

Budget Speech 2025

Madam Speaker, Honourable colleagues, Honourable Ministers opposite, and to those listening or watching. It is an absolute privilege, once again, to rise and deliver my second Budget Address to this House. This year, my contribution will cover Youth, Tourism, the Environment and Transport.

But before I start, it is important to take a moment and express my sincerest gratitude to the Parliamentary team. This year, we thank you for the prompt turnaround of Hansard. A task which is by no means easy to do, not least given the amount of hours we often spend here.

Turning to my address, it is worth noting, that last year, the Honourable the Chief Minister, had complimented my contribution to the budget debate, stating that it was the most elegant speech given from this side of the house. My criticisms were both calculated and constructive and for that I wish to publicly thank him for his praise.

This year, I will do my best to repeat that performance. I hope the Honourable the Chief Minister, along with all his cabinet Ministers, from the Government that HE leads, find it as elegant as he did on the last occasion. However, in terms of being constructive, this has been nothing short of challenging, often, even impossible to do.

As I will discuss throughout my address, there are many concerns which have been raised, both by my colleagues and myself, which appear to have fallen on deaf ears. One then wonders, what is the point of being so constructive, if the Government then fails to capitalise on those suggestions and ignore our good will. With any luck, we shall not have a recurrence of such failings in what remains of the second half of their term in Government. But that may just be the optimist in me speaking. Of course we shall wait and see.

Youth:

For the first part of my contribution, and as the youngest member of this House, it would be remiss of me not to start my address with a discussion

of our young people. It is often said that the true measure of a country's future is how it treats its young people. If that is the standard by which we are to judge this Government, then I regret to say, that we are failing our youth, and failing them badly. I came across a wonderful phrase the other day. "In the heart of every young person lies the potential for greatness". Madam Speaker, I fear this government is not only destroying their potential but also breaking their hearts.

If I may just remind members, last year, I stood here and made a heartfelt plea. A plea to take our young people seriously. I spoke of the lack of enthusiasm, lack of engagement, lack of opportunities and lack of investment in their potential. A year later, I regret to say, that very little has changed. We are moving backwards, not forwards.

And for clarification, this is not the direction which we want to be moving in. Whilst there have been some initiatives by name, and I repeat, by name alone, the fundamental issues remain largely unaddressed. Today, the reality for young people is clear. There is a growing sense that their aspirations are not matched by the policies of those in power.

If I may speak plainly, the youth services are unsatisfactory, underfunded, undervalued, and underperforming. We often see this government make political U-turns, some which we welcome, however all these U's are undesirable. And certainly, unpleasant for me to point out yet again.

Our youth clubs, which should serve as hubs of growth, education and support, are being run on a shoestring budget. They lack the resources to provide consistent programming and professional mentorship. We cannot simply keep them open in name alone.

Youth services must be equipped to mean something in the lives of the young people they serve. The Minister has of course tried to persuade us and say otherwise, but the proof is in the pudding, and I'm sorry to say this pudding has a bitter and sour taste.

With that said, we patiently wait for the long-awaited improvements to our youth clubs. It is regrettable but also notable that the refurbishment of both the Laguna and Plater Youth Clubs, remain outstanding. Both projects having been the subject of a long and tedious DPC approval process, meaning that our young people are to eagerly wait for the first brick to be laid and for the promised investment to materialise.

Madam Speaker, this comes to no surprise. At least not to me. Especially, when 38 million pounds later, and having originally been planned for completion in May/June of 2023, the Rooke Elderly home still hasn't received a certificate of fitness.

With any luck, within the coming year and given that I could see quoted in estimate's book a figure of £15,000 dedicated to youth club refurbishments, perhaps. Perhaps, we may see usage go from what the Minister has previously described as "negligible" to one which is "meaningful". His words, not mine.

In my view, a manifesto pledge, often known as a commitment and more often described as a contract made with the electorate, is something to take seriously. However, it is clear that the GSLP/LIBERAL Party Manifesto, not the Government Manifesto, is a document aimed only for their own political gain. It is most unfortunate that this government has become too comfortable with backtracking on their promises.

So I ask, what. What is the Minister going to tell the 500 youth who attended youth clubs in 2024, when he explains to them that the Rooke Youth club is not going ahead.

It is unfortunate, that they will not see the light of day in the government's commitment to them, to provide a new centralised Youth Centre. The construction of this project is not even mentioned within the plans submitted by the DPC. They sold this as a central hub that would cater for all of Gibraltar's youth. But the only thing this government caters for, is votes, on false promises to win an election by a swing of 150 ballots.

As the Honourable Chief Minister said in this chamber not so long ago, if the Government think they are doing enough for the youth, they must be secretly laughing, like the turkeys that voted for Christmas. It therefore appears that this is indeed another, of their many U-turns, and one which on this occasion, is not welcomed.

We are getting used to the Minister headlining project launches with subsequent photo opportunities, social media posts and good publicity. I want to believe that these are being done with noble intentions, to genuinely improve youth services. The truth on the ground tells a different story. It is a sad and sorry state of affairs.

We continue to hear soundbites as opposed to outcomes. What we certainly don't see is the Government treating our youth as a priority. The goodwill of young people is running out. Their patience has limits. They want to believe in Gibraltar. They want to participate in building its future. But we must give them the tools to do so, before the damage is irreversible.

You may be asking, but what do these tools look like? In my view, we must provide meaningful and sustained funding for youth clubs, not just token grants. We must provide career advice services that function all year round, not just once a year. We must provide proper vocational pathways that lead to real jobs, not waiting rooms. We want to see Youth centres open during evenings and weekends, not just on the occasional two-hour-only windows.

We require a cultural shift. One that values youth voices not only during elections, but every single day. This is a small community with massive potential. We should be, a model to the rest of the world on youth engagement and opportunities. But they cannot fool the young people of Gibraltar any longer, we cannot expect them to believe that appropriate funding and initiatives will develop based on press releases and photo opportunities alone.

Last year, I said that our youth were the heartbeat of Gibraltar. This year, I say that unless we act boldly and decisively, *we risk* flatlining their future.

But when the GSD gets into Government, we will promise and commit, that we will resuscitate the non-beating heart and restore the pulse of our nation. Ensuring priority, funding and care are provided to our youth. A pulse which will beat stronger and build a future for Gibraltar that we can be proud of.

You may be questioning, why I am so passionate about this. All you need to do is to talk to the young people themselves. They will tell you they feel invisible. The opportunities for meaningful employment and advancement remain slim. It is a growing issue. Many young Gibraltarians are either leaving to seek opportunity elsewhere, or worse, falling through the cracks entirely. We cannot afford to continue to haemorrhage their future in this way.

Let's turn to the numbers. Last year we spent less than £660,000 on Youth Services. That figure has barely moved with expenditure having gone up to £683,000 for this coming year. An improvement, one might think. But how naive was I, almost falling for that trap. Shockingly, the contributing factor in this increase, is the rise in wages. Not investment into refurbishment of the clubs. And not in investment in our young people.

When compared to the millions poured into refuse collection, it's painfully clear: we invest more in *bins* than in our young people. It is no wonder then, Madam Speaker, that our youth are disengaged. That they don't see their future here. Because what exactly are they being offered?

The "Zone: Step Up and Thrive" project—still running on *90 minutes a week*. We said it last year, and we say it again now: how can anyone *seriously* claim to support NEETs. Those not in education, employment, or training, when the drop-in service to help them, lasts for less time than a football match?

Madam Speaker, this is not a beacon of hope. It is a flicker of light. A flicker, like the one we often see just before a power cut. Let us hope, and not the beacon type, that our youth do not suffer the blackouts we are so used to

from our Electrical Authority. This is not just my opinion, it is based on facts.

Since questions were last asked in Parliament, a mere 39 young people have used these services to date, 11 of which have made use of this service over the last 9 months, averaging just over 1 young person per month, this calendar year.

It is indeed regrettable, that despite highlighting the importance of surveying the target group of NEETs, we have yet to be provided with statistics in this regard and are therefore unable to assess the usefulness of this project. It is crucial in our view, to be able to properly plan and provide such an initiative with the resources it needs, to have a better understanding of the target group that we are aiming to serve. That is, if we are genuinely aiming to provide “beacons of hope” and not just flickers of light.

You could therefore ask, are these initiatives simply about ticking a box? Because I do not see hunger for positive change. I do not see intent to prioritise youth, I do not see commitment to engage, to consult and to improve. What I do see, is a government that goes through the motions without substance. One that announces projects to deflect criticism and appear worthy of re-election, rather than making real change and transform the lives of young people.

But I sincerely hope, that in the next two years, they can prove me wrong and that this is not the case. Because those who would qualify for the PATHS program deserve more than token gestures.

But we do have events which are commendable, such as the Youth Symposiums. However, it remains sporadic and insufficient. It does not constitute a comprehensive strategy to engage our youth year-round. Overall, despite the minimal efforts made, the financial commitment to youth services remains inadequate. It operates on an empty tank and limited resources, which has a direct impact in our ability to deliver

consistent and comprehensive support to our young people. The government's expenditure on youth services pales, in comparison to other sectors, reflecting what I would call, a misalignment of its priorities.

Let's talk about employment. We know how hard the transition from education to employment can be. It remains a significant challenge for young people. So, I welcome initiatives such as the Connect Hub, which aims to provide much needed guidance and engagement between young people and professionals in the Financial Sector. However, the stark and unfortunate reality is that the aims do not meet expectations. The intended goals do not match the outcomes.

The feedback I get is that young people are unaware of what to do, how to access it and who exactly it is for. I am afraid that this program has not developed and matured in the way that it should and is very much still in its infancy. Announced on the 15th November 2023; we heard yesterday that only 7 workshops have been held to date. Just 7 workshops, in 20 months. It clearly lacks the reach and depth required to make a substantial and meaningful impact.

I really do sound like a broken record Madam Speaker. I hope this house believes me when I say I would want nothing more than our youth members to be thriving and looking forward to their future. Instead, I feel they are approaching a dead end.

Which brings me quite nicely to the Careers fair. An initiative that I welcomed the prospect of its return and was finally held on the 28th November 2024. It was opened to the public and its aim was to provide a meaningful experience to promote various career pathways and guide the youth on exploring different avenues with a view of ensuring the right career choice at such a critical time in their lives.

However, it is one thing to make announcements of a questionable "success story"; it is another entirely to deliver. And delivery, Madam Speaker, is where this Government have consistently fallen short. Instead, the Careers

Fair, raised many concerns and ultimately feelings of disappointment. It lacked depth. Our youth left with more questions than answers. So, I urge the government that next year we do not have a repeat of this Micky Mouse format.

And so, the cycle continues. Young people leave school and fall into a void, often lost and disappointed with their choices, wishing they had been given more information and better advice before embarking into the depths of their despair. It is clear there is no structured transition, and more importantly no tailored guidance. Many will end up in unemployment or in a revolving door of government placements, with no stability and no prospects of building a meaningful career.

So, what happens next? Let us also turn our attention to a topic that is too often dismissed. But nevertheless, whispered about in the cafe's and other public places. We hear rumblings of the increases in crime, antisocial behaviour and even substance misuse. Things are getting out of control we hear. But this is not a coincidence. Because when our young people are given no viable outlets for expression, creativity, or ambition, when they are excluded from the economic engine and deprived of engagement, they turn inward, or worse, outward in destructive ways.

We need to tackle the root of the problem, that is the neglect of youth education. If we had good careers paths, advice and progression opportunities, there would be no doubt in my mind that these problems, would be less prevalent amongst our young people than they are today.

As a member of the Opposition, I must express my deepest concerns at the Government's complacency in addressing Gibraltar's growing youth drug problem. Ministers have spoken at length about the Drugs Advisory Council and so-called cross-agency coordination, yet since the program's inception, very little action has followed.

In the past 12 months alone, we've seen just one token awareness campaign, timed just for Christmas. With no sustained outreach, no

structured school programmes, and no consistent community engagement. Madam Speaker, drug campaigns, like dogs, are not just for Christmas.

Back in 2019, the Chief Minister himself proudly chaired the first meeting of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, pledging urgent, strategic action. He announced the creation of a dedicated team at No.6 Convent Place, the development of a centralised drug database, and meaningful community outreach. He rightly warned that drug misuse “can destroy people’s lives” and called for smarter, coordinated efforts involving educators, healthcare professionals, and the RGP.

The Chief Minister since having proudly chaired the council in 2019, has passed on the responsibility to the Minister for Youth, and with it, the momentum all but disappeared. The newly appointed Minister seems to think a one-off festive awareness push, is enough, to tackle a crisis that’s clearly escalating. These are his words, not mine.

In his own Budget speech, last year he confirmed that there was a staggering 40% increase in drug-related admissions, yet where is the urgency in their response? A single workshop here, a press release there, and no consistent, year-round strategy to educate, prevent, or support our young people. Where is the meaningful action. Our young people, our families, and our future deserve far more than empty rhetoric and one-off seasonal campaigns.

And we know what occurs when young people feel excluded from the social and economic life. We see it reflected in the rising tide of youth crime. The most recent statistics available, were concerning—600 youth arrests over a three-year period. But it is this trend that is even more disturbing: year after year, young people top, they top the list of the RGP’s most arrested age groups.

These are not just statistics. These are lives. Young people turning to drugs, vandalism and petty theft. Not out of malice, but out of *frustration* and

hopelessness. They are in my view, reacting to a system that has neglected them.

Which brings me to another glaring omission in the Government's youth policy: the complete abandonment of nightlife and safe recreational areas. Gibraltar has, quite frankly, no viable entertainment for young people. We are creating what appears to be a vacuum in our society.

With no music venues, no late-night cafés and no youth-focused events or clubs, what are we offering our young people? Where are the policies to create youth-oriented social activities, particularly on Friday nights and the weekends? Where is the support for artistic development? Too many questions madam speaker, with very little answers I'm afraid.

Madam Speaker, the youth of Gibraltar are more than just a demographic in our statistics. They are not a box to be ticked or a press release to be issued for political point scoring. They are our future doctors, teachers, engineers, artists, parents and leaders. Whilst some of initiatives undertaken are steps in the right direction, they are not sufficient in name alone. Our young people deserve more than occasional events and underfunded programs. They deserve more than piecemeal policy and photo opportunities.

I wholeheartedly hope, that next year, I am able to commend the government for developing a comprehensive, well-funded strategy that provides continuous support, engagement, and more importantly, opportunities to our young people.

This Budget was yet another opportunity to realign our priorities. It could have been the moment where youth services received the bold funding they really needed. Regrettably, Madam Speaker, this seminal moment, appears, to have been missed. But let us be clear, we are not short on potential in Gibraltar. What we are short on, is political will. We need to begin to truly value and invest in our young people, not just with words, but with action.

As it currently stands, this Government's legacy will not be one of progress, but of betrayal. One that would cast a malevolent shadow on those young people who were falsely promised a brighter future. We cannot speak of building a resilient Gibraltar without properly funding the very people who will inherit it. This requires a radical uplift in the youth budget, not just token increases. We need sustained and strategic investment in skills development and employment opportunities. Anything less is not just short-sighted, it is negligent.

Now that a political agreement on a future treaty has finally been reached, it may be, that a new chapter could open for Gibraltar. One that may bring prosperity and new opportunities. I urge that a treaty is developed with our young people at its heart. Because the value of any treaty is not just in what it protects, but in what it empowers us to build. This may help us construct the kind of future our youth deserve. A future that is safe, secure, ambitious, and worthy of their trust. For the short, the medium and the long-term.

Tourism:

Moving swiftly now to tourism. I am sure that the Honourable the Chief Minister would be best pleased to hear that this is the point where I shall sit down and give way to my learned and honourable colleague, Mr Bossino; one of my peers from this side of the house. Peer. P.E.E.R.

Madam Speaker, I say that only in jest. But jokes aside, maybe at the next viewpoint he can attend on my behalf, given that he performed so diligently at the last program.

Because you see, we are collegiate on this side of the house, and have no problem in sharing the spotlight, particularly, when the potential topics of discussion cuts across some of our portfolios.

Just as much was admitted by the Honourable Minister for the Environment on Tuesday, when he explained that whilst he is responsible for tourist the product, under his environment and heritage portfolios, the Honourable Minister for Tourism deals with the marketing.

Perhaps the other Government Ministers could learn from this. Given, that they look as divided as ever. With not one, not two, but three potential candidates vying for its leadership. It is that kind of competition, that often destroys a party, rather than bringing it closer together. We shall wait and see..

Madam Speaker, I must once again reiterate an ongoing concern regarding the availability of tourism statistics. The public data provided throughout the year has for months been lagging and suffered significant delays in record keeping.

I have asked for the reason for the delay numerous times, and in true GSLP/Liberal style, I am yet to receive a meaningful answer. This absolute lack of transparency is disheartening and alarming. You may think I'm paranoid but perhaps they do not want scrutiny by the members of the opposition. Because you cannot mask raw data. You are unable to spin yourself out it. Data is valuable and gives us insight, which then allows us to be critical in assessing trends in tourism, particularly in relation to the government's policies.

This persistent failing undermines our ability to effectively assess whether this year's budget allocations truly represent value for money for the taxpayer. In the spirit therefore of constructive dialogue, I remind members opposite, of the importance of updating the data that is made publicly available, which would undoubtedly facilitate more informed and robust debate going forwards. And not just provide a clear picture, 3 days before a budget debate, in the form of a yearly report.

Having finally addressed this glaring oversight, I now turn, despite relying on limited and outdated data, to the uncomfortable truth about our current

state of affairs. Visitor numbers to the Upper Rock Nature Reserve have yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Between 2016 and 2019, we saw over a million visits annually for three consecutive years. That momentum is gone. Vanished. Yet the Minister since having learnt how to cycle, continues to peddle the fiction of “steady improvement.” This isn’t optimism, it is misdirection.

Despite repeated claims of growth, the sector remains stuck in a sluggish recovery, failing yet again to reach benchmarks we had only just achieved before the pandemic. Even more concerning, early 2025 data paints a worrying picture, only 31,000 visitors by the end of January, this is a 5% drop compared to the same period last year. This isn’t growth. Madam Speaker, it is regression. Tourism is not booming. It is not growing. It is limping. And no amount of spin can change that.

Let’s cut through the pleasantries and look at the facts. Let’s stop pretending mediocrity is progress. Cruise passenger arrivals in 2024 totalled just over 300,000, which is well short of the 400,000 plus we consistently saw in the two years before the pandemic. That means we're still 25% below where we once stood. We’re still dragging behind, that is not recovery, it is stagnation. Because after all this time, a full recovery remains out of reach.

Yes, the 2025 figures up to April, show around 90,000 passengers arrivals, that is an improvement on last year. But let’s not confuse “better than last year” with “good enough.” It simply means we’re doing less badly than before. The bar should be full recovery, not slow-motion progress. As of now, the Gibraltar Port website has scheduled 236 cruise arrivals for 2025. That’s seven shy of the all-time record set back in 2018, which is now seven years ago. A slow-motion recovery indeed.

While it is perhaps encouraging, it is hardly groundbreaking. A near return to form almost a decade later, isn’t cause for celebration. Well, it might be for them, given their track record. So, whilst the Honourable Minister might

want a round of applause, I say, let's not pop the champagne just yet. Because the reality is that we are not ahead, we are not breaking records, we are still trying to catch up to them.

But let's put these numbers into context. Let's not allow them to spin this in classic GSLP/Liberal style. Yes, we have better numbers, but the jewel in the crown is what we do with these visitors and how we treat them.

Madam Speaker, as I have stated in the past, the potential economic contribution of each cruise call to our local economy is considerable and should not be underestimated. Each arrival, along with the thousands of passengers disembarking, provides opportunity, to generate tangible and immediate benefit to our catering, hospitality, and retail sectors. But are we doing enough to impress our visitors?

Does the Minister genuinely believe that our port entrance is up to standard? Or is it only 'good enough' because he is the one responsible for letting it fall into this state? If he were sitting on this side of the House, I've no doubt he'd be tearing it apart. Quite frankly, if this is the welcome we're offering cruise passengers, we might as well hang a sign that says: 'Lower your expectations, you're in Gibraltar now.'

Because Madam Speaker, it is disappointing, that despite concerns raised last year, the cruise terminal remains in a state of neglect, offering a poor first impression to arriving visitors. The port entrance on which these tourists embark from, remains in shambles.

To add salt to the wound, the journey from there which they make towards town, is best described as navigating through a jungle, with no clear signs, no beautification and no method to the madness. While there have been assurances of future investment in the port, which has been very much welcomed, little progress has been made. The Government's own manifesto admitted the current cruise terminal is "looking tired."

But let's be honest, the only thing truly exhausted here is the public's patience. We were promised a "state-of-the-art" terminal, a "magnificent

facility” that would set the benchmark for the region. And yet, not a single brick has been laid. The current condition not only undermines the appeal of the Gibraltar as a destination of choice, but also reflects a lack of urgency in addressing what is a long-standing issue.

This isn’t just about aesthetics, it’s about pride, planning, and economic sense. Gibraltar cannot afford to sell itself short at the very point of entry. If we truly believe tourism is a pillar of our economy, then it must be treated as such in our investment priorities. Because just like with youth services, the neglect we see here is not due to lack of means, but a lack of prioritisation. And until that changes, we will continue to fall short of the standards our visitors would rightly expect.

At the same time, we must take a broader and more strategic view of our tourism offering. If we are to increase the average spend per visitor. We must invest in elevating the overall quality of the product. This includes enhancing key attractions, diversifying experiences, and ensuring that our cultural and heritage sites are compelling, accessible, and well-maintained.

But let us be clear. Enhancing our tourism product means very little if visitors cannot reach it. Quality must go hand in hand with accessibility. Just as much was stated within the latest Chamber of Commerce Tourism Manifesto in 2024.

Whilst I understand that the Honourable the Chief Minister doesn’t often quote the Chamber, given that they don’t often agree on things, earlier this week, he did so at least twice, during his address.

So let me draw to his attention, something else which the Chamber have said. In their Manifesto they stated that: “*the key to unlocking Tourism’s full potential is transport*”. The message is clear. What’s unclear is whether this Government is even listening, let alone willing to act. That is not just disappointing. It is a red flag. They are warnings. Repeated, clear, and now impossible to ignore. The cruise industry is evolving at pace, and Gibraltar must evolve with it, or risk being left behind.

A compelling tourism strategy is urgently needed. One that is imaginative and capable of inspiring potential visitors. A bold, strategy isn't a luxury, it's a necessity. Yet after a year of talk, we've seen nothing. No plan. No detail. No direction. Just vague assurances, shifting timelines and lateral moves of senior staff. Without a published strategy, there's no way to track progress, to constructively scrutinise, or hold anyone accountable.

Back in October 2024, the Minister assured this House that: "Of course we have a strategy. We have developed a tourism strategy, which we will publish very soon." That was over eight months ago. Still, nothing. And now, last week, when asked yet again, we got the same tired line: "It will be ready soon." Madam Speaker, after this much delay, "soon" means nothing. And if the strategy lives only in the Minister's mind, then it's not a strategy, it's a delusion. It's a fantasy and one which is effectively meaningless. We await for its prompt publication.

Which neatly brings me to my next observation, which involves one of our most prestigious offerings, the Museum. Madam Speaker, while the Honourable Minister has previously claimed that the Gibraltar Museum enjoys significant global recognition, citing its work on the Neanderthal World Heritage Site, its mention in a Netflix series, and its inclusion in the newly launched "Alternative Tour", the raw data tells a very different story. Since those statements were made in September 2024, we have instead seen an 8% decline in visitor numbers, compounding an already downward trend.

But we heard on Monday, that museum receipts were up and that we should be proud of this achievement. We were told that it has gone from £60,000 to £75,000, representing a 25% increase in revenue. Wow. I almost, for just one second, fell for the spin.

But how could I forget, the Museum entry fees were increased last year by 200%. From a modest £5 to £15. A 200% increase Madam Speaker. What we haven't seen a 200% increase in revenue. That is because visitors

numbers are down, and our tourists are clearly not satisfied with the product. It seems that whilst we were able to put the wool over their eyes in the short term, it appears that the message of dissatisfaction has already been catching on.

Setting aside the exceptional disruption caused by the COVID, we must go as far back as 2014, to find comparably low attendance figures. That we have now reached this low point speaks to a serious and ongoing neglect. It is both disappointing and unacceptable that such a historically significant attraction, one that should be a cultural flagship for Gibraltar, is being allowed to fall into decline. Talk about strategy.

If the museum is indeed a "world leader" in its field, then the question must be asked: why are we failing to translate that reputation into visitor engagement? Who is to blame for this? If, as the Minister claims, the museum is widely known and well-promoted, then marketing is clearly not the core issue.

The logical conclusion, is that the problem lies with the product. If it is to fulfil its potential as a centrepiece of Gibraltar's cultural identity and tourism offering, as it does in every other part of the world, it must be properly resourced and revitalised without further delay. It is not enough to rely on abstract prestige or assumed visibility abroad.

Turning to more statistics, it is regrettable that the data on the number of arrivals via the land frontier was lagging 12 months behind, only to be updated last week in the tabling of the Tourist Survey Report. From the report, we can see a modest increase of 1.5% in arrivals compared to the same period last year. But let's not overstate it — that small uptick still leaves us two million visitors short of pre-pandemic levels. So, twelve months after the Chief Minister admitted "we were not quite in the good times yet," it's clear we're still stuck in the hard times and choppy waters, with little sign of a meaningful turnaround.

As for air arrivals, the picture is equally bleak. By the end of 2024, just over 210,000 passengers had arrived in Gibraltar — a 10% drop from 2023. So, Madam Speaker, the numbers speak for themselves — and no amount of spin can turn this decline into a success story. At least, not yet.

So, while the Minister for tourism boasts about “Rising Star” badges in the context of increased searches for bookings to Gibraltar, it is as they say, *“a little too early to count your chickens before the hatch”*. Because searches have clearly not yet translated into actual reservations. The volume of flights has not improved but rather, it has gotten worse.

With that said and with the latest addition of the new flight route to Birmingham, it is very much hoped that we will in the near future, see these figures increase, which will then lead to more visitors and more spending in our local economy. Perhaps by then we can legitimately consider ourselves as a “Rising Star” and not the falling meteorite we have recently become. But as of today, we are yet to see the results of the sports-led, and entertainment-led tourism, which this government promised it would attract, if re-elected.

Despite all these failings, there is a potential prospect. With the political agreement now announced and talk of ‘enhanced use’ of the Gibraltar airport, we may finally be on the cusp of greater EU-wide flight opportunities. If indeed, we are able to commercially attract them, then the impact on our connectivity and by extension, our visitor numbers, could be significant. But it is as I say, a glimmer of hope, which must be nurtured.

Because that glimmer is worthless if those tourists land here, only to sip sangria in Spain instead of enjoying a pint in La Piazza. If all we’re doing is flying people in so they can spend their money elsewhere, then let’s be honest: we’re not running a tourism strategy we are running a transit lounge.

Moving on, can I ask, when was the last time any of us enjoyed a proper night out in Gibraltar? When did tourists or local youth last rave about our

nightlife? The hard truth is this: Gibraltar's tourism and leisure offering is embarrassingly incomplete. It is a glaring omission from our current Tourism Strategy, that there is no structured night-time entertainment worth mentioning. No nightclubs. No late-night venues for music, dance, or modern entertainment. For a destination pitching itself as a "city break" or weekend hotspot, this is simply indefensible.

How can we expect to compete with our Mediterranean rivals when, come Friday or Saturday night, there's nowhere for young people, or even adults to go? Not one nightclub. Not a single venue. So yes, our youth and tourists head to Spain to unwind. Because here, we offer them nothing. And frankly, this failure isn't just a social embarrassment; it's a direct hit to Gibraltar's economy that this Government chooses to ignore.

The modern city break traveller is looking for more than just natural heritage and historical landmarks. They are looking for a complete experience, which includes evening and late-night options. Our tourism statistics clearly show that Gibraltar is overwhelmingly a day-trip destination, with the average stay being too short to bring meaningful economic benefit. And part of the reason, is that there is very little incentive for visitors to stay. Even from a business point of view, this is a missed opportunity. A vibrant nightlife economy creates jobs and opportunities. Other cities of our size have understood this. Gibraltar, under this Government's watch, has not.

Gibraltar is not just less attractive, it is incomplete. Madam Speaker, this is not just about clubbing or entertainment for its own sake. This is about economic diversification and modernising our tourism product to reflect the expectations of today's visitors. The longer this gap remains, the more it limits our growth potential and the more young people, both tourists and locals, will look elsewhere.

What about hotels? The Chamber of Commerce recently commented on the lack of hotels in Gibraltar and availability of beds, making a plea for an

increase in both areas in the next few years to allow increase in overnight stays. As I have said in the past, the search for new business in terms of flight destinations, cruise calls and visitor numbers should be developed in tandem with investments to our hotel infrastructure and that of our transport facilities. These pleas cannot simply be acknowledged and then left to gather dust. Otherwise, we risk creating demand we are simply not prepared to meet, which will result in turning the prospect of opportunity into missed potential.

We have however, seen an increase in bed availability through privately managed short-lets, which have recently been regulated this past year. However, while these have helped to ease some of the pressure, they are not, and cannot be, a substitute for a well-developed hotel sector. If we are serious about attracting more overnight visitors, then we need a proper hotel infrastructure. They need to be purpose-built, professionally managed, and able to support the volume and standards expected of a modern destination. The Government, on its part, must stop dragging its feet and do everything possible to attract these vital investments, sooner rather than later.

Looking at small visual improvements, I regret to note that the stone paving bricks on Coral Road remain unreplaced, leaving the project unfinished and the area visually compromised. What exists now is a patchwork of partially restored brickwork disrupted by an unsightly piece of tarmac at the centre. In its current state, the road falls far short of reflecting the beauty and character we pride ourselves with, undermining the overall impression of our community.

Why has this not yet been fixed? I ask, is it a cost issue? Is there not a willingness to finish the job properly? Didn't they campaign on "getting the job done"? Perhaps not. Because there is a clear and striking track record of unfinished projects.

Unfinished bicycle routes which link up to nowhere, broken automated toilets at tourist hotspots like grand parade and an abysmal entrance to the place that we call home, both at the land frontier and the cruise terminal, to name but a few.

But all that is fine, according to this Government. We continue to comfort ourselves with rhetoric about the good times ahead, clinging on to promises of a brighter future that since 2016, have always seemed just out of reach. We fuel our nostalgia, hoping it's enough to carry us through, and that somehow, visitors will look past the chaos that greets them. All of this may now change, albeit, a very long and painful 9 years later. The recent announcement of a political agreement may indeed provide the motivation which was required to address some of these unsightly areas.

In summing up all of this, we firmly request that significant resources are allocated to address all of these issues. Because whilst we may have seen an increase in Tourism Expenditure of 7.1% this last financial year, it is still 41 million pounds less, than what we used to enjoy at our peak, now over 5 years ago. Slow-motion progress.

Our journey back to those good times is far from over and it demands more than rhetoric of a bright future that is to come. It requires honest reflection and a renewed commitment to doing things differently if we are to truly recover and move closer, towards those good times.

Environment:

Madam Speaker, I am delighted to address you now on the environment. It is firstly noted that a year has passed since I last raised some of the following concerns in this House. Regrettably, very little has changed. I say this with profound sadness, because I care greatly for our environment and consequences if we do not look after it. But also, because of the respect and admiration I have for the Honourable Minister. The issues, however, remain as visible and as pressing today as they were twelve months ago, and perhaps even more so.

Our natural environment, that unique and irreplaceable landscape we are so proud of, continues to suffer from chronic neglect. Green spaces continue to diminish, while development projects sprout relentlessly. Construction sites, scaffolding, dust, and debris have become part of our everyday life and are not just found on the beaches.

The visual pollution this creates does no justice to Gibraltar's image. Not for those of us who call it home, or for those we seek to attract as tourists. The complaints that Gibraltar looks unkempt, unsightly, even filthy, have not faded away. In fact, they have only intensified and indeed worsened.

On transport and pollution, again, no real and tangible progress has been made. The over-reliance on cars remains, and so does the traffic congestion, the poor air quality, and the noise pollution. The density of vehicles in Gibraltar, is still among the highest per capita in the world, a statistic we should not be wearing with pride. Yet, we continue to approach the issue with hesitation and half-measures. One such example, as many will recall, was the proposed Pollution Levy announced last year. It was a policy so ill-considered, so detached from the lived reality of working-class families, that it had to be retracted just as quickly as it was announced.

It was a policy that did nothing to improve the environment, because if you could afford to pay, you could afford to pollute. That is not environmentalism; that is environmental inequality. And while I welcomed the swift reversal of that measure, I must also point out that backtracking is not the same as forward planning, we must recognise that avoiding bad policy is not the same as delivering good policy. Reacting to public outcry is not the same as planning to address the situation at hand.

What is needed is a coherent, long-term environmental strategy, one that includes investment in cleaner and more efficient public transport, the protection and expansion of green spaces, the enforcement of standards for air and noise pollution, and yes, a responsible and fair approach to

reducing our dependency on private vehicles. Madam Speaker, the people of Gibraltar deserve better, and so does our environment.

Because the cracks in our infrastructure, both literal and figuratively, have become glaringly obvious over the past year. Nowhere has this been more evident than at Wellington Front, where civil servants were left scrambling to contain issues that should have been anticipated. The emergency works which have had to take place there in recent months, at an additional cost to the taxpayer, wasn't an unforeseen emergency.

It was the predictable result of 14 years without a coherent plan to upgrade or modernise our sewer systems. So much so, that even sink holes have recently appeared, on two separate occasions on the same street, due the dilapidated state of our main sewer system. Addressing these sinkholes also required emergency repairs which have come at increased cost to the taxpayer.

This kind of reactive governance, one which responds to crises rather than preventing them, is unsustainable. It's not good for departmental expenditure and it is certainly not good for the environment. But that's okay, it seems, at least to them, because overtime and allowances are better than ever within this department, as we found out, only last week.

As I have said before, ultimate political responsibility rests with the elected Government. And as our population has grown, the failure to invest in critical infrastructure has only worsened the strain. The longer we delay meaningful investment, the more costly and disruptive the consequences will become. These are not just health hazards, they are daily eyesores, that diminish the quality of life for residents and tarnish Gibraltar's image.

If that were not enough, the continued delay of the promised wastewater treatment plant is nothing short of shameful. After 14 years in office, this Government has failed to deliver a basic piece of infrastructure, one that any modern jurisdiction should consider essential. As a result, raw sewage

continues to be discharged directly into our surrounding waters, day after day; and day after day.

This is not only an environmental embarrassment, but also a serious public health concern. It is a failure of planning, and of responsibility. These should have been environmental and public health priorities, which the Government should have adequately dealt with, but regrettably have not.

The contractor in question was awarded preferred bidder status nearly two years ago, yet we have seen little to no tangible progress on the proposed works. Updates have been vague, and public confidence continues to erode.

Earlier this week, the Honourable Minister confirmed that the tender had been awarded to the preferred bidder. Finally! However, it is notable that he did admit that there were still a number of commercial points to be agreed. So it may still be the case that this is not yet, signed sealed and delivered. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

It is my sincere hope therefore, that these commercial points, are soon resolved and that by this time next year, I will not be standing once again, compelled to repeat the same uncomfortable truths, about a Government who pretends to care for the Environment and its people. Because these are not simply political talking points, they are symptoms of deeper, systemic failure.

Only a few short weeks ago, I was at the Sunborn's Aspire Conference on Sustainable Development. A conference which examined what Gibraltar should be doing, to achieve its sustainability and climate objectives, with a particular focus on new building developments. The conference was opened by the Hon Minister for the Environment, where he said a few words during his opening, which stuck with me: "Sustainability is about progress and Gibraltar is an example to the rest of the world".

The Minister will be delighted to hear that I totally agree with him. We certainly are an example to the rest of the world. Perhaps. But on how not to do things. At least, insofar as the Environment is concerned. For

example, since my address last year, we have barely managed to move the needle on renewable energy consumption. In 2023, our renewable energy output, stood at a miniscule 1.14%. This year, as at the end of 2024, we disappointingly managed to increase this, up to 1.55%. This is not progress, it is inertia.

We heard on Tuesday that since taking over, now almost 14 years ago. That Gibraltar had no renewable energy. But despite the many millions of pounds invested, it appears that we still do not have any now. So while the Minister likes to talk about perceived MAX Capacity, I prefer to talk about outcomes.

While small territories like ours across the globe are investing in renewables, we are still overwhelmingly dependent on fossil fuels. We cannot continue to speak the language of sustainability while acting in contradiction to it.

But where are the contradictions, you ask? Well, as I have just stated, we continue to pump raw untreated sewage into our beloved oceans, whilst we see no movement and no progress on the development of the waste-water treatment plant negotiations. We continue to have more cars than we do people, which aids in creating a noxious habitat, where we bathe ourselves in fumes and pollution on a daily basis. Our beaches are plagued with dust, dirt and debris, causing an influx of infections and disappointment within our community. Our waste recycling rates, stands at a mere 12%, despite the government's ambitious target of reaching 55% by the end of this year. And finally, our clean energy, stands at a mere 1.5%, despite the millions of pounds invested into renewables.

All of these Madam Speaker, are all certainly examples, of how the rest of the world, should not follow suit.

We also heard from the Hon. Minister for Health, Care and Business at this Conference, who explained how the Gibraltar Development Plans of 1991 and 2009, both helped shape the Gibraltar that we live in today and how the Government is looking ahead to issuing a new Plan by the end of this

year, which will help shape the future of tomorrow. We very much look forward to seeing this new plan and sincerely hope that it adequately factors in all the significant changes which we have seen take place in Gibraltar over the past decade and a half, which includes the changes to our population, our economy and our natural environment.

During the conference, the Minister also said something which I can't forget to this day, speaking on sustainability, the Minister confessed, that "*drafting the legislation is easy, but getting the work done is the hard part*", and how accurate was that! A statement that embodies perfectly the achievements, or rather the lack-thereof, from this Government.

Because drafting and legislating a Climate Change Act is easy, promising to build a Waste-water treatment plant, is also easy, but reaching the Interim and the Net Zero Targets, or actually building the plant, is where the real work is done and quite frankly, it appears that we are not working hard enough. Maybe, in their next election manifesto they should replace their slogan from '*getting the job done*' to '*we will try our hardest*' but probably won't succeed.

When analysing some of the data, we can see that according to this year's estimates of expenditure, the departmental budget for the environment was again over budget, this year by a total of £1.3m. The causes of the overspend derived largely from overtime wages paid, which is of course of no surprise given the answers we have recently heard in this House. The Collection and Disposal of Refuse was also 20% over budget for a second year running. With a total expenditure rising to a staggering 11.8 million. Just under 12 Million pounds, for the Collection and Disposal, of Refuse!

But am I surprised? Of course not. As we heard only yesterday, we are dealing with the Silver Medallist, in the Bust the Budget awards ceremony yesterday. We hope, that next year, he may wish to go for bronze instead.

While last year's overspend coincided with election-related activity, this year's figures point to more systemic issues. We must now question

whether these overruns are the result of consistent underbudgeting or ongoing inefficiencies within the department. Either scenario is unsustainable. And crucially, we must also ask, that despite this increased expenditure, is the public actually seeing a cleaner Gibraltar?

Because if not, we have to be honest and ask ourselves are we getting value for our money? Because despite the record levels of spending, many would argue that Gibraltar looks no cleaner today than it did before. It seems to me, that the only thing that's been cleaned out is the public purse.

Madam Speaker, in terms of the Upper Rock Tourist Sites and Beaches, it is highlighted that these too were also slightly over budget, by half a million pounds. Which brings me to my next observation, that is, what exactly has 8.4 Million pounds been spent on? Because only last year, we expressed concern about the chronic state of our beaches, particularly those on the east side, which appeared to be coated in dust from never-ending construction.

This year, the situation appears to have worsened and we fail to understand, how this is so, given the serious overspends in these areas. The budget for our beaches alone, has increased by a staggering 24% since last year, so I would be very grateful if in their reply, the government could account for this increased expenditure and explain why we are still not seeing any significant improvements.

I now turn to the 25-Year Environmental Plan, a document which is understood to be in the final stages of development. A draft was finally published for public consultation in December 2024, despite having been promised as far back as June 2023. It was now two budget sessions ago when the Minister for the Environment addressed the then Mr Speaker and advised that: [the] "Government will this month be publishing its 25-year Plan for the Environment". This month he said. In June 2023. The Minister has indeed redefined the concept of time, given that "this month", was now over two years ago Madam Speaker.

The Honourable Minister did, however, confirm earlier this week that the Plan would be released, albeit, in draft by the end of that evening. So, while the plan has finally reached completion, its delayed finalisation raises concerns.

The consultation process which it recently was engaged upon, though valuable for public engagement, has extended the timeline for implementation. Given the urgent environmental challenges Gibraltar faces, including air quality issues and the need for sustainable infrastructure, the prolonged development of this plan is a missed opportunity for timely action.

The Government's commitment to environmental improvement is commendable, but the delay in finalising the blueprint underscores the need for more efficient policy development processes.

Looking at specific projects, it is noted that this House is often called upon to weigh the practical against the principled, or the desirable against the ethical. The proposal for an aquarium and oceanic research centre is one such matter.

It raises concerns, not merely whether something can be done, but whether it should. In response to my recent question on this project, the Honourable Minister indicated that he is not yet in a position to express support for this project. I understand that he is pending a review of implications for heritage, animal welfare, and the credibility of the proposed research upon which this project is being justified. That is a prudent position to take, and I commend the Minister for resisting premature endorsement. But prudence alone is not enough when we are dealing with sentient life.

Madam Speaker, aquariums can inspire awe. They can foster learning. And they can, in the best of cases, act as gateways to scientific understanding. But we must also confront an uncomfortable truth: that many modern marine biologists, conservationists, and animal welfare experts, are increasingly questioning whether the captivity of ocean life can ever be truly

justified, especially when it is not in the service of direct rescue or conservation.

To enclose animals that are born to navigate vast and complex marine ecosystems, solely to place them behind glass boxes, for human observation, raises a deep ethical dilemma. Even with the best intentions, can we square that confinement with the high standards of animal welfare we claim to uphold? Moreover, we must critically ask: what is the real educational value of such an experience? Are we truly teaching respect for marine life, or are we offering a spectacle dressed as science?

If the educational experience is based on distortion on animals behaving unnaturally in fabricated environments, then we are not educating. We are misleading.

Something which this GSLP/Liberal party, are getting so good at doing.

But Madam Speaker, there is another equally important concern, one grounded not in ethics, but in environmental sustainability and infrastructure resilience. I understand that one of the main features of the proposed facility includes a large tank of approximately 180,000 litres of water. It is also not the only tank planned in the project, but one of many. Such installations are not environmentally neutral. They require significant amounts of electricity to regulate temperature, power filtration systems, provide artificial lighting, and a continuous supply of treated water.

Research into tanks of this scale has shown they carry a high carbon footprint, especially when operated in regions without significant renewable energy infrastructure. This raises a pressing question: can Gibraltar's current electrical grid support a facility of this intensity without placing further strain on our system? Because I am sure that we could all agree in this House, that we do not want to see the blackouts returning.

Equally, in a time when we are encouraging conservation of energy and reduction of emissions, can we justify launching a project that may increase consumption across all these areas? These are not merely operational

questions. They go to the heart of whether this project aligns with our climate commitments and with our sustainability goals. Madam Speaker, I am not here to condemn the idea of marine research or public education.

But I do believe that if such a centre is to be built, it must stand up to the highest ethical and environmental scrutiny. We must support science, but not at the expense of compassion. We must value education, but not when it distorts the truth. And we must pursue innovation and development but not when it comes at the cost of principle or sustainability.

So, I urge the Minister to be cautious, and to give all these matters serious thought before he considers green lighting such a project when the time arises. But I am sure that the Minister knows all of this, and hence why he couldn't commit in parliament when I asked him whether he would indeed support the project.

Madam Speaker, as we examine this year's capital investment programme, we must not only scrutinise how much we are spending but reflect on the values that underpin our spending decisions. Few developments exemplify this balance of opportunity and responsibility more than the East Side Project.

It has been positioned as a transformative initiative, one that could unlock economic growth, revitalise underutilised land, and provide new housing and infrastructure. That potential is, in principle, welcome. But potential must not be confused with inevitability, and ambition must not come at the cost of transparency, environmental stewardship, or public trust.

As I highlighted during recent proceedings, the handling of key components of this project, such as beach nourishment and the proposed marina at Catalan Bay, has raised legitimate concerns. We were told that beach equilibrium would be reached within ten years, yet no binding guarantees, or long-term contingency plans have been clearly articulated. Beaches like Eastern Beach and Catalan Bay are not private amenities; they are national, communal spaces and part of our shared environmental legacy.

Whether or not the public purse funds the interventions directly, the public still bears the consequences of their success or more importantly, failure.

Meanwhile, when it comes to the proposed marina and breakwater, we must be careful not to dismiss concerns by residents, planners, and environmental experts alike, as if they were nothing more than political noise. The comparison to plans from nearly two decades ago does little to address the current, well-founded anxieties about coastal impact, visual encroachment, and the erosion of community spaces. A statement that the public 'will be able to see over the seawall' is not a legitimate answer to a question that is fundamentally about preservation.

And so, I repeat, this is not a call against development. It is a call for better development. For planning that is rigorous, for engagement that is sincere, and for delivery that is as mindful of our coastal identity as it is of our economic ambitions. If we can get this balance right, the East Side Project could indeed become a model of smart, sustainable growth. But if we get it wrong, the cost will not just be financial, it will be generational

Transport:

Finally, Madam Speaker, yes, finally. I turn to transport. I note that a lot of transport related matters has already been covered, at least in respect of our tourism concerns and with that of the environment, so I will endeavour to be as brief as possible and deal with issues not yet considered throughout this final part of my address.

In exchanges in Parliament earlier this year, we raised questions regarding the recently updated Sustainable Traffic, Transport and Parking Plan 2025 – which I will be referring to as the “Transport Plan”. Here, we raised concerns in order to critically highlight how very little has been done in this area, since its adoption now almost 8 years ago.

The Transport Plan in its original form had aspired to achieve many things, such as: addressing road traffic safety; oversee traffic planning matters; better management of the impact of developments on traffic; addressing

issues at junctions; and improving access to the city centre. Despite the many aspirations of the Transport Plan, it appears that the Government had chosen to start with, and stop at, the introduction of bicycle lanes.

Which even then have only been developed in a piecemeal manner. It is disappointing, that despite the ambitions of the Traffic Plan, the Government have done very little, if anything at all, to alleviate and address the major traffic flow issues referred to in the Plan which appear to plague Gibraltar on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, our over reliance on personal transport vehicles to navigate in and around Gibraltar, is only compounded further by the lack of a reliable and efficient public transport system. A transport system which paradoxically, also formed part of the Government's original Transport Plan. There are over well over 40,000 registered motor vehicles in Gibraltar, and this is no longer sustainable, which raises several concerns in respect of safety issues on our roads.

These very points were recently highlighted over the course of the last few months, such as the dangers which many vulnerable road users are experiencing when navigating through the Gibraltar road labyrinth. Particularly by those using e-scooters and bicycles.

With that said, safety concerns were also raised as to whether these types of road users were subjected to a theory or practical examination under the Highway Code prior to being eligible to use our public roads. It appears, that they do not.

This is concerning, not least, given the increasing number of complaints that has been received by members of the public of these vehicle users, often flouting many of the relevant road rules which often, put them and others at risk. Perhaps it is high time that we spend more money in this area and subject these road users to some kind of examination, which would no doubt assist in making our roads safer.

Speaking of road safety. I recently asked the Honourable Minister a simple question: are the roads safe? The roads he is responsible for. He said yes, confidently. That response wasn't just arrogant. It was dangerous. Let me explain. I raised concerns as to the deficiencies contained within our current Transport Act, which gives outdated a whole new meaning. The legislation is two decades old. There are zero legal requirements to report serious medical conditions that could impair driving. None. This no doubt is putting the public and drivers at risk.

In the UK, which we often boast we mirror, if you suffer from epilepsy or have a stroke, you are legally obliged to stop driving and inform the authorities. In Gibraltar? Nothing. No policy. No enforcement. No concern. Are we seriously pretending that medical conditions such as these don't affect drivers here? What kind of fantasy are we living in? It's worse than negligence. It's a wilful blind spot. There are no clear lists of disqualifying conditions. No guidance. And no infrastructure to protect the public.

And when someone over 70 wants to renew their licence? They go to a private doctor. Pay a fee and get signed off based on a chat. No access to medical records. No checks. No oversight. And no involvement of Public Health. That's not a safeguard, that's a loophole you could drive a bus through.

I brought this to the attention of the Minister just a few months ago. For our concerns, to be brushed aside. So let me try again, plainly. This is like certifying a car as roadworthy after inspecting just 20% of it and taking the owner's word for the rest. This isn't hypothetical. It is irresponsible, deeply concerning and it is happening right now. We are essentially gambling with lives.

This is reckless and unacceptable. And it's not a question of if this will lead to a tragedy, it's a question of when. And when it does, the responsibility will sit squarely with those who knew but chose to do nothing about it. So, I say again, as I did at the start of my budget address. It is difficult to

remain constructive, when it appears that our concerns, some which are much more serious than others, appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

I nevertheless expect that such deficiencies are addressed as a matter of urgency, before any avoidable harm is caused and we find ourselves regretting inaction when it is already too late. So let me ask him one more time. Does he actually think our Roads are safe?

Madam Speaker, let me briefly touch on the Taxi Service. While not strictly a budget item, it has nevertheless come at a cost, in time, resources, and public patience. We welcomed the new regulations mandating minimum taxi availability for flight arrivals. But let's be honest: it shouldn't have taken legislation to fix what should be a basic public service.

Reliable taxis are essential, for our community, for business, and for Gibraltar's credibility as a modern destination. Service levels have long been unacceptable. And while the Government doesn't fund the Association, it licenses and regulates it and with that comes responsibility.

And I say this not just in theory, I speak from experience. I lived it. After breaking my leg, I spent 24 minutes trying to get through to dispatch. With no answer. And no taxi. I had to hobble to Parliament on my crutches. We're told that things are improving, but the experience that I went through, spoke volumes of the level of the service provided. I can only but imagine the frustration that our tourists, residents, the elderly or those living with disabilities, must go through. We can and need to do so much better here.

For example, until recently, we had just one accessible taxi and even that wasn't always in service. The arrival of a second, and the promise of seven more, is welcome, but long overdue. Gibraltar cannot sell itself as a modern and inclusive destination while failing at something as fundamental as transport. If the current system can't deliver, then it's time for tighter regulation. We cannot hesitate to take action. This is after all, a public service.

But before I move on and given that I have made a reference to having broken my leg last year, I find that it is only just and fair to thank all those involved in my swift recovery. From A&E and Radiology, to the surgeons theatre staff and nurses who operated on me, to the physios and doctors who dealt with my aftercare. Thank you. I wouldn't be standing here to give my address without you. So for that I am grateful.

It is amazing, what the GHA can do, when assembling a team that works in unison. It was a seamless experience. One can only hope that every patient has the same journey and receives the same standard of care in these situations.

Turning back to transport, and on the issue of subscription of sustainability measures, questions were posed in Parliament to ascertain whether or not the Government itself was subscribing to its own idea, of electrifying and creating a greener transport sector for Gibraltar, which unfortunately, left many in shock when they read that less than 5% of the additional or replacement of public service vehicles in 2024, were electric.

Whilst the Minister advised that the government was "leading by example" in carrying out a review of the Government fleet and to electrify as much as possible, it is notable that of the 21 public vehicles that were acquired or replaced last year, only 1 was electric and another was a hybrid. Meaning that the other 19 vehicles, representing 90% were powered by petrol. This is certainly by no measure, leading by example Madam Speaker.

The irony, of the answers provided to Parliament, is nothing short of an embarrassing admission by the Government, that notwithstanding its electoral promises in its Party Manifesto to create a "green and efficient transport network" and to "decarbonise the transport sector via a move towards vehicle electrification", it will do so, not by leading as an example, as one would hope.

But instead, by imposing the cost of decarbonisation on the general public. It is regrettable, that this is the position which has been taken, not least, given how much green transport initiatives featured in their Manifesto.

Because it appears, that despite having a whole chapter dedicated to this area, the Government are for a second year running, merely paying lip service to these initiatives and to those people who supported them. It is therefore very difficult to take the Minister's environmental credentials seriously, when his policies consistently undermine the very principles, he claims to champion. With that said, it is sincerely hoped, that within the next two years, we will see significant improvements to these areas. But again, that might be the optimist in me that is speaking.

Until such time, it would appear, that notwithstanding the fact that pollution indeed does have a significant impact on people's health and quality of life, it is lamentable, that efforts to reduce air pollution, are clearly, not a GSLP-Liberal Party priority. It is either that, or an acknowledgement that the electoral manifesto promises, often described as a contract with the people of Gibraltar – are not worth the paper on which they are written on.

I can only but expect, that in the final second half of this four year electoral term, the Government will indeed follow through with its electoral promises and pay dividends to the people of Gibraltar who voted them, on what so far appears to be, the false narrative that they will be delivering a greener, safer and much more effective transport system for our community.

Conclusion:

Madam Speaker, as I conclude my address, which I have no doubt some of the Ministers would be grateful to hear; I must once again stress that it is our shared responsibility to advocate for a budget that truly reflects our collective values and priorities. From my perspective, this includes advocating for greater investment in environmental sustainability, youth development, infrastructural transport needs, and the promotion of tourism. These are not peripheral concerns. They are essential pillars for

securing a prosperous future for all Gibraltarians, especially that our young people.

I wish to remind those in this house, and those watching or listening, that the role of the Opposition is to question, to scrutinise, and to ensure that government decisions are subject to proper accountability. We get told by the members opposite that we get given a good salary for our contribution to this house and that we should do more to justify this; almost as if they are questioning our worth.

Madam Speaker, on reflection of this all, I find myself questioning their listening skills, when I have given example after example of constructive criticisms that continue to go in one ear and out the other.

But, it is my earnest expectation that my contribution, and my criticisms, are received in the constructive spirit in which they are intended. It is with these words and for all the reasons I have outlined, as well as those put forward by my Honourable colleagues thus far, as well as those which are still to be heard, that I will not be supporting the Appropriation Bill. Thank you, Madam Speaker.