



Contribution to the 2015-2016 National Budget Debate

**The Honourable Randall Mitchell
Minister of Public Administration**

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, it is with Pride and Humility that I rise today to make my First Contribution to this Honourable House. My Pride is magnified because we are not here today to debate a specific Bill, but one that sets our Nation on the road to Economic Recovery, Responsibility and Prosperity.

And as I am on my feet, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, on behalf of San Fernando East, I join in the Chorus to congratulate you on your elevation to the Chair of this Honourable House. Based on what I have seen thus far, I have no doubt that you will perform your duties with the Decorum and Dignity befitting this House.

The pride I feel today, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, is largely in part because I am a member of the Political Movement that has contributed the greatest to the overall growth and development of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, In the last few months leading up to the Election and even in this debate, I have listened with Amazement as speaker after speaker, representing the other side, singled out the amount of box drains they built in some Constituencies as the Signature Accomplishment of their Administration.

And if that is what makes them happy, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I will not deny them that pleasure. But while they continue to look down at drains, we on this side will look upward and onward to bigger and better things

For example, consider the impact of the establishment of the UTT, the Construction and Commissioning of the Pt. Lisas Industrial Estate, and the introduction of GATE. These three PNM initiatives are responsible for taking this entire Nation leaps and bounds ahead in this region and even far beyond.

Through you, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, allow me to extend my Congratulations to my Senior Colleague, Member for Diego Martin North East, who, though a veteran of this Chamber, delivered his maiden contribution as Minister of Finance, in a manner that only he could have.

It is clear Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker that he intends to follow in the vein of his PNM predecessors and deal holistically with the Development of Trinidad and Tobago.

I respectfully submit that he has exceeded expectations in this regard.

He demonstrated in his presentation that the Peoples' National Movement is indeed made of sterner stuff.

In only 4 weeks, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, he was able to deliver a succinct, penetrating analysis of the performance of the previous Administration and point this Nation forward in a manner that was a mixture of sobriety and sagacity, erudition and empathy. This is the Pedigree of the gentleman and by Extension, the Political Movement to which he belongs.

I offer to him and all my Colleagues who spoke before me my sincerest congratulations on their Respective Contributions.

But Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, the Humility with which I stand before you today, is inspired principally by the seat I now occupy, and the people I now have the honour to represent, the people of San Fernando East.

For well over 4 decades Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, the people of San Fernando East were represented by the Honourable Patrick Manning, bedrock in the Political Landscape of Trinidad and Tobago. Today I accept graciously the Baton that has been passed to me, and pledge to keep the flag of San Fernando East flying high.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, there is a point I wish to make about my Predecessor and his conduct in this house. It is a point which came to me quite forcefully during the contribution of the Member for Naparima who, quoting scripture and all, chastised the PNM for Gloating in the wake of our Election Victory.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, no one here can forget the disrespect, the contempt, the picong, the mauvais langue, visited upon the head of Mr. Manning and **ALL** the Members of the Opposition Bench when they returned to this house after May 24th, 2010?

Those on that side reminded him, at every turn, of how he had reduced the PNM to a 12-seater maxi, and he took it all without as much as a Murmur. Today, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, when the shoe is on the other foot, the Member for Naparima seeks the Solace of Scripture.

The same Scripture that conveniently eluded him when he was busy Scripting the NoRowley Campaign.

But may I remind this Honourable House, that even the **DEVIL** is capable of quoting scripture.

But, time marches on and today the PNM is led by our Country's 8th Prime Minister, Dr. the Honourable Keith Christopher Rowley, and I take great pride in being part of this team, as the Member of Parliament for San Fernando East. I admire his Vision, I respect his Leadership and I have unreserved faith in his Ability to Lead this Nation.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker In my conversations with the people of San Fernando East, prior to September 7th, they all spoke with One Voice about the Neglect of the Constituency during the last 5 years of the UNC administration, and the obvious vindictiveness they suffered as a result of being represented by the PNM.

Today when I speak to them, having heard our Budget Statement, the Hard-working, Honest and Patriotic Constituents are looking forward to the planned reform of Local Government. As Decent and Conscientious Tax Payers and Property Owners they recognize their Obligation to pay Taxes on their Properties, Appreciating the Fact that the Property Taxes they pay will be used to improve their own Local Municipality.

The people of San Fernando East are looking forward to the increase in Personal Allowances from \$60,000 to \$72, 000 per year, the increased Allowances to Retirees, and the reduction in VAT from 15% to 12.5%.

The Young Scholars of San Fernando East are looking forward to the increase in the OJT stipends and the introduction of the Graduate programme in Ministries.

The people of San Fernando East, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, now express the view that they are worth a lot more than box drains.

THE PUBLIC SERVICE

I stand today as the Minister of Public Administration, charged with the responsibility of guiding the Public Service through the rough waters of Challenging Economic circumstances, when we are being called upon to do so much more with so much less.

It is a responsibility that I have accepted wholeheartedly, and today I pledge my unwavering commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, to deliver a Public Service that is modernized, customer focused, and result oriented.

I have boundless faith Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker that this is attainable, particularly if one is to judge by this Government's ability to produce a budget within 4 weeks of having been elected to office.

That herculean task, put onto the shoulders of the Minister of Finance, was undoubtedly made easier by the sheer diligence of the Army of Public Officers in the Ministry, supported I am sure by countless others scattered throughout the other Ministries.

Today, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I salute these heroes of our Public Service who, yet again, delivered when it mattered most. Their efforts not only confirmed my belief in our Nation's motto: "Together we aspire. Together we achieve," but also Underscored the theme of this year's Budget presentation: "Restoring Confidence and Rebuilding Trust – Let's Do This Together."

And that is why it pains me Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker when I hear the members opposite lament about the "job losses and job cuts" taking place in ministries. Permit me then to put some things into context.

Members opposite have argued that despite a promise to the contrary, scores of persons are being sent home and their contracts terminated. Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, the truth is a different story.

The facts as we know them to be are as follows:

- Persons who are in permanent positions in the Ministries are not being sent home, they have absolutely nothing to fear
- Persons with legitimate contracts and possessing legitimate qualifications, working in contract positions approved by the Chief Personnel Officer are not being sent home, they have nothing to fear.
- However, Persons who were brought into the Ministries and State Enterprises on three and six month contracts, in positions **NOT** approved by the CPO, **WITHOUT** job descriptions, and whose contracts have **EXPIRED**, may have Cause for Concern.

- Persons who were brought into the Ministries and State enterprises, whose only qualification, as the Minister of Communications noted, were their birth paper and their family relationship with a Minister, may have a Cause for Concern.
- Persons who hold no Qualifications for the positions they occupy....or WORSE....those who misrepresented their Qualifications may have Cause for Concern.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, there is ample evidence to suggest that the majority of Duly Concerned workers, were brought into the Ministries and State Enterprises for the Singular purpose of campaigning for the UNC candidates in the Last Election.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, the real tragedy here is not that these workers may have to seek legitimate employment elsewhere. The real tragedy is that the former administration knew very well that those contracts would not have stood up to any real scrutiny, and the UNC were using these vulnerable persons for their own short term personal and political gain.

The real tragedy Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker is that all this was being done, at the expense of the Public Service.

There was a time Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker when persons aspired to join the public service, when persons wore the title of civil servant as a badge of honour, accepting that service to the public was not servitude, but rather a contribution to a higher calling – the development of country.

Sadly, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, this is no longer entirely so. The public service is viewed by many as Archaic, Lethargic, and less than Customer-centric in its daily interactions with those who pay their salaries

Additionally, working in the public service has come to be equated with dilapidated buildings, environmental nightmares, out-dated technology, and snail-pace bureaucracy. The Public Service, whilst being the single largest employer entity in the country, is no longer viewed as a preferred place to work.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, based on the latest figures available to us, the incontrovertible fact is that at the end of December 2013, approximately 44 percent of the available positions in the public service were vacant.

Of the 30,552 establishment positions 46 percent or 13,709 were vacant, and of the 14,194 contract positions, 41 percent or 5,863 were vacant.

Madam Speaker, these figures are not figments of my imagination but were contained in a response to a question filed by the former Member of Parliament for La Brea, the Honourable Fitzgerald Jeffrey. I refer to Question No. 98 in the 2013/2014 session of Parliament posed to my predecessor.

| | Establishment | Contract | Total |
|-----------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| Filled | 16843 | 8331 | 25174 (56%) |
| Vacant | 13709 | 5863 | 19572 (44%) |
| Positions | 30552 (68%) | 14194 (32%) | 44746 |

Madam Speaker, out of 44,746 positions in the Civil Service, fifty-six percent (56%) of these are filled... have bodies. Let me repeat, Madam Speaker, out of 44,746 positions in the Civil Service, only fifty-six percent (56%) of these are filled, have bodies - 25,174 bodies.

This means, Madam Speaker, that as at December 31 2013 an amazing forty-four percent (44%) of positions were vacant. There were no bodies, no one in 19,572 positions to do the work.

If we factor in Vacation and other negotiated leave entitlements, and we factor in that quite a few of the jobs are old, and thus public officers are underutilised, we can roughly estimate that the true filled rate, the true staffing rate in the civil service is closer to fifty percent (50%).

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, what these figures demonstrate is that the Public Service has been operating on approximately half of its human resource capacity, and therefore explains the sorry predicament currently facing us. I hasten to add though Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, that this does not justify shoddy customer service, nor does it excuse inordinate and unnecessary bureaucratic delays.

Instead of hiring persons for campaign purposes, instead of hiring friends, family, activists and other closely associated persons, those on the other side could have concentrated on properly staffing the public service.

One of the critical objectives of the Ministry of Public Administration over the next few years therefore, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, will be the improvement of the staffing situation in the Public Service.

Is it any wonder then that the service experienced by members of the public is often less than desired? Can you imagine the strain on those officers who are currently in the service?

And to compound the situation further, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker I note that the previous administration engaged in six re-alignments of Government Ministries during the period 2010-2014.

The Public Service was therefore in a repeated state of upheaval, unable to settle down and achieve stability and focus.

The cost of these repeated re-alignments Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker is significant. Examples of these costs include:

- The labour cost of implementing the re-alignment exercises by Divisions. This involves significant work by agencies such as
 - the Budgets Division,
 - the Public Management Consulting Division which has to transfer **positions** from one agency to another,
 - the Service Commissions Department – which then has to transfer **persons** from one agency to another,
 - the Integrated Human Resource Information System team that has to record these transfers and
 - the Government Printery, which has to print all the realignment information.
- The time factor involved in completing the exercises which results in the loss of momentum on other projects.
- The negative impact of the exercise on the day-to-day operations of Ministries.
- The costs involved in replacing signage, stationery and supplies
- The maintenance and utility costs involved in housing new Ministries and their Departments
- The negative impact brought about by frequent and significant changes in strategic direction such as stress, job insecurity, de-motivation.
- Worse, every re-alignment affects the pension and leave records of public officers and has contributed greatly to the delays in the payment of pensions to our retirees.

I also hope that our citizens can now understand more fully why before we came into office and now in Government today, we have said that there will be NO Overall Loss of jobs.

There are jobs in many areas of public service for competent, honest, and committed people.

I hope that the other side and our citizens can now understand why there is a need to have Fewer Ministries.

The Government took this decision in recognition of the fact that the public service had these resource constraints and needed to pool what resources we actually have in order to get the job of the public service done.

As one of our core strategies to address this Manpower Issue, the Ministry has already started collaborating with the Service Commissions Department in a major initiative to strengthen and modernise that institution, so that it too is better equipped and resourced to fulfil its obligations to the various other Service Commissions, which are such an important part of Democracy and our Governance.

That support, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, will include any backing that is needed for Legislative changes, Organisational Structure Changes, Process Enhancements, Training and Development, the development of improved information systems and other areas. These initiatives will no doubt continue over a period of several years.

But perhaps it was evidence of this human resource insufficiency that lead my colleagues on the other side to hasten to place persons in those positions; persons who possessed neither

the qualifications nor the experience, persons whose resumes were littered with inaccuracies and falsehoods, persons whose only claim to fame was their Blind Loyalty to the handful of persons who irresponsibly wielded the Reins of Power for the past 5 years. The mistake those on that side continue to make Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, is they confuse Loyalty with Competence. Or is it that they just did not care?

My simple bit of advice to them is this: It is easier to earn the loyalty of a competent person than to make a loyal person competent.

I would hasten to call the name Reshmi Ramnarine, but I am advised that she no longer carries that name. Imagine having to lose one's identity over Ill-Gotten and undeserved Political Patronage.....Now losing a 3 Month Contract Position, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker does not seem so Bad by Comparison.

GHR

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, in addition to strengthening the offices of the Service Commission, the Director of Personal Administration, and that of the Chief Personnel Officer, the Ministry of Public Administration will further ensure that the Government Human Resource Services Company, one of the State Enterprises in its portfolio is Re-organised for Greater Efficiency.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, this institution was established in 2006 to support the transformation of the Public Sector through value-added recruiting and human resource solutions.

Like so many of the country's other institutions, GHR declined in its reputation and service delivery following 2010 when many of its Most competent and Experienced Personnel, some with global reputations, were forced to leave, forced out by many of those who are now crying foul.

It is incumbent on the Ministry of Public Administration therefore, as a matter of priority, to rebuild that organisation so that it can fully deliver on its mandate of embedding modern tools for recruitment and selection, including multi-staged assessments; competency based structured interviews, psychometric evaluations, sound reference checks on candidates and other methods.

This will improve the quality of the recruit into the contract stream of the public service.

As a necessary precursor, however, GHR must undertake its own recruitment and selection exercise to re-build the capacity of that institution to undertake modern methods of recruitment and selection for contract employment using globally accepted best practice.

One immediate area of concern for the transformed GHR, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, will be the staffing of the new Authorities to be created, namely the Revenue and Motor Vehicle Authorities. In commenting on the 2016 Budget, auditing and accounting firm Ernst and Young Services Limited noted that the challenges in the implementation of the Revenue Authority include for example:

- the inability of the BIR to retain competent staff within the tax system
- a heavy reliance on external bodies to provide funding (MOF) and perform the vital recruitment function (Public Service Commission).

The commentary noted that whatever the model adopted by the Government, the key to success would be to ensure that the Authority has “a human resource management function which should facilitate effective recruitment and selection of appropriate personnel; career planning; promotion and advancement; learning, growth and development; performance management; rewards and compensation.”

It is my considered view that such a task ought properly to reside with the GHR, as this was the **Raison D’Etre** for its creation in the first place.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I now turn to **ACCOMMODATION** for Public Officers, because ensuring that the right people with the right skills are placed in the right jobs Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker CANNOT be.... the be all and end all of the reform of the Public Service.

One salient element of this transformation is the accommodation of these Officers in safe, comfortable working environments that are conducive to productivity,

Madam Speaker, the last PNM administration pursued the policy of creating more Government-owned office Accommodation.

Apart from seeking to reduce the Government’s Annual Rent Bill of over Half a Billion Dollars, that administration pursued the Policy to build its own offices mainly for 2 reasons: **1.** It recognised that the Portfolio of Government properties had neither increased in quality nor quantity for decades; and **2.** Increasing numbers of public officers were working in unsuitable workspaces, that frequently invited the scrutiny of the OSH Department and the Representative Unions.

This often resulted in both partial and complete shutdowns of operations, causing significant disruption in the quality of service offered to the public, and a consequent loss of revenue. One can easily recall the frequent stoppages of work at the various Revenue Offices of the Board of Inland Revenue in Sangre Grande and Arima as testimony to this problem.

I have heard horror stories Madam Speaker - of ceilings falling on Public Officers, of rats in the workplace eating public records, and of termites falling into employees’ food and drink. I cannot understate the accommodation crisis that Ministries currently face. Most public officers know this, and the general public can sense their growing discontent, as they too become collateral damage in the process.

And sadly, although being aware of these issues, the previous UNC Administration, and despite their public posturing about caring for Public Officers, left the valuable asset of the Government Campus buildings unfinished, unfurnished and standing idle for the past 5 Years.

Madam Speaker, I re-emphasise that this Policy was pursued to reduce the Government’s rental bill, while simultaneously providing Public Officers and an increasingly demanding public with modern, clean, safe and OSH-compliant office accommodation.

Public Servants deserve nothing less.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I emphasize as well that many Ministries currently have extremely challenging space constraints. They simply do not have the room to grow, and this impedes efficient service delivery and the accomplishment of national objectives as a result.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, This Government is working assiduously to Complete the Government Campus, and when completed it will accommodate 3,867 persons as follows:

- The Customs and Excise Building is designed to accommodate 474 persons.
- The Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs Tower is expected to be completed in November 2015 and can house 1087 persons.
- The Immigration Division Tower will be completed in January 2016 and can accommodate 362 persons
- The Education Tower is expected to be completed by March 2016 and will accommodate 972 persons
- The Board of Inland Revenue Tower is expected to be completed in July 2016 and is designed to accommodate 972 persons

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker the Property and Real Estate Services Division falls under my portfolio, and therefore the responsibility for the accommodation of public officers is mine to shoulder.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker I wish to advise the National Community that since assuming office, I have taken a Note to Cabinet, to establish an inter-ministerial committee to assess and rationalise office accommodation for Ministries.

Every effort will be made to expedite the relocation of several offices. My commitment to Public Officers and to members of the Public is that by the end of fiscal 2016, and possibly before, there will be more office spaces suitable for the service delivery they expect.

Madam Speaker, there is one more thing I wish to say about the Public Service Portfolio. For too long, we have not been tapping into the strengths within our own silos.

In this era of discipline and leaner pockets, we have to look at collaboration, knowledge sharing and replication of best practices.

In fiscal 2016, I intend to promote the implementation of inter-disciplinary teams at various levels, from Permanent Secretaries to Clerical Officers, designed to create more consistent Administrative and Institutional processes and practices in the Public Service. We will learn from each other and grow with each other.

The end result of all of this Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker will be a transformed, rejuvenated and rebranded Public Service, where those agencies and personnel who excel will be celebrated.

DIAMOND STANDARD

In the last few years, the Ministry has established an initiative called the Trinidad and Tobago Diamond Standard Programme, which is a good initiative, in my opinion.

This Standard is a National Certification/Quality Assurance mark that is awarded to Public Service providers who have demonstrated that they offer a high Quality of Service to the Public and are committed to Continuous Improvement and Innovation.

This approach Madam Speaker was based on a model operating in the Civil Service in the United Kingdom. And in 2016, I intend to continue this Programme and seek new services that can obtain the Certification.

Madam Speaker, 11 services received the Diamond Certification in 2015. Among these were the Sangre Grande Accident and Emergency, TTBizLink, and the Tobago Emergency Management Agency.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I now publicly acknowledge those unsung heroes of the Public Service who are responsible for service excellence, and I want to encourage them to keep shining and maintaining their certification. Because the citizens who use these services want and deserve more.

While this administration needs to provide some stability and in this instance, continue sound programmes, we must mark our era for smart governance by adjusting some strategies.

And so with respect to the Trinidad and Tobago Diamond Standard Certification, I am committed to finding a way to focus on those 20% of Public Services that have 80% impact on the citizens. In the next few years, some of those high impact services will be targeted.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I say this with caution. These Public Service agencies, and the Public Officers in these agencies, have much to do.

And so, while many may not achieve the Diamond Standard in fiscal 2016, we will be working to ensure that citizens will see some improvement in the space where they are served, in the manner in which they are served, and where possible, in the time in which they are served.

Please trust that this will be realised.

Information and Communications Technology

Madam Speaker, I now turn my attention to the ICT and Telecommunications aspects of my portfolio.

As we all know, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) continues to transform the way we live and conduct business.

It was under successive PNM administrations, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, during the period 2002 to 2007 that the Ministry of Public Administration managed the liberalization of the Telecommunications Sector and developed our Country's first ICT strategy.

Sadly, we have had little progress over the last 5 years, with our rankings, and more importantly our country scores, on the Internationally-recognized International Indices remaining essentially unchanged.

ICT is both a fast growing Economic Sector in itself and an enabler for Sustainable Development in all aspects of our national economy and society.

Trinidad and Tobago is at the fore-front of this global technology revolution. Our citizens, especially young persons, are among the most avid users of social media in this Hemisphere,

if not the world. All of us have mobile phones; many, perhaps most of us already have smart phones.

ICTs are increasingly embedded in our daily lives. We get our information from the Internet, and thousands of us are now shopping online.

And, as the Last Election Campaign so clearly demonstrated, we increasingly communicate online, or through other ICT-enabled mediums.

What does this mean in practice for our citizens? Permit me to consider one example, that of our Farmers.

Given this administration's renewed thrust in the Agricultural Sector, farmers also have to improve their efficiencies in how they grow, harvest and sell their crops. And technology is one of the most important tools that they can use.

The ability to access and send information will allow them to become not just a part of the national agricultural community, but the regional and global one as well.

With online access, farmers can use Predictive Applications that can help forecast potential crop yield, find ways of dealing with diseases and pests, get notifications on weather events that would affect them, find buying and selling prices, participate in crop auctions, all making informed decisions that would affect their livelihoods of themselves.

A farmer does not have to know how to create an application but he needs to be familiar with and have access to basic technology tools. Computer literacy and access to a computer, tablet or smartphone connected by high-speed access are a useful start.

This however could advance to more sophisticated applications, taught in farming communities at times convenient to them; briefings delivered by video-conference at community based facilities; information on current prices delivered by text alerts, a picture to describe a particular problem – answered within 24 hours by a global expert. The possibilities, and the returns, are endless.

Madam Speaker, as you can see, ICT affects the lives of our Citizens on many levels, and in many ways.

ICT Access, Infrastructure & Digital Inclusion

But while there have been several major investments by both the public and private sectors to enable increased competition, choice, and lower prices - these investments have perhaps inadvertently served to exacerbate or "widen" what has often been referred to as the "**Digital Divide**".

And these marginalized groups and communities on the other side of the DIVIDE can be identified as including (with several overlaps):

1. Rural and Remote communities
2. Persons with Disabilities
3. The Elderly
4. Persons living in poverty
5. Women & Girls, and

6. At risk Youth

In fiscal 2015/16, the Ministry of Public Administration, in partnership with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as well as its sister Ministries and Agencies, including iGovTT, the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts, and the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government Collectively propose to build upon and enhance existing initiatives and infrastructure, and aggressively implement measures to, once and for all, eliminate the Digital Divide in Trinidad and Tobago.

As we have indicated in our Manifesto, we will endeavour to develop Trinidad and Tobago into a technology and innovation centre, with one of the most basic steps to ensure that ALL of our citizens have access to ICT equipment and connectivity.

It is that same resolve Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker that propels our vision to ensure that there is Broadband Internet Connectivity for every citizen who so desires.

In the **FIRST INSTANCE**, we will work with the private sector to drastically increase the footprint of free public WiFi hot-spots in popular areas AS WELL AS in those areas and communities which have been traditionally underserved.

This will then be Coupled with the creation and deployment of a free island-wide Public Broadband Wireless Network - affording citizens the ability to seamlessly access WiFi Internet services safely and securely at hundreds of locations throughout Trinidad AND Tobago

LAPTOPS IN SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I did not take the opportunity to offer a brief comment on the Laptop in Schools initiative pursued by the previous administration, and which formed part of their list of accomplishments.

So excited were they about it Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, that they gleefully announced its expansion to First Year University students and even to Primary School Students.

All of this sounded good in Theory.

But Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, there is growing evidence that the distribution of laptops, without the necessary infrastructural support in the schools, in the absence of a focused integration into the curriculum, and without broadband connectivity in the homes, rendered these laptops as mere game playing machines to thousands of students.

Many of my constituents, Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, who do not possess the intellectual acumen of the esteemed former Minister of Education and former Prime Minister, but who are not short on common sense, simply ask whether the country might not have benefitted more if the Ministry of Education had ensured that every school had a proper computer lab, sufficient broadband connectivity, and properly trained teachers, before embarking on the wide scale distribution of Laptops.

Providing laptop computers to students served little good, when teachers did not have laptops and schools did not have broadband access.

In this regard, the Ministry of Public Administration is committed to continue working closely with the Ministry of Education and all stakeholders to ensure that our students get Laptops, an Electronically delivered Curricula, and Internet Access.

Madam Speaker, the need to build capacity and improve access to ICTs is not limited to the education sector. We must do this for the wider society especially for senior citizens, persons in rural communities, persons in poverty and persons with special needs to bridge the Digital Divide.

THE E-LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Madam Speaker, This Administration will continue to play a key role in creating a suitable Enabling Environment to facilitate the effective adoption and utilization of ICT.

This responsibility includes ensuring that the Legal Framework for conducting Electronic Transactions is put in place, which would facilitate the continual growth of Electronic Commerce, Electronic Communications and Electronic Transactions, including the delivery of Government Services electronically, commonly referred to as e- Government

National Broadcast Code

Further, Madam Speaker, a Draft National Broadcast Code has been prepared and submitted for approval.

The objectives that are outlined in the Code are geared towards ensuring, among other things, THAT:

- Children are neither harmed nor misled by the transmission of inappropriate and/or inaccurate material;
- That Standards are applied to provide adequate protection for listeners and viewers against harmful, abusive or discriminatory material;
- That Material likely to encourage or incite the commission of a crime or lead to disorder is not included in broadcasting services;
- That News, in whatever form, is reported with accuracy and presented with impartiality;
- That To the extent that Broadcasting Service Providers cover political matters especially during the period of elections, that they present a sufficient range of information, views and opinions, in a balanced manner;
- That Viewers and listeners are given adequate information or warning about programming that contains any material that may be harmful to viewers or listeners;

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I give this Honourable House the Assurance that the Ministry of Public Administration will undertake the necessary Consultations with all Stakeholders before a final position is taken with respect to this Broadcasting Code.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, these are challenging times ahead of us. But I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever, that the people of Trinidad and Tobago can rise to and surmount any challenge that comes our way.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, we have been through the traumas of 1970 and 1990 and we survived. We have been through the collapse of oil and gas prices and a world recession in 2008 and thereafter, and we have survived.

We....the People of Trinidad and Tobago are destined to Succeed. If we could overcome 5 years under the Last Administration, we are resilient enough to face any obstacle in our path.

We as a nation are living proof that pressure creates diamonds. This PNM Government will restore our brilliant shine for generations to come.

Mr. Deputy/Madam Speaker, I thank you.