement regulator; 32. Over \$1b for eat-ah-food lawyers.

This amounts to \$17 billion stolen, wasted, and deposited into bulging Balisier bank books – 17 billion!! This is where the money has gone. It didn't go towards anything that benefitted the average man or woman on the street.

What is the legacy of this PNM government after spending 530 billion...? PNM – Plundering national money.

PIPER GOVERNMENT

Because of the legacy of failure to create a single revenue-generating project and shutting down revenue-generating projects like Petrotrin, the steel mill, and half of the Point Lisas plants, they have repeatedly raided this country's savings. This PNM government, through their minister, is the only one ever to withdraw monies from the HSF. Not once, but on ten occasions: HSF withdrawal.

1. US\$375,050,860 in September 2016.
2. US\$252,548,048 in September 2017.
3. US\$79,853,158 in March 2020;
4. US\$600,000,000 in June 2020;
5. US\$300,000,000 in September 2020;
6. US\$198,943,283 in December 2020;
7. US\$293,771,250 in March 2021;
8. US\$300,000,000 in June 2021;
9. US\$100,000,000 in September 2021;
10. US\$160,383,699 in December 2023, which the government did not publicly announce. (HSF Annual Report 2023)

That is the legacy of this PNM government, with over US\$2.7 billion or over TT\$17 billion withdrawn on ten different occasions. PNM- Pipers Need Money.

On the other hand, my government deposited over US\$1.18 billion or TT\$7.91 billion in the HSF from 2010 to 2015 and did not make one single withdrawal. Under my administration, we accumulated the highest foreign reserves in our country's history. These are the facts, F.A.C.T.S or F.A.X, as the Prime Minister likes to spell it, for the PNM true believers to see: My UNC government put \$7.61 billion into our savings, and this PNM government withdrew \$ 17 billion from our savings. Seventeen

billion dollars were raided from the nation's savings. Seventeen billion wasted and corrupted added to seventeen billion raided from the nation's savings. Thirty-four billion dollars of taxpayer money vanished with nothing worthwhile to show in return. That is the legacy of this PNM government. PNM – Pathetic negligent misappropriations.

BROKEN PROMISES FROM BUDGET 2024

The minister always has a sunny theme for his presentations, every budget and every midterm review. Maybe he secretly likes the warmth of the Rising Sun. The PNM has broken over 90 per cent of its budget promises in the past nine years. A government's promise(s) to a democracy's citizenry is a sacred covenant that holds a meaningful place in a nation's political and social psyche. This is because a budget is more than itemized estimates of government expenditures and revenue for a fiscal year. At its core, a budget is a contract between the government and the citizens who elected them to office and at whose pleasure they serve in obeisance to the Constitution of the land and the sacred tenets it espouses—that of equality, justice, and fairness. Every year, the Rowley government consistently makes numerous promises under each of the ministries/heads of expenditure. Data analysis shows this adds up to about 490 budget promises made in the past nine years.

The total number of broken budget promises over this period (2015-2024) is about 373, and the total number of repeated budget promises is about 100. Of these broken promises, the Ministry of National Security registers the highest number (51) —incidentally, when the crime and violence wave is at an unprecedented, historic high level. This is followed by Works and Transport (43), Public Utilities (37), Education (35), Tobago Affairs (35), Health (32), Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (32) and Finance (31). The other sectors comprise the remainder of the 373 broken budget promises of the PNM government. My colleagues will provide the details of the broken promises.

I speak here only to the numbers. Some matters go beyond the cut and thrust of politics, and the PNM government's chronic failure to keep its budget promises is one of them. This government and Minister must honestly account for these 373 broken budget promises to the citizens. This is the history of the Minister, gimmickry, and non-performance. \$530 billion, half-a-trillion were spent, but the country got nothing—zero, nada, zilch. PNM – projects not moving.

However, the UNC has plans that we will implement. They will not be broken promises like what you get from this government. Let us look at how this government

has hoodwinked the population in some critical sectors.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Madam Speaker, it is both alarming and disappointing that in the heart of the digital age, the Minister of Finance could only muster nine mentions of digital transformation in his five-hour plus presentation on Monday. This again shows the PNM Government's continued failure in such a critical sector. Page 51 of 133 The future of our country's economy, productivity, and global competitiveness depends on the nation's digital transformation. However, digital transformation cannot be misconstrued as being equated with a cashless society. The UNC is on record as supporting a hybrid digital and cash transactions system. While the world has fast-tracked its digital future, TT is left behind by the PNM's failure to deliver on its digital transformation promises.

In past budget statements, we were given grant assurances about the future of digital transformation in this country. However, in the 2025 draft estimates for the development programme, the Ministry of Digital Transformation was allocated \$ 1 million for the digitisation of the ministry. Imagine the ministry responsible for digitisation is not digitised. It gets worse: \$1 million was also allocated to computerise this ministry. Imagine the Ministry of Transformation is not even computerised. The government promised widespread digital infrastructure improvements, enhanced e-governance services, and digital tools. Yet, what have we seen? We saw two ministers standing by the Arima dial trying to connect to WiFi because, to the PNM, that is what a smart city is. Look at the failure of the Arima Connect project. When it was announced in 2021, it was one big mamaguy. The TTConnect platform, which was meant to be the cornerstone of e-government services, collapsed last year. And since then, we have had nothing. Leaving citizens in the dark when trying to access essential services. This is the pattern with this administration—creating initiatives without providing the necessary infrastructure to support it. In 2015, this PNM deliberately dismantled the digital infrastructure that was carefully built under the UNC's leadership.

Madam Speaker, let me remind you and the citizens of this nation that while the Minister of Finance spoke glowingly of the creation of the Ministry of Digital Transformation in 2020, he conveniently forgot to mention that his government eliminated the Ministry of Science and Technology in 2015, which was fulfilling the same role. The ministry's rebranding in 2020 does not



A view of the Petrotrin refinery from Guayacana River, Gasparillo

absolve the PNM of the five lost years during which no meaningful action was taken to advance digital initiatives. After the pandemic underscored the importance of digital infrastructure, they hastily revived this ministry.

Instead of delivering on the promised future, this government's digital transformation agenda remains mired in stagnation, underperformance, and a lack of vision. TT deserves more than half-baked projects and unfulfilled promises, yet no one is surprised that this is where we are under this government. Digital leaders within the private sector have spoken to the challenges of digital transformation. They emphasise that transformation is about implementing technology, preparing teams, upskilling staff, and creating an organisational culture that embraces change. Yet, there's no indication that this government has a plan to support businesses or public sector employees in adapting to new digital realities. The result? Low adoption rates, underutilised systems, and public sector inefficiencies cost the country time and money. Despite promises of more robust cybersecurity frameworks and legislation, TT remain woefully unprepared for modern cybercrime threats.

The Cybersecurity Incident Response Team (CSIRT) is under-resourced, and we have yet to see any Page 55 of 133 substantive movement on the comprehensive cybersecurity legislation promised years ago. Madam Speaker, this Government clearly has no coherent digital transformation strategy. They have failed to deliver on their promises, and their approach lacks both ambition and follow through. Digital transformation should be a key pillar of our national development strategy, yet this PNM administration treats it as an afterthought, which I say also

applies to how they see their own Minister of Digital Transformation. Ask any citizen who is the Minister of Digital Transformation; they can't tell you. Ask citizens what the ministry has done; they can't tell you. No one knows. TT deserve a government that understands the power of digital transformation and is ready to harness it for the good of all citizens. It is just another mamaguy... A digital mamaguy.

ENERGY – THE RUST BELT

Madam Speaker, I am now turning to the energy sector. The consensus among the energy industry community is that this sector, which is the most important to our country, is in a worrying decline. Workers in some plants in Point Lisas, where natural gas supply contracts expire within the next two years, are already making plans to migrate.

A few weeks ago, Methanex shut down the Atlas methanol plant, which has a production capacity of 1,719,000 tonnes per year, and restarted its smaller Titan methanol plant, which has a production capacity of 875,000 tonnes per year. There is a view that the Atlas methanol plant will never restart, given the amount of natural gas it needs and the fact that it is due for maintenance, which will require a significant investment.

It will, unfortunately, become an addition to an ever-growing industrial graveyard that includes: 1) the Mittal Steel Complex 2) the TTMC 1 methanol plant; 3) the Yara ammonia plant; 4) Atlantic Train 1; 5) the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery. In addition, Nutrien is now only operating three of its four ammonia plants. All these closures happened under the watch of this PNM administration. The dislocation is reflected in the labour statistics for the energy sector.

According to the Central Bank,

the number of persons with jobs in the energy sector fell from 20,500 in 2015 to 10,400 in 2023 – a decline of 49.3 per cent. Where have all these professionals gone?

Madam Speaker, both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance have confirmed this decline. In his famous affidavit supporting the state's case in *Dhoray v the AG* under the compulsion of an oath, the Minister of Finance admitted that lower-than expected oil and gas production had had a "profound impact" on revenue. He further said the deficit for fiscal 2024 was expected to be \$9 billion.

Nowhere in his budget speech does he mention this \$9 billion deficit, which the Central Bank reports as \$9.5 billion. This decline, amid the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister's 'wailing and gnashing of teeth,' leads to a rust belt akin to what they have in the US. The legacy of the last nine years (now going into 10) is the TT rust belt. The government has ignored and sidestepped this decline, but denial is not a strategy, and speaking to the Energy Chamber soon is not a plan.

PETROTRIN REFINERY

The centrepiece of the PNM's rust belt is the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery, a major national asset that once provided energy security for this country and the entire Caricom region. That refinery is now left to rot and become the world's most expensive scrap iron heap. In his budget speech, we heard about three bidders. None of these companies are known to have any track record in the refining industry. This coming November marks six years of the closure of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery. That is six years of depreciation of the refinery's assets. Did the Cabinet's decision to close the refinery consider the impact of six years of depreciation

in its economic analysis? Three attempts to find a buyer for the refinery have failed. From 2006 to 2014, some US\$1.6 billion was spent on the upgrade known as the GOP; this money is not lost. Maybe the approach to restarting has to change. We, on this side, commit to restarting the refinery. Upon returning to office, we will appoint a task force of industry experts to report to the Cabinet within 90 days on a roadmap to restart the refinery.

HERITAGE PETROLEUM

As for Heritage Petroleum, it has made no difference to oil production. Heritage has produced less oil after six years than Petrotrin. In its last year of operation (2018), Petrotrin averaged 37,558 barrels of oil per day, whereas Heritage has averaged 34,406 barrels of oil per day for 2024. National oil production is now at 1938 levels. Large swaths of what was once the proud oil industry in places like Santa Flora, Palo Seco, Los Bajos, Point Fortin, Guapo, Parrylands, Guayaguayare, Barrackpore and Penal are now in decay and being reclaimed by nature. Places like the Pointe-a-Pierre camp and Beach camp now lie in ruin. The boasts about Heritage's profitability are hollow and vacuous. Petrotrin's Exploration and Production Unit, now Heritage, was always profitable. Petrotrin made an operating profit of \$1.7 billion in its last year of operation. We believe that saving oil production requires an infusion of private capital, new technology, efficient acreage management, and a debottlenecking of the maze of approvals.

NATURAL GAS PRODUCTION

As mentioned earlier, the Prime Minister lamented the level of

natural gas production and said it would worsen before there was some relief in 2027. When the PM returned from Switzerland in September 2022, he warned similarly. He said then that he had seen a diagram showing that by 2026, 2027, and 2028, the levels of gas that would be available to Trinidad and Tobago would have far-reaching consequences for government revenues and the quality of life for all people in TT. While this government tries to hide its concerns about Atlantic's restructuring, our LNG production declined by 39.4 per cent from 2015 to 2023 and will decline further from 2024 to 2027. The consequence is the now permanent shutdown of Train 1 while Trains 2, 3, and 4 operate at under 65 per cent of their capacity. They boast that the restructuring will allow third-party gas to be sold to Atlantic. Where will this third-party gas come from, and when will it come? In addition, Train IV is not yet part of the restructured Atlantic, as its commercial arrangements continue into 2026. We can restructure as much as we want, but the reality is that with significantly less gas being produced, there is less LNG to sell. It would be helpful if the Minister of Energy could say when he expects natural gas to arrive from Dragon and Coucina-Manakin.

DEBUNKING PNM PROPAGANDA

In his budget speech, the Minister of Finance repeated the same old story they had repeated for the last nine years. They say the leadership of a major upstream company told them when they came into office that they would not pay taxes until 2024. That company is BPTT. They posit this was due to the accelerated capital allowances introduced in mid-2014. That statement shows

a gross lack of understanding of the fiscal regime that underpins the energy sector. When they say, "Pay no taxes," which tax are they referring to? Is it SPT, PPT, unemployment levy or royalties? The fiscal regime changed in 2014 with the introduction of accelerated capital allowances, which only affected petroleum profits tax (PPT) and Unemployment Levy. It had no bearing on bpTT's payments of supplemental petroleum tax (SPT) or royalties.

Moreover, the PNM did not immediately change these accelerated capital allowances. The accelerated exploration allowance expired in 2017 as a sunset clause was inserted in the Finance Act 2014, and the accelerated development allowance was only changed in 2020. Data from the EITI show that from 2016 to 2022, bpTT paid the government TT\$14.7 billion in taxes and royalties, not zero. Either the PNM did not understand what the leadership of bpTT was telling them, or they misrepresented what they were told. The irony is that the investments that led to the Juniper, Angelin, Matapal, and Cypre projects are directly related to these accelerated capital allowances made by the UNC.

WAY FORWARD ENERGY SECTOR

When we return to office, we will revitalise the energy sector to save this economy from its current economic death. We will revise the fiscal incentives system to conduct drilling. Drilling declined by 56.9 per cent from 2015 to 2023, at the heart of our production decline. We will assess the efficacy of State enterprises' structures to determine the appropriate model for tackling declining production and the energy transition. STOW certification will no longer be a requirement for working in our energy sector. It is too onerous, expensive, and discriminatory to small businesses. It can cost hundreds of thousands to become STOW-certified. Certification is given for one or two years, after which businesses must be recertified. STOW, through the energy chamber, is holding companies to ransom by having a monopoly on who can conduct business in the energy sector, using health, safety, and the environment as a strangling tool.

We will revert to the PLEA certification combined with an expanded role of the OSH agency by adding an advisory capacity. The OSH agency will then have a department that can advise and assist companies in complying with the provisions of the OSH Act. The Energy Chamber has existed for almost 68 years and has previously provided good service. However, the chamber is now dominated by large multinationals and local special interest groups and the locally-owned MSMEs in the energy sector are really without an



The Ministry of Health, Queen's Park West, Port of Spain. PHOTO BY ROGER JACOB

adequate voice.

Indeed, many local businesspeople have stated they are afraid to voice their true opinions for fear of retaliation from multinational companies and local special interests. We will create and fully finance the formation and operation of a new body to represent local energy service companies and contractors. The new body will also represent businesses that provide goods and services throughout the energy value chain.

All locally-owned MSMEs in the energy sector will be able to join and use this body to make representations directly to the Minister of Energy and Prime Minister without going through the existing energy chamber. We will remove all state-owned energy companies from the Energy Chamber and create a new, separate body to represent their interests. I do not believe that the current energy chamber represents and advocates for the best interests of our state-owned companies.

State-owned energy companies must make decisions and policies in the best interests of our citizens and not for a private body mainly controlled by multinationals. Through these new representative bodies, we will prioritise the interests of local energy companies and local content. We will further incentivise the rollout of electric, hybrid, and CNG vehicles. Our new Government will lead in this regard

and mandate that practical new government vehicles be electric, hybrid, or CNG. We will implement a system to determine the fuel price at the pump that protects the population and keeps the subsidy manageable. As mentioned earlier, we will restart the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery. Madam Speaker, a lot more can be discussed in the energy sector, but I will leave that to my colleague from Pointe-a-Pierre to expand on.

HEALTH SECTOR

The Minister of Finance continues to boast and make great promises after spending nearly \$60 billion—taxpayers' dollars—on the health sector. He is now saying that he is trying to enhance the capacity and efficiency of our healthcare system, where the quality and accessibility of both primary and secondary care have been almost absent. To date, patients in our public health institutions are unable to get the attention they deserve at both the primary care and secondary care levels. This is unacceptable and a total shame and travesty!

After nine years, the Minister of Finance is still trying to tell the population about his government's so-called "multi-disciplinary approach to managing and preventing non-communicable diseases," when the reality is that in TT, we don't have an idea of the actual incidence of diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. There

has been no national survey nor study done under this government to determine the true incidence of these non-communicable diseases and to ensure that adequate planning would be appropriate for the management when you have empirical evidence to be able to plan. That has never been done over the last nine years.

The finance minister presented to the nation his government's so-called health sector achievements but had to group them for four years to blatantly hoodwink and fool the population into believing they were doing a lot of work. In terms of 3,400 beneficiaries for dialysis for over four years— that is 800 per year. And the fact is that the incidence of renal failure is over 4,000 citizens. These 4,000 patients require dialysis at least twice or thrice weekly, but the minister boasts that only 800 per year are being done. Regarding radiation treatment, the minister said that over four years, 2,000 patients would receive radiation. But that is 500 patients per year. What about the other patients per year who need radiation treatment and who are not getting it?

The finance minister should be quite unhappy with himself and his government for stating that only 1,000 persons receive cardiac services per year and 750 retinal surgeries were performed when thousands more patients need cardiac services and retinal surgeries in this country. So, what

has happened to these patients who have been waiting for years to have these surgeries done? Well, the sad reality is that many of the patients waiting for cardiac services (heart) bypass surgeries have died waiting. Similarly, many patients waiting for retinal surgeries became blind while waiting.

When the minister opens the statistics to show that 265,000 people have to go to the CDAP programme, it tells you how dire the national situation is. And honourable minister, let me tell you this—this is not something to boast about! This shows the need for more adequate, cost-effective, efficient, or effective pharmaceutical drugs. So, 265,000 people will be eligible for the CDAP programme at \$190 million over a four-year period, which is about \$47 million per year. Do you know what this means? It shows that when we on this side have always complained that CDAP pharmaceuticals are ineffective, you have just proven us correct! The statistics analysis exemplifies the need for improving the types of pharmaceuticals provided in the CDAP programme to ensure greater effectiveness in managing diabetes and hypertension. It is time now that we improve the level of ambulance care to:

- Upgrade the level of training for ambulance service attendants
- Provide the relevant equipment and pharmaceuticals in the ambulances and ensure an effective communication strategy from the



The Ministry of Education, St Vincent Street, Port of Spain.

ambulance to the hospitals, as is being done internationally to save lives, particularly concerning heart patients and patients requiring urgent treatment on the way to hospitals.

It is time enough that we upgraded the training to bring a higher level of emergency medical technicians. Why hasn't the government been able to provide sufficient medical equipment for breast cancer screening, mammography, and prostate screening throughout the country in different centres? What about screening for bowel cancer, which is the second highest cancer in men

after prostate, and in women, it's almost as common as in men?

The finance minister quoted the statistics for non-communicable diseases, but the CSO has not been able to provide the country with relevant statistics related to deaths from different diseases. So, when the minister quotes these, where is getting the information? In the absence of this information, adequate planning has not been and will not be implemented, and this has been the hallmark of this government over the last nine years. They have been promising to have an effective mental health programme, but there is no evidence

of any efficient mental health programmes within the national community. There is a shortage of some of the pharmaceuticals that are urgently required for patients who are acutely mentally ill. And when you examine the accurate picture, healthcare continues to be an abysmal failure, and we have always said that patients enter the hospitals walking and are being brought out as corpses.

EDUCATION SECTOR

It was shocking to hear the minister, in his budget presentation

on education, speak about how, in the past decade, they have not merely discussed enhancements but have turned words into action. The facts speak for themselves: the education sector has been at its worst during these nine years, and thousands of students have failed in our education system. After nine years of governance, the minister is talking about introducing a numeracy adaptive learning platform by January. For nine years, they sat and did absolutely nothing about a digital system within the education sector after we had paved the way for massive digitalisation in education. They have failed miserably by stopping the provision of laptops for students, teachers, and principals and training teachers, principals, and school personnel to continue an ICT education.

All the ICT apparatus and computer rooms have been left to disintegrate and decay. All the ICT technicians have also been left out of the system. But nine years later, they came to talk about a digital system within the education system. It's a shame. The minister tried to bring to the population a list of about six or seven schools we had started. Most were 50, 60, and 70 per cent completed, and some were 95 per cent completed. And now, after nine years, they discuss completing a few of these. What a shame. Over five years while in government, we completed over 5,000 repair projects utilising more than 500 contractors. Imagine the Minister trying to tell the population of school support services, such as social workers, but this PNM government reduced the number of school social workers and other relevant personnel who would have been helping the students in the learning support systems. We gave 500 national scholarships, about 150 open scholarships, and 350 additional scholarships. You have now reduced that to 50 open scholarships, and then you say you have bursaries for students who have done well. On what criteria? You have never been able to tell the population what criteria are being used to award these bursaries. Do you have a list of these students who have been given the bursaries? And on what performance and on what merit have they been given bursaries? So, everything is secretive and hidden with a political agenda in education; imagine a political agenda in education?

PUBLIC UTILITIES

In his budget presentation, the minister sheepishly addressed the previously touted rate increase in water and electricity rates without giving any specifics and updates on the government's plans moving forward, especially since the electricity rate review is currently before the Cabinet and the water rate review is at the RIC. This is an attempt to pull the wool over the

eyes of citizens. This comes as no surprise in an election year despite the government's previous position that a water and electricity rate review was paramount to them to collect additional revenue from citizens. The population must go into the next General Election with their eyes wide open on the issue of increased water and electricity rates. The government cannot leave this issue in limbo, and therefore, whether it is the Minister of Public Utilities or the Prime Minister, the public must be told: how much the rate increase will be, and from when it will be effective under a PNM government. To do otherwise is playing smart with foolishness since citizens are very aware that the government has adopted a holding position on this issue until after the next general election. The government's handlers have told them to back off on the issue since it has received widespread public opposition. Should citizens forget God and vote the PNM back into office, they can rest assured that one of their first acts would be to increase water and electricity rates. The UNC commits that, upon assuming government, we will immediately halt any plan to increase water and electricity rates at this time. The UNC determines its policies based on the needs and circumstances of its population, not on the advice of public relations handlers.

MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (MSMEs)

According to the Minister of Finance, a recently completed National Financial Inclusion Survey Report specifically to determine access by micro, small and medium-sized businesses to online payment options determined that "77 per cent of micro, small and medium enterprises lack business bank accounts accept digital payments, limiting their growth and access to digital markets."

In fact, the 2023 study went further, revealing that: "70% of the population that are MSMEs and don't accept digital payments stated that the main reason they do not accept digital payments linked to a business account is because they don't have a formal business account for their business." They found the application process tedious, were concerned about cyber theft, and were opposed to banks charging fees for processing transactions.

Faced with this report and the known media reports of the severity of other challenges facing the MSME sector, including excessive crime levels and the inability to access foreign exchange, the government has created yet another Roadmap instead of providing solutions to the constraints identified by the sector. Once more, the minister is paying lip service to this sector. Having abandoned the MSMEs during

covid19 while providing support for other entities, this budget continues to undermine the financial interests of this expansive business group. Who will facilitate the costs associated with these struggling entities going cashless?

The UNC supports a hybrid payment system that includes digital transactions or cash. No incentive has been offered in this or any of the previous nine budgets to provide support for business registration for the kind of details that banks demand, all of which are general prerequisites for the procurement of the equipment and facilities to pursue cashless transactions that the government is so anxious to promote. In effect, while the government utters buzzwords about promoting the MSME sector, it continues to deliberately disadvantage them. What is required is financial support, perhaps training and education in operating these small entities – not additional costs.

The introduction of recent legislation requiring these micro, small, and medium-sized businesses to complete a full registration process, have proper accounting, and comply with certain rules at the risk of significant fines for non-compliance presents challenges to these entities that make it unattractive to continue. Blockchain technology offers opportunities. By integrating blockchain into property and asset management, the government can create a secure, transparent system for tracking ownership and transactions, protecting businesses from fraud and providing certainty in their dealings. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools can also be critical in business optimisation. AI can automate customer service and inventory management processes, providing MSMEs with tools to enhance efficiency and reduce costs. By supporting the adoption of AI in sectors such as retail, agriculture, and logistics, the government can position local businesses to compete better.

THE CLICO FIASCO

On Monday, we learned that the government intends to divest Clico Life Insurance Company Ltd, from which it expects to earn “several billions in revenue” to finance government spending in the upcoming election year. In 2017, this same Minister of Finance announced that the government had no intention of winding up the insurance company. Today, they are planning to sell it off. The initial bailout of Clico cost taxpayers \$24 billion, according to the Central Bank. The minister told us that \$13 billion of the debt is still outstanding, even while he boasted that significant Clico assets were tied up in the NIF. But the minister has questions to answer. What was the revenue earned by the Clico group, including the assets tied up in the NIF? Because the revenue

from those NIF-based assets is now being used to pay dividends to private investors and corporations instead of to repay the taxpayers.

So, how much of that revenue from each company in the Clico group has been used to retire the debt over the past 15 years? What is the value of Clico's assets that have already been sold off, including the Clico shares in Methanol Holdings? The same Clico life insurance company that the government is looking to divest recently announced a \$2.3 billion profit. Is this why the government is anxious to sell off the company to their financiers on the eve of a general election? Why now? I call on the Minister to provide a comprehensive report on Clico publicly. No more secrets. I call on the government to amend the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act if necessary to bring this proposed divestment of Clico, Magdalena and the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery under the watchful eye of the Office of the Procurement Regulator.

We demand complete transparency. VAT bonds. Once again, the issue of outstanding VAT refunds emerged, with the minister announcing his intention to issue another tranche of interest-bearing VAT bonds up to \$3 billion in 2025. These bonds will be used for larger VAT refunds owed. The minister has committed to settle cash VAT refunds to small and medium-sized companies December 2024. This VAT bond issuance will be the third such bond. The minister acknowledged that 80 per cent of the VAT refunds are due to energy companies.

Previously, these bonds were issued with coupon rates of 3.15 per cent (first iteration) and 3.3 per cent (second iteration), paid interest semi-annually and were both oversubscribed, displaying the desire from taxpayers for this facility. There is an obligation to settle these VAT refunds expeditiously. However, the government appears to delay refunds, thereby benefiting from what is, in effect, a forced, effective short-term loan from the company while simultaneously negatively affecting the business's operating cash. Nonetheless, businesses that are owed substantial VAT refunds will benefit from an improved cash flow position, as they can redeem these bonds or trade them on the secondary market if the minister keeps his promise. This is particularly crucial for companies that traditionally experience high VAT refund delays due to their large volume of zero-rated and VAT-exempt supplies. Many companies have, in practice, encashed their bonds with financial institutions in exchange for the full face value or a limited discount in an effort to secure their operational and other commitments.

The minister has not addressed the root cause of the delay in VAT refunds. There is no indication of whether this \$3 billion would be

enough to clear the backlog of VAT refunds due entirely. Some have recommended a review and revamp of the VAT regime to determine whether a sales tax should replace the tax and whether a reverse VAT charge can reduce the VAT refund claims made by companies so that net sales tax is remitted to the state. I now turn to UNC plans and policies to secure and rebuild TT.

UNC PLANS FOR CRIMINAL CIVIL JUSTICE SYSTEM REFORM 2025-2030

The criminal and civil justice system is in a mess. We have to fix it. That is why I had a justice ministry to focus on improving the justice system. These are some of UNC's plans for criminal and civil justice reform. A UNC government will:

1. Undertake a comprehensive review of all criminal laws to weed out obsolete laws that are oppressive to a free democratic society or cause unnecessary bureaucracy.
2. Categorise the offences of murder and rape into first-degree and second-degree.
3. Introduction of a constitutional right of an accused to have a trial within a reasonable time.
4. Place victims at the centre of the criminal justice system from the beginning: Provide support for victims, including restitution, job placements, housing, and social programmes. Due to the current low detection and conviction rate, this support will be given regardless of whether someone is caught or convicted.
5. Provide the needed resources to ensure that cases involving offences against children and sexual offences are determined rapidly.
6. Raise the legal age for marijuana use and gambling to 25 years and older.
7. Increase the number of functional courtrooms. Right now, there is a deficit. Each judge of the High Court must have a designated courtroom to ensure he/she can sit every day.
8. Provide more courtrooms in highly populated areas outside the capital, such as Chaguanas, Rio Claro, Sangre Grande and Diego Martin.
9. Increase key support for the judiciary to reduce the backlog, to bring indictable cases to trial within two to three years.
10. Create smaller detention centres around the country to break up gang activity and to ensure closer family support to prisoners by enabling regular visitation.
11. We will also ensure that incarcerated persons are allowed frequent visitation from their children.
12. Establish lower security prisons for first-time nonviolent offenders with work release during the day.
13. Modernise prisons and break up large prisons into smaller ones,

where the inmates can be better monitored.

14. Utilise intelligence services for crime fighting and not for spying on political opponents.

15. Implement appropriate social programmes involving training and life skills to prevent recidivism

16. Comprehensively reform and reorient the education system to cater to all children, not just academically gifted ones and, in particular, to identify young persons with learning disabilities or vulnerabilities so that they can be channelled to productive activities such as trades or remedial learning. Most criminals have not been successful in the education system.

17. Encourage the participation of NGOs and service organisations in mentoring youth. Targeting and mentoring at-risk youth is critical to preventing them from falling under the influence of gang leaders and falling through the cracks.

18. Provide support for single parents, including afterschool care, to ensure children are supervised. Homework centres shall be reintroduced.

19. Introduce a system of rewards for police officers and divisions where crime is being kept low.

20. Invest resources in the DPP's office and the Public Defender's office and ensure better conditions so staff are encouraged to stay.

21. Will work with all stakeholders to convene national consultation on crime and criminal justice within one month of forming the government.

22. Revamp plea bargaining legislation to make it easier for the accused to plead guilty and be sentenced on a fast-track system, including for manslaughter.

23. Revamp and refurbish Magistrates' Court infrastructure, which has deteriorated substantially since covid19 with no repairs being done.

24. Reform the judge-alone trial process to provide for three judges to sit in capital cases.

25. Ensure capital cases are heard and determined expeditiously.

26. Maintenance grants for families of murder victims and victims of serious sexual offences while they cannot work.

27. Structured and expanded psychological services and support. Support of victims must not be ad hoc.

28. Restitution mechanisms so prisoners can work to compensate victims and receive time off their sentences for contributions to victims.

29. Train police officers in victim management and support.

30. Ensure children of victims receive adequate support in school.

31. Develop mechanisms to ensure victims have the right to information about the progress of cases.

32. Increase the number of safe houses for women and children who are victims of domestic abuse.

33. Decentralise the services offered by Children's Authority.

34. Train prosecutors in victim advocacy.

35. Introduce additional mechanisms to hear and involve victims in the sentencing process.

36. Introduce a Victims Rights Act to include a charter of rights for victims of crime.

37. Invest in forensic sciences in conjunction with the UWI to ensure timely sample analysis, including drug and firearms analysis. This will include scholarships to encourage more people to enter the forensic science profession.

UNC PLANS FOR HEALTHCARE REFORM 2025-2030

This government has misplaced priorities regarding investments and expenditures in the health sector. While critical supplies, drugs, and equipment for diagnostic and surgical procedures are ignored, they choose to build a vanity Ministry of Health administration building and San Fernando Hospital car park. No beds, medicines, or surgeries exist, but we have a carpark. A UNC-led government will work to ensure that all citizens receive proper health care. A UNC-led government will improve the healthcare sector in the following ways:

1. Review the Children's Life Fund legislation to enable more applicants with diseases not currently included in the Fund to access the facility.
2. Ensure the Couva Children's Hospital is fully equipped, staffed, and operational.
3. Install a centrally specialised Burns Unit close to the Point Lisas Industrial Complex. (This unit can be part of the Couva Children's Hospital and Multi-Training Facility)
4. Purchase and maintain modern equipment at all medical facilities. This will also include having qualified and trained staff to operate the equipment.
5. Fix the supply chain issues to prevent the “shortage of drugs, equipment and supplies” that now hinder the work of doctors and nurses at many of our healthcare facilities.
6. Establish guaranteed maximum waiting times for clinic appointments, diagnostic tests, and surgical procedures.
7. Immediately treat the backlog of patients awaiting critical diagnostic tests and surgeries, including cataract and joint replacement surgery.
8. Create a national Stroke Rehabilitation Centre.
9. Treat the chronic non-communicable disease burden promptly and innovatively, including reintroducing extended opening hours at health centres and school and home visits within communities.
10. Settle negotiations in the health sector and offer proper/ better terms and conditions for all doctors, nurses, and other staff.
11. Introduce legislation to create

a unique medical malpractice court and special investigative unit, aided by foreign experts, to handle suspected medical malpractice cases.

12. Most medical malpractice cases are civil matters; we will also establish a no-fault compensation fund so that affected citizens can receive some relief even outside the courts.

13. Conduct a skills audit within the public healthcare system to train qualified staff in highly demanded areas of specialisation.

14. Provide opportunities and funding for doctors and nurses to specialize in particular fields.

15. Do a full review of the management of the covid19 pandemic for clinical management and economic impact.

16. Revise the Patients' Charter to give patients a greater voice in public health services.

17. Implement a National Health Card for all resident citizens so that a patient's medical records can be accessed at any public or private health facility. This will save time and allow the healthcare provider to access information readily at their fingertips. This means faster delivery of health services and will make the issue of "lost files" a thing of the past.

18. We will also implement data protection systems to back up these electronic medical records safely and securely.

19. Review the entire IT system at all RHAs and procure the latest IT technology and systems [for all RHAs] to mitigate against cyber-attacks and hacking.

20. Conduct an audit of the number and qualifications of the many foreigners working in our health sector while our citizens are jobless at home.

21. Employ local doctors— Increase the number of doctors in the public health system to achieve the required complement at all public hospitals and health centres and thus increase the number of doctors to the number of patients.

22. Employ local nurses – Increasing the number of nurses in the public health system by focusing on training and certification of nursing programmes and the availability of jobs within our public health sector, thus increasing the number of nurses to the number of patients.

23. Employ local technicians – Increase the number of cardiovascular, radiographic, and other specialist medical technicians.

24. Focus on decreasing wait times for clinic appointments and surgeries by increasing nursing staff and medical doctors to these facilities or departments to reduce the workload on existing staff.

25. Train primary care doctors— increasing the number of primary care doctors will decrease non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and obesity.

26. Equipment Audit—All diagnostic and radiographic

equipment will be audited to determine any deficiencies, with a mandate to equip medical professionals with the necessary equipment.

27. Build cath labs—complete the construction, equipping, and operationalisation of catheterisation laboratories at all major Hospitals. This would include the San Fernando General Hospital, the Arima Hospital, and the Sangre Grande Hospital. The Scarborough Hospital has a catheterisation lab, but there is no attending interventional cardiologist. This would enable cardiac stenting on a 24-hour basis within minutes of arrival at the hospital.

28. Dialysis Clinics –Complete the construction, equipping, and operationalisation of dialysis clinics at all major hospitals, with the relevant staff, to enable 24-hour dialysis. Thus, the state's bill to the External Patient Programme would be reduced by at least 100 million per year. Only emergency dialysis cases to private providers would be paid for.

29. Ambulance Service—The ambulance service will be expanded to rural areas in Central and South Trinidad, creating a central and southern hub for cleaning and re-outfitting.

30. National Laboratory Centre –This state-of-the-art laboratory adjacent to the Couva Hospital and outfitted with the equipment and staff to enable the quickest turnover in testing.

31. National Cardiac Centre – A state-of-the-art cardiology centre adjacent to the Couva Hospital, equipped with two operating theatres, one ICU, one CCU, and a Cath Lab to allow bypass surgeries to be done. This would significantly reduce the bypass backlog. Patients currently have to wait at least 12 to 18 months to wait for urgent bypass surgery. This can be remedied with a National Cardiac Centre.

32. Strategic partnerships with international health educators for Internal Medicine, Cardiology, and Nephrology. 33. CDAP—Review and update CDAP, streamlining medication and increasing service to rural communities. Newer drugs that are very effective in hypertension and diabetic treatment should be included on the list.

34. Childhood obesity— Legislation for Front-of Package Warning Labelling to be implemented on retail food products will warn consumers of high sugar, high sodium, and high-fat items. This will intensify the existing awareness programs for combating childhood obesity and expand their reach.

35. Implement a modern prenatal, maternal, baby, and early childhood care strategy.

36. Expanding access to immunization.

37. We will implement a multipronged strategy to deal with reproductive issues and empower women to seek good health during

pregnancy.

38. Maternal and Child Health Policy and Standard Operating Procedures for Obstetrics and Midwifery will be updated and implemented.

39. Antenatal and postnatal care services will be improved by purchasing additional equipment needed to track the health of mothers-to-be and their babies.

40. Reintroduction of the Baby Grant.

41. An emergency response plan will be developed to cover all possible medical crises ranging from natural hazards and oil spills to infectious diseases.

42. The Ministry of Health will make an interministerial arrangement with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources to address the effects of climate change on human health.

43. We will initiate a national awareness campaign on mental health.

44. Public-private partnerships will be formed to widen the Ministry of Health's reach in mental health promotion. Some persons desperately need mental health help but don't know it.

45. We will formalise the draft National Comprehensive Mental Health Implementation Plan.

46. Mental health services will be integrated into all routine health service delivery systems.

47. We will increase the number of trained staff at the Ministry of Health Research Unit so that more health research can be accomplished, and timely data can be provided.

48. Formulate a Healthcare Financing Policy, including introducing and implementing a comprehensive National Health Insurance System, and create mechanisms for sustainable finance.

49. The Ministry of Health will collaborate with the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education and Skills Training, and research institutions focused on the health sector to develop a comprehensive plan for Trinidad and Tobago's health wellness and preventative medicine.

50. Commit to fully refurbishing and adequately resourcing the Ministry of Health's Insect Vector Control Division.

EDUCATION POLICY DIRECTION 2025 – 2030

The Ministry of Education is a key leader in formulating the UNC Strategic National Development Plan. As the ministry responsible for the education and development of almost 300,000 students at four levels of the education system and over 12,000 employees, it is crucial to ensure that the Ministry of Education's sector plan is fully integrated into the Strategic National Development Plan to deliver impact, value, and benefit to the citizens. The

Ministry of Education has three key policy direction imperatives to transform the education system and contribute to progressive national development.

The imperatives are rooted in The Vision of the Child, which affirms the following outcomes for our children: 1. Children who will achieve their full potential 2. Children who are adequately prepared educationally to fulfil their potential 3. Children who are adequately developed socially and culturally 4. Children who are healthy and growing normally 5. Children who are emotionally developed, mature and happy.

To achieve the above, the education system has three major priorities: 1. Focus on our children 2. Focus on parents 3. Focus on the elements of the components of the education system fundamental actions must be performed if the education system intends to support every child and achieve equity, access, and quality. The Ministry of Education can deliver the best results to the nation through the following primary considerations at the operational level: Preparation of all children to maximise education opportunities.

The UNC will perform the following actions to achieve:

- Universal Screening and Treatment of Children between the ages of 4 to 6 re: neurodevelopmental, physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, socio-economic wellbeing, etc. It is expected that specialist consultants (neurodevelopmental) will be engaged to assist in planning, conducting initial screening and treatment, training and development of specialists and other advisory support and any other requirements, as deemed necessary.

- The Children Authority and the Student Support Services Division (SSSD) of the Ministry of Education will be reevaluated concerning their purpose, roles, institution construct and performance expectations to satisfy best the preparation, development and care of the nation's Children, including operational delivery of services and in terms of regulatory.

- Neurodevelopment specialist expertise will be hired to enhance the competence of existing resources and fulfil the Transformational Initiatives' performance. Further, international alignment with neurodevelopment science research centres will be pursued to stay abreast of learning and development. The Students Support Services Division (SSSD) of the Ministry of Education will be re-engineered to become the primary operation for Screening and Treatment for all Children in the country between the ages of 4 and 6 and to lead and manage the entire screening process on a sustainable basis into the future.

- The Children's Authority's role will be re-examined to give it a more focused regulatory and overarching supervisory role in protecting and developing children. At present, the

role is mixed between reacting to reports of at-risk children and being a regulatory measure

- A computerised development tracking system of the "understanding" of all children will need to be developed. This should form the basis for tracking the development and performance of children throughout their schooling. This will be a major digitalisation project that must be planned, developed, and managed. This is an opportunity to focus on the development of local business organisations, with possible assistance from foreign consultants, but the opportunity must be locally led to derive optimum benefit from capital expenditure (CAPEX).

Parents and guardians provide pivotal support for children in the education journey. However, not every parent or guardian has the requisite skills, abilities and experience. The UNC will provide parents and guardians with the following types of support to enable them to best assist their children during and beyond their school years.

- Parental Training of Parents, Guardians, Caregivers

- An inventory of all Parental Training Programs and corresponding resource deployment will be undertaken within the government and the private sector.

- An exercise will be conducted to consolidate understanding of the nature of Parental Training programs in the government and the private sector.

- A team will be established to develop a Parental Training Framework of critical understanding which all Parents should have to allow them to best contribute to the development of our Children of the Nation.

- Standardised Parental Training Programmes will be designed and developed using lessons from the nature of existing programmes.

A Parental Training Management Division within the MOE will be established to oversee all parental training. This is considered appropriate because only the MOE has an appreciation and possible understanding of who parents, caregivers, and guardians ought to be because of the correlation between children and parents.

The Parental Training Programme will be initiated as a volunteer participation and incentive system but will be prepared to institute legal and regulatory requirements to ensure Parental Training participation and recognition of responsibility. A certification-type process will be instituted to verify Parental Training participation. The opportunity to use a computerized system to manage parental training is also available.

TRANSFORMATIONAL INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE EDUCATION

The framework for a leading practice education system was

developed from 2010-2015. The basis and substance of the model remain valid and can now be enhanced and improved through the following activities, interventions and initiatives.

STUDENTS SUPPORT

- Provision of tablets and laptops to facilitate digital learning, research and technological competence.
- Procurement of learning materials such as textbooks for enactment of the curriculum.
- Establish literacy libraries in every classroom to improve reading and comprehension skills.
- Provide students with reliable high-speed internet and bandwidth to facilitate IT traffic.
- Review and improve homework centres.
- Introduce the peer discipline concept
- Provide continuous career guidance advice.

CURRICULUM DELIVERY

- Activate a teacher management and development unit at the curriculum division to facilitate current and future training requirements. Establish master teacher positions to improve curriculum delivery and provide localized teacher support.
- Recruit outstanding retired educators in language and mathematics to continuously conduct workshops and training sessions in these key subject areas.
- Create teacher specialists at each level at primary and secondary schools to enable more focused curriculum delivery.

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

- Establish position of master principal to lead and manage high-risk schools based on school improvement ability.
- Assign principals with proven ability to improve their performance to assist underperforming schools.
- Provide continuous upskilling training for principals.
- Provide compulsory training for persons seeking promotion.

EXAMINATION AND ASSESSMENT (Primary Schools)

Reintroduce continuous assessment component(CAC) on a phased basis as part of SEA examinations since it allows a fairer assessment of the multi-intelligence principle of students than the present model.

SCHOOL SUPERVISION

- Reengineer the School Supervision Division to be more focused on school performance. Establish independent cross-disciplinary school intervention

teams as another layer of school support and evaluation.

TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

- Establish a full-fledged technical university to provide the highest level of technical vocational training, including a technical vocational teacher training division independently or in a private public partnership. Integrate the TEC/VOC schools into the secondary school system. Students interested in technical vocational education can attend a technical vocational institution full-time for two days per week from form three. They can graduate with a combination of O' Levels and CVQs at the comparative level
- Engage the National Training Agency more directly in delivering technical vocational education.
- Create more positions of technical vocational curriculum officers to facilitate technical vocational expansion.
- Review the staffing certification and quality of technical education for performance standards.

TEACHING SERVICE COMMISSION

- Seek a full-time TSC to address the volume of work adequately.
- Urgently work with TSC to seek to delegate more responsibilities to the Ministry of Education since TSC mainly functions as an HR contractor MOE.
- Improve alignment with MoE's processes.

PHYSICAL PLANT AND EQUIPMENT

- Work urgently to complete schools in an advanced state of completion.
- Plan and perform refurbishment at distressed schools.
- Provide schools with the required funding, equipment and supplies to deliver quality education.

LEGISLATION

- Review reports of consultations to determine the way forward on amendments to the Education Act.
- Since 2017, MP Padarath has advocated for Parental Responsibility Act to address violence in schools and bullying and as a long-term measure to deter crime. Several other commonwealth countries, such as Canada and the UK, have similar pieces of legislation that have assisted them in reducing deviant behaviour and bullying in schools. The UNC will pursue such

legislation.

THE UNC WORKERS' AGENDA

After nine meetings of intense dialogue with the executive leadership of the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM), Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU), Seaman and Waterfront Workers Trade Union (SWWTU), NATUC (National Trade Union Centre), and the National Union of Government and Federal Workers (NUGFW), we have created the UNC's Workers' Agenda, which aims to restore prosperity to the working class.

The UNC Workers' Agenda contains critical commitments of the incoming UNC government to holistically enrich, empower, and develop the way of life for our nation's working-class citizens. The UNC's workers' agenda is built on some core commitments to our nation's workers and trade unions.

1. The UNC rejects the unjust four and five per cent imposed on all state sector workers and commits to engage in the free and fair collective bargaining process through the office of the CPO.

2. The UNC is committed to creating a living wage to ensure that all workers earn sufficient salaries to support themselves and their families comfortably.

3. The UNC is committed to amending the TT Revenue Authority Legislation for PSA union successorship to ensure representation of TTRA workers.

4. The UNC will oppose the proliferation of contract workers in public services, statutory bodies, and state enterprises.

5. The UNC will facilitate the recognition of unions that have applied for recognition status at state companies based on tripartite arrangements and expert advice from the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

6. The UNC commits to the holistic review and modernisation of the Industrial Relations Act(IRA) by the cabinet's Legislative Review Committee (LRC).

7. The UNC will propose legislation to introduce the criminal offence of corporate manslaughter.

8. The UNC will facilitate the discussion on providing a contributory pension plan for daily rated workers.

9. A UNC government will go beyond re-establishing the National Tripartite Advisory Committee (NTAC) to improve dialogue with labour and ensure that Labour has a representative on state boards, giving labour a strong, sustainable, and effective voice.

10. The UNC will work with all unions to ensure accessibility to HDC housing is a priority.

11. A UNC government will act urgently to use the free collective bargaining process and resolve outstanding settlement negotiations.

12. The UNC is committed to preserving the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) for workers

where it presently exists based on the collective bargaining process.

13. The UNC will commit to an improved health plan for all public sector workers.

14. A UNC government will strengthen the Praedial Larceny Unit through proper funding, policy, and legislative support.

15. A UNC government is committed to land tenure for farmers to boost our agricultural sector, rural community development and employment.

16. Through robust incentives and support for farmers, a UNC government will reduce the food import bill.

17. The UNC will strengthen the role of all agricultural agencies within the public sector to support farmers in their local, regional and international commercial activity.

18. The UNC will work to modernise all labour legislation.

UNC ANTI-CRIME PLANS AND POLICES

The UNC will:

1. Pass stand-your-ground laws.
2. Create the offence of home invasions.
3. Allow for the right to bear arms or modify the current legislation to make acquiring firearms law-abiding citizens easier.
4. Change legislation to make gating communities easier.
5. Increase the complement of municipal police.
6. Introduce police officers full-time in all high-risk schools.
7. Restructure the Ministry of National Security.
8. Create a Ministry of Home Affairs.
9. Create a Ministry of Defence
10. Create a Ministry of Justice
11. Increase the retirement age for Defence Force to align it with other arms of the protective services.
12. Provide diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate degrees in policing for recruits combined with a police apprenticeship programme.
13. Undertake Pre-trial detention and bail reform.
14. Implement individual risk and financial assessments.
15. Establish minimum security detention centres.
16. Implement laws to prevent incarceration of nonviolent drug offenders (addicts).
17. Implement ankle bracelets and house arrest systems / legislation.
18. Establish state support for children of incarcerated persons.
19. Establish a fund for children who have lost one or both parents to crime.
20. Implement the revamping of the witness protection programme.
21. Construct a forensic science complex and training facility at the UWI Debe campus.
22. Provide personal licensed firearms to active TTPS officers and prison officers.
23. Ensure the enforcement of the drug and liquor laws regarding

minors.

24. Enforce a zero-tolerance approach to any physical violence in schools. Any student physically attacking another student must be immediately removed from school and only be allowed to return after completing neurodiagnostic testing and a proper counselling programme approved by the state.

25. Review legislation to enable citizens to hire private attorneys representing their interests at hearings for party and bar licenses.

26. Implement legislation for mandatory cut-off time for all public events requiring a dancehall licence not held within an enclosed building. Exceptions to be made during the carnival season.

27. Carry out a performance assessment of social projects in national security.

28. Restructure social programmes that have become gang and criminal activity havens.

29. Perform a short-term assessment to identify the scale of involvement of illegal immigrants in criminal activity.

30. Ensure that all schools have the full complement of required deans of discipline, security officers, and schools safety officers.

31. Ensure staffing in the full complement of student support services, which constitutes guidance counsellors, guidance officers, and school social workers, with educational, behavioural, and clinical psychologists looking after our students in need.

32. Introduce proper and continuous testing and neuro-diagnostics of children to test for special needs.

33. Introduce a financial incentive programme for dedicated and high-performing teachers based on students' end-of-term examination results across all levels.

34. Introduce the anonymous anti-bullying app for students to make reports.

35. Introduce parent patrols in schools.

36. Implement a policy whereby all students must undergo free, mandatory, annual physical and medical screening by state-approved public and private medical doctors to examine for physical abuse, substance abuse, sexual abuse, malnutrition, and diseases.

37. Ensure after-school meals for children who apply which is to be supplied by the school feeding programme.

38. Establish community mediation services.

39. Establish free counselling sessions.

40. Establish parental support groups for single parents and victims of family violence.

41. Implement peer mediation.

42. Implement parenting workshops to address parent-child conflict, parental rejection, parental communication, proper parental supervision, and identification of criminal behaviours in children.

43. Establish a fund for faith-based weekly community mentoring and guidance programs.



Police on patrol along Charlotte Street, Port of Spain. PHOTO BY FAITH AYOUNG

44. Ensure that through the Ministry of Local Government, all councillors would oversee the formation of a "community support council" in each PD of their electoral district.

45. Strengthen a rebranded highway patrol unit.

46. Properly staff the E999 call centre.

47. Reactivate the community comfort patrols.

48. Increase and maintain CCTV cameras throughout TT.

49. Properly support the Transnational Organized Crime Unit.

50. Increase covert operations at the seaports and airports.

51. Enhance and fully reimplement The National Operations Centre.

52. Install Security Electronic Billboards.

53. Immediately provide electronic data access in all Police vehicles.

54. Integrate a fully Computerized crime statistics and reporting (COMPSTAT) system to include:

- Computerised vehicle maintenance and service records.
- Computerisation of all police stations and provision of internet access via NOC data.
- Equipping every Police vehicle with GPS and link via NOC.

55. Establish indoor and outdoor shooting ranges for all the protective services.

56. Establish a training swimming pool facility to train all arms of the protective services, police, fire, coast guard, and army.

57. Establish a simulation training theatre for TTPS.

58. Establish proper health and fitness facilities for the TTPS.

59. Provide Customer Service and Public Relations support for the TTPS.

60. Standardize and acquire fit-for-purpose vehicles for the TTPS.

Madam Speaker, I turn briefly to a matter that has captured the attention of cricket lovers across the globe and our passionate supporters of our beloved Trinbago Knight Riders (TKR). I first wish to congratulate the entire team, management staff and corporate drivers of our TKR. A special word of thanks to our inspirational captain and West Indian powerhouse Mr Kieron Pollard for his outstanding leadership and mature captaincy over the years and particularly in the recent circumstances.

I take this opportunity to single out our national and regional pride in the person of Dwayne Bravo known across the globe as DJ Bravo and Sir Champion. We thank him for his decades of service to our nation and the regional sporting fraternity. This true legend has been a tower of strength, courage and inspiration to a generation of youth. We express our heartfelt gratitude to Dwayne for his lifelong achievements, unparalleled accomplishments and iconic leadership on and off the playing field. Madam Speaker, the circumstances in which our TKR departed the ongoing Caribbean Premier League (CPL) tournament left a sour taste to legions of sports lovers.

Madam Speaker, outrage led to outrage. We hosted the finals during our years in office. Today, I would like to place on record the desire of my incoming government to approach the Caribbean Premier League to once again host the eliminator matches and finals of the CPL in the coming years. This will bring enormous economic opportunity and foreign exchange to our shores but will also signal our deepest commitment to the sport and the future of West Indian cricket.

We live in a time when a government puts endless pressure

on the average citizens. But we all know there is a better way; we know that our children deserve a better education. We know that we deserve the best healthcare. After nine years of PNM abuse and neglect. It is time to say No to another five years of this government's games. After nine years of poor healthcare, where citizens lay helpless in the corridors of hospitals and government politicians live like kings in the corridors of power.

PNM ministers roll around with blue lights and armed security but don't want You to have a licensed firearm to light up criminals..... How can that be fair?

PNM ministers roll around all day on the bus route while you have to face the traffic and the potholes. How can that be fair? It is time to bring back people-centred UNC governance. And no amount of lies about the UNC will save this government this time. No amount of cries about no money, No amount of mamaguy about the economy turning around will save the PNM this time. Keep your lies, cries and mamaguys; the people are fed up with it! This PNM government has systematically been making the rich richer and the poor poorer for the past nine years, and the current budget continues this disastrous trend. And they think their propaganda will last another five years, but the people are waiting to reject you whenever you call that election. The Prime Minister's mantra is: There are difficult times ahead while his own Minister of Finance says: "The sectors are booming, Madame Speaker! "The Economy has turned around, Madame Speaker! "I can see clearly now!"... So, which is it? Tell us! Make up your mind!

From day one the Prime Minister has been singing the same song of

'there are difficult times ahead. This form of fearmongering has lost its effect. People are now asking where all that money gone!

The systemic organised corruption in high places is invisible and deeply entrenched, operating behind a veil of bureaucracy and political gamesmanship. It thrives in the shadows, woven into contracts, policies, and decisions that appear routine but are designed to benefit a select few while the public remains unaware of the full cost. When the Prime Minister said he was about making the rich richer and the poor poorer, believe him! Part of the strategy is to tell you that difficult times are ahead and that you must tighten your belt while they eat the fat of the land. They are very organized and systematic, infiltrating all levels, and we keep asking, "Where has all that money gone?"

So, from the John O'Halloran scandal to the Calder Hart scandal and now the missing billions under Colm Imbert exposed by the Auditor General scandal- When their corruption becomes too massive, it becomes disorganised. They then lose elections, change the players and reboot the machine! And that Madame Speaker is the PNM playbook. And that is why they are afraid to call the election!

A very weary, burdened and cynical population has opened up their eyes to the reality that faces them every day: mayhem and murder, empty pockets and cashless. Even if the Minister had taken ten, twelve, or even 24 hours, he would still have been short on credibility. Because the government is not just broke and bankrupt for cash; they are broke and bankrupt for solutions. Despite the five hours and thirteen minutes of a madman's rant, the population had tuned out long before the minister's statement on

Monday, especially since the Prime Minister had signalled the actual state of play.

In the minister's tenth budget statement, he attempted to eulogize the pathetic performance of his government. He spent long hours painting, glossing, varnishing, and putting up new curtains, smoke screens and mirrors. This time, though, there were no buyers. Like the emperor without clothes, everyone except his 21 colleagues in the House had finally seen the decade of destruction.

The real issue wasn't the five hours and thirteen minutes of the minister's farcical tirade. It was the decade of destruction that citizens have endured. Most citizens went into the budget exercise expecting nothing because they had grown accustomed to receiving nothing after ten years. For many citizens, death has already reached their doorstep by way of murder, poor healthcare, mismanagement of covid19 and the lack of will to continue struggling each day to survive. For others, the reality of joblessness, empty kitchen tables, dry pockets and depths of poverty has fully set in. Therefore, I understood the minister's talking strategy until he was blue in the face.

First, he had to convince himself that things were ripe and rosy because no one outside here believed that. It is often said that those who know feel it the most; the people of Trinidad and Tobago have felt the decade of destruction the most. Therefore, whether he speaks for five, ten, or 24 hours, it will change nothing, fix nothing, or deliver nothing. However, the average citizen of this country knows the UNC cares, and I care. This government will soon hear the voices of the 99 per cent on election day.