The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[Madam Speaker in the Chair]

PAPERS LAID


Papers 1 to 3 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2020

[Fourth Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 09, 2020]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Madam Speaker: The Member for Diego Martin Central has utilized seven minutes of his speaking time, he now has 38 minutes remaining. Member for Diego Martin Central. [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, as I continue in my role of night watchman for the Government, last evening I was juxtaposing
the role of government communications against a deregulating media industry. And I had gone on to explain that it is in the myriad number of keyboard warriors that social media has given a voice to, one can immediately envision the mind-boggling levels of misinformation and unfortunately, quite often, misinformation that is thrown at citizens on a daily basis. And it is in that clutter that the portfolio of government communications finds itself located.

Madam Speaker, however this Government is adamant that education must remain a priority for our people and it is the richness of that education that would lead ultimately to persons being equipped to make better choices for themselves and for those for whom they have responsibility. And while we are cognizant of our responsibility as a facilitator of growth, we are also ever mindful of our commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals where people are at the heart of any developmental agenda. And it is for that reason that the institutions that fall under my remit will always strive to ensure that the information needs, diverse views, voices and expressions of all our citizens retain the top rung of their agendas.

Madam Speaker, I would now speak briefly to the successes of the Communications Division over the last year fiscal year beginning with TTT Limited. In 2018 the Caribbean New Media Group was rebranded to TTT Limited with the overarching goals of providing critical public information and developing local content. Now, with a new chief executive officer and a clear and ambitious mandate, TTT Limited has been able to significantly increase its viewership and whilst still dependent to an extent on government subvention, it is moving ahead with plans to become self-sufficient.

For the fiscal year 2019/2020 TTT rose to the occasion particularly at the onset of COVID-19. The nation now turns to TTT as a reliable source for
government information to receive timely and accurate updates and guidelines. And to date, Madam Speaker, over 350 hours of content has been produced and aired. They have also worked closely with various stakeholders to deliver their mandate. TTT has moderated all critical government press conferences and continues to work closely with its line Ministry and manage the dissemination of government produced content. Permit me, Madam Speaker, to highlight a few partnerships that were maintained over the last fiscal year.

The Ministry of Health: TTT produces and provides a home for the Ministry of Health’s COVID-19 press conferences which, at the height of the pandemic, were broadcast daily via television and radio. These updates remain critical in our fight to remain informed and control the spread of the virus.

Ministry of Education: As a result of social restrictions put in place because of COVID-19, the nation’s schools were physically closed. This meant that the curriculum had to be delivered in a different format which resulted in the development of SEA time which saw teachers move teaching from the classroom to the studio and the creation of educational content for broadcast. Initially targeting SEA students, the programme was expanded to include content for other age groups via the open classroom session. And, Madam Speaker, TTT also would have worked with the THA’s Division of Education, Innovation and Energy to develop virtual lessons which were aired twice per week, and in addition to that, worked with the THA to stream their executive council’s weekly media briefing via YouTube.

Madam Speaker, in support of its objective of encouraging the development and promotion of locally inspired or produced content, TTT premiered numerous features and including: Cutlass the internationally acclaimed film by Teneille Newallo; 1970: Remembering A Revolution, a film chronicling the Black Power
uprising; a *Child of Two Worlds*, which tells a story of a Canadian artist who came to Trinidad in search of her father; *Women Making A Difference*, which profiled female citizens who have reshaped Trinidad and Tobago from captive to citizens which was completed for Emancipation Day 2020, and which production interviewed Dr. Rita Pemberton as she recalled the journey of enslaved citizens; *Trinidad And Tobago - This Is Us*, commissioned for Independence Day 2020, which was a feature that captured various performers against the back drop of iconic and symbolic national monuments and TTT together which was a public/private partnership that saw TTT working with Digicel to deliver a well-received concert performance in celebration of Republic Day 2020.

Madam Speaker, while all these activities and more were taking place, TTT, also recognizing that it is an organization in transition, has also been focusing on internal improvements to both physical and human resource assets and to that end, during the last fiscal TTT initiated a company-wide infrastructure upgrade aimed at improving operation efficiency and its overall broadcast quality. Critical pieces of equipment were received and understandably, in the implementation of the initiative has been delayed by COVID-19, it is now expected to be completed by the end of the second quarter of this fiscal. Madam Speaker, in addition to that, the board of directors commissioned the development of a company-wide strategic stabilization plan to focus on the company’s governance, human resources, system and processes, and a consultant has been selected via the approved procurement process and it is expected to commence this engagement in the first quarter of fiscal 2020/2021.

Madam Speaker, the National Archives, and headlining my report for the period under review, I am particularly pleased to announce that the Tobago Archives was successfully reopened in collaboration with the Tobago Library
Services and to date 60 per cent of their records have been restored. Madam Speaker, as we move towards the wider digitization of our society, the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago will continue to play a fundamental role in concomitantly building a national identity by preserving and cataloging our history for access by the wider population.

During my initial visits as the line Minister I was in awe to find the treasures resident within those walls. Madam Speaker, the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago has a twofold mandate. Firstly, to guide public records policies management practices; to strengthen good governance; transparency; accountability and efficiency and also to acquire, preserve and provide public access to all records deemed to be of archival value and national historic and cultural significance. The National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago is the main source of primary, public historical material and its collection which includes over 200 years of governments and the nation’s irreplaceable historical documents and records in all formats, including colonial and post-independence government records, laws, newspapers, Indian, Chinese and Portuguese immigration records, slave registers, maps, rare books and journals, photographs, micro-film, audio visual recordings and a small complementary library are all accessible at the National Archives reference and search room located at 105 St. Vincent Street, Port of Spain.

Madam Speaker, during 2019/2020 close to 1,000 users consulted approximately 2,651 records in that reference room, requesting some 4,768 photocopies, photos or scans and over 816 enquires were received online, including queries from overseas researchers. During 2019/2020, the collections of the historical society of Trinidad and Tobago, Trinidad maps, early Governments press releases, as well as at-risk and in demand publications were digitized and are
now available online via its website as we continue to execute daily on our digital drive. Some of this content is also being considered to supplement the material offered by the Ministry of Education for remote learning via the television station Channel 4.

Madam Speaker, as I move to the business of Government Printery I wish to note that the Printery continues to play an integral role in supporting efficient and effective communication, primarily for government, but also for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And while we push towards a digitized environment, we continue to rely on the products and services of the national printery. And while there is an ongoing digital drive to streamline and make information easily accessible online we have also overseen the production of significant volumes of printed material over the past year. The Government Printery was also a key stakeholder in our dissemination of printed material across Ministries and to citizens on the updates and preventative measures against the coronavirus.

In the early stages of the pandemic the Government Printery was able to keep its doors open by successfully implementing all safety protocols and this allowed us to provide uninterrupted service to the citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as our Ministries, their departments, divisions and units. We were able by way of example, Madam Speaker, to assist the Minister and Ministry of Education in meeting the urgent need for the printing of over 20,000 SEA Student Performance Reports, over 20,000 SEA Information Booklets, in addition to 20,000 COVID-19 full colour posters for the schools. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, over the past few weeks I have had the good fortune of meeting with the board and management of the National Library and Information Services Authority, commonly referred to as NALIS. And touring some of our library facilities, including the national library, just south of where we are currently
gathered, the work in progress that is the Dr. Eric Williams Memorial Public Library; the Beetham Gardens Community Library and both the existing and the ongoing new Mayaro Public Library site. What I have seen in those visits, Madam Speaker, is the willingness of a team to do more with less so that no one is left behind. [Desk thumping] And the Beetham Community Library is a shiny example of this, Madam Speaker, located in the heart of Beetham Gardens community and in partnership with the Inter-Agency Task Force, this library represents a beacon of hope for the community and now serves as a neutral place where no borders exist so that all can come and drink from the proverbial fountain of knowledge and information that flows there. Located in the very close proximity to this library are the Success Laventille Secondary, the Servol Life Centre, the Laventille Technology Centre and the Excel Primary School. And, Madam Speaker, the students of these schools, their parents and other residents now have access to a fully stocked library that is integrated with the main library in Port of Spain. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, the information highway is open to all of these residents including those who might have not have the benefit of Internet connectivity at their homes. All that is required is a simple card and that can be obtained in less than 24 hours as my good friend, the Member for Port of Spain South discovered when he had accompanied me on my visit.

Madam Speaker, one of the effects of Government’s well advised imposition of country-wide restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was the physical closure of schools and with that the 133 school library media centres located therein. These restrictions also demanded the closure of NALIS’ Heritage Library, 23 public libraries in Trinidad and three in Tobago, four libraries located in correctional institutions, 48 special libraries and three mobile libraries. This
notwithstanding, Madam Speaker, NALIS’ staff has continued to provide library and information services using online platforms such as NALIS’ website, Twitter and Facebook pages. On the topic of Facebook pages, with the creation of Facebook pages for all its libraries, NALIS has extended its reach thereby enabling audiences far and near to benefit from school resources, e-books, journals, storytelling sessions, book talks, poetry competitions, meet the author session, science experiences, sign language classes and a host of fun and entertaining programmes.

Madam Speaker, given the publics heavy dependents on online resources during this unprecedented time, NALIS successfully sought and obtained approval from the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the zero rating of its website by TSTT as of August 2020. This meant that persons with Bmobile accounts are now able to access NALIS’ website and databases without their data being impacted. This has already proven to be quite a benefit for students who rely primarily on remote access to research resources. Madam Speaker, I am also happy to report that the process to implement this on Digicel’s platform is currently under way. Through the efforts, Madam Speaker, NALIS is ensuring that no child is left behind and that no citizen desirous of accessing factual information is disadvantaged because of the current circumstances.

Madam Speaker, there was another striking feature in my visits to the sites that are under construction, and that is the deliberate intent of NALIS to commercialize some of its spaces so that libraries can become, if not entirely self-sustaining, at least partially so and in so doing reduce NALIS reliance on the national Treasury.

Madam Speaker, I am certain that many of us when we travel abroad take the opportunity to visit major libraries and centres of learning. I am happy to report
that NALIS is moving full steam ahead, very much like those centres of learning to ensure that its new facilities in Mayaro and in Diego Martin and the Dr. Eric Williams Memorial Public Library when completed will contain spaces where one can sit, have a cup of coffee and read, where one can access other Government services through the TTConnect kiosks, where one can be treated to displays of historical artifacts and encounter the collections of our most prominent passed citizens. In short, Madam Speaker, where one can come away truly edified through the process of emersion.

By way of example, Madam Speaker, the Mayaro Public Library, which is now under construction and is roughly about 10 times the size of the library that currently exists in Mayaro. Through the NALIS board’s intervention this two-storey building has been repurposed to ensure that its significantly expanded library service can be delivered on one floor while making the entire second floor available for commercial purposes complementary to those offered by the library. A similar model will be utilized for the Diego Martin Public Library and any new public library to be opened in the future. In this way, Madam Speaker, NALIS reliance on the public purse will be gradually and systematically reduced.

Madam Speaker, at the Office of the Prime Minister, Communications Division, we increased visibility and our citizens’ awareness of our policies and programmes through many strategies but in particular the creation of interactive television programmes that explain new policies. The launch of *The Math Jingle* in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the educational drive which was undertaken to create clarity around our country’s foreign policy and the role of Caricom. In efforts aimed at leveraging our digital landscape to improve effectiveness and reach we introduced our digital newsletter *One Voice, One Message*, which is used to highlight the Government tangibly working for the
people.

Our social media scope was expanded to include additional platforms and our content curated to appeal to a wider sector of a population, especially Gen. Z and millennials. This strategy allowed us to realize an average increase of over 50 per cent of our followers across all platforms. Madam Speaker, in delivering on our Government’s promise to make all citizens a priority through NALIS we were able to establish libraries to support our prisoners and at-risk youth in the remedial and rehabilitative efforts. Libraries and access to library services are now available at the following institutions: the women’s prison, Maximum Security Prison, the Youth Training Centre, Port of Spain Prison, Remand Yard at Golden Grove, the Eastern Correctional and Rehabilitation Centre at Santa Flora, the Tobago Prison, the MiLAT and MYPART Programmes and co-location access at newly built community centres similar to the models at Mount Hope, Mount Lambert, Barataria and Beetham Gardens.

Madam Speaker, I would now like to turn to the plans and initiatives of the Office of the Prime Minister, Communications Division, for the coming fiscal year. For the ensuing year a budget of $3 million has been allocated to the continued strategic redevelopment of TTT as it deepens its commitment to bringing relevant content to its audiences. There will be a distinct focus on telling the unique story of Trinidad and Tobago and the various perspectives of different groups will be profiled as a mechanism for citizens to better understand and appreciate each other. It is also envisaged that TTT will deepen its partnership to deliver superior value to its various stakeholders, and particularly TTT will work closely with the Film Company of Trinidad and Tobago to cement itself in the creative sector eco-system. The company is also going to play an integral role in developing creative content to support the initiatives of the Ministry of Tourism,
Tourism Trinidad and Tobago Tourism Agency. This will be directed locally through the station and its network as well as to the wider diaspora via its TTT online platform.

TTT also has plans to take a lead role in filling the content void created by the absence of a traditional Carnival celebration in 2021. This will again be in conjunction with its line Ministry and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts in their continuation of a whole of government approach.

There is a proverbial saying, the key to the future is knowledge of our past. Madam Speaker, our National Archives and our national libraries are repositories rich with treasures that tell our story. That story of our collective struggles and triumphs, understanding the origins of our diversity and the heroes that paved the way for our country to become independent and to be proudly called the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is one that the youth and the young leaders of our nation need to know. It is against this backdrop and our mandate of lifelong learning that support will continue to be given to NALIS in efforts to complete our Mayaro Library and commence works in Toco and Diego Martin while continuing other projects.

Support also continues for the National Archives as we remain committed to ensuring that we not only preserve our heritage for generations to come but to ensure that it is also accessible to every citizen of this country. As part of our Roadmap to Recovery Vision for our nation there will be a continued strong focus on preservation, digitization and leveraging various platforms to curate our story to appeal especially to our younger citizens. The Office of the Prime Minister, Communications Division, through extensive collaboration, will seek to close any existing gaps within government communications and serve as the communication support in ensuring alignment across all Ministries with the roll-out of professional
communication standards and policies throughout the government communication service and facilitate the co-creation and delivery of information to all our stakeholders. This allows for a more unified approach whilst still maintaining each Ministry’s individuality. Our cross functional team will effectively enable colleagues throughout the Government’s communication units to increase visibility, confidence and trust with all stakeholders while working in tandem to manage the total cost of government communications downward.

Madam Speaker, the Communications Division will take a holistic approach to communications and develop and implement strategies for its Ministries that will transform the way that we communicate. And in order to do that we will be citizen centric, we will focus on communications efforts that are created firstly by knowing who we want to speak to and where they are to receive our message, and secondly by understanding that the message must be crafted in such a way that is both palatable and engaging for the intended audience, thereby ensuring that the communication experience is oriented to the needs of our citizens so that they can have a user driven experience while accessing information from all Ministries.

Madam Speaker, we will be agile. In recent years communication structures have been transformed dramatically in response to the extraordinary changes in the media landscape. This is no different to our team in an environment of digital communications and unprecedented integration of channels. Traditional siloed structures have been replaced with what is commonly referred to as a trading floor model in which employees are deployed based on ability and interest. This approach to our organizational design will allow us to be highly responsive and flexible which is increasingly necessary as the communications discipline evolves rapidly in response to our internal and external audiences’ changing and rising expectations.

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Madam Speaker, we intend to be digitally enabled. While we will be developing a communications approach across the Web, social media and offline communications channels, it is an integrated fashion in which we will operate and our approach will allow us to set the tone in the digital space by creating and designing communication tactics and approaches around the Web as a core channel. We will continue to be focused on dialogue and engagement. We will continue our communications approach with a more of a participatory and inclusive one of fostering meaningful two-way communication and engagement rather than more traditional model. This increased focus on dialogue and engagement is in part as a result of the impact of social media in shifting expectations of communication as a conversation, thereby building trust through effective conversational and engagement. Some of the online initiatives that would be explored are citizen panels, online deliberative dialogue and open houses as foundational elements in our new communications model designed to elevate relevance and trust through engagement by all Ministries. And, Madam Speaker, we will tell the stories of our Ministries.

Today one of the most significant trends in strategic communications and marketing is the use of content strategy. This strategy allows us to identify priority themes and narratives within our Ministries and bring them to life through a concerted exercise of storytelling. It allow us to deliberately create meaning for citizens by clustering various elements of information from all Ministries into a coherent storyline. By way of example, Madam Speaker, I will be working alongside my fellow Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, the hon. Ayana Webster-Roy, to bring further attention to the issue of gender-based violence. Madam Speaker, through the strategies laid out before we will be creating content that speaks to the experiences of the victims and survivors, the prevailing
stereotypes that feed these behaviours and to engage and provoke the necessary discourse that must take place as part of public education. This will be in support of the ongoing work that the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs is doing along with the Ministry of National Security and the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs.

Madam Speaker, as the parliamentary representative for Diego Martin Central, I have already started working with my esteemed colleagues in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gender Affairs, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and Ministry of Health in an effort to continue to provide relief, support and more so opportunities for self-advancement for my constituents.

Madam Speaker, I have come to this House via the local government route and I understand the critical nature that is the collaboration between the Member of Parliament and those councillors that work in the constituency. And I want the time to also thank those local government councillors who support me. The councillor for Petit Valley/Cocorite, Marcia Marslin and the councillor for Diamond Vale, councillor Keeda James. Madam Speaker, through the tireless efforts of both those councillors my constituency executive and my team at the constituency office, I am made aware not only of the persons in my constituency who are in need of assistance but also those stories of potential, those stories of growth and those stories of success. And those are the stories that make representation the most fulfilling vocation a person can ever aspire to. It is why I thank the Minister of Finance for his bold move to increase the personal tax allowance which further allows investment by constituents in the small businesses,

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in places like Cocorite, in Ross Land, in Four Roads and in Simeon Road. It is why I thank him on behalf of young existing and aspiring entrepreneurs and creatives in Diego Martin Central who welcome the removal of taxes on technological hardware and software, as well as the new and continued support of small business and technology start-ups as the resources they require to build out their dreams become even easier to afford and access.

Madam Speaker, it is the reason that I applaud the initiative to provide personal broadband devices to those students who are in need of it so that they can access the Internet for school and research thereby further demonstrating this Government’s support of equity in education and the overarching policy of no child being left behind. Madam Speaker, I am excited for what is to come. I am excited as a citizen, I am excited as the Minister with responsibility for communications and I am especially excited as the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin Central. And above all else, it is my deepest desire to deliver on all these ambitions with enthusiasm as I see them as inseparable from our collective efforts and successes as a government.

Madam Speaker, this ends my contribution for today and I wish to thank the Chair once again for the opportunity to speak on behalf of my constituents. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I recognize this as the maiden contribution for the Member of Diego Martin Central and I wish to congratulate him. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

10.30 a.m.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to join this debate on the Appropriation Bill 2021. Madam Speaker, I know there is a lot of confusion
in the House. My colleagues on this side are wondering why I am speaking from this side. Madam Speaker, what we have discovered in the Government is that no matter how hard you speak, how loud you speak, how much you say, the Opposition in this Parliament does not understand, and maybe if I come on this side closer to their ears and closer to their brains they would be able to process what I am about to say. [Desk thumping]

It is all about location, location, location, Madam President—Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I had the opportunity to listen to the hon. Leader of the Opposition, and let me say, Madam Speaker, I was disappointed. Last budget debate the hon. Member for Siparia spent about 40 per cent of her contribution on agriculture, and in this debate I expected at least that amount. But, Madam Speaker, what I heard was mumbling, grumbling, bumbling, and the oddest last four minutes of the contribution when the Member apologized for not being able to say much on agriculture in the interest of time and mumbled and rambled for four further minutes.

You see, Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia has been around long. She comes from a farming district. In fact, Madam Speaker, she is on the record as speaking about her life in rice farming, the Moree, but, Madam Speaker, somewhere in the middle of the mumbling and the bumbling she touched on something that really connected with me. I think it was the only point of significance in the entire episode as short as it lasted, the Member for Siparia acknowledged that land tenure is the most important issue in agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago. And why I found that interesting, Madam Speaker? I have had the opportunity to serve in this position for five years and now for another five years. I had the opportunity to interact with Members of Parliament on both sides. I am standing very close to MP for Couva South, Mr. Indarsingh, a man who wrote
my office almost every week on a matter relating to land tenure.

I am standing close to MP Rushton Paray, another MP who wrote me continuously because we are from the same constituency. But, Madam Speaker, it struck me that I have no idea what the signature of the MP for Siparia looks like. I have no idea. If I was an autograph collector I would have waited forever for the signature of a former Prime Minister to join my collection. [Desk thumping] I challenged the Member for Siparia to do one thing and one thing alone for me, Madam Speaker. I challenged that Member of Parliament to produce to me one letter she wrote on behalf of her constituents relating to this issue of land tenure. Because if in this short, sad episode in this debate where the Member went back into the history of the PNM and agriculture, rewriting it in a manner that nobody could ever manage to do, that Member never referenced the plight of the constituents she has represented for so long.

I would think, Madam Speaker, if a Member of Parliament rises to the position of Prime Minister and recognizes in her time, both in the county council and in the Parliament, that land tenure is a matter that consumes the time of the producers of food in her constituency, she would not only take her five years to address the issue, but she would take the opportunity that followed. When I went into her constituency on 11 occasions and held meetings with her farmers to at least attend one meeting, send a representative, or pen me a letter in the manner her MPs were doing all the time. [Desk thumping] Because the Member is right, land tenure represents the most challenging issue for our farmers in this country, and she talked towards the end about roads and access roads and so on, but that was the part when she was mumbling because she knew two things in her contribution. She could not defend her thesis that she opened with in relation to agriculture, that the history of the PNM has been to undermine farming, and I will tell you why she
could not defend that. But more importantly, she could not speak with any conviction on the issue of land tenure because in her time as parliamentarian, in her time as Prime Minister, and in her time as parliamentarian which follows, she has not advocated for one moment on the issue of land tenure on behalf of her constituents, but I have done that because that is my job. [Desk thumping]

The Member went to the Caroni Racing Complex and the closure of the railway and she said since Independence the PNM has turned its back on agriculture, but let me tell you our version of turning our back. You see, we turned our back so that we could face the solution. [Desk thumping] And it is the PNM—I was in Cunjal. The Member for Couva North mentioned Cunjal and I was in Cunjal, Madam Speaker. I was there on Republic Day at the invitation of some very young farmers and I say to you that the Cunjal food crop, 51 agricultural plots farmed on today by third generation farmers, that land was surveyed in 1969, seven years after Independence under a PNM administration. And when you look through Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, and you see Wallerfield, Carlsen Field, two major livestock areas in this country, two areas that fed this country beef, pork, poultry for decades.

When we had no access to the imports for decades Wallerfield and Carlsen Field were created by PNM policy in relation to agriculture. [Desk thumping]

I heard my colleague the MP for Moruga/Tableland, Michelle Benjamin, yesterday just making passing reference. After a series of inaccuracies just making reference to La Savanne in Moruga. A food crop, Madam President, surveyed under the hands of the People’s National Movement in 1970. It is a 900 acre parcel of land divided into three areas, La Savanne also known as Moruga food crop. The MP for Moruga/Tableland would not know that because even after she has had two months in office knowing that she campaigned and she met with farmers and she
met all sorts of food producers, that Member of Parliament has not even attempted to talk to me on the issue of land tenure.

In Barrackpore, Madam Speaker, in Rio Claro, seven or eight foods crop projects in Cuche, Guayaguayare, all constructed with PNM policy. [Desk thumping] So the first thing I would say, Madam President, in relation to the Member for Siparia, the hon. Leader of the Opposition is this. It is the PNM that created the basis for agriculture in this country, but more importantly, Madam Speaker, I want to tell the Member that it is the PNM—when I go to Barrackpore, Debe, Cunjal, the constituency of Naparima, when I go to those places it is the PNM policy in relation to the distribution of land that made it possible to generate wealth in those areas. But, of course, in this country given the opportunity and without the oversight of those who should be watching what has happened. In Debe, for example, agricultural land has turned into supermarkets, commercial buildings; in Barrackpore, in Bamboo, former rice land. There is a stretch in the Bamboo that is all foreign used parts because of persons who are on the payroll of the State in this country who have turned a blind eye. But those lands, Madam Speaker, generated the wealth that is the basis of what has happened in terms of the economic development in South and Central Trinidad.

Let me say this to the Member for Siparia, Madam Speaker. When you say the PNM turned their back on agriculture and undermined farming, it is the PNM, Madam Speaker, that took the decision to take those small sugar companies over a period of time that once occupied Woodford Lodge Estate, Orange Grove, Tacarigua Estate, Brechin Castle. All those small estates south, it is the PNM. The sugar did not start to decline in 2002 you know, Madam Speaker. Mr. Indarsingh is there and he knows. The sugar was declining since the 1970s, and when Tate & Lyle signalled—like all the other smaller companies, when Tate & Lyle signalled—
that they were going out, it is a PNM Government that took the decision to nationalize and create Caroni (1975) Limited. [Desk thumping]

That gave the sugar industry a lease on life and, Madam Speaker, it did not stop there. It is 1992 under a PNM Government, with the current Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley as Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, it is that Government that took the decision to initiate via the Tripartite Report on the sugar industry the first billion dollar debt write-off of any state company in this country. And it is that decision, Madam Speaker, and the implementation of the Tripartite Report, and most importantly the write-off of the Caroni debt, that allowed Caroni to go on for a further 20 years because from 1992 to 2002 Caroni soldiered out, and by the time we got to 2002 had created another billion in debt. And it is then in 2002, Madam Speaker—what people think is a bad decision and a horrible decision—MP for Couva South is there—it is the trade union. The Government decision was to rationalize the size of the sugar industry and move to one factory in Ste. Madeleine, and it is the trade union that took the employer to court and sought a court order compelling the Government to offer the VSEP to all the daily-paid workers and the monthly-paid unions followed suite.

Mr. Indarsingh is there and he received a national award for his contribution to the work in the sugar industry.

Madam Speaker: Minister, just to remind you in here, we refer to the Member as either the hon. Member for Couva South—

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Member for Couva South. Sorry, Madam Speaker, and I apologize to my friend Mr. Indarsingh. But it is. And, Madam Speaker, that decision to rationalize Caroni (1975) Limited led to a decision that has not been followed in this country in the 18 years since, and that is to give those workers, those workers who were interested and met the criteria to give them a
residential parcel of land and also give them access to a two-acre parcel of land.

Madam Speaker, when they say we turned our back on agriculture and we undermined the farming community, I want to say to you that every Caroni worker—and it is 7,400 of them who have benefited from the residential lot, and it is 8,885 who have benefited from the two-acre parcel. Madam Speaker, anybody who has accessed a residential lot and a two-acre parcel has accessed a minimum of $1 million in wealth. What a way to undermine the farmers; what a way to undermine the sugar workers by giving to them as we did in Carlsen Field and Wallerfield, Cunjal and La Savanne, the Government gave in the transition a million dollars of wealth via the allocation of land. It is the PNM, Madam Speaker, who created the framework through policy, availability of lands, support of the sector, who created what we have today which is a vibrant self-sufficient poultry sector, a billion-dollar industry that is strong enough to resist imports.

And, Madam Speaker, may I say it is my friends, with the Member for Siparia as Prime Minister, who opened the door and turned a blind eye to leg and thigh coming into this country. They did not care how old the leg and thigh is and how long it has been frozen for, but it ate 20 per cent of the market and threatened the jobs of thousands and thousands of persons. In those same areas, Barrackpore, Moruga, Biche, all those areas, 12,000 jobs on the east-West Corridor, many of them single women, persons working in the processing. It is the PNM that built the self-sufficient poultry sector we have now and it is PNM that would continue to defend it. [Desk thumping] It is the PNM, Madam Speaker.

It is the PNM that supported local, buy local, supported local farms, created the framework for Trinidad and Tobago to become an exporter, and what did my friends do, Madam Speaker? This is why the Member for Siparia was so cagey about talking about agriculture and threw it on the shadow Minister. It is very
simple. I do not go into the history, but I just want to say very quickly, Madam Speaker, in relation to cocoa my friends on the other side, through the Finance Act, removed the longstanding Cocoa and Coffee Industry Board replacing it with nothing. For livestock they spent $4 million on a milking facility at Sugar Cane Feed Centre, never managed to commission it. With buffalypso, they talked and talked and talked and talked about buffalypso, spent money, had committees, do all kind of things. They went to Italy, Madam Speaker, and did absolutely nothing. They imported conch and cascadoo and dumped it into the rivers as a policy decision to replenish local stock. That is what they did. That is what they did.

On this large farms that they talked so much about, they did nothing. They can point to nothing, and one single large farm that developed under them. Legislation, fisheries legislation, animal welfare legislation, plant quarantine legislation, absolutely nothing. No, the Member for Siparia I asked her to produce for me and to produce for us a single piece of legislation from 2010 to 2015 relating to agriculture. [Desk thumping] In Mon Jaloux, the only infrastructure apart from the fiasco in Mayaro, 60 million on a fisheries facility in Mayaro that nobody could use. In Mon Jaloux, 11 million in buildings, but not a cent spent on an electricity supply for these buildings. [Desk thumping]

In YAPA, youth—what they did for youth in agriculture a programme called YAPA and all the equipment when I came in as Minister, everything that should have been distributed to young people, spray cans, boots, coveralls, gloves, five containers sitting there dry rotting. In praedial larceny when I came in—I am still dealing with an issue of guns being ordered for the Praedial Larceny Squad, paid for, received and still cannot be found and accounted for and it is in the hand of the police, Madam Speaker. On honey, they hired a consultant to develop legislation to open our markets to lab produced honey from China coming in via our Caricom
countries. That is what they were doing. In school feeding they moved away from a well-constructed policy of buying from farmers and went to a single supplier of produce for the school feeding. All imported school feeding became 100 per cent imported under my friends.

Madam Speaker, let me just—

Madam Speaker: One minute Minister, please. I just want to remind all Members, firstly, masks remain on your faces; secondly, masks are to be worn properly including over your nose and your mouth; and thirdly, I think we have done well for the past couple of days and I would like Members to remember Standing Order 53. Please continue, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam Speaker, I heard two things in the contribution yesterday that really convinced me that the Member for Siparia was in the right company. The only person who is in the wrong place today is me. They all belong on this side. Because I could not imagine Member of Parliament for Princes Town having served five years as Member of Parliament—well discount the part when he was not here. So four years and some months—having served referring to a Moruga agro processing project that was abandoned by the PNM for five years. Madam Speaker, Princes Town is in walking distance of Moruga and if he does not want to walk he could drive, but you could walk the length and breadth of Moruga and you cannot find a Moruga agro processing project abandoned by the PNM.

Madam Speaker, what you will find is a $90 million project commissioned by the PNM, built, executed and delivered [Desk thumping] And the paint barely dry on the facility and they are standing up in Parliament asking what export markets have been reached; what has been produced in the facility? Listen, it is shells, and that is why I am standing here because apparently “all yuh can’t hear
and can’t understand”. [Desk thumping] But you know, Madam Speaker, if they go and they talk to their constituents—because after MP Padarath, the Member for Princes Town, MP for Moruga/Tableland she is new, but she is from there. She is from St. Mary’s, and I have always said four of my siblings were born in that area of Moruga—four of them.

My parents lived there, then they went on the east coast to have me. But, Madam Speaker, the MP spoke about an agro—a food crop project by former sugar workers and all of that. Well you could walk the length and breadth of Moruga and you could talk to the farmers, nobody knows anything about that. Just in case I was mistaken—and I was there last week Wednesday you know. I spent the whole day, “I ain’t see no MP”, “I ain’t no UNC councillor”, “I ain’t see any MP for Princes Town”, “I ain’t see anybody”. And most importantly the Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland has not gone to a single farmer since her election. That same La Savanne, I spoke to the farmers down there and they have said to me they have not seen the Member of Parliament. [Desk thumping]

I heard the Member for Couva North Friday, the shadow, talk about the distribution of the agri-incentives and we only did three in Tobago, but let me tell you something. Up to yesterday I handed a farmer farming in that same La Savanne an agri-incentive cheque to expand his hydroponics project. His name is Michael Rooplal, Madam Speaker, and I want to ask the MP for Moruga/Tableland to go and find Rooplal. I want to ask her to go and find Clyde Ragbir. He is a fourth generation farmer, third; his son Jonathan is the fourth generation. I was with them in La Savanne last week because I was talking to them and telling them, Madam Speaker, that while I did not want to get NAMDEVCO into more agro processing facilities as owner, I realized something about places in Moruga, and even Rio Claro, Mayaro—and I spoke to MP Rushton Paray Friday about it.
We cannot leave it to these small farmers to produce their own agro-processing facility, and what I realized—and I spoke to the Minister of Trade and Industry Enterprise Industries afterwards—is that one of those shells in Moruga, in the Moruga Industrial Estate, agro-industrial estate, one would be taken by NAMDEVCO and it would be outfitted for the sole purpose of doing agro-processing and packaging for those small farmers in Tableland and Moruga because this is what I have seen, Madam Speaker. The Leader of Opposition, the hon. Leader is right, land tenure, because I spoke about those farmers in Cunjal, land survey in 1969, 51 plots, not a piece of paper given to anyone of them and they are the third generation farming there.

I spoke about La Savanne, 900 acres and over 100 farmers, not one of them have a lease of land. Not one of them. And everybody we talk about, many of them do not have that other than the ones we have already dealt with, but they are producing and they are producing very well, and we, through NAMDEVCO, will outfit one of those units to service small farmers living in that region and planting in that region. And it would not be a phantom agro-processing facility that MP for Princes Town and a non-existent food crop project that the MP for Moruga/Tableland talked about. These are real people. Follow my Facebook page, Madam President, you would see them. You would see four plots, acres of pawpaw, you would half a mile of lemon, you would see all sorts of things taking place across this country, but all people, all those who do not wish us good luck and good fortune and those who wish to do the farmers harm continue to talk about all the foolishness that they could find to talk about.

On the issue of land tenure I know I have a question to answer. I have a question to answer, Madam Speaker, filed by the MP for Naparima, and I know he would be shocked by the answer on this use of land tenure because he has asked a
question to me. He has asked about the two-acre plots—because there is a lot of talk you know, PNM “ain’t” giving the former Caroni workers the lots and all of that. The MP for Naparima asked me the question about how many persons in his constituency have received their leases for the two-acre parcel and he will be shocked because, Madam Speaker, 86 per cent of those entitled to receive it have already received it. [Desk thumping] And I am just using one constituency. There are that 14,084 persons in the constituency of Naparima entitled to receive two-acre parcels and 1,286 have already received their leases from a PNM Government. [Desk thumping]

I read in the 2015 budget statement by former Minister of Finance Larry Howai, and in one line there he talks about the leases and he says 2,900 leases have been given out so far, and I have already told this country that when I look at what was given out, the same lease was given out three times. And in my first year, five years, and under this PNM Government, under the leadership of Keith Rowley, and with the resources provided by the hon. Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, I distributed more than 8,000 instruments of title [Desk thumping] just to former Caroni workers. And, Madam Speaker, unfortunately I said I would take because I am entitled to one, and I thought that when I finish all I will get mine. I said I will take mine last, but there are about 400 or 500 persons who cannot be found and I am begging those people if they were in that first group that qualified to come forward because I would also like to get my lease, Madam Speaker, and I said I would be the last of the people getting them. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, this 500 million is intended to continue work, and I hear my friends talking about they are not seeing it in the documents, they not this, they cannot find it and all of that. The Minister of Finance was very clear. He said 500 million would be made available in 2021, and that is because, Madam Speaker, we
have institutions that have been working with the Government and this Ministry in particular to provide specific support for agriculture once it is consistent with what they would like us to do. So, Madam Speaker, the 500 million is meant to deal with those areas where the funding has to be available at a particular time in order to execute, and the Minister of Finance has decided that the best way to manage the funding and allocate it to the projects that have to be funded is to have the funding housed in the Ministry of Finance and I agree with that.

11.00 a.m.

And what we would do with that funding, Madam Speaker, in the first area of state land management and dealing with this issue of land tenure, I have said that we have already spent—our digital transformation started a long time ago, Madam Speaker, and we have already spent about $15 million on digital transformation in the land area, and what we are doing particularly in turning those paper files into electronic files, digitized files, in the state land, core state land—and that is state land for agriculture, state land for residential, state land for commercial, state land for institutions like your churches and your temples and so on—those files are about 30,000 and those files received the priority, and of those 30,000 files, we were able in the two years of the project so far to do 10,000 files. [Desk thumping]

But, Madam Speaker, accessing additional resources from the $500 million would allow us to do the remaining 20,000 in about 18 months’ time, two years for the max, and Madam Speaker, the focus is to deliver state land leases long expired in the areas of Lopinot/Bon Air, Arouca, Tabaquite. The Member of Parliament before she became Member of Parliament for Tabaquite, I told her. I said in case you win, you will be one of those that we would be talking very early because Tabaquite, food basket, an important area, we will focus on there: Cunjal,
Barrackpore, Moruga, Orange Grove, Diego Martin and Toco/Sangre Grande.

Madam Speaker, very importantly, in that same 2015 budget statement, former Minister Larry Howai talked about the Caroni farmers, the tenants. Caroni had both residential tenants and agricultural tenants and he put a number of 3,290 of those who were agricultural tenants who after the closure of the company just remained on the land. What they are doing on the land is not something we know. I believe some of them are very, very active farmers and some may not be. But this $500 million, we want to get into that part of the work that no Government has touched so far and that is to work on the former Caroni agricultural tenants in order to give them leases of their land where they are complying with the Government’s policy on agriculture. And we intend in the first phase, Madam Speaker, to include Tabaquite and Princes Town. The MP for Princes Town had a discussion, there is an area in his constituency called Broomage with a lot of former cane farmers who would benefit from this and other parts of the country where we have former Caroni cane farmers.

And most importantly, Madam Speaker, I have said to the country, we have been working hard to give people their leases. We have been accelerating, we have been doing what we could do but that comes with an important responsibility. I have said that across the country, young people in particular are saying to me that they would like to deploy their skills on the land. Many of them are in farming families. I heard the Member for Siparia talk about farming families. Many of them are in farming families where they have exhausted the land that is through the families. And the only way we could allocate land to new tenants is by enforcing the covenants which require people to plant the land and sustain the cultivation.

So part of the $500 million will go towards enforcing the covenants and ensuring that those persons who are non-compliant are relieved of the
responsibility to hold that land and that land will be redistributed in a fair and transparent manner with priority. [Desk thumping] With priority in accordance with what we have said as a Government, with priority to young farmers and farmers in farming families who want to expand what they do now.

Madam Speaker, part of that money, we already have focused on Plum Mitan, an important food crop project in Plum Mitan. We have already invested in new pumps and cleaning of the water courses and so on but we want to accelerate it. It requires a further $9.5 million and I have said to the farmers in Plum Mitan that the money will come from the $500 million.

Access roads, many of my colleagues on both sides of the House have written to me. Even the Minister of Finance has written to me on this issue of access roads and we have received on average about seven or $8 million. Madam Speaker, we are restoring the plan to repair all access roads in the country. Based on previous work that has been done, we know it could be in the amount of 900 kilometres of access roads. Not all are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry but we propose to approach the Minister of Finance to access funding in the sum of $30 million out of the 500 to repair in two phases. One hundred kilometres of agriculture access roads on a priority basis in Toco/Sangre Grande, Tunapuna, St. Joseph, Talparo/Las Lomas, Tabaquite, Paramin, Barrackpore, Oropouche, Fyzabad.

Digital transformation: Madam Speaker, a lot has been said about digital transformation and this is what we want to use the $500 million for. They long talked about online platform. From the opening, I wanted to say but you know, I wanted to respond immediately and I want to say now on this issue of digital transformation. When we entered the COVID phase in March 2020, right away, the experts, one of them called upon me to talk about a post-COVID plan and I said we
have not even gotten into COVID yet. Wanted to know a post-COVID plan for food security, I said we have not even gotten into COVID yet and a lot of them were talking about price gouging, starvation, food shortage. The Government did, the Prime Minister, the very first thing was to put in place these committees. I was on one of them alongside the hard-working Minister of Trade and Industry, Sen. Paula Gopee-Scoon and Sen. Rohan Sinanan, the Minister of Works and the three of us, together with a highly supportive business community, which included the Supermarkets Association, spent day in, day out looking at what was offshore, what was onshore, what was on the way. The permitting system, the port, the containers, the delivery; the prospect of security issues and the transportation network being compromised in the country; the prospect of supermarket warehouses being attacked and we went through the wide range.

And while they had to go in Barbados to shop based on the first letter of the alphabet in their surname and while in Canada, you had to sign up and receive an email three or four days later to tell you come and buy toilet paper, in Trinidad and Tobago, there has been no food shortage, no starvation. [Desk thumping] And, Madam Speaker, I credit the hon. Prime Minister for his leadership, NAMDEVCO for stepping up and those farmers who kept this country fed through those farmers’ markets. [Desk thumping]

And what we have learnt is that people are very interesting in planting and consuming locally. People are interested in using an online platform where buyers and sellers could meet. We have talked about this a long time. People are interested, farmers are capable of using an online system to do the veggie boxes and delivery. So part of the digital transformation would be to drive those strings via NAMDEVCO and through the Ministry too.

We passed legislation dealing with animal welfare and as we see, the
continuation of this loss and theft of livestock, even the Ministry lost and recovered 50-something animals. The legislation calls for us to put in place an animal tagging and tracking system for the livestock sector and part of this digital transformation includes that.

We have talked about, Madam Speaker, after 27 years, the hon. Prime Minister was able to lay a fisheries management Bill in this country. After 27 years, after he commissioned the work and that calls for a vessel tracking system and part of our digital transformation is not to wait on the law but to put in place this tracking system that will protect our fisherfolk but will also identify those criminals who are masquerading as fisherfolk.

Madam Speaker, COVID has exposed all our training in the Ministries, in-person training, high-demand training and so on. Part of this $500 million will go towards developing an online platform, not only for the Ministry’s training modules but for those offered by the private sector.

Madam Speaker, the Grow Trinbago Seed Distribution has gone very well. Many Members of Parliament have become farmers and those who are farmers already have expanded. The project has gone well, the seeds are in demand. The MP for Pointe-a-Pierre was just quarrelling with me that he has not received his allocation as yet. I would not tell you what I said to him, I promised that he will get it.

Madam Speaker, we recognize that our propagating stations where people go to buy planting material have not performed efficiently. I have tried different ways to solve the problems but we plan to use part of that $500 million to expand Marper Farm to focus those nurseries first and foremost, Madam Speaker. Not everything they do now, they should be doing. I repeat what I have said so often that I do not believe that the Ministry should undermine or compete unfavourably
with the private sector. We have to allow those private nurseries to become strong, we have to allow them to be able to produce and sell planting material.

So as we expand in certain categories, we would get out of certain things that the private sector, the private plant propagation people could do efficiently. We do not wish to compete with them unfavourably. So in St. Augustine nurseries, La Reunion and Marper Farm, we plan to increase the production of the planting material that would boost the sector.

Madam Speaker, I heard some references to cocoa and we could talk and talk about cocoa but I will tell you two things about cocoa. Trinidad and Tobago just retained after a very competitive and laborious process and I congratulate the Cocoa Development Company for its work, UWI Cocoa Research Centre and the cocoa farmers in this country. Trinidad and Tobago remains a fine flavour producer of cocoa beans. At the European awards last week, Duane Dove from a Tobago estate, out of a project called Tamana Estate in Tamana taking abandoned cocoa farms which are privately owned, bringing them back to life and produced world-class beans. Duane Dove yet again through the Laura’s chocolate bar gained a silver medal in the European awards and has gone on to the world cocoa awards. [Desk thumping]

But I will tell you, Madam Speaker, in the area of plant propagation in cocoa, I had mentioned a few times before that Trinidad and Tobago, UWI and one of the world’s largest brand in the chocolate industry, we have embarked on a project. Because we recognize that in cocoa, it is very, very important that in the propagation process, the farmers get the plants that they desire the most, the plant that will produce that bean and it is only after a tree is matured eight years down the road, that a farmer really gets to know whether it was a viable tree, a good tree or a tree that they actually wanted and this project will introduce for the first time
in Trinidad and Tobago, this concept of DNA fingerprinting where we are able in three weeks, in the third week of the life of a seedling to determine what bean that seedling would bear eight years down the road. It is a very important project, not only for cocoa but for agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago driven by that project. Part of that money, part of that 500 will go towards that project. We have already allocated the land in St. Augustine nurseries for the project.

More importantly, Madam Speaker, we could talk about cocoa and beat our chest about fine flavour cocoa and many of you are in constituencies where your constituents are producing a chocolate bar or something like that. But here is what the experts have said to me. They have said to me one of the things that they have found with our cocoa processing in Trinidad and Tobago, not the Duane Dove and the Tobago estates and some of those projects, but all those small projects they have found an inconsistency in taste. In other words, the producers and processors are not adhering to the same standards of production, the beans are not roasted in the same manner and for the same time, the quality is not the same and ultimately the product is not the same.

And that is going to be solved, Madam Speaker, through this international fine cocoa centre that is being established with the Cocoa Research Centre at the University of the West Indies. It is not pie in the sky, the building is already there, the acreage is already there, the model farm is already there, the expertise is already there, the equipment to set up that model chocolate producing facility is in the country, and the funding that they desire that could not be provided through the line Ministry for that project, the Ministry of Education, the Minister of Finance has committed to fund that out of the $500 million. A vital project not only for cocoa but for all the forms of agro-processing in this country.

Madam Speaker, in relation to young farmers, I want to say for a long time, I
have battled this issue of the Sugarcane Feed Centre in Longdenville, a former Canadian funded project. The Member for Couva South knows it well, he was once on the management committee for it, he was once head of the union that represents those workers. And I want to say, Madam Speaker, I was minded in the manner we have done it with other parts of the assets of the Ministry to put that facility out for private-public partnership. But with the creation of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Services and with the interest I have seen in young people in becoming hands-on farmers, we have decided that that facility in Sugarcane Feed Centre in Longdenville will be the first young farmers school in Trinidad and Tobago and it will give young persons in that catchment area an opportunity to develop hands-on skills and it will not affect a single job currently existing at the Sugarcane Feed Centre.

Madam Speaker, we would develop with the new Ministry of Youth Development and National Services the curriculum to support the teaching of agriculture across this country using our own resources in the Ministry and that has existed in UTT and ECAIF.

I want to say, Madam Speaker, most importantly, what we wish to do in agriculture is to compete head on with the imports and via NAMDEVCO to put side by side with the imports comparable, competitive products that will allow us to sustain our farmers and compete effectively with the imports. NAMDEVCO, Madam Speaker, a public policy decision made during COVID was that we will move away over time from this food card that is used to fund processed food and put imported food on the tables of the most vulnerable, we will move away and we will give them produce in their hands and the veggie box project that had already delivered 30,000 boxes involves the distribution of a 90-pound package of fresh vegetables—
Madam Speaker: Member, you have 30 seconds.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I thank you for the opportunity to make this contribution, I thank my colleagues for listening. [Desk thumping] I thank you for positioning me on this side and I wish that my colleagues, particularly on the Opposition have not only heard but have listened. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (Oropouche West): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute. The number of deaths as a result of COVID has reached 92. The number of murders for the year is now over 320. Let us take a moment to remember all of those families who have lost loved ones to COVID and to crime 2020.

I want to take this moment as well to remember our frontline workers and their families. Those are the persons, the heroes who have been keeping this country together despite being severely challenged by inadequate resources. Madam Speaker, I think it is imperative for us to remember that this debate is not about who the people voted into Government and how much they must regret it now. It is about how to best allocate and expend the resources of our country to raise the standard of living and the quality of lives of all the citizens of this great Republic now and in the future. And it is imperative, Madam Speaker, because today, Trinidad and Tobago is suffering from an emotional, financial and economic depression, the likes of which we have never seen before.

Madam Speaker, before I delve into the intricacies of where we are today and what we must do for a better tomorrow, allow me to extend my appreciation to the political leader of the United National Congress and the Member of Parliament for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar [Desk thumping] for the confidence she has reposed in this son of a taxi driver. I wish to also thank the constituents of
Oropouche West for affording me the opportunity to serve them and my nation in this honourable House. I am also grateful to my hard-working staff for their unparalleled service over this period. Madam Speaker, I want to pay personal tribute to my parents, Doris and the late Sonnymoon Tancoo whose humility, integrity and dedication to God have been my guide throughout my life. \[Desk thumping\]

When I took my oath, Madam Speaker, I swore to serve my country faithfully and fearlessly and to the best of my ability. So that when I, when we speak in this honourable House, we represent every citizen, not just the 309,000 persons who voted for us and we will hold this Government to account no matter how much they object and how nasty they fight. \[Desk thumping\]

I confess, Madam Speaker, that I was a bit surprised to see the Minister of Agriculture on that side especially as he has been beaten out of office, not just once, twice. \[Desk thumping\] He has been removed by the electorate from sitting anywhere in UNC territory. \[Desk thumping\] And as he shouted and ranted at the top of his voice, he reminded me of an old Shakespearean quotation:

Out, out brief light. Life’s but a walking shadow of a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. Full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

\[Desk thumping\] His Government claims that agriculture was the centre of their diversification thrust yet we see the same petty political games being played. It was disheartening to see that only on Friday 9\textsuperscript{th} of October, 2020, last Friday, a programme for grants that was approved in a budget two years ago has not been properly rolled out. After a lacklustre budget last week that failed to capture the imagination of citizens, the business community and the nation’s farmers, the PNM Government hurriedly rushed to distribute a mere handful of grants to save face.

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Madam Speaker, I say that just to tell you that you can cannot trust what they say in this budget, you cannot have confidence in their words because PNM means “promises never materialize”. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I ask you to consider these very hard stone cold facts. Everyone on this side, on this side of the Bench, everyone on the PNM side has a job, goes home to their family at night, has food on the table, can educate their children with the latest technology, has access to proper health care, can take precautions against crime, even if it is to find a cell phone or a peacock that went missing. The lives of the Members of the PNM Government are very, very different from the lives of many of our fellow citizens across Trinidad and Tobago. We are speaking for our fellow citizens whose voices are not being heard by this Government: the jobless, the poor, the single mothers and fathers, the parents of the differently-abled, the tens of thousands of victims of crime and the rest of us who live in fear of the criminals. We are speaking for the multitude of persons devastated by flooding, the small business owners who have seen their investments and their dreams vanish in the last five years.

We are speaking for those young men and women who have toiled to complete their training and education but who simply cannot find a job. We are speaking for all employees, including those in the private enterprises, the public service, State enterprises and statutory bodies who know that their ability to earn a living is in danger under this Government. Today, we are speaking for our fellow citizens who want to hear how we in the Opposition are going to fight to alleviate their suffering and bring some semblance of hope to the lives of all of Trinidad and Tobago.

I say all this, Madam Speaker, because I have sat here and listened to contributions of all previous speakers, including a most excellent and
comprehensive contribution by the hon. Leader of the Opposition and by my Opposition colleagues on that side. [Desk thumping] I have listened to incisive questions raised by the Opposition on behalf of the people of this country and I must say that I am deeply saddened and concerned by the refusal of the Government to account to the Parliament and the population for the more than $253 billion it has spent in the last five years and the 50 billion more it intends to spend in the current fiscal year.

I have heard the Minister of Finance gloat in his presentation about how well the economy was doing and how at the start of the last fiscal year 2020, the country had magically emerged from the economic contractions of the past and was poised to return to sustainable growth and then the Minister wants us to believe that the COVID pandemic stepped in, collapsing in a matter of weeks, this sustainable and stable facade. Really? Madam Speaker, the Minister is entitled to his own opinion but not to his own facts [Desk thumping] and when he comes to this House, what he is supposed to bring are the facts, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

And what are the facts, Madam Speaker? The hon. Leader of the Opposition has already proved that the collapse of the economy took place not in 2020 as the Minister claims. In fact, during the period fiscal 2016 to 2019, the economy of Trinidad and Tobago contracted by 9.8 per cent in real terms before COVID. That is a fact. And in 2020, the economy is expected to contract by more than 6 per cent. This Minister of Finance has been able to shrink the economy by more than a decade in his few years in this office. Madam Speaker, the number of persons who lost their jobs grew by over 300 per cent in the first four years of this Minister of Finance and this Government. They know that and that is why they have deliberately underfunded the conduct of the household budgetary surveys, the
survey of living conditions, to conceal the truth from the population. But you cannot hide the truth, Madam Speaker, the population sees it, we live it every day. We know that the economy has collapsed.

In fact, Madam Speaker, the decline of virtually every macro and micro economic indicator shows that the integrity that characterized this country’s economic health was lost once this Minister of Finance took office in 2015, and it has been downhill since then. But do not just take my word for it, Madam Speaker, stakeholders, business owners, consumers, banks, even householders have become extremely risk-averse over the last five years.

As economic uncertainty has grown, the level of aggregate demand has collapsed and despite the reduction in the repo rate and a series of initiatives on the monetary policy side by the Central Bank, this gap continues to worsen. Why? Because fiscal policy continues not to match monetary policy.

There have been no corresponding actions by the Members of the PNM Government to create a workable economic environment, to stimulate the private sector and to develop the small and medium-sized enterprises which are the life force of the TT business economy. All we get from the other side, all we get from this side, I stand corrected, Madam Speaker, because unfortunately, I am standing on the side here behind the PNM. Maybe that will encourage them to be pushed forward to productivity.

Madam Speaker, the Government’s fiscal policies continue to target the development of a privileged few mega businesses at the cost of economic common sense. The agenda of this Government is to make the rich richer at the expense of the middle class and the poor. This is a dysfunctional and cynical policy agenda and one which we oppose significantly. And yet it is the one that the Government has pursued over the past five years and continues to pursue despite the fact that it
has failed. It has failed the population, it has failed the business community, it has failed Trinidad and Tobago. The failure to stimulate the economy and to develop economic certainty will lead to continuation of a downward spiral deeper into the economic depression that we have found ourselves in.

11.30 a.m.

The Central Bank Economic Bulletin dated July 2020 included a very revealing piece of research entitled *Measuring Economic Uncertainty in Trinidad and Tobago*. In it the researchers argued that individuals and firms tend to postpone their decisions to borrow, spend, save or invest until they are more comfortable in their knowledge of the direction of the economy.

Madam Speaker, this behaviour can complicate monetary and fiscal policy making and therefore requires a Government to itself be informed, understand the economy and the economic actors and to determine policy with specific and obtainable short, medium and long-term goals. It does not just require a Minister of Finance to be sensible. It requires his actions to be, as my friend from Couva North describes, SMART. S-M-A-R-T. In this context, Madam Speaker, and I cast no aspersions, no one can accuse this Minister of engaging in conduct which would characterize him as smart.

The Central Bank Bulletin reveals that Trinidad and Tobago recorded elevated levels of economic uncertainty in 2018 and 2019, respectively. This means that growing lack of confidence in the economy and by extension, Madam Speaker, in the PNM Government’s mismanagement of the economy. That was before COVID and it got worse.

As the Government passed budget after budget and burnt billion after billion in misdirected fiscal policies, mismanagement and corruption, Trinidad and Tobago continued to register elevated levels of uncertainty. Those sentiments
worsened considerably over the first half of 2020 as economic uncertainty rose to very high levels and continued to remain very high even today.

Just for reference, Madam Speaker, very high is the worst level of economic uncertainty that this study could plot. Ironically, and perhaps revealingly, this crisis position is shown in the study in the colour red. This collapse of confidence in the economy is all based on the policies and directives of this Minister of Finance and that Prime Minister.

The continuation of the PNM policies into the 2020 fiscal year to favour their friends, family, and financiers to bludgeon the middle-class into poverty, to penalize SMEs.

Madam Speaker: Member, might I ask that you withdraw the word “bludgeon” and you use more parliamentary terms please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Guided, Madam Speaker. The continuation of the PNM policies into the 2020 fiscal year to favour their friends, family and financiers to belittle and bewilder the middle-class into poverty.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, does he need to withdraw the word? He did not withdraw it.

Madam Speaker: Member, I think for the record you have to say that you withdraw. I know you started your—you have resaid it but you need to say that you withdraw and then proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I do so withdraw, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, if I may continue? The continuation of the PNM policies into the 2021 fiscal year to favour—I am appreciating the opportunity to repeat it—to favour their friends, family, and financiers, to beat the middle class into poverty and to penalize means that the vast majority of economic actors will continue to reflect the crisis of confidence in Trinidad and Tobago's economy.
Mr. Tancoo (cont’d)

This country did not collapse under COVID, Madam Speaker, it collapsed under the PNM. By the time COVID materialized in January 2020, this country’s economic infrastructure was already collapsing under the deliberate hand of this Government. And, Madam Speaker, this Minister of Finance was in a position to know the true state of the economy. He ought to have known and I dare say he knew and still knows. But you see, it does not suit his narrative of fiscal balance, economic stability and growth, which he so carefully spun to the citizens of this country.

What COVID has done, Madam Speaker, is to give the Minister a diversion, an opportunity to borrow more, sell more, spend more, all under the guise of necessity. Blame COVID. I say no Madam Speaker, the blame lays squarely on the head of the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East. [Desk thumping] When citizens pleaded for medicine and beds in hospitals, waiting months for basic medical tests and treatment, when families throughout this country battle floods and commuters experience bad roads, when police officers, doctors and firemen remain underresourced, when parents plead for basic food and support, this Government throw their hands up in the air chanting their blame Kamla mantra and they did it again today. For five years they blamed Kamla for their failure to provide the basic necessities that we pay taxes for.

There was no money in the Treasury. The economy was running on fumes. That is the imagery they sold to the population, when in fact what they were doing was enriching themselves, their privileged friends and while creating this Rowley depression for all of us.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.
Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member for Oropouche West there is a particular term that you said that is imputing improper motives so that, again I would ask you to
withdraw and restate in a way that complies to the Standing Order, please.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Duly guided, Madam Speaker. I hereby withdraw. There was no money in the Treasury, Madam Speaker. The economy was running on fumes. That is the imagery that they sold to the population, when in fact what they were doing was enriching vested interest groups. Is that better Ma’am?

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so it is not just the word, it is the concept. Okay? So you have to withdraw and as I say.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I hereby withdraw again, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** So the words are deleted.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I hereby withdraw again. If I may continue.

That is the imagery that they sold to the population; that things were really bad in this country. But it was not the Member of Parliament for Siparia who shut down Petrotrin after it paid $20 billion in taxes between 2010 and 2016. It was not the Member of Parliament for Siparia who collapsed the sea bridge and suffered Trinbagonians to create the illusion of urgency so they could choose to pay hundreds of millions to as suddenly preferred bidder name Bridgemans.

And it was not the Member of Parliament who signed a multibillion dollar contract with China Gezhouba Group International Engineering Company, which if the Prime Minister is to be believed, contains terms and conditions that he and the AG and the entire Cabinet did not see before they signed it. If the only thing that Diego Martin North/East can do is to point fingers, then he should be pointing his finger right at the mirror. Madam Speaker, blame Kamla is not a strategy. It is not a plan. It is an admission by this Prime Minister and the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East that they can do nothing. They have nothing to offer to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.
Madam Speaker, this Prime Minister repeatedly told the population to wean itself off the Government, treating Tobagonians as if we some dependent unwanted nuisance. They repeatedly told us to tighten our belts, even as the Prime Minister and others of his colleagues hopped continent to continent on the backs to taxpaying citizens.

The Government kept crying that it had no money. They could not settle wage negotiations, no money. It could not buy police cars to equip the police with technology. Anyone watching CSI knows about it. No money to stop crime, Madam Speaker. No money for health care to open the children’s hospital, to service equipment so people who went for support would not have to wait for weeks and months or die waiting for a test.

Madam Speaker, the truth is that this Government spent over $137 million every day for the last five years. That is a fact. That is enough money to give every single citizen, every man, woman and child almost $200,000 in cash. That is a fact. But it is the only, Madam Speaker, if that wealth was shared around that this would happen. And we all know that is not what transpired. Instead, they picked our pockets, taxed and taxed, removed subsidies and grants which the UNC had carefully constructed and carefully crafted into a social safety net. They created mass unemployment and even thousands of those employed found themselves shoved into the ranks of the working poor by this Government.

Madam Speaker, they spent $253 billion. “Where de money gone?” I raise this, Madam Speaker, because this Government is here again bleating about the country running on fumes. Propaganda, Madam Speaker. The truth is there for all to see.

Madam Speaker, the IMF, in its 2020 *World Economic Outlook* cautioned that moving forward the strength of any recovery in market and economies will
depend on how well policymakers restore investor business and consumer confidence.

Sadly the Minister’s 2021 plan repeats the failures of his last five budgets. It manifests a significant lack of understanding of the macroeconomic realities confronting the business community. It is insensitive to the socio-economic challenges being faced by our citizens. And, Madam Speaker, it lacks vision.

This is the same Government that ran this country into the ground for the last five years. Same Government, same policies, same Minister of Finance, same Prime Minister, same incompetent anti-people policy. Today they come to the Parliament to ask for another 50 billion to continue their profligacy, to do the same things they did over the last five years because they have a new mandate.

What you think will happen, Madam Speaker? The gulf between what the PNM expects from the wealthiest and what they demand from ordinary taxpayers cannot be greater. What ails this country are not the macroeconomic indicators. Those are the symptoms. The illness is the PNM. I am not sure whether the Minister is simply incompetent or whether he knows exactly what he is doing and this destruction of the economy has been engineered to favour vested interest groups. Let me share my reason, Madam Speaker—[Interruption]

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6) again.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—and I ask you to be the judge.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West, I have to uphold the objection. It is a similar infraction as you had done earlier. So I ask you to withdraw and find another way to say it, or else go on.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Hereby withdrawn, Madam Speaker. I am not too sure, Madam Speaker, whether the Minister is simply incompetent or deliberate in his actions. Let me share my reasoning and ask you to be the judge.
Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, was that a withdrawal? Madam Speaker, 48(6). Was that a withdrawal?

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, I said, for the clarification of the Member, that I am not too sure whether the Minister was simply incompetent, or whether he was deliberate in his actions, and I am about to explain why.

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Mr. D. Tancoo: [Desk thumping] At the Spotlight on the Budget, the Minister gave us one set of data which one week later appears to have been changed by hundreds of millions and some cases, billions.

At the Spotlight the Minister rounded off the expenditure for fiscal 2018 at 50.5 billion. But seven days later the Review of the Economy gave us a figure of $50.8 billion. With a stroke of his pen, this Minister managed to lose more than a quarter of a billion dollars.

For fiscal 2020, the Minister again understated revenue by half of a billion dollars by rounding off 34.06 billion to 33.6 billion. Another half of a billion dollars varnished with the stroke of a pen.

Madam Speaker, do you mean to tell me that my six-year old cousin knows how to round off figures but this Minister of Finance does not? The Minister told us that Government received 14.1 billion in energy sector revenues in 2019. One week later, the review revealed that the figure was actually again understated by $2.1 billion. These are not my figures, Madam Speaker. All of these figures were provided by the Minister of Finance himself. Do you believe, Madam Speaker, that these are innocent mistakes?

Well, what about this? The Minister claimed that he had provided financial support to companies and individuals to keep people in jobs. He then listed the
payment of arrears to individuals and businesses as evidence of that support. Madam Speaker, that was never the Government’s money in the first place, and their refusal to honour their debt obligations to taxpaying citizens and businesses is effectively hijacking people’s money forcefully.

Many small, micro and medium-sized businesses who dutifully complied with the law, registered and submitted their VAT returns on time, were penalized by this Government withholding of their refunds. In our highly competitive environment many were bankrupted as a result and simply went out of business.

Would you believe, Madam Speaker, that these are some of the very businesses bankrupt that this Member for Diego Martin North/East is to date promising a tax relief for listing their businesses on the Stock Exchange? What are they going to list? You have bankrupted them. Even the 460 companies which receive refunds and bonds still have to wait years before they can collect the face value of what the Government owes them unless they are willing to take a loss and sell them at a discounted price, maybe to some international or global financial entity, such as those which the Government prefers these days.

Do you think, Madam Speaker, that this Minister does not know that he is misstating facts? The Minister of Finance complained bitterly that the collapse of the ease of doing business is completely unacceptable. As we say in Trinidad, Madam Speaker: “He take in front before in front take he.” Because you know who is to blame for this unacceptable state of the business environment? The Minister of Finance himself. It is how it is, and as bad as it is, because of this Government and nothing we have seen or heard in this budget gives us any hope that there would be any reversal any time soon. So do not let his words fool you.

Madam Speaker, I opened the PSIP 2021 booklet supplied by this Minister last week, and randomly opened to page 49. Here they listed a series of projects,
Madam Speaker. I just selected one, the repair of a landslip L51 Reform Road 2.0 to 2.4 kilometre mile mark, which they claimed they started in fiscal 2020. I am glad that the Minister of Works and Transport is here, maybe he can clarify.

Madam Speaker, I checked. Not a single bolder was put down on that reform road, Madam Speaker. I challenge the Minister when he gets his opportunity to speak, to prove me wrong. You see, you cannot believe anything these Ministers say. No work done, no money allocated, no money spent. Where the money went? It is ludicrous to hear a Minister of Finance flippantly talk about the massive debt this country has amassed. This Minister has presided over the descent of our country into a various spiral of debt crisis. The Minister of Finance has been borrowing to pay interest on existing debt and to engage in recurrent expenditure. He is creating greater debt to service debt, piling debt upon debt upon debt. Every secondary school student of economics knows that this is completely unsustainable, Madam Speaker.

Over the past five years the Minister has borrowed over $48 billion; $48 billion, with a significant and growing component being external debt, and at a time when we have collapsing foreign exchange generation.

The bunching of interest payments and debt servicing requirements in the short-term is an alarming occurrence, Madam Speaker. Worse, the failure of this Government to invest in or create the environment for the investment in new revenue streams is unfathomable. This is not about COVID. If this had been done over the past five years, the economy would not be in the precarious position they have placed us in. Instead, this Minister boasts about the speed with which he was able to borrow. Please, Madam Speaker. He is boasting about putting us in debt. The Minister is boasting about mortgaging state assets, boasting about borrowing US dollars when we have no way to pay, no way of earning the US dollars to
repay. That is what he is boasting about. The Minister knows that there is excess liquidity in the domestic and world market, and this has been so even before COVID, and at a high enough interest rate, any bond will attract takers.

By the end of 2019, there was over $4 billion in excess liquidity in the domestic market. By last month, September 2020, commercial banks’ excess reserves has skyrocketed to $13.4 billion, the most it has ever been in our nation’s history. Interest rates are low, liquidity is high, but people are not borrowing to invest because they have no confidence in this Government, Madam Speaker. Those are the facts. This runaway debt is worrying, particularly because it mortgages our lives and that of future generations. There is an intergenerational bias against young people. We and our children and their children for generations will have to pay this debt.

This Government, Madam Speaker, has already demonstrated that it only knows two ways of generating revenue. The first is to tax the people into oblivion, and I urge you never to forget his glee when he chortled that he was increasing taxes, because we had not rioted after the last increase. And if taxes do not work, Madam Speaker, their next resource is to sell off the patrimony of the country.

We have already seen steps being taken to conduct valuations on several state assets. Madam Speaker, why would the Government conduct valuations now in what is the worst seller’s market that we ever had? The Minister wants us to believe that he has to plans to engage in a fire sale. But those are the same persons who swore to the national community that they were not going to shut down Petrotrin. [Desk thumping] We all know how that went. You cannot believe anything that this Minister of Finance says, Madam Speaker. We know too that the puppet masters are already eyeing state assets, and have even recommended billions in asset sales over the short term, starting as early as the next six months. It
is there in their road map, Madam Speaker.

But, Madam Speaker, it is not too late to do the right thing. I urge the Minister to reconsider his policy. Instead of sacrificing our human capital as he has done, instead of further unraveling the delicate macroeconomic infrastructure, look to our youth. Look to our youth, Madam Speaker. Public investment lays the foundation for future goals. The future is a high skilled, highway and high technology economy. All this talk about digitalization is a joke. All this talk about digitalization is a joke, when thousands of our children cannot afford a laptop up to today. This deliberate underinvestment, both public and private, means that the productivity gap between Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the world will continue to widen.

Strangely, the Minister has chosen a counterproductive strategy designed to push T&T into an even greater cycle of low investment, low productivity and low output. Madam Speaker, this budget is a political choice, not an economic necessity.

I urge the Government, let us harness the optimism, the enthusiasm, the hope, the energy of our young people and our business community. Let us not burden them with debt, unemployment and underemployment. Let us instead provide the opportunities and chances they deserve and want to build a better, freer, more equitable, more equal and more developed Trinidad and Tobago. This Minister has missed yet another opportunity to create confidence and to build capacity.

Madam Speaker, the UNC believes that it is the role of the Government to create the environment for economic and social development. We have shared our ideas for transforming the economy and the country with the nation as a whole. I urge the Government to put its collective egos aside and read it. It is no secret that
the country performs best when the working class and the middle class get a fair chance, when the economy is managed in the interest of everyone, when the people who create the national wealth get their fair share of the national wealth, and when everyone has a fair chance to achieve their true potential.

Madam Speaker, when the UNC and People’s Partnership were in the majority there was one big difference. We governed in the best interest of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago, not just who voted for us. Sadly, that is not the case under this PNM Government. The UNC is about serving the people. The UNC is about representing the people. The UNC is for all the people. The current Government, in contrast, is all about serving the people? Serving the people of the PNM; representing the financiers of the PNM and for the friends and family of the PNM. Let me repeat that, Madam Speaker. The current Government in contrast is also about the PNM, serving the PNM, representing the financiers of the PNM and for the friends of the PNM. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche West, it is a continuing sort of theme. So the Member for St. Joseph has risen on Standing Order 48(6), and again same sort of infraction. So I ask you to withdraw it.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I hereby withdraw, Madam Speaker, thank you. Madam Speaker, before I conclude, before I close, I want to spend a few minutes speaking specifically about the needs of my constituency as they have been privileged to be represented by the UNC, but abandoned by this partisan, punitive and wicked PNM Government.

Madam Speaker, if you were to meet my constituents of Oropouche West, you would be incredibly impressed by their humility, their discipline, their commitment to thrift, sacrifice, hard work, family and country. And yes, Madam
Speaker, their patience. You see, the constituency of Oropouche West is a southern constituency and we all know how the PNM treats south Trinidad. Ask the residents of La Brea and Point Fortin. They have some of the worst roads in this country, the highest levels of poverty and unemployment, despite being part of the Government for the last five years; epic, geographic discrimination, Madam Speaker.

The closure of Petrotrin by this Government decimated the entire southern region of this country. Overnight people went from being employed to being disenfranchised, in debt, unemployed, hopeless, frustrated and dejected. Entire communities in Oropouche West were impoverished at the stroke of a pen by a Prime Minister without any opportunities being put in place for them. Geographic discrimination, Madam Speaker.

I challenge the Minister of Finance to provide a breakdown of all Government projects over the last five years by constituency to allow the citizens to judge for themselves. I challenge the Ministry of Finance to give us a constituency breakdown of all grants provided before and during COVID. I ask, Madam Speaker, because every single day someone enters my office who has not received any support from this Government. This is geographic discrimination at its worse.

Let me make it quite clear that I have no problem if the needy in any constituency is able to access some kind of state support, especially at this difficult time. But I am deeply opposed, Madam Speaker, to any form of discrimination. And over the last two months, as I have travelled Oropouche West, I met a young mechanic from Radhu Trace who was a specialist in the repair of motor vehicles. Some of you may not know what a Laurel motor vehicle is. His property was assessed by NIDCO over five years ago as one of those which had to be moved to
facilitate the highway extension. Do you know that he has been waiting for compensation since then? The Government has chosen not to proceed with the extension and to deliberately penalize this constituency and all of south Trinidad; geographic discrimination, Madam Speaker. I call on the Government to finish the highway now. [Desk thumping]

What about the struggling doubles vendors who was robbed last month as she was to preparing to cook? She and her family were beaten, bloodied and traumatized. What about the grocery owner from Pluck Road, robbed five times this year in broad daylight who is now considering packing up and migrating? What about the residents of Tulsa Trace, San Francique, Palmiste, La Romain, Hermitage and the rest of Oropouche West living in fear? I call on the Government to give the police the resources, including vehicles, to increase the number of patrols so that these people have a fighting chance to survive.

What about the 80-year-old woman, Madam Speaker, who lives in Gandhi Village whose house has been flooded countless times over the last five years? I call on the Government to fix the floodgates now, fix the drainage, prevent the loss of lives and livelihood, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Works and Transport is aware of the collapsing tunnel on the main road in Syne Village because he found it, finally after five years, he found it two weeks ago.

I call on the Government. I call on the Minister, fix the infrastructure now. Farmers from Rahamut Trace have been flooded out and have been waiting for compensation for years; geographic discrimination, Madam Speaker. I call on them to pay the farmers now. These are not fabricated stories. These are real experiences of the real people I represent and will continue to do so until real change comes.

12.00 noon
And you know these are some of the same people, Madam Speaker, that this Government is threatening to charge the property tax on.

If they can find over $1.2 million of scarce US dollars, Madam Speaker, if they can find over $1.2 million scarce US per year to pay their lobbyist friends, to do what our embassies are supposed to do they can very well find the money to fix our problems. [Desk thumping] That is the way to save foreign exchange. If they can find half a million dollars to pay a bonus to a CEO in a state company which right immediately after that goes into the red, they can certainly find money to address legitimate taxpaying citizens. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, 309,000 persons in this country knew that this Government was incompetent and yet they prayed that in this budget the Government would have recognized the need to do things differently, to stimulate the economy, to generate foreign exchange, to create new revenue streams and to provide employment. Another 322,000 believed that this Government actually had their best interest at heart. Alas all of us have now come to the painful conclusion that this Government does not care about us. Instead, all we get are the same recycled broken promises, year after year, after year.

Madam Speaker, do not believe them. We all know what PNM stands for. PNM, promises never materialize; PNM, promises nothing more; PNM, people never mattered. Same Government, same Prime Minister, same Minister of Finance, same policies, same results. Allow me to summarize in my last few minutes, Madam Speaker. This Government knows that it will not be able to achieve its revenue and expenditure projections. This Government knows that the deficit will be significantly larger than it projects. This Government knows that it plans to penalize this country for putting them into office. It is tax, tax, and more tax.
This Government deliberately abandoned thousands of our citizens abroad not caring how they lived and if they survived. This Government knows that they have pushed us into an exploding foreign exchange crisis. This Government knows that its policies have destroyed the ease of doing business and caused a crisis in confidence in the economy and the PNM Government as a whole. This Government knows that it intends to come back in this House in the mid-year review and ask for more money, to borrow more money, and to pay more debt. This Government knows, Madam Speaker, that they have no intention of keeping any of their promises and they simply do not care. Because, Madam Speaker, this Government knows that they intend to continue to sell off the assets of the State to vested interest groups and now the country knows it too. May God have mercy on our souls. I thank you, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

**Madam Speaker:** I wish to draw to your attention that this is the maiden contribution by the Member for Oropouche West and I wish to congratulate him. [Desk thumping]

Hon. Members, I wish to remind that upon the introduction of the speaking booths to this Chamber it was indicated that the booths belong to neither side, and it would be advisable that Members familiarize themselves with both. This was to allow for a cleaning regimen which would comply with the COVID-19 best practice for the individual and collective protection of Members and staff. Regrettably, and by way of disclaimer I may not be in a position to assure that adequate sanitization of the booths will take place if Members prefer to speak sequentially from the same booth. Thank you. Minister of Works and Transport. [Desk thumping and crosstalk]

**Ms. Ameen:** “Ah, yuh fraid boy”. [Crosstalk]

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Works and Transport. [Desk thumping]
The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the amount of withdrawals I heard a little while ago, if the Parliament had to be described as a bank this might have been a run on the bank. Madam Speaker, I rise in this House today to present the road map ahead for the Ministry of Works and Transport as it continues to deliver on the mandate to provide transportation and infrastructure services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But before I elaborate on the work ahead, let me congratulate the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development for this year’s budget presentation geared towards resetting the economy of Trinidad and Tobago for growth and innovation during this stringent financial time.

Decisions at Government level are never easy, but the issues that we face because of the economic shortfall and the global pandemic have made the task of governing all the more challenging. Our Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley disclosed that as a nation we have lost $10 billion as a result of our inability to conduct business in a normal fashion. Globally, the World Health Organization estimates that $375 billion is lost per month as a result of this crisis. I repeat this so we can understand exactly where we are as a country.

Madam Speaker, at the Ministry of Works and Transport we have paid in excess of $3 million in grants to maxi-taxi drivers who have lost wages as a result of the COVID-19. Productive man hours have been compromised, and all sectors of transportation industry impacted. Yes, we are living in a time of perilous public health and economic crisis but this is not a time to surrender in uncertainty and fear because the future is only guaranteed for the courageous and not the faint-hearted.

Over the past five-year period despite the challenging economic circumstances brought about by the former administration, this Government did
not passively throw up its hands in surrender, it persevered with the limited resources available and eventually stabilized the economy. Looking back, we are proud to report that not one gazetted public servant was sent home, not one social service was cut and the 15 per cent increase in the salaries of CEPEP and URP workers are all examples of our ability to manage the country during difficult times. Because of this enduring commitment to dispense astute political leadership, the people on August 10th chose the PNM as the captain to steer the ship through such [Desk thumping] a critical time.

As we continue on the journey together, I am reminded of the words of Dr. Eric Williams on the occasion of the Independence Youth Rally in August 1962, he said and I quote:

"I have given to the Nation as its watchwords, Discipline, Production”—and—“Tolerance.’

They apply as much to you the young people as to your parents. The Discipline is both individual and national; the individual cannot be allowed so seek his personal interest and gratify his personal ambition at the expense of our Nation...

We must produce in order to enjoy. Wealth does not drop from the skies for any individual or any Nation. Reduced production, skylarking on the job, taking twice as long to do a job that makes it cost twice as much, do any of these things and in effect you are reducing the total amount available to share among the total number of people.”

I take this opportunity to encourage each one of us to read the full text of this speech.

At the Ministry of Works and Transport this is the type of environment we seek to nurture and develop. When we speak about doing more with less, discipline
and production; working as a team with internal and external stakeholders, tolerance. I am pleased to say that over the past five years the Ministry of Works and Transport has delivered its mandate and achieved far more with fewer resources.

Madam Speaker, today I am proud to stand in this honourable House to relay to the nation the progress made. As a team we were able to successfully complete the Curepe Interchange as well the Cipriani pedestrian overpass. Additionally, work is well under way in the Morvant to Maritime Roundabout road repair and drainage programme, as well as the Lady Hailes Avenue widening project in San Fernando which stands to benefit thousands of citizens in the southern region along with the Grand Chemin, Moruga Fishing Facility is also in progress.

The construction of the Valencia to Toco Road is also being undertaken. That motorway will serve as a critical connector route for the many now underserved and disconnected communities in the east. Madam Speaker, these projects are not merely about construction roadways and infrastructure, they are more about creating opportunities for all, thereby ensuring that no one is left behind.

In this second term I see this time as Government’s opportunity to further close the infrastructure and transportation service gap, in order to build a more equitable and prosperous Trinidad and Tobago. In working to fulfil this promise I have devised a road map to continue infrastructure improvement and strategic policy action that rest on the following pillars. Pillar one, Madam Speaker, maximizing our economic potential through the completion of the national highways and road reconstruction programme.

Madam Speaker, high quality infrastructure unlocks economic potential and ensures that equitable distribution of growth and opportunities. It boosters
productivity and competitiveness, and creates an embryonic environment that allows businesses to grow and prosper. Quality infrastructure creates employment and attracts investment opportunities.

Madam Speaker, I begin today with a specific focus on this Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin project of achievement for the people of the south Trinidad. As I speak I plan to demonstrate how this initiative serves as a blueprint for the many socioeconomic benefits that are available to all as the Ministry of Works and Transports established other progressive infrastructural projects in every quadrant of Trinidad and truly resets the economy for growth and innovation.

Construction of this project restarted in May 16, 2017, after being suspended for some three years following the demobilization of the previous Brazilian contractor in December 2015. The project will see the completion of 29 kilometres of new roadway from Dumfries Road to Dunlop Roundabout, with a connector from Mon Desir Interchange back to Fyzabad. Unlike the previous arrangement which placed one major foreign contractor in charge, this Government made a decision to utilize local expertise. This approach was deliberate with the intention to booster activities in the construction sector by earning over 400 to 1,400 individuals at any given time with work continuing into 2021. This highway will reshape and rejuvenate the economies of the smaller communities as it will offer easier access to residential areas, businesses, schools and recreational areas just to mention a few. Ultimately, this project will enhance such areas such as La Romain, Oropouche Village, Mon Desir, La Brea, Fyzabad and Rousillac.

Madam Speaker, this infrastructural development serves to create greater interconnectivity by opening up isolated spaces and decentralizing populations to further more in line with the concept of urban oasis. In 2020, construction work on
all nine work packages are ongoing. However, all packages have been directly impacted by the reality of the COVID-19 which has delayed critical dry weather work. All packages are now scheduled for completion in fiscal 2021.

This type of development is happening across all of four quadrants of the country. Undeniably, it will create equitable opportunities for sustainable development ensuring that no one is left behind. Madam Speaker, whether you live in the east, west, north, or south, this social and economic betterment offering opportunities for commerce, employment easier travel, and leisure will eventually touch you through a transportation infrastructure project located in or near your vicinity.

Please allow me to briefly mention these leading edge initiatives now being constructed around Trinidad. In the east there is a Churchill-Roosevelt Highway extension to Sangre Grande which will offer new and improved access to communities between Cumuto and Sangre Grande which are now unserved by a highway.

The way forward, in fiscal 2021 work will include the completion of package 1A and 1B, commencement of construction for package 3A, 3B and 3C. Further east there is Valencia to Toco Highway which continues apace with the promise to deliver faster and safer travel and create economic activities that will invigorate smaller communities along its paths like Salybia Cumana, Grande Riviere. The Churchill-Roosevelt Highway extension to Sangre Grande will eventually link seamlessly to the Valencia to Toco which will bring the eastern quadrant of Trinidad even closer to the sister isle of Tobago when the port is operational.

The way forward: In fiscal 2021 work on the Valencia to Toco Highway project continues through the PURE Unit, will include the upgrade of
approximately 12 kilometres of roadway starting from the Valencia Junction heading east to the intersection of the Valencia Road and Toco Main Road.

In the west, there is the Diego Martin Highway/Western Main Road Improvement Project which is designed to address the problems of traffic congestion in the western peninsula. The genesis of this project dated back to the 1990s, 30 years later under this administration in May 2020, a contract was awarded to China Railway Construction Caribbean Company Limited and Junior Sammy Construction Limited, a joint venture firm to execute this long overdue project.

The way forward, in fiscal 2021 work programmes under this project involve the construction of a four lane overpass over the Diego Martin Highway. A full signalized intersection at Columbus Boulevard connecting to a new four lane western connector road and roundabout access to new development. An eastern connector road to provide access to the Victoria Keyes and Powder Magazine Development, and the drainage improvement work which includes a detention pond to alleviate the flooding in that area.

In the north there is the Port of Spain East-West Corridor expansion and improvement work programme which will remove all traffic lights along the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway. This project will not only reduce traffic congestion but will also decrease travel time for commuters, thereby improving levels of productivity. Like the Solomon Hochoy extension to Point Fortin project, this initiative will yield similar employment opportunities and stimulate the construction sector.

The way forward: In fiscal 2021 it is expected that work will continue on the design and construction of additional interchanges at the following intersections, Macoya, Trincity and Golden Grove. In the south there is the Moruga Road
Rehabilitation Project which extends from Petit Cafe in the north to Marac Village, Moruga in the south. This project will improve access to the Grand Chemin Port that is currently under construction. This project comprises the rehabilitation of the Moruga Road and the La Lune Road. It includes the design and widening and construction of culverts, the design and construction of adequate drainage, and the construction of footpath as required; the design and construction of bridges and the design and implementation of slope stabilization measures.

The way forward: In fiscal 2021 rehabilitation work will continue on the Moruga Road.

The Programme for Upgrading Road Efficiencies: Madam Speaker, under the PURE Unit over 150 projects including the San Fernando Waterfront Project will be executed. From fiscal year 2019/2020 PURE projects alone created 2,331 jobs across eight counties of Trinidad. The proposed projects for 2021 will include the hands of hundreds of workers with construction expertise including skilled and unskilled labour as well as technical and administrative construction professionals.

Madam Speaker, allow me to focus on the San Fernando Waterfront Development Programme. In the past, several administrations have spoken about starting this very project. In fact, two sod-turnings were held to signify the intent of beginning work, yet nothing significant materialized. And this initiative remained a pipe dream. On June 26, 2020, the Ministry turned the sod for the project and work has already commenced on key elements which includes the widening of the Lady Hailes Avenue to a dual carriageway by the PURE Unit; repairs of the seawall along King’s Wharf Central Road by the Coastal Protection Unit; and the establishment of a boardwalk along King’s Wharf Central and the south road.

The Ministry recognized the role of the national roadway on the experiences of the driving public. As such, we seek to conduct a road condition survey every
three years. The last survey indicated that approximately 50 per cent of our road network was in a fair to poor condition record. To address this issue through the PURE Division, the Ministry will focus on preventative maintenance which includes spot paving and minor rehabilitation on sections of the roadway that are in critical condition. The PURE Unit as far as possible will repave roads based on the availability of funding and resources.

Likewise, the Ministry intends to utilize its Agua Santa Plant to facilitate extensive patching work throughout our road network. Additionally, the Ministry will strengthen its collaboration efforts with the Water and Sewerage Authority to allow for greater synergies which will facilitate a more proactive approach to road maintenance and repairs. Vegetation management on our main and secondary roads and cleaning of drains and culverts and the repair of damaged manholes will receive considerable attention in fiscal 2021.

The Bridge Reconstruction Programme: Under the Bridge Reconstruction Programme 62 structural deficient bridges have been identified for repairs and rehabilitation. Work includes the installation of sidewalks, increased lane capacity, slopes and road protection, improved drainage, and enhanced lighting for the safety of both pedestrians and drivers.

The way forward: In fiscal 2021 the Ministry intends to carry out construction on 16 bridges and complete the procurement process and the award of contracts for designs and construction for 12 additional bridges. Work will also focus on 259 landslips across the country.

Developing infrastructure that is resistant to flooding and climate change: Madam Speaker, at this point in time this country is currently in its wet season and it is experiencing weather patterns which brings with it heavy and intensive rainfall. Worldwide and specifically in our region the impact of climate change on
our weather pattern has resulted in higher than normal levels of precipitation, which pose a serious challenge to our existing drainage channels.

As Minister of Works and Transport the stories on the news of families who have lost everything weighs heavily upon my mind and I wish that as the incumbent I could easily provide a one-time fix to alleviate flooding across our nation. However, the truth is that many of the solutions to this complex problem must address historic issues such as land use and unplanned settlement, illegal encroachment on river reserves, littering, inadequate drainage systems, and the lack of adequate funding.

Our drainage response has grown increasingly aggressive over the past few years. In fact, the work of the Drainage Division on the Caroni River has yielded success. To date we have not had the reoccurrence of the type of flooding which occurred in the Greenvale and Oropune Housing Development. Additionally, we are seeing generally faster runoff of water in other areas that are prone to flooding.

As we move forward, the Ministry of Works and Transport remains committed to building capacity, building upon our capital projects and increasing maintenance work through the national de-silting programme.

The way forward: In fiscal 2021 the Ministry will continue to work in the following areas:

1. The national drainage plan for Trinidad and Tobago: the Development Bank of Latin America, CAF, will work with the Ministry to develop a strategic drainage plan to diverse solutions to mitigate flooding across Trinidad. Tenders for this final design and immediate measures for flood control and drainage action plan close on August 18, 2020. Evaluation has been undertaken and an award is expected shortly.

2. The programme of upgrade existing drainage pumps and gates
inventory this programme comprise the undertaking of approximately 13 projects and involve the upgrade and mobilization of various pumps and gates. Efforts to this end include the procurement of static pumps at various locations in flood prone areas such as Sea Lots, Debe, El Socorro, Bamboo 1, 2, and 3, Aranguez and Penal. Work will also include the replacement and upgrade of gates in the areas namely, the Caroni irrigation area, Kelly Village, St. Augustine, El Socorro, Bamboo 1, and Penal, along with the desilting of sumps and associated work.

Madam Speaker, it is unfortunate what happened yesterday at one of these pump houses, but we will talk about that later.

3. Comprehensive Desilting Drainage Desilting Programme. Under this programme over 300 projects were executed since 2018. In 2020 the Ministry undertook 480 desilting projects across Trinidad. These actions increased the capacity of our rivers to move water during times of excessive rainfall.

The way forward: Without fail, Madam Speaker, this programme shall be executed in the upcoming dry season 2021.

The flood mitigation and erosion control programme: This is an ongoing initiative that delivers short and medium term flooding mitigation solutions on volatile water courses and river basin catchments. To date, nine projects have already been tendered including rehabilitation work on the San Juan River adjacent to Savannah Villas Aranguez; construction of a block work drain in the Parforce River in Gasparillo; rehabilitation work of the grand ravine in Bourg Mulatresse; construction and reinforced concrete walls at T&TEC installation on Mausica Road, Carapo; construction of the RC wall and RM wall at MTS Aranguez Plaza;
flood reduction work at the Marie Douleur and Guaracara River, the Diana River improvement work phase II; the Soledad River improvement work, and irrigation and drainage structure in the Caroni irrigation phase III.

Madam Speaker, as a Government we pride ourselves on working to make the wrong things right, finding solutions to alleviate perennial flooding problems which have troubled many in our nation for years stands as one of our highest priority.

Madam Speaker, under coastal protection, the response in this age of climate change also includes efforts to safeguard our coastal communities. Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago is a small island developing state and its coastline is particularly vulnerable to the effects of the sea level rise and volatile weather systems. As such, mitigating the effects of coastal erosion and coastal flooding will continue to hold a priority in the Ministry of Works and Transport’s schedule of work. For fiscal year 2021, the Coastal Protection Unit will continue the following projects: The Mayaro/ Guayaguayare Coastal Management Programme, Otaheite Shoreline Stabilization Work, Salybia Shoreline Management Project, Cap-de-Ville Shoreline Stabilization Work Phase II, Matelot Shoreline Stabilization Work Phase III, Paria Main Road Coastal Protection Work, Macqueripe Bay Seawall Restoration Project, a Comprehensive National Coastal Monitoring Programme, a Granville Shoreline Stabilization Work, and the La Brea Beach Stabilization Work.

Madam Speaker, I would like to speak a little on the blue economy. Madam Speaker, these infrastructural solutions that are designed to help us deal with the reality of climate change represent an aspect of Government efforts to develop the national blue economy. However, developing the blue economy also involves providing infrastructure to maximize the opportunity for marine resources. The Ministry of Works and Transport understands its responsibility to develop port
infrastructure and in 2021 work will continue on the Toco Ferry Port, the Fishing Port in Grand Chemin, Moruga and the La Brea drydocking facilities.

Further to this structural development, the Ministry will move to institute systems advancement by building on the capacity of the Maritime Service Division. This change will see the implementation of a new standardized system for quality assurance, continued development of online services to accommodate customers, and the review of the Shipping Act to augment service delivery at international standards.

12.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, building the capacity at the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago to improve service delivery. Madam Speaker, we are now also pursuing significant advancement at the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. Its operations and output meet international quality measures. This process began early in the 2000s, at which time a decision was taken to create three separate companies to deal with the major functions being undertaken at the Port Authority, namely, inter-island fast ferry, cargo operation, management of port lands and infrastructure. Work started with the engagement of a management company and maintenance entity. History now tells us that this movement was not sustained and a number of factors can be attributed to its decline. A key aspect has been the way business is conducted at the port.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry has been pursuing, with vigour, all and any instances where proper process was not or is not being followed. A recent example of this came to light when it was brought to my attention that the port has a legal matter resulting from a payment of a 30 per cent administrative fee on a contract, when the contract in question does not carry the requirement. In other words, a supplier apparently was getting 30 per cent over the contracted amount without any
proper documentation. Such irresponsible action has cost taxpayers millions of dollars.

Madam Speaker, this is a clear example that shows us why there is the need for change. When we couple the institutional issues at the port with the development in the global/regional environment, in particular, the works undertaken in the Panama Canal and the qualification of Panamax vessels, the need for change is even greater. The Ministry has sought the input of the IDB in how we move the port forward. A formal assessment was performed in 2019 and based on this, a number of areas have been identified to be addressed including, the upgrade and expansion of the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago; existing berthing and channel infrastructure to accommodate the new Panamax vessels; the procurement of equipment to improve the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago cargo handling operations; engagement with stakeholders on new modern port models; introduction of a public-private partnership model to increase private participation in operations of the port.

The expected benefits of a public-private partnership model includes, private financing for public infrastructure and development needs; improved foreign exchange; improved governance; improved operational efficiencies, and reduction of the operating subsidies.

The way forward: In fiscal 2021, the Ministry will seek to engage all relevant stakeholders as we move towards the development of the necessary framework and policy document for the implementation of a public-private partnership model. Additionally, the intention is to fully operationalize the TTIT company to ensure a proper management of the ferry service between Trinidad and Tobago. At present, the inter-island service has an operating capacity of 1,800 passengers one-way, with a goal to accommodate 3,100 passengers one-way. With
the arrival of the *APT James* and the *Buccoo Reef*, the Ministry is confident that there exists sufficient capacity for the needs of the inter-island passenger service. These vessels will add an additional 1,900 seats and accommodate 500 motor vehicles on the sea bridge. The first of these vessels, the *APT James* is expected in Trinidad by year end.

Madam Speaker, let me shift some focus to the PTSC, the preferred means for public transportation through the improvement and customer service. The Ministry of Works and Transport remains committed to the task of building the capacity of the Public Transport Service Corporation with its fleet, so that it is prevailed as a reasonable, safe, responsible alternative to drive in your own vehicle.

Madam Speaker, over the past five years, the PTSC has remained focused on several areas that will improve the customer experience and make its bus service the preferred choice for public transportation. In 2018, 35 buses were deployed into service, and 25 routes in Trinidad, and 10 in Tobago. By early 2020, an additional 25 buses were commissioned. Negotiations are in train for the acquisition of 300 additional buses, which will augment the entire PTSC fleet to 500 buses, increasing its capacity to serve more travellers nationwide. With the added intent to embrace greener fuel alternatives, 38 of these buses were deployed, run on compressed natural gas, which leaves a softer impact on the environment as it is far more energy efficient.

The way forward: PTSC is moving towards the introduction of an intelligent transportation solution to leverage the efficiencies and innovation of information and communication technology, to transform and support its overall operation. The intelligent transport solution will enable PTSC to identify all 500 buses, their real-time location, arrival and destination, tracking their movement and monitoring
them while they are operating on the route; enhance and automate its dispatch and bus capability at all depots; develop bus routes service plans and schedules in a systematic and efficient way for all its routes; and deliver quality and real-time information of the arrival/departure schedules of their buses at Port of Spain City Gate hub, depots, hubs, terminals, malls, through display monitors online and through a mobile app. The real-time information will also be available at bus stops and shelters. This will improve the customer satisfaction of the travelling public of Trinidad and Tobago. Additionally, focus will be placed on new infrastructure to passengers. Plans are also in place for the refurbishment of bus stops, shelters and passenger facilities in San Juan, Curepe, Tunapuna, as well as upgrade of the terminal facilities in Sangre Grande, San Fernando and Scarborough.

Madam Speaker, let me speak a little on the license office. The Licensing Division is undergoing rapid transformation, as we meet the demands of an even challenging environment which calls for social distancing. The use of online technology and the introduction of innovative solutions, as you may be aware, to ensure the continued operations at the Licensing Division during this period, the Ministry established an appointment system, offering particular services on specific days. The solution arose out of the efforts to manage and adapt to the volume of customers in a situation of reduced capacity to deliver regular service. As a result of the COVID-19 restrictions as well, what we have found interesting is the fact that there is almost double the amount of required driver’s permit transactions this year, at 40,355 as compared to 22,227 in 2019. Despite increased transactions during a pandemic that forced us to decrease our service capacity to date, the Ministry continues to provide a consistent service to the customers across the nation and implement additional measures that will allow us to expand our touch points.
In the near future, the Ministry will officially launch its licensing mobile service unit which will carry out scheduled visits to rural communities and villages. Citizens who reside in these communities will soon have hassle-free access to service without having to travel lengthy distances to visit license offices. This mobile unit will be fully equipped with all the necessary technology, tools and consumables to allow for printing of certified copies, processing of learner’s permits, renewal of driver’s permits, regular tests for all driving permit classes, renewal of taxi badges, verification and update of driver’s permit records.

Madam Speaker, in May 16, 2020, amendments to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act were proclaimed. This allowed for the operationalization of the demerit points system, a new traffic ticketing fixed penalty system and a red light camera enforcement system in Trinidad and Tobago. Since the demerit points system has been implemented, we recognized that between the period May 27th to September 20th, there has been a 22 per cent decrease in fatal road traffic accidents and a 29 per cent decrease in road traffic deaths compared to last year. However, it is rather unfortunate that drivers continue to defy the traffic laws. The number of suspensions and disqualifications as at September 21, 2020, stands at 235.

The way forward: Over the next fiscal year, under the transformation programme, the Licensing Division will launch a number of online services to further enhance the customer experience and create additional revenues to the Ministry which includes, expanding its debit card payment service to all sites, including the new mobile unit; deploy an electronic vehicle inspection system, directly linked to all approved testing stations; implement an online vehicle registration system; introduce an online application for learner’s permits; introduce online certified copy requests and delivery system; offer the online renewals for driver’s permits; reintroduce specialized numbers via a transparent online system.
The Ministry will also continue to pursue additional reform initiatives which includes tint legislation, “drugaler” legislation, the introduction of a disabled accessible parking system, the modernized registration plate system and the introduction of parking meters in the cities of San Fernando and Port of Spain.

Madam Speaker, to close, I would like to remind this honourable House and the wider nation that while this is a budget delivered in challenging times, now is not the time to lose heart, regarding a brighter future for Trinidad and Tobago. Rather, it is a time to keep moving forward. The coronavirus presents new and unknown challenges and sadly, many tragedies of live lost around the world and here at home. Nevertheless, let us cope during this time of crisis by searching for opportunities presented to us by this new norm in which we now live. This shift presents us with a chance to develop more efficient digital services that offer mobile access that is available 24/7. The reality of the global pandemic has also brought Internet access to communities formerly cut off from the access of the World Wide Web. As well, this crisis teaches us that we can be even more innovative than we ever thought possible, as we find new ways to cope, remain connected and devise a new way ahead for the future. I can assure you that the Government of this day is committed to doing whatever it takes to keep this nation moving and thriving.

Today, I have been honored to share with you the Ministry of Works and Transport’s road map to continued infrastructure improvement and the strategic policy action. We, in Government, assure that this framework will serve as the foundation upon which we will rebound from the crisis of the pandemic and go on to achieve even greater things. The provisions of a more efficient and robust road network is essential to opening up opportunities that offer new access to places now considered remote and providing more efficient means by which we can move
people and goods to keep our economy going. Construction will help to create more jobs in the months and years ahead, while the development of the blue economy will help to increase more long-term benefits and sustainable marine resources to make the maritime sector a more lucrative and accessible venture in Trinidad and Tobago.

I thank our Prime Minister, Dr. the hon. Keith Rowley for his faith in me and to once more lead one of the largest portfolios in Government. I offer all the surety that we will continue to serve, provide outcomes, which are aligned with government development agenda. Within this context, this is our opportunity to close infrastructure and transportation service gaps, to shape a more fair and equitable nation full of hope and prosperity. I also thank what I consider to be one of the best teams in the public service, the Ministry of Works and Transport, led by the esteemed Permanent Secretary and her team of technocrats and administrators who helped to sustain the life of every project pursued for the nation. I thank them now for their efforts and hard work to this great end. My appreciation also goes out the statutory authorities under the remit of the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Chairman, CEO and officers. Also, I thank the National Infrastructure Development Company which has played a major role in facilitating an implementation of several of the Ministry’s major projects. The Ministry of Works and Transport, we have grown fond of the phrase “Team MOWT”, yes, Team Ministry of Works and Transport. Together we will continue to deliver progressive first for Trinidad and Tobago and successfully lead the charge in implementing the mandate service to build this great nation.

Today, I will end as I begin with the refrain, “Discipline, Production and Tolerance”. My brother, my sister, fellow citizens, let us continue to build this
nation together. Thank you, and may God continue to bless Trinidad and Tobago.

[Desk thumping]

12.45 p.m.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Pennelope Beckles):
Madam Speaker, let me first congratulate you on your election as Speaker of the House. I wish to thank you for the opportunity to participate in this 2020/2021 budget debate. [Device goes off]

Madam Speaker: Member, one minute please.

Hon. P. Beckles: Sorry.

Madam Speaker: Is there a device—just locate the device and take it out of the Chamber, please. Member for Arima. [Desk thumping]

Hon. P. Beckles: Madam Speaker, let me first congratulate you on your election as Speaker of the House. I wish to thank you for the opportunity to participate in the 2020/2021 budget debate in this august Chamber. Madam Speaker, I also wish to thank the people of Arima for returning me as the Member of Parliament for Arima, as well as voting for the right choice by ensuring the return of the People’s National Movement. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I wish to place on record my thanks to the hon. Prime Minister for his confidence he reposed in me by appointing me the Minister of Housing and Urban Development. Having recently celebrated our 58th anniversary of Independence and our 44th anniversary as a Republic, I would like to take this opportunity, through you, Madam Speaker, to thank the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, for restoring this magnificent edifice which is at the heart of our democratic traditions. [Desk thumping]

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Colm Imbert, Minister of Finance, for his presentation of the 2021 budget. The hon. Minister of Finance has
prudently managed the financial affairs of this nation by creating opportunities to foster growth and development in the various key sectors, and that must be applauded. [Desk thumping] I also wish to extend appreciation to the hard-working team of technocrats from the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Development who would have assisted in putting the budget presentation together. Today, my role is to give account in this distinguished House, through you, Madam Speaker, on the achievements of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and its implementing agencies during fiscal 2019/2020. Also, I will elucidate on our proposed plans, programmes and projects for the 2021 fiscal period.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and its implementing agencies are committed to improving the living conditions of our more vulnerable citizens, and ensuring that the infrastructural development of our urban and peri-urban environment are in keeping with the country’s national development plan, Vision 2030.

Madam Speaker, international best practice advocates that the housing and urban development sector must design its programmes to stimulate sustainable economic activity and encourage social inclusion. UN-Habitat at Habitat III, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development that took place in Quito Ecuador in October 2016 emphasized that urban development can open up job opportunities, improve livelihoods and contribute to poverty eradication. Consequently, Government’s policies, programmes and projects are guided by two principles: one, “Putting People First: Nurturing Our Greatest Asset” which is “Theme 1” of the National Development Strategy and, two, ensuring that activity in the housing and urban development sector is also focused on contributing to the country’s economic development and poverty reduction.
Madam Speaker, adequate housing is central to a decent life and is recognized as such in several international human rights instruments. Goal 11 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals affirms:

“Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” For the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, putting people first means ensuring that a primary focus is placed on providing to eligible low to lower-middle income families access to adequate and affordable housing solutions; creating sustainable and pleasing environments that engender a sense of safety and a sense of personal esteem and revitalizing our urban spaces through infrastructural upgrades and housing projects. These motions are at the very heart of how the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development approaches its responsibility.

Madam Speaker, as we transform the country’s landscapes, a beneficial spinoff effect is that we can contribute to this country’s economic sustainability. Madam Speaker, the housing and urban development sector contributes to the vibrancy of the economy, particularly, through its construction initiatives. For instance, the Accelerated Housing Programme is executed through the Housing Development Corporation, HDC. Between 2016 and 2020, the HDC has been able to complete 2,488 housing units of which 1,079 units were in projects that were previously stalled or left incomplete prior to August 2015. There are currently 2,882 units under construction in over 36 sites across Trinidad.

The units constructed through public funds are priced between 250,000 to 550,000 to target applicants whose monthly earnings range between 10,000 and 14,000 as these applicants can access 2 per cent interest rates from the State’s revised mortgage financial facility at the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage and Finance Company.

Madam Speaker, it is worth noting that 5,471 housing units were allocated
during the period September 2015 to August 2020, which is on an average just about 1,000 homes a year. Additionally, 527 units were allocated to eligible servicemen and women of the joint protective services and 180 units were allocated to senior citizens and persons with disabilities in keeping with Government’s housing allocation policy.

Consequently, the Accelerated Housing Programme generated direct employment opportunities for over 10,000 persons and created indirect opportunities for another 7,000 to 10,000 persons through backward linkages in the supply chain, in this way, promoting equity and shared prosperity. This leads us into the engagement of private sector entities in the construction of public sector housing.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry acting on behalf of the State has actively engaged and partnered with several land developers, house traders and small to medium-sized contractors in the private sector to bridge the gap between the supply and demand for public housing. Several initiatives have been employed in this endeavour, including the public/private arrangements, the Housing Construction Incentive Programme, the introduction of a suite of income tax exemptions and incentives for traders of newly constructed homes and the Small and Medium Contractors Housing Initiative, creating a centrum for commercial enterprise.

The stimulus to the economy that is forged is reliant on job creation and the turnover associated with capital enterprise. In embracing this manifold responsibility, the Ministry had fostered the public/private partnership initiative design/build/finance model. Madam Speaker, utilizing a public/private partnership procurement model, the Ministry and the HDC have been able to harness much needed investment, technical and other resources, with approximately 500 million
that is being used in the construction of public housing projects all over the country. Through this initiative, there are over 800 units under construction, and I am pleased to report that, to date, 450 units have already been completed under this initiative which was implemented in 2016. [Desk thumping]

In the same vein, the Housing Construction Incentive Programme was introduced to attract housing developers with and without land, to construct housing units valued at between 550,000 and 750,000. And under this programme any person, developer or contractor, who wishes and has demonstrated the ability to finance, build and sell housing units in accordance with the guidelines and pricing structure provided by HDC is eligible to participate.

Madam Speaker, successful programme participants can receive cash incentives of 75,000 on a unit selling no more than 550,000 and a cash incentive of 100,000 on a unit selling no more than 750,000, once all specifications and agreements for the programmes are met. Funding for this initiative will be accessed through the State’s Public Sector Investment Programme.

There are currently 71 units under construction that are near completion through the HCIP. It is anticipated that this programme will continue to contribute significant to an increase in the provision of housing units nationwide. The Government’s policy is to engage and utilize small and medium contractors on its housing construction projects. The small and medium contractors housing initiative which was initiated during the fiscal period 2019 to 2020 is aimed at engaging experienced small and medium contractors to construct basic two and three bedrooms, no frills housing units costing no more than 500,000 per unit. The unit which forms part of the Ministry’s Accelerated Housing Programme will provide much needed relief to our housing applicants whose monthly income is less than $9,000. Qualifying applicants for the programme will be able to access TTMF’s 2
per cent mortgage interest rate facility.

Since the implementation in June 2020, 45 contractors are in the process of constructing 173 units on service lots within existing HDC housing communities’ infill sites or in available government land development across Trinidad. The projects are located in Arima, Malabar; Chaguanas, Edinburgh South; D’Abadie, Boy’s Lane; Mount Hope, Pioneer Drive; Moruga, Preau Village; Princes Town, Buen Intento; Arouca, Bon Air; La Brea, Pierre Road; Point Fortin, Strikers Village and Gasparillo, Harmony Hall. The HDC as the implementing agency, will provide house plans as well as required infrastructure for the construction of the units and facilitate payment terms to meet the cash flow needs of the small businesses through the Ministry’s Public Sector Investment Programme.

Madam Speaker, we are cognizant that many of our applicants are unable to service a mortgage and, for this reason, the HDC will make units available for rental. During the period 2015 to 2020, the HDC reintroduced the Rent-to-Own Programme in which a portion of the rent paid for the property is allocated towards the eventual purchase of the property over an initial five-year period. This is to assist persons in transitioning from rental to homeownership based on their life stage and earning capacity.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry is continuously enhancing its communities through the construction or refurbishment of play parks within new and existing developments. Additionally, there is installation of street and directional signage as well as welcome walls, and over the past five years, the Ministry through HDC has built over 20 play parks in the various communities of which four were sponsored by corporate partner, First Citizens Bank.

Madam Speaker, we must remember that previously the idea of homeownership remained an elusive dream for many persons as they were unable
to access affordable financing to purchase a home and they could only enter into
rent-to-own or rental arrangements. The challenge with this was that money was
not being recirculated into the housing construction programmes and persons could
not access this wealth creating asset to improve their circumstances and pass it on
for future generations.

Madam Speaker, it is for this reason the Government took the policy
decision to revise the qualifying income and property values of the state mortgage
facilities through the Trinidad and Tobago Finance Company Limited. In so doing,
the revised mortgage regime now reflects a more realistic picture of the property
market and gives more families the opportunity to access affordable financing and
realize their dream of homeownership. This measure has positively impacted the
standard of living and improved the quality of life for many of our citizens.

In February 2017, the Government approved the revised terms and
conditions of the 2 per cent and 5 per cent subsidized mortgage financing regime.
Now, persons with a single or combined household monthly income between $10
and $15,000 can assess 100 per cent financing utilizing the 2 per cent mortgage
interest rates for residential properties valued at $1 million or less. Likewise,
persons whose household monthly incomes are between 14,000 and 25,000 can
access the 5 per cent mortgage interest rate for residential properties valued
between $1.2 million and $1.5 million. Madam Speaker, this not only applies to the
applicants of the State’s public housing programme, but also to those seeking to
purchase properties on the open market. Now, the expansion of an affordable
housing programme allow citizens to access the subsidized rates to purchase homes
on the open market.

Madam Speaker, under the PPP arrangement, a lending product, such as
developed by the TTMF, referred to as “stage financing”. This initiative will
benefit individuals intending to purchase properties from housing developments who require stage payments towards the completion. The approach to funding is a tripartite arrangement, involving the lender TTMF, the developer and the customer. The TTMF has commenced the acceptance of applications for mortgage from successful beneficiaries of housing units within the Bamboo Creek and Mahogany Court developments.

Madam Speaker, the Housing and Urban Development also has two flagship housing programmes that are projects managed by the Land Settlement Agency, which is another of the Ministry’s agencies. The first is the Government Aided Self-Help Housing Programme, which is an affordable high-quality housing initiative that targets eligible citizens without land, and those with approved residential lots who require assistance from the State to construct their own homes. Applicants’ monthly household income must not exceed $25,000. Under the Government Aided Self-Help Programme, the State acts as a facilitator to create an enabling environment in which beneficiaries finance and manage the construction of their own homes. The programme is a promising approach to improving opportunities and services for new housing developments and in direct alignment with Government’s policy to provide decent affordable housing for low to lower income families. Through this strategy, potential applicants will be able to access subsidized 2 per cent and 5 per cent mortgage interest rates from TTMF, approved building contracts, pre-approved housing plans, technical assistance and oversight during the construction of their homes.

Madam Speaker, under the Government Aided Self-Help Programmes, 505 potential applicants qualified for the programmes and were approved for residential lots in central and south Trinidad. The breakdown of allocation is as follows: Cashew Gardens, Carlsen Field, seven lots; Chin Chin, Cunupia, 13 lots;
Hon. P. Beckles (cont’d)

Factory Road Chaguanas, 124 lots; Milton Village, Couva, 20 lots; Orange Field, Carapichaima, 118 lots; Picton, Diamond Village, 22 lots; Roopsingh Road, Carapichaima, 182 lots and Waterloo, Carapichaima, 21 lots. Madam Speaker, 386 sale agreements have been signed by lessees. Madam Speaker, 373 beneficiaries have been forwarded to the Commissioner of State Lands for preparation of deeds of lease and, to date, the Office of the Chief State Solicitor has executed 11 deeds.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry recently held a deed of lease distribution ceremony for beneficiaries who qualified for residential lots: Chaguanas, Cashew Gardens, Carlsen Field and Milton Village, Couva. It is estimated that it will cost approximately $25.4 million to complete infrastructural works on some 89 lots at the Alamby Development, Tarouba and 167 lots, Glenroy, Princes Town.

Madam Speaker, it is notable that the Government Self-Help Housing Programme, while providing housing solutions, is also projected to create new employment opportunities for 270 persons during fiscal 2020 to 2021. Madam Speaker, during the contributions of many of my colleagues on the other side who mentioned continuously that the Government’s projects did not exist in areas such as south and central Trinidad—and I hope they are paying very close attention to the areas that I have been reading over the last couple of minutes.

Madam Speaker, the Housing and Village Improvement Programme is another of the Ministry’s legacy programmes that is also project managed by the Land Settlement Agency. This programme was established in fiscal 2017 to 2018. Since then, it has received awards from the IDB for Service Excellence and Innovation and the President’s Award for Service Excellence and Innovation in the public sector. Approximately 195 families in 12 communities have benefited from the service and the programme also created employment opportunities for over 1,000 individuals. The programme is preparing for implementation of the fourth
phase which is geared towards improving the housing and living conditions of beneficiaries within impoverished, rural and peri-urban communities at both the individual and community levels, utilizing the self-help approach. This means that the State provides fiscal and technical resources while the beneficiaries provide sweat equity.

Madam Speaker, the HVIP Programme targets communities with neglected infrastructure and poor quality housing. The Ministry, through the Land Settlement Agency, utilizes small contractors within the community or environs to facilitate development and upgrades of basic infrastructure, utilities and services. This also helps to keep home construction cost down to 120,000 per starter unit. Families who do not require new construction are able to access grant funding to assist with home improvement projects to improve their living conditions. This has also allowed for the provision of a construction skills training component which greatly benefits residents of these communities.

In light of our current economic circumstances, this programme has not only positively impacted the standard of living and quality of life of low-income families, but has also made a meaningful contribution to the national economy through the home construction sector and the backward linkages it inevitably creates. The programme also spells good news for Government housing programmes as it reduces demand for public housing under the HDC.

In fiscal 2019 to 2020, $15 million was allocated to complete phase two and to undertake intervention works under phase three of the programme. COVID-19 stay-at-home measures affected the pace of implementation of the programme. But, Madam Speaker, the Ministry, through the LSA, proposes to implement phases four and five of the Housing and Village Improvement Programme in fiscal year 2020 to 2021. The LSA has already undertaken the necessary social surveys
and identified seven communities for intervention: Wallerfield, Marabella, Point Fortin, Sangre Grande, Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, Beetham and Petit Morne. Thus far, the LSA has received 19 agreements from persons wishing to participate in the fourth phase of the programme. These persons are from the communities of Embacadere, Sangre Grande, Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo and Moruga. The LSA is also proposing to construct 250 new single family units and complete 82 single family units and 21 apartment units in the Beetham community at the cost of approximately $35.6 million consisting of about 5 to 6 million for ongoing contractual commitments and 30 million for new proposed projects.

Madam Speaker, several persons are now employed on construction sites and during fiscal year 2020 to 2021, the LSA is expected to create even more employment opportunities for approximately 3,320 persons under the Housing and Village Improvement Programme. To ensure transparency, accountability and improve efficiency, the Ministry has established oversight committees comprising key stakeholders to monitor and evaluate the Aided Self-Help Housing and Housing and Village Improvement Programmes. In addition, to these programmes, Cabinet has approved the policy framework for the distribution of residential lots to former Petrotrin employees. Under this programme, residential lots can be accessed by first-time homeowners who were affected by the closure and restructuring exercise. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development will be implementing an Urban Upgrading and Revitalization Programme largely funded through the 50 million IDB loan agreement. The objectives of the programme, in addition to enhancing the housing conditions of low income houses are: to develop the infrastructure and offer land tenure security for persons occupying informal settlements on state owned lands and to revitalize some of this country’s public
urban spaces and strengthen the capacity of the supply side stakeholders to satisfy effective housing demands and urban development needs.

The programme will be executed in four components. Madam Speaker, the projections for fiscal 2020 to 2021 include:

1. Infrastructure development for housing community at Riseland, Canaan Tobago and under the urban residential infrastructure component.
2. Upgrade and refurbishment of the East Side Plaza located at Charlotte Street in Port of Spain and upgrade of the Scarborough Esplanade in Tobago under the urban regeneration component.
3. Under the affordable housing subsidies component, the Ministry will disburse funds for home improvement and home construction to eligible applicants.

1.15 p.m.

These subsidies will range in value from 20,000 to 50,000 and will benefit low-income citizens who own a monthly income of no more than $8,000. Approximately 450 families will benefit from this component.

4. Preparing an infrastructure investment plan to guide the sustainable development in Tobago under component four of the programme which deals specifically with the strengthening of housing and urban development sector stakeholder capacities. The objective of the infrastructure investment plan is to strengthen the underlying physical planning framework to public sector policy and investments.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, through the LSA, executes the function of regularization of designated squatter communities and this involves the incremental development and upgrade of infrastructure and the provision of services within designated squatting
communities and land settlement areas, which include paved roads, drainage and sewerage systems, potable water, electricity and other needed amenities. Squatter regularization also involves the provision of leasehold titles to eligible squatters who have been in illegal occupation of state lands prior to January 1998, and have met the criteria outlined in the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act No. 25 of 1998.

In fiscal 2020 to 2021, the land settlements will continue these infrastructural projects. These works are projected to create employment for close to 1,000 persons. Madam Speaker, earlier this year, Cabinet approved the implementation of the Bayshore housing project as part of the San Fernando waterfront redevelopment project. [Desk thumping] Due to the stark reality of the housing conditions within the Bayshore, south Marabella Settlement, Madam Speaker, the Ministry proposes to replace the dilapidated housing structures and relocate families where redevelopment cannot be achieved. This will result in the construction of 130 residential units, 50 along the existing Marabella train line and 80 in a new greenfield development.

Madam Speaker, the plans, programmes and projects that I have outlined do not represent the full slate of the products offered available under the umbrella of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. The Ministry’s public awareness programme will continue to place more detailed information in the public domain as we continue building Trinidad and Tobago. The intention is for our citizens to become more informed and empowered to pursue home ownership. Be assured, Madam Speaker, that a strong foundation is being laid for the long-term economic performance of the urban housing industry to be sustained and it is projected to generate over 20,000 jobs annually. This is not a light matter but there is more.
Madam Speaker, the Ministry is committed to producing a well-designed, inclusive and participatory housing policies and programmes. There is a commitment to adapting to new understandings about housing and urban development beyond securing the basic human rights to shelter for citizens. There is a proposal in the works for a smart city design within an urban sustainable development model. And using this model, Madam Speaker, the Ministry could provide solutions that are available and are resilient to continuous change. The Ministry is continually thinking about how the current infrastructures can be altered to ensure the needs of the present without compromising the security and prosperity of future generations.

Madam Speaker, in line with Goal 11 of the SDGs which advocates to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, the Ministry is preparing to develop smart, sustainable cities and neighbourghoods. Smart cities use digital technology to transform and improve environmental, financial and social aspects of urban life. They have been successfully launched in many parts of the world. The Ministry will adopt and implement integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, as well as resilience to disasters. This will improve the lives of our people.

Madam Speaker, I would just like to spend a little time now on Arima. Arima has seen significant growth in the recent times with the opening of the new state-of-the-art hospital for which the people of Arima are pleased. Continuing with this progressive thrust, I have a vision of bringing forward Arima as the first pilot smart city in line with a digital transformation strategy of the Trinidad and Tobago Government and the innovative urban development strategies. Madam Speaker, smart cities are an inclusive space that thrives on interconnectivity as an engine for creating a better quality of life for the whole community within the
framework of sustainable development.

Now, just specifically to my constituents, and that is to the residents of North Coast, La Fillette, Blanchisseuse, Morne La Croix, Paria, Temple Village and Avocat Village, I will continue to make the appropriate representation to the Ministry of Works and Transport and the Ministry of Public Utilities for improved road works and water supply. And to the residents of Calvary, Mount Pleasant, Pinto and environs, I will also continue to make the appropriate representation for improved water supply. To the constituents of Wallerfield, Heights of Aripo, Heights of Guanapo and the agricultural districts, I am committed to work with you and the Ministry of Agriculture as it relates to access roads and vexing issue of praedial larceny. And towards this vision therefore, I would like to say that consultations would take place between the office of the Member of Parliament and the various constituents that I have mentioned.

Madam Speaker, I wish to thank finally the Ministry of Community Development for the construction of the state-of-the-art community centre on Anglican Street which is due to be officially open very soon. Madam Speaker, in closing, I would like to say the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is committed to its mandate and its responsibility to create sustainable housing and urban development. And finally, I wish to thank my own staff, the Permanent Secretary and the other staff members of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, as well as my own staff at my constituency office for their continued support in ensuring the success of my budget contribution. I thank you, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. [Desk thumping]

Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I want to thank you. This is, I think, my sixth budget contribution in this august
Chamber. And before I start I would like to thank the Member for Siparia, the political leader of the United National Congress and the United National as a party, Congress as a party for placing their faith in me, and also the constituents of Pointe-a-Pierre for returning me as their representative for another term in Pointe-a-Pierre, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] As my colleague, the Member for Oropouche East told me, in the history of Pointe-a-Pierre, they have never had a candidate back to back when in two terms, and I want to say thank you to all my constituents of Pointe-a-Pierre. [Desk thumping] Before I respond in this year’s budget statement presented by the hon. Minister of Finance and his theme for 2021, it was “Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation”, we must look back, Madam Speaker, over the past five years of his performance. And I know the Minister of Finance sets a very high standard for himself.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER in the Chair]

So I was very taken aback that—and I want to quote from his budget statement, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I quote from page 3 of the Minister of Finance’s budget presentation:

“Madam Speaker, I am deeply honoured that the Prime Minister has again assigned me the responsibility for the Ministry of Finance. This duty allows me to continue the role which I assumed in 2015 and managed for the last five years…”

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you review the performance of the hon. Minister of Finance, I am surprise he had accepted to take back this job in this 2021 term, because it was a horrendous performance by the Minister of Finance over the last five years, and I will show over in my contribution why I say so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look back from 2015 when the hon. Minister of Finance took up that position—it is in October 05, 2015, his 2016 budget
In his budget presentation of 2016 he mentioned “special economic zones”. Again, in 2021, he has repeated that promise. He mentioned about assistance to small and medium businesses in his 2015 budget presentation. Again, nothing has happened to the small and medium businesses in Trinidad and Tobago over the last five years under his stewardship.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, he mentioned “diversification” with respect to maritime and information and communication technology, nothing has happened in the last five years. [Desk thumping] He mentioned in that first budget presentation something called the “statistical institute”, and I hope my colleague from Arouca/Maloney would expand on that when she speaks in this budget debate. Nothing has happened with that statistical institute. [Desk thumping] In his first budget presentation, the Minister of Finance talked about procurement legislation. The PP administration, 2014/2015, brought the procurement legislation and under the stewardship of this Minister of Finance, they tweaked it. They brought it back in to Parliament between 2015—2016 and with the Opposition, we passed that piece of legislation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, to date, that procurement legislation has not been properly operationalized [Desk thumping] after five years, and again, he mentioned procurement legislation.

And I heard the hon. Attorney General, the Member for San Fernando West, when he spoke yesterday, he talked about bringing procurement legislation to this Parliament once again. And you know what is funny, Mr. Deputy Speaker? When you look at the Recurrent Expenditure in respect of the Office of Procurement Regulation, in the last 12 months, they have spent—that office has spent over 10
million to $11 million between wages and board fees and they have nothing to show this country what they have done as respect to procurement operationalization. [Desk thumping] Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Minister of Finance, the hon. Minister of Finance in his first budget presentation talked about “transfer pricing legislation”, nothing has happened with respect to that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Desk thumping]

I want to remind this august Chamber, and some of the Ministers who are on the other side who returned and our Members on the Opposition side, there was a line Item and there was a hue and a song and a cry by the Minister of Finance in his first budget presentation, something called, “graduate recruitment programme”. My colleagues, you remember that? They budgeted $51 million in the first year, and every year when we asked them in the Standing Finance Committee, “What is the status with the graduate recruitment programme?”, because every year they allocate these funds and nothing has happened to date. [Desk thumping] So the promise of recruiting graduates and placing them in 23 Ministries for the last five years, every year they have put a line Item as a recurrent expenditure and they have not fulfilled that promise. And it is ironic that in this year’s budget presentation, not a mention was made about the graduate recruitment programme. When I looked at the Recurrent Expenditure, there is nothing allocated, so again, that is a failed promise by this Government and this Minister of Finance. [Desk thumping]

This Minister of Finance in his first budget presentation talked about public and private partnership. Now, public and private partnership is really where the private industry is taking the lead with the Government in whatever development they would like to do. The only public and private partnership that has happened in the last five years under this Government and Minister of Finance is where this Minister of Finance and this Government bailed out Massy Communications [Desk
thumping] to the tune of hundreds and millions of dollars and put it in TSTT. That is not public and private partnership, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What about the trade unions and the $50 million in the first budget presentation? And I know my colleague from Couva South spoke about the labour trade unions yesterday.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what the results are of this Minister of Finance’s first tenure between 2015 and 2016? Let us do this budget—that was his theme, “Let us do this together”. You know what was his record in his first year?—a negative 5.6 economic decline in this country. [Desk thumping] That was his first year as Minister of Finance. In his first year, what we witnessed in this country is the closure of ArcelorMittal. My colleague from Couva South spoke about that. The decline in private consumptions; manufacturing activity declined in his first year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and, you know, the ease of doing business dropped to 88 in the world ranking, all under the Minister of Finance’s first year.

Let us look at his second year, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The second year his budget was themed “Shaping a Brighter Future: A Blueprint for Transformation and Growth”. So his first year, you had a negative 5.6 decline in the economy. The second year of his budget, what did he bring in his budget? He brought something, he mentioned— the Minister of Finance, sorry, the hon. Minister of Finance, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund legislation. The Minister of Finance talked about separating that fund, sounds good. After five years, nothing has been done about that separation of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund [Desk thumping] which is the backbone that we are surviving here in this country here today. The second year, the Minister of Finance brought back in his budget the “statistical institute”. Again, nothing, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Desk thumping] The Minister of Finance’s second year, along with the Attorney General talked about FATCA, that FATCA story where, with the assistance of the Opposition, we went to a joint
select and was able to work that piece of legislation with the Minister of Finance and we came out with a better piece of legislation, *[Desk thumping]* and we supported that piece of legislation.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one would remember this whole FATCA, blacklist, grey list, European Union, CFATF, FFATF that the Attorney General has been mentioning for the last five years and to date, we are still on the blacklist. *[Desk thumping]* Now, what is disingenuous about the financial—

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** What is that?

**Mr. D. Lee:**—organizations in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker—*[Crosstalk]*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please, Members.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Bankers Association talked about if the Opposition did not assist and work with the Government in this FATCA pieces of legislation, the sky will fall, correspondent banking will decline. They would be eroded. We would not be able to do international banking. We, the Opposition, supported all the pieces of legislation to assist this Government and this country in taking us off that blacklist and grey list. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we supported them so much that the Minister of Finance, in 2017, brought an online tax, an online 7 per cent tax which most of us, if we utilize that, you use your credit card. So this correspondent banking story that the Attorney General and the Minister of Finance likes to give this country that the Opposition does not support legislation for the good of their country is a false narrative, Mr. Deputy Speaker.  *[Desk thumping]*

So I hope that the Minister of Finance in his winding up could tell us exactly where we are in respect of being taken off this blacklist, grey list, whatever colour they want to call it at this point in time, Deputy Speaker. In his 2017 budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance mentioned something called,
“entrepreneurial talent grant” to give five projects of $1 million to individuals for entrepreneurial spirit. What became of that? Nothing to date, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Desk thumping] Again, in 2017, the Minister of Finance again mentioned special economic zones, policy to replace the current free zone regime, nothing has been done in the last five years and the Minister of Finance brought it back again in this budget. [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Finance in 2017 talked about “renewable energy”, nothing in the last five years [Desk thumping] has happened under renewable energy, because they brought the hybrid cars one year and they took it back the next year, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And today the only thing in renewable energy, they issue four bulbs to everybody in this country about a month ago. Now what has happened in the performance of the Minister of Finance at the end of 2017, the second year as Minister of Finance? A negative 3 per cent in economic decline in this country for a second time under the Minister of Finance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So his first year was negative five, the second year was negative three. That is performance by the Minister of Finance.

His third year, 2018, the theme that he themed his budget “Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path”, third year as Minister of Finance. In his budget presentation, he talked about the “gas master plan”, nothing has happened to date. [Desk thumping] I sat on the energy committee and that gas master plan went nowhere. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the 2018 budget, the Minister of Finance made a hue and a song and a cry about something called, Shark Tank and Planting Seeds, the reality show; seed capital to be provided by the Government to the amount of $100,000 for each project and a provision of $50 million. To date, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that shark, like somebody ate it and it disappeared, [Desk thumping] but we have never heard anything about this Shark Tank.
Mr. Lee (cont’d)

Tank reality, even from the Minister of Trade and Industry and Enterprise Development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance talked about diversification in the yachting industry, nothing to date about the yachting industry. [Desk thumping] Now, I will state further, in respect to the maritime because about a month ago, there was an article in the newspapers where the Minister of Finance made a statement that they purchased CL Marine from CL Financial. Now, CL Marine is a dry dock facility in Chaguaramas. We used to call it CARIDOC and it used to be known as CARIDOC and Swan Hunter in those old days. Now, I will expand about that CL Marine because I heard nothing in his budget statement from this Minister about CL Marine, and I do not know why it is such a secret.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, again in his third year, the Minister of Finance talked about the HSF legislation, separating the fund. Now what happened at the end of his third year? The Minister of Finance got 0.1 per cent growth in the economy—[Desk thumping]—0.1 per cent, not even 1 per cent. It is closer to zero per cent. And the Minister of Finance and his team had projected for that year a 1.9 per cent growth. So the Minister of Finance had projected 1.9 per cent growth, what they achieved was 0.1 per cent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us turn to his fourth year. His fourth year, the Minister of Finance themed his budget “Turnaround”. We all remember that budget, “Turnaround” budget. I think the Minister of Finance got excited because his projections were really for 1.9 per cent. So he got overexcited and in that year, where the Minister had a “Turnaround” budget theme, they came with six game changers. My colleagues would remember those six game changers; the Dragon gas was one. Well, the dragon still dancing somewhere. They got excited and to date, all of those six game changers have failed, down to Sandals [Desk thumping]
was one of the six game changers. The La Brea shipyard facility or dry dock, again, that is pie in the sky. They are now talking about conceptualizing it after two or three years, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And what did this Minister of Finance achieved in his fourth year? His fourth year, this economy, he got a negative 1.2 decline in the economy.

So for four years, his first year was negative 5, second year was negative 3, his third year was plus 0.1, and his fourth year was negative 1.2. This is the Minister of Finance that our Prime Minister has placed, again, for a sixth year on this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am surprised that the Minister of Finance took up that position. And when you evaluate this year, 2020 budget, the Minister of Finance themed it, “Stability, Strength and Growth”. Now, the last 12 months have been very hard on this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but they are in charge in running this country and so far, I have projecting that you will get somewhere between a negative 6 per cent decline again in this country.

Now, we are in 2020/2021 and the Minister of Finance themes his budget “Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there has been no growth, no innovation, nothing in this country for the last five years under this present Minister of Finance. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you went through his budget and it leaves much to be desired because it is a rehash of the same old, same old promises that the Minister would have made over the last five years. Now I listened to the Minister of National Security in his contribution and the Minister of National Security is boasting about issuing passports within two weeks, now that is a shame for this Minister of National Security after five years destroying the passport system. Under the PP administration, you used to get passports under a week, sometimes two weeks depending on what is. [Desk thumping] So to come and tell this country, to tell this Parliament that they have
fixed this issue with the passport after they destroyed it, to bring back issuing passports within two weeks, is a shame. It is a shame, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, when you listened to the Minister of Works and Transport in his contribution, again, it is a rehash of his budget contribution of the last two to three years. It is the same old, same old, and I will get more into that under the works and transport. Now, I listened to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries here this morning, inside this booth on our side and I think the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries lost his way, because he got so much licks in the last two general elections, he felt that he should have joined the Opposition on this side. [Desk thumping] Because he got destroyed by the Member for Mayaro, he got licks in Chaguanas East by the young Vandana Mohit, MP, brilliant contribution yesterday, and, you know, [Desk thumping] he is just, you know, making a hue and a cry. And I really hope that this Prime Minister does not put the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries up for a third term, but he could try and come in Pointe-a-Pierre and he will be annihilated. [Desk thumping]

I listened to the Minister of Housing and Urban Development and I really—you know, very calm contribution. I really hope that the Minister of Housing and Urban Development would work with the Opposition, because for the past five years, as Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, and I have written several, several letters pleading for my constituents to be able to access housing and in the five years, I have not been able to get one house for any of my constituents. And it goes, like all of our 18 Members who sit here, it is the same problem we have had for the last five years. [Desk thumping] So I hope that we have a new Minister of Housing and Urban Development that she can work and be fair. And the Minister of Housing and Urban Development seems like a very fair individual, and I am giving her credit that she might work with the Opposition in equity in respect to housing

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distribution in our constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

1.45 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me get a little bit into the Minister of Works and Transport’s contribution. I want to talk about flooding. For the last five years this Government told the people, “Let’s do this”. They promised in their 2015 manifesto, page 32, PNM Manifesto:

Develop and implement Flood Management Plans, including mitigation, response and adaptation measures.

That was their plan. My friend, the Member for Port of Spain South, loves to talk—yesterday in his contribution—and he is a good friend of mine—about the Opposition should take note of the PNM’s 2020 Manifesto. I want to draw his attention to the PNM 2015 Manifesto about flooding. Today, no such plan has been created by this Government, yet another failed promise by this administration.

The flooding situation facing our nation is brewing into a national crisis, because as time goes on it is happening on a more regular basis and affecting more areas throughout our nation. I think all 41 Members here at some point in time each one of us would be affected by flooding. Pointe-a-Pierre—I mean, just after election my colleague from Tabaquite was greatly affected by flooding. Just last week again she was affected by flooding. The Member for Chaguanas East and West and Fyzabad, and Naparima, and Caroni East, and even my good friend from Arouca/Maloney, even my friend, the Minister of Health from St. Joseph, from time to time he gets flooding. Even the Minister of Finance’s area in Maraval gets flooding. So flooding does not miss any one of our constituencies. So that is why I am asking the Minister of Works and Transport to take flooding very serious for this country. [Desk thumping] It is time he stops the “ole” talk and really put the money into alleviating flooding. Flooding might not be sexy, but it really impacts
everyday lives of our citizens.

I listened to my colleague yesterday when he was talking, the Member for Chaguanas West, a new Member, and I felt it for him, because I am like that. "When rain fall yuh don’t sleep"; you become very uneasy, because Claxton Bay, Pointe-a-Pierre is, at its lowest point, the runoff to the sea. So I am always checking tide tables.

So I am asking, and I see my friend there, La Horquetta/Talparo, the Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport, I really hope, I really hope that something is done in respect to flooding this time around, and not just flippantly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government has mashed up flood mitigation by suppressing funding for the cleaning of waterways. This Government has shut down the ability to prevent flooding by suppressing funding for alleviation programmes. They are now in a process with a flooding crisis looming, engaging in a pure squandermania of money from CAF, and they have gotten money from CAF for alleviation of flooding. I am asking through the Minister of Finance: What have they done with this money?

Just September 2020 alone in respect to flooding—now flooding is a very serious thing. As the Minister of Works and Transport mentioned in his contribution, we are in the rainy season. We are in the wet season at this point in time. Just alone in the month of September 2020, there were four instances of major flooding. September 3rd, Trinidad Newsday:

“Flash flooding in several parts of Trinidad”

September 20th:

“Arouca hit hard by flooding”

September 4th, a mother climbs a tree to escape flooding. August 02, 2020, a few days before general election in La Horquetta/Talparo:
“Flooding in Greenvale, residents being evacuated”
Trinidad Newsday. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are hit hard by flooding, all of us in this august Chamber.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to look at the Development Programme, and really show you how serious this Government is about flooding. According to the Development Programme, the yellow books as we call it, in the 2020, this is how the PNM, this Government, shut down and manage flood mitigation. In 2019 under the Development Programme for drainage and flooding mitigation they allocated $84 million. You know how much they spent, Deputy Speaker?—11.7 per cent in 2019, just 13 per cent of the allocated development funding. They are not serious about flooding. Under 2020 in the Development Programme for drainage and flooding they allocated $65 million to alleviate flooding. They spent $22.8 million, 35 per cent. So in two years, Deputy Speaker, they allocated $149 million, yet they only spent $34.5 million, 23 per cent. This Government is not serious about alleviating flooding. They need to be more serious than that.

Deputy Speaker, let me turn to roads. The Government did nothing in the last five years about fixing roads. Five years ago, again in their 2015 manifesto, the PNM promised, and I quote:

“Implement a comprehensive programme of construction and maintenance of all roads and bridges throughout Trinidad and Tobago.”

Nothing has happened five years later. The Minister of Works and Transport came this morning and said they surveyed the roads and 50 per cent of the roadways in our country is horrible. He admitted that this morning in his contribution. Again they have done nothing in respect to roads. The only time you see road repairs being taking place, is either we have a local election in our constituencies or a general election. Because, just before the general election, especially on the
Marabella side in Pointe-a-Pierre, they started to patch the holes and reads and so forth. “And yuh know dey geh licks in Pointe-a-Pierre, Deputy Speaker.” They still got licks. [Desk thumping]

I want to ask: How are the road projects really selected when they do it? Is it done holistically? Is it done equitably? Is it done based on proper surveys? I really doubt, I really doubt that.

Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Works and Transport, and I hope maybe the Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport, when he speaks, will talk how they intend to deal with traffic. For the last five years we all know the horrors of the traffic situation in this country, but every year they talk about having some plan, and I want to go back to the PNM manifesto of 2015, and I quote:

“Thousands of productive man hours are wasted every day in non-stop grinding traffic jams, even at non-peak hours.

No mass transit, national transportation or traffic management have been produced.”

To date, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have nothing about a transportation plan. I listened to the Minister of Works and Transport again. He comes again every year upon year talking about a national transportation plan that is not in place. Even in this budget the Minister of Finance mentioned something called “smart transportation strategies and system”. It is just pure “ole” talk again, Deputy Speaker.

I want to spend a little time on the collapse of the sea bridge. Now we all know what this country went through with the sea bridge, more so my twin island of Tobago. What is ironic again, there was a company called Bridgemans, that there was a whole song and a hue and a cry about the contracts given out to Bridgemans. You know, on September 18, 2020, the Minister of Works and
Transport announced that Bridgemans had their contract renewed for another two years. This is the same Bridgemans that we had problems with.

Now, this Government used Bridgemans in the last few years, but what is startling, Deputy Speaker, the contract that was given or renewed to Bridgemans on September 18, 2020, they were never in the running. Because they had tendered back out for another vessel, and the number one company that won that tender was called Stena RoRo. They cancelled that contract because they told this Government, they told the Minister of Works and Transport, or NIDCO, that they could no longer provide a vessel at an already agreed price while negotiations with the second and third bidder were not possible. So Bridgemans was never in the ranking in one, two and three, but somehow Bridgemans got a renewed contract again for another two years. And they reduced their price from $21,000 a day to $16,000 a day. So we are calling to purview that contract because something smells fishy about that Bridgemans contract.

Deputy Speaker, I want to spend a little time on energy. Now the energy sector, and I listened to the Minister of National Security in his contribution, his response to the Opposition Leader, and while the Minister believed that there was stability and growth in our energy sector, before COVID-19 in his own *Review of the Economy* in the book 2020, page 32, shows us that under this PNM administration our energy sector has experienced consecutive periods of negative contraction. In 2018, the energy sector decreased by negative 3.5 per cent. In 2019, the energy sector fell again by negative 4.5. In 2020, the energy sector in the first quarter fell by negative 3.7 and the second quarter negative 8.3. There was no COVID-19 neither in 2018 or 2019, but it is because of the incompetence of this administration our energy sector kept contracting.

Our drilling—our drilling fell by 44 per cent. Our drilling days fell also.
want to ask the Minister of Finance or even the Minister of National Security: What is the status of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery? One year ago they had promised in the Minister of Finance—the 2020 Budget, boasted the refinery would be back up in 12 to 18 months.

**Mr. Hinds:** File a question.

**Mr. D. Lee:** To date we do not know what is the status of that. Prior to the general election they talked about selling it, but to date that has gone under the radar again. [Desk thumping] Deputy Speaker, they have to make up their mind what they want to do with this refinery, because at one point in time, when they shut down Petrotrin, they closed down the refinery, the Chairman at that point in time had said that they shutting the refinery, they are not opening up. Even the Prime Minister had said so, and then a couple weeks after they said, all of a sudden, the refinery is up for sale. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talked about mothballing that refinery.

Now, Deputy Speaker, in business sense, if this Government wanted to restructure Petrotrin because of whatever financial situation it might be going through over the years, why not restructure, keep the refinery going as a going concern, restructure the debt, restructure the expenditure, so that if you really want to sell it you could sell it as a going concern that would have more value when you do get a buyer. For two years the refinery has been languishing. It is a wasting asset that is our asset. It is like scrap. So even anybody who wants to buy that refinery, what are they going to be buying it for? Who are they going to really sell this refinery to?

People are suffering because of the closure of Petrotrin. I want to ask, because there are many Petrotrin retirees that live in the community of Pointe-a-Pierre and, they have a great concern, and I really thought in this budget
presentation the Minister of Finance would have mentioned something about the Petrotrin pension, the retirees’ pension, because that is great concern to thousands of Petrotrin retirees.

Two years ago, when concerned retirees asked question on the stability of the plan, the Prime Minister—the Prime Minister had said that Petrotrin was one of the soundest plans in this country. On November 19, 2018, Republic Bank, who are the trustees of the pension plan, noted in a media article in the Trinidad Guardian on November 18, according to the bank’s last actual evaluation done on September 30, 2016, there is a massive billion-dollar deficit in that pension fund, Deputy Speaker. So let us fast track. Let us fast track to now.

In February 2020 this year, the Minister of Finance related a different story in the Senate on February 21, 2020, when he confirmed that there was a possible deficit in the pension plan. On the Guardian of February 22, 2020, the Minister of Finance is quoted as stating the last actual report was prepared for the three years ending September 2016, and thus out of date. That is his quote.

The Minister of Finance also added sometime this year in June that there would be a new valuation that was done, actual valuation, and he would have had it. I am hoping that he would have gotten it by now and he would in his wind-up give the pensioners, the retirees of the Petrotrin fund some comfort that they will be able to maintain their pension that they have worked hard for, and their sweat and blood in this oil company that was a crown jewel for us. So I really hope.

You know, I would have thought also that the retirees or the ex-workers would have heard from the Minister of Finance, or even the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, that they were going to be extending their medical plan, which is ending in November, which is in a couple days, Deputy Speaker. So I would have thought that the Minister of Finance, or even the Minister of Energy and
Energy Industries, would have come here and talked about extending the medical plan for those individuals.

Deputy Speaker, I want to go to a subject matter called CL Marine. CL Marine is a shipyard in Chaguaramas that was owned by the CL Financial group. It used to be known as CARIDOC. I want to ask, we are now—this Government is privatizing, but this Minister of Finance, this hon. Minister of Finance, is now purchasing something called CL Marine, a dry dock facility in Chaguaramas that has been losing millions of dollars every year.

Back when CL Financial had it, it used to be run by Calder Hart’s son, Chase Hart, at that point in time. Unit Trust Corporation is holding a lot of debt on that CL Marine shipyard. I am wondering why this Minister of Finance found it prudent to get involved in purchasing the CL Marine dry dock facility. I want him to come in his wind-up and tell us about that CL Marine, what is going on there, that was part of the assets of CL Financial.

Deputy Speaker, I listened to my colleague from Laventille West, the new Minister of Youth and Development—I am sorry if I do not know the Ministry properly, but my hon. friend, the Member for Laventille West—and he sounded good. The first time he sounded good. I really hope that his Ministry, that the development of that Ministry is really a rehash of the skills training aspect under Education. So it is nothing new that his Ministry, the Minister would be creating, and I hope that they do not duplicate or triplicate programmes that already exist in the skills training aspect. Under MIC we have level 1, level 2. Under the YTEPP you also have that. Under NESC you have level 1, level 2, level 3 programmes, the same programmes that target the youth of this country, that we have been doing it under the Minister Fazal Karim for years, and we did a great job under the PP administration, under skills training.
So I know in his constituency there is a school called Laventille Technology Centre. It is a hybrid between MIC and NESC. I do not know if he is going to bring those things, those assets, under his Ministry. I really hope he does to avoid the duplication in times that we do not have plenty. But I know my time is coming to an end, Deputy Speaker, and before I close it would be remiss of me if I do not underline some achievements by the PP Government. We delivered over 100 new schools for this country. [Desk thumping] They delivered none. I asked the Minister of Education—I asked the Minister of Education. I know—she is a friend, she is a friend. I am asking you. I am not raising, I am asking you to open the ECC centre that has been neglected in Marabella, Minister. In 2015 it only had 5 per cent to be completed, so after five years it is languishing. I also ask on behalf of not me, Minister, on behalf of the constituents, the parents, the Anglican Claxton Bay Primary School that was condemned, and your predecessor moved out the children and placed them in Marabella. I know it might not be on your radar at this point in time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two minutes.

Mr. D. Lee: Your predecessor had promised us a new school to be built, Madam Minister of Education. So I really hope we see some results in your tenureship under you.

As I close, Deputy Speaker, this Government has often touted in recent months that citizens must adapt to a new normal. Today on behalf of the people of Pointe-a-Pierre I call on this administration to provide us with governance for this new normal. For the last five years I had the privilege to represent the dynamic people of Pointe-a-Pierre, a constituency that boasts of some of the most talented and gifted citizens. But today we are all tired of the neglect and disrespect by those in charge of our State resources.
In the five years we have seen this Government rip out the heart of Pointe-a-Pierre by the closure of Petrotrin. In five years we have seen them ruin fenceline businesses in Marabella, Gasparillo and Pointe-a-Pierre. Now we are witnessing the destruction of Point Lisas, which means more jobs losses. The people of Pointe-a-Pierre need to benefit from our State resources. So I am pleading with this Government that you really work with me as the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre, and give us some equity for the next five years, Deputy Speaker. Because they sent up a homegrown boy, a homegrown candidate for them in Pointe-a-Pierre. He lives in Tarouba. You know, my friend the Attorney General used to say I did not know any roads in Marabella. I do know the roads or the rivers. They sent up a homegrown boy, and the UNC beat that homegrown boy in Pointe-a-Pierre, [Desk thumping] and we will beat them again, Deputy Speaker.

So, in closing, this is a hapless, hopeless budget. It is a rehash of the “same ol’, same ol’”. I want to thank my colleagues, all my dynamic Members who would have spoken before, and young MPs who are here for the first time, and thank you, Deputy Speaker. I thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I will now recognize the hon. Senator, the Minister of Trade and Industry.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I want to thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the 2021 fiscal Appropriation Bill.

I congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance again for his very detailed and insightful presentation. I also would like to show appreciation to the Minister of Planning and Development, and also to the staff of both Ministries who were very involved in this budget exercise.

The Government has decided and the people have decided and have
entrusted this new PNM Government with a mixture of substantial experience and youth, [Desk thumping] to navigate this country as we continue on a path of stability, sustainability, employment and economic growth.

Since the last national budget presentation circumstances have drastically changed, and this has forced to live, to work and to conduct our business in other ways that we are not traditionally accustomed to. One thing has remained constant throughout, and that is good governance, effective management and transparency by the People’s National Movement Government under the astute leadership of Prime Minister, Hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley.

As I deliver this contribution, I do so in recognition of the social and economic realities. Given the new normal, it is the imperative that we all contribute to the recovery of the economy by demonstrating our resilience and maximizing and monetizing existing and new economic opportunities.

Many of my colleagues would have spoken to COVID-19, but I just speak directly in terms of trade and business. The outgoing Director General of the World Trade Organization, Roberto Azevêdo, has stated that COVID-19 has retarded the trade process globally, and estimates that world trade is projected to decline by roughly 13 per cent to 32 per cent in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt economic activity globally.

I want to say that our Government has been very proactive in implementing a series of mitigation measures to ensure the safety of the population, but also to minimize the impact on the business community.

Several sectors of this economy was never closed in terms of supermarkets and so on, parlours, pharmacies, agro shops, agricultural activities, financial institutions, oil and gas operations. There was never really a complete lockdown in Trinidad and Tobago. But let me acknowledge that for many businesses, large and
small and micro, the impact is substantial. But the Government is called upon and has to, is obligated to, to weigh and unravel the impact of lives and livelihoods, and act in the best interest of all and therefore a number of strategies have been put in place.

I say so, but I also give the assurance to the general public that we are listening, that we are consulting, we are collaborating with the business community and we are responding to their needs, but along the lines of the health science says. So it is looking at both aspects of it.

So there was support given to the business community in terms of—this is during the COVID pandemic period, clearing VAT refunds in a very substantial way, financial support to businesses through the SME Stimulus Loan Guarantee Programme. Also support to micro enterprises through the Micro Enterprise Grant Programme as well. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 200 million being made available also to credit unions. A number of importers of the essential items benefitting from a special import forex window which since has been repeated, and of course there has also been monetary support through the Central Bank through monetary policy.

During that period Government would have appointed a committee which I co-chaired with the Minister of Works and Transport, the Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries as well. We also worked with the business community and the Supermarket Association, working on three important imperatives: food security—and I want to say to the population, and they know and say it again to you here in this honourable House, there was absolutely no food shortage.

Again, we were entrusted to look at business sustainability and employment sustainability as far as this was possible during the crisis, and we continue to do this as I speak now.

Based on the commitments outlined in our Government’s policy frame
work, the Ministry of Trade and Industry has since developed a very robust and targeted work plan for fiscal 2021 and of course it is about creating the right mix of targeted strategies to generate economic recovery and to diversify the economy. So we are working.

Before I go to the core of the responsibilities of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, I just want to speak, just add my voice to the whole business of the preservation of foreign exchange because the work of the Roadmap Recovery Committee, appointed by the hon. Prime Minister would have revealed and underscored the need for a serious reality check on the entire country, and the urgent need to adjust our economic priorities. And the hon. Prime Minister has expressed his concerns openly about this. The Minister of Finance spoke to these aspects in the budget.

2.15 p.m.

And the fact is, this country has been spending more on utilizing more foreign currency than it actually earns on an annual basis. And the Minister would have highlighted in the budget that during the period January to September 2020 alone, the value of purchases of US currency from the Central Bank by all authorized FX dealers in the financial sector was something like US $940 million close to US $1 billion. And the statistics that we talk about all the time and which we must reduce are these. For instance, the food import bill stands approximately at $5.67 billion, that is substantial and it has to be reduced. And of that amount we are still spending $1 billion on fruits and vegetables when we should be growing our own fruits and eating our own fruits and vegetables. $1 billion is spent on cereals and cereal preparations annually. We spent $180 million on biscuits, breads and pastries. Tell me why? These are things that we ought to be producing here. We spent $28 million on doughs. And I mean
by that, dough, flour and water. We spend money to import that. That cannot be allowed to continue.

And we use, and the argument went into the budget the fact that we use $2.5 billion on an annual basis to import motor vehicles. And I say this to say, this the context for decisions to be taken to curb FX leakages. And there has been quite some noise from the foreign-used car dealers. I have since spoken to the president of the used car dealers, Mr. Babwah. I have promised to meet with him. I know he has written to the Minister of Finance as well. We will listen to his concerns as it relates to goods already on the water but a decision will be taken on that, I leave that in the hands of the Minister of Finance.

But let me say in terms of the foreign-used car dealers, we are also looking closely at those dealers that have not observed all of their commitments and the terms under their dealerships, and we will be moving to deregister them where it is necessary.

We will also have to look at the quantum of vehicles that are purchased by individuals because what happens is, people go to the trade licences unit in Barataria, they get their individual, as they are allowed to, their individual licence and then they take it to the used car dealers. So the used car dealers have their appropriate quota but then they also accept individual licences when the individuals bring it to them. We have to look at that as well.

We also have to look at the fact that the franchise holders in terms of the new cars are not the only ones who bring in new cars, that there are foreign-used car dealers that are also bringing in new cars as well. So that, I think, it requires some research, the Ministry has the responsibility for the used car dealers. We will also listen in order to be fully fair and transparent, the new car dealers association. I think they are called the automobile association.
And at the end of it all as it expected of this Government, the decisions in allocating the quota system for the new car dealers, our decisions will be fair and transparent. But I cannot say more than ever, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we really must prioritize the use of foreign exchange and use it for the food, medicine, inputs into manufacturing. I know that there are other things that we are not producing and that we will require as a population, keep those to a minimum. I want to urge the population to buy what we manufacture locally. Get into manufacturing as well and certainly support all of the goods and services that are produced locally.

And I just want to go into trade now and have a look at our export profile and to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Trinidad and Tobago has a robust non-energy export sector, and over the last five years our average annual exports have been at TT $13.6 billion, and that is 21 per cent of total exports.

Eighty five per cent of the non-energy exports are manufacturing, and basically the subsectors at the top would be iron and steel products, 41 per cent; food and beverage, 25 per cent; tobacco, 4 per cent; paper and paper-related products, 4 per cent; chemicals and other products, 3 per cent; printing and packaging, 3 per cent; and a number of other notable products as well.

I want to say that in 2019, it is so important to note that this is what our export base looks like. We exported to more than 120 markets globally. And it is important also to recognize that in the non-traditional markets, the traditional markets being Caricom and also the US, the US being our number one, Caricom being our second most successful market, we are seeing the improvements in Central America, in North America, in Oceania, and also we are seeing the improvements in the Caricom market. But as I said, the vast majority of exports still, most of it, the 86 per cent of it goes to the US and also to Caricom.

Another matter to note concerning our exports and it is so interesting and it
tells you why our Government has made the effort in this budget to speak about SMEs, and the help will be there for SMEs through the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the other Ministries that are connected in some ways possible.

And I want to say that there were 184 non-energy exporters whose export earnings were above $1 million, 180 of those. Would you believe that there were 55 per cent of those exporters, 102 in particular that are small and medium enterprises. And if I look, let us say, under $25 million in exports per annum, still small and medium, but 150 of those are in fact in that category, and it really justifies the support that they are needed, and I will speak to the $50 million advance which the Minister of Finance has put in for export promotion and I will build on it later on. But it is absolutely deserving when we look at the number of businesses that are at that lower end and that have gone into manufacturing and have shown, they have exhibited their export capabilities, and we have to support them so that they are going to be in this for the long term. [Desk thumping]

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say that there has been a rebound in our non-energy exports. COVID dealt a heavy blow in almost every aspect of life but there has been a rebound. So I can tell you that during the period January to March 2020, our non-energy exports stood at $2.2 billion. And that is the kind of figure that we have, it is consistent with 2019.

However, in April 2020, we saw the big decline but our non-energy exports, 270 million which is 60 per cent lower than the usual $706 million. I say this to say that our exporters are catching up in that in our non-energy exports in September stood at $702 million which is consistent with what we did in 2019.

And this is despite the fact—I will tell you, I think the figure is better than it looks, because as I said before, the markets of the Caribbean and the USA, but considering that this is almost normal, $702 million, but the average for 2019 being
772 and recognizing that the economies in their region are not really full—up to full capacity concerning that their tourism activity has not, is really I think quite minimal and they are operating under very strained economic circumstances, I want to say that this figure that is shown in September is quite admirable and I could well imagine that once the economies in the region pick up and their tourism activity picks up, we are going to be on a good run with regard to our non-energy exports. Already we were down to 57 markets, as I told you before from the 120, we are up to 71 markets now and, again, it is a testimony of the resilience of our exporters in really maintaining their market share, we are getting somewhere.

And there are some sectors which were not affected, I just mentioned food and beverage; it remains almost the same, and I feel so proud because as we fed ourselves as a nation during the difficult COVID times, the initial times, we fed the rest of the region.

And paper and paper products as well, we had a look at our SEW figures and that sector is even surpassing the 2019 figures for the same period which is a good sign. Cigarettes, again, cigarettes, cement, they have all made a good recovery. So I am very pleased about the performance by our exporters. And I am looking now at market excess before I come just to speak a little bit about manufacturing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a result of the connections, the relationships forged between businesses but also between governments and from our trade missions and from the assistance provided from the Ministry and ExporTT in market intelligence, in capacity building, we are seeing the results and looking extra regionally, I made the point before, we are seeing the improvements in the Panama market, the Costa Rica market and the Cuba market. For instance, the Panamanian market that has the exports for this year with all of our strained circumstances is now at $132 million which is an increase of 28 per cent from 2019 for the same
period. And again, because we had a trade mission and, of course, Vemco, KC, Associated Brands, Trinidad Tissues, they were all on that trade mission as well.

Costa Rica has improved. We are now really getting into that market, and so that even though it is just $7.5 million for the year so far, it still is a 46 per cent improvement. And Cuba we are now up to about 20 million and we continue to work with our trade facilitation office there.

Overall the Government will continue to inject more resources into export promotion, and we will continue during this period, we will continue to do virtual trade missions to Latin America, to the USA to the EU and so on, and to negotiate the kind of expansion preferential access that we need, and again, build on the export capacity; I will come to that again.

Looking at our agreements, the CARIFORUM-UK Economic Partnership Agreement signed in April 2019, aimed at preserving and expanding our region’s preferential trading relationship with the UK in a post-Brexit climate. I want to say that this Bill, the draft Bill has been prepared, and we hope to have its enactment by the end of December 2020.

That market is so very important for us. Just between January and September 2020, and with the lockdowns and so on, but not total lockdown but we have exported methanol to the extent of 168 million; LNG, 169 million, this is to the UK; aromatic bitters, $11 million; rum, beer, cereal, curry and so on. And, of course, the passage of this legislation will ensure that these products continue to enter into those markets, with CBERA, the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act. And on October 10, 2020, the US President Donald Trump signed into law the legislation extending preferential duty treatment for certain goods produced in the Caribbean basin under the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act until, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 30th of December, 2030. We are quite so pleased about this. As I
said, the US is our number one market. We have been exporting—in 2019 for instance, our top energy exports would have included LNG, ammonia, urea, methanol; it is so important, TT $8.6 billion. And the non-energy exports to the US including rum and all of our sauces and biscuits and so on, TT $55 million; that is the importance of this piece of legislation that was enacted in the US.

I want to thank, of course, credit goes to all of the various Caribbean countries who conducted missions to Washington including a trade mission which was led by our hon. Prime Minister, Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley. I think on that occasion he would have had with him the Minister of National Security and the then Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and they would have met with various congressional leaders where this and other matters of mutual interest were discussed.

I also must, of course, congratulate and commend our ambassador in Washington, ambassador Phillip Spencer and of course and I have to say this, the work of the lobbying firm the Group DC has also been instrumental in providing strategy and support to the Government of [Desk thumping] Trinidad and Tobago. We value the work which they did in this regard. Right.

Our relationship with the US, as I said, is a vital part of this country’s overall trade. The US, as I said, is a very, very important partner recognizing that 200 firms have exported duty free to the USA, providing foreign exchange for this country, providing employment as well.

And I will tell you something, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this decision by the USA underscores the strong bilateral relationship between our countries and in particular the effort by this PNM Government to reinforce and build the bonds with our largest trading partner. The world has come to understand the political, the social and the economic stability of this Government under the leadership of Prime
Minister Keith Christopher Rowley, and thankfully it has withstood the divisive politics of those on the other side. And you would recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the efforts by the Opposition and in particular the Member for Oropouche East who by example saw to encourage the imposition of sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago. There is a reason why they sit on that side and why we sit on this side. [Desk thumping]

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just continuing a little bit about export promotion with regard to the Ministry’s 2019 to 2020 Trinidad and Tobago trade policy, we have begun our implementation, and via a multi-stakeholder approach together with all of the connected Ministries and agencies and all of the institutions that are involved.

The Government at this time will seek to expand on our export relationships and we are looking at possibly establishing a trade facilitation office in the first instance in Central America, and a decision will be taken with regard to its location. We are considering Costa Rica and Panama. And why? Because the wider Central America presents significant commercial opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago in both trade and investment with a market size of 51 million people and, of course, this TFO will deepen trade relations with the Central American region.

We are also looking at some other trading clusters where we feel that we can deepen and expand our exports, deepen our relations. Again, even within the Caribbean looking very closely at Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, that cluster to the north we feel that, at least, we must have a trade attaché to look at those areas, and then depending on how it goes, then we can analyse and look at whether we can put a TFO, though we see the benefit of having a TFO based on Cuba and how that arrangement has served us as well.
Another market that we look at closely is Guyana and Suriname. We are to open a mission there some time pretty soon. And those are important markets for us and it is important that we ensure that there is, at least, in the beginning a trade attaché there and so on. And we will look at modernizing and transforming the ExporTT, it is on the cards. For instance, if just—I will give you one of the recommendations which came out of the International Trade Centre benchmarking exercise started in 2013 but we did it again in 2019. We have put in place an electronic client management system which is to better serve the needs of the exporters. We have to ensure that all of the exporters get onto this system as well, and there are a lot of other development of KPIs and so on that we have to ensure that is done as well.

ExporTT continues to do all of their export capacity building programmes, they did quite a lot, I just looked at the last five years, about 2,000 individuals from 886 companies were trained in over 100 export capacity programmes. They are doing the work, and in fiscal 2020, 19 of those training programmes were conducted with 346 individuals from 269 companies benefiting from programmes and product and process standardization, customer value propositions, e-commerce, developing the RFPs, food safety preventive controls, and it is about a dozen or so programmes that they provide co-financing and so on.

I know that in the budget, the Minister of Finance would have spoken to the Eximbank and the expansion and the modernization that will take place there, it is a manifesto objective, and we look forward to that. I will tell you, that sort of introduction to blended financing and of course any recapitalization and so on, and increase in the size of foreign currency offerings, all of those kinds of actions, reform actions, would assist manufacturers, and so we would work with the Ministry of Finance and the Eximbank on those matters.
Let me go into diversification because I see the clock is ticking away, and to say that—your leader spoke for three hours, you spoke nothing about diversification, I am not surprised, again, you did not have a plan or maybe the plan was just blank, and that three hours spent could well have given to us on this side. We have been focusing, and I will tell you, we will accelerate our focus on manufacturing, the creative industries and on services. Up front I will say in this honourable House that I will speak extensively on manufacturing in the Upper House when I get there. It is impossible to speak the full gamut of arrangements that are being looked at now.

And I want to say that this Government continues to have an excellent relationship with the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association, the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber as well, the general private sector, and with that you would find that we are going to be pushing ahead with diversifying the economy, creating sustainable jobs, and ushering the kind of growth that we absolutely must have. And in that regard I want to say that we support the TTMA’s goal to double manufacturing exports in particular subsectors by 2024. We are also seeking to increase employment and to increase the sector’s contribution to GDP beyond the 19 per cent.

There are some projects that I will address again in the lower House which is the enhancement of the human resource capacity through two programmes, the national vocational training strategy and the national apprenticeship programme, we will be unlocking that. The Government has, again, has given support to the manufacturers to the extent of $50 million for overseas market promotion and development, this will go to full use. Recommendations have been made by the Ministry of Trade and Industry in consultation with our partners. At this time the ExporTT and the TTMA are engaged in consultations. We meet with them this
Friday coming, and I will tell you largely this is about establishing a certification programme for food and beverage standards. It is also focused because the focus is on, I told you the numbers before, the focus is on our small and medium-sized enterprises. This programme is expected to increase the quantity of exports to new exports markets. Again, we will expand our co-financing programmes, work on our market access and the establishments of TFOs and the appointment of trade attachés, we will build the export capacity also in Tobago and again, I will continue to speak to this in the Senate.

Financing for SMEs on the Stock Exchange, I think this is particularly a good enhancement. All of the incentives would seek to encourage SMEs to list on to the junior Stock Exchange, the full tax holiday for the first five years and, of course, the 50 per cent tax holiday for the second five years, but further to that and which will certainly contribute to the success is that the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange will execute a mentorship programme for those SMEs that list on the Stock Exchange. This is a sort of a hand-holding exercise to assist all of these growing businesses.

I want to speak about our Grant Fund Facility, I want to say that since inception we have given out 17 grants amounting to $3.2 million, and based on that $3.2 million, those firms have invested a further $8.5 million. So I will speak—this is going very well.

Our Steelpan Manufacturing Grant Fund Facility launched only this year has gotten off. Codrington Family Institute, Panland has benefited, Panland Trinidad and Tobago Limited, Harragin instruments, they have all benefited. This is about manufacturing the steel pan, this is about also training and developing the entire subsector. I will speak to the whole question of the special economic zones in the Lower House, this is an incentive framework that seeks to attract new and
sustainable investment in high-value manufacturing as well and other areas that are of strategic interest to the country and I will talk about the free ports and the free trade zones and so on when I get there.

The other thing, the other aspect of manufacturing that I would like to focus on is the linkages between our retail and manufacturing and agricultural sectors, that is where we will also save foreign exchange, also the strengthening of our local value chains and our regional value chains as well.

The matter of illicit trade. We cannot talk about manufacturing, we cannot talk about trade unless we address illicit trade. I will deal with it comprehensively in the Senate. We have come up with a full proposal to deal with it because whilst levels of legal trade have been expanded over the year, there has been a concurrent increase in illicit trade. This is not good for business. It is not good for business, and this practice really undermines legitimate local businesses, deprives them of sales, deprives us of tax revenue as well and is also harmful to consumers, it is damaging and therefore, I will speak to the full plan of it then.

Our creative industries have been doing so very well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and naturally we have to focus and expand. In the fashion industry we also looked at the garment industry as it is, and we put it into the context of the garment industry. We know that has been around for 90 years but there has been a lull, there have been more imports of clothing and garments from China.

The focus has to go—we need the focus again, once again on the garment industry. There are good firms involved. Exporting, Janouras, Three Star, Cruz Garments and I know, for instance, of another one, S & A Garment Contractors, Lazuri Apparel has started only within this fiscal year. Exports are now at $13.8 million for 2019, up from 10 million in 2017, we see the increases and this is where some of our focus will be.
FashionTT will continue its work again with its fashion VCIP programme, 200 designers under the VCIP programme with various tiers involved at all levels exporting, also doing introductory training in entrepreneurship and so on. I want to say that even virtually we are continuing these courses again.

We are on now to the Train the Trainers Programme in Ultra Bespoke Tailoring, again, to expand the tailoring subsector and, of course, to increase the number of certified Ultra Bespoke Tailoring teachers as well, again, expanding the garment industry. Time flies.

And I want to speak to as well the film industry. We are expanding film. I want to remind everyone to look at the Emmy-award winning reality on CBS, the Emmy-award winning realty show the Amazing Race featured in Trinidad and Tobago, 1.9 million in revenue spent and created 310 employment opportunities created locally as well. And we expect with all of the proposals on the table, seven music videos, five documentaries, we are looking at all of this, three international commercials, two films, that is what we are looking at for this year.

The Live Music District will continue, and even during the quarantine period we have been doing online quarantine concerts. In April on Facebook 97,000 persons looked at this Live Music District. We have to do this. This country was designated a UNESCO Creative City of Music and therefore, we are going to continue all of our programmes, the Artist Portfolio Development Programme, the Music Tech Platform and so on.

There is something called a Trinidad and Tobago International Standard Recording Code now in music. And I want to say a little bit about that. And because why? Because it is a game changer for the local music industry. Previously all of our new releases were auto-assigned ISRCs from aggregators and distribution platforms from foreign territories with codes that were not associated
with Trinidad and Tobago. Now, now these codes are going to be Trinidad and Tobago’s codes. And the benefit of that is that we are going to be able to measure, track, index, manage our song recordings and identify our song recordings for royalty payment services, ensuring that our artistes and our production teams all get paid. Again, those persons with special skills will be able to monetize their assets, and this is what it is about, growing our entrepreneurship, monetizing our assets. But yes, the question is with regard to our creatives, we have been doing well but we have got to go to another level. Where next? So that I can tell you that we are very pleased for the additional tax allowance which was given to the industry from 6 million to $12 million, and it is perhaps timely that we now do another strategic intervention to understand the next level.

Services sector initiatives: No effort will be spared to increase the country's services exports and foreign exchange earnings. Services alone account for more than 60 per cent of the country’s GDP and employ 70 per cent of the working population. There is a Caricom regional strategy that we are part of right now to strengthen the regional services sector. Trinidad and Tobago, on the floor, introduced the energy services subsector, and it was immediately accepted, so I can tell you that discussions are going on with the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Energy, and the Energy Chamber to formulize the energy services subsector so that it becomes part of this Caricom strategy.

2.45 p.m.

We have done in the Ministry of Trade and Industry in conjunction with TTCSI, they are the ones who did most of the work, a national services export survey, which was launched, so we now have a report on the collection of data from 121 service providers in Trinidad and Tobago, that was launched. We are
moving now to the development of an online platform. We are talking exports. So that I can tell you that 51 of our professionals graduated from another programme put on by CEDA, which is Caribbean Export Development Agency. Fifty one professionals in Trinidad and Tobago, ICTs, animation, energy, and tourism and so on, benefited from this services global programme, completing their export plans, and I can say that we are indeed enabling services to go global. There is the gateway to trade programmes as well, and I would find a way to speak to the public about services. We are also working with the THA to establish a trading services unit in the THA.

E-commerce: COVID-19 has shown us the importance of the digital economy, so we continue on that trajectory. Over the last three years we have been training, sensitizing, through exporTT, all of the entrepreneurs, we have done hundreds of them. And this has help many of the small SMEs to do business during COVID, selling their goods and services to the rest of the world and locally through their electronic—through e-commerce and their electronic platforms. We are launching the SheTrades hub in Trinidad and Tobago. Already, this is an international platform, about a million women on the platform already exchanging goods and services and so on, and I can tell you that the goal is get to about three million women on that platform. It is about monetizing, monetizing, monetizing whatever you do well.

I will speak about the National Quality Policy in the Lower House. As I talk about job creation, I want to just speak about investments and to say that in 2019, for instance, we had—the Opposition is always saying that there are no investments in Trinidad. I can tell you that we track, just what we track from our facilitation in the Ministry of Trade and Industry Enterprise Development, we track something like $338 million. That is only what we track in 2019. And I can tell
you that there was a strip mall, for instance, in central Trinidad that was an investment of $61.2 million and employing 510 persons. Again, a major manufacturer of snack products completed a new state-of-the-art manufacturing facility, $250 million, and there were two other smaller non-energy FDI investments as well.

In addition to that, there are a number of pipeline investment projects which would become operational in 2021 and going beyond that for the next five years. We have practised, we are seeing $1 billion, and that is what we can track at this time. I can tell you that, for instance, in 2021, you would see a $50 million investment in a state-of-the-art tissue manufacturing facility at Diamond Vale Industrial Estate, permanent employment for 70 persons, the ability to penetrate export markets. A new yogurt manufacturing facility, the first commercial yogurt factory in Trinidad and Tobago, a $2 million investment. A regional distribution centre, the anchor tenant for the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate, that anchor tenant, $58.2 million. We are talking to a second tenant for the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate and that figure for that investment is valued at $196 million, that is a regional distribution centre for pharmaceuticals and health care supplies, TT $1 billion. And I can speak to another local conglomerate, they are traditional importers, they have just signed a lease with eTecK, and they are going to be investing $550 million over the next five-year period, 650 persons to be employed once completed, and the investment would include five new manufacturing plants and a regional distribution centre as well.

As I said before, the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate is on and will be completed in September 2021. The Moruga agro-processing park, it received a lot of opposition. I could remember the then Vidia Gayadeen-Gopeesingh wanted to know why you are doing this in Moruga. Well, we have completed the Moruga
Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park in 2020. Mr. Deputy Speaker, two have already signed their leases and will tenant within the next three months. And I want to thank all of these supporting agencies involved: the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, NAMDEVCO, ECIAF, CARIRI, ADB. So, the first investment is for the manufacturer of processing—is for processing locally grown peppers to pepper mash, pepper flakes and powder, and pepper power for local inputs and exports, that is on. They will hire 14 persons and that investment is $1.6 million. The other factory shell will do root crops and staples, and their investment over the next five years is for $6.6 million, 316 persons to be employed.

The Moruga Hill Rice will also— they have reserved and we are finalizing with them another shell, and they would have gotten assistance, I think, from NAMDEVCO. So that it is proven that this Moruga park is a good model for small and medium-sized agro-processing and also, for rural development. We expect to see this going places. Again, as I said, the Phoenix Park project, once completed, 4,500 direct jobs. We are at this time speaking to 12 Chinese investors for the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate on a range of issues, a range of businesses, apparel manufacturing, beer manufacturing, logistics and parts, services and training, solar panel manufacturing and so on, prefabricated housing, waterproofing solutions, and again, manufacturing, a whole range of manufacturing opportunities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two minutes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Two minutes. We are excited about this. The ease of doing business, with regard to the single electronic window, the rest of it is being done throughout the government service by the hon. AG, for the Judiciary and the Attorney General’s Office, and of course, the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation for the rest of government service.

We continue, happily, we completed the DevelopTT, which is the automated
online approvals for—sorry, online construction permitting process completed, and this roll out will be completed throughout Trinidad and Tobago by January 2021. The Trade Licence Unit at the Ministry, we now have automatic online approvals. A businessman said to me that he gets his approval within 35 seconds. So the time is drastically improving. We are continuing to work on our other agencies. The Bureau of Standards has already implemented online payment for all of their trade services; ExporTT, by December 2020, all of their services will be done online as well. We continue to work on our business process reengineering, which I have spoken about extensively before, and our port community system, which will ensure that there is a platform that manages and automates the smooth port and logistics processes through a single submission of data.

I would speak to consumer protection at the end—sorry, in the Lower House—in the Upper House. And as I conclude, I want to say that this Government, we are up to the challenge, and together with the private sector, we are confident that we can transform this economy and move from these times, these very difficult times into extraordinary good times, with unexpected opportunities to be worked on. I want to invite the private sector to work with us, to collaborate with us, to look for the opportunities, whether you are in micro, small, medium, large businesses, the opportunities are there. I want to thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the hon. Member for Toco/Sangre Grande.

[Desk thumping]

**Mr. Roger Monroe (Toco/Sangre Grande):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is with a great deal of national pride and humility that I stand here this afternoon in this honourable House to offer my maiden contribution while contributing to this debate on fiscal 2021 Appropriation Bill. I wish to first thank
the hon. Prime Minister for allowing me, at age 32, to represent the People’s National Movement in the 2020 general elections. I wish to thank the voters of Toco/Sangre Grande for their overwhelming confidence placed in me to be their Member of Parliament in this Twelfth Parliament.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the vast majority of citizens understand the challenging circumstances which this fiscal package has been presented to the Parliament. Indeed, the people of Trinidad and Tobago are fortunate that they have the most experienced and competent individual in the Member for Diego Martin North East as the Minister of Finance. The Minister has been able to expertly support the hon. Prime Minister in sturdying the ship of state for the last five years, and I am indeed honoured to be able to support their work for another five years. I wish to also recognize and congratulate the Minister of Planning and Development for her supportive role and responsibility in the budget exercise, especially as it relates to securing financing for the execution of the Public Sector Investment Programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance has once more been able to balance competing interest at a time when government revenue is severely constraint. He has been able to demonstrate how to run a country with far less revenue.

You would recall, Madam— sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the UNC, during their term in office, had raised the expenditure profile of Trinidad and Tobago to over $63 billion, and now the Finance Minister is showing that we can adequately provide the necessary goods and services for the people of this country with far less, TT $49.5 billion, in fiscal package 2021. This is what good budgeting is about. And this is how the ordinary citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and Toco/Sangre Grande manage their daily affairs. In other words, how to get more with less. The theme of the fiscal 2021 budget is about “Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation”. It is therefore about providing opportunities for
entrepreneurs, farmers, the youths, but also importantly, ensuring that the rural constituencies such as Toco/Sangre Grande and others are not left behind.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, please permit me to elaborate on how fiscal 2021 budget will benefit all the constituents of Toco/Sangre Grande and the rest of Trinidad and Tobago. I start with construction. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the simple reason why Toco/Sangre Grande lags behind the rest of the country is because of inadequate infrastructure. Adequate infrastructure creates possibilities, and possibilities create opportunities. The PNM, under the hon. Prime Minister, continues to have a clear vision for holistic national development for all of our country. Over the last five years, despite the challenging economic environment, the Government has continued to make budgetary provisions for the execution of several large projects that are directly benefiting east Trinidad and by extension, all of Trinidad and Tobago.

I wish to mention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Toco ferry port. One of the major projects which the Government has already taken steps to commerce is the construction of a ferry port in Toco, with a ferry service from Toco to Tobago. The new ferry port and improved road works will create much needed job opportunities, not only during the construction phase but also, through positive influence it will have on the other economic sectors and the new industries it will attract to the east. It will also provide great socioeconomic benefits and able sustained development for the entire eastern region of Trinidad in a manner and on a scale similar to which gave birth to Point Lisas.

Improved road networks: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Churchill Roosevelt Highway extension to Manzanilla, being implemented by the National Infrastructure Development Company, NIDCO, is intended to establish First World transportation routes, which will create ease of connectivity to the eastern and
north-eastern region of Trinidad. It will also assist with the formation of an alternative route for entry and exit into the town of Sangre Grande to diminish traffic congestion. The construction of the Churchill Roosevelt extension to the Manzanilla highway project has been allocated the sum of $75 million in fiscal 2021 package.

Valencia to Toco road works project: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Work and Transport, as part of ensuring improved road works in Toco/Sangre Grande, is also currently implementing the construction of the Valencia to Toco road project. This project is expected to increase opportunities for business and economic investment for the eastern region of Trinidad. In fiscal 2021, the construction of the Valencia to Toco road project will continue with an allocation of TT $55 million for the completing of detailing engineering design, cadastral surveys, utility relocation activities, and the attainment of regulatory approvals. Funding is being provided to the PURE Unit of the Ministry of Works and Transport for eight ongoing construction work packages along the Valencia Main Road, from the Valencia Junction to the Toco Main Road. The package includes: stabilization measures, construction of a roundabout, widening of bridges, drains and road-widening surface works, which are all done by NIDCO. Also, there is road upgrade to be done soon between Matura, Salybia, Rampanalgas and Cumana.

New bridges: Mr. Deputy Speaker, improvements in the road infrastructure in Toco/Sangre Grande will also come in the form of new bridges. Within the list of the 13 bridges to be constructed in fiscal 2021 under the Bridges Reconstruction Programme are those located under B1/45 of the Paria Main Road, Toco; B1/43 of the Paria Main Road, Toco, Shark River; B1/40 of the Paria Main Road, Grande Riviere. Also, Matelot to Grande Riviere, stabilization work; Matelot shoreline,
stabilization work; San Souci shoreline, stabilization work. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish
to take this opportunity to thank the hon. Minister of Works and Transport, a son of
the soil of Sangre Grande. He has always shown his faithful commitment to the
people of Trinidad and Tobago and Toco/Sangre Grande. I am confident in saying
this, that there is no other Minister in the history of this country, holding this
important portfolio, delivered so many transformative projects to the people of
Toco/Sangre Grande and Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, permit me to head on to housing. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as
you know, the most significant investment by anyone is a home, especially one
that is safe and secure. The Government understands this and is ensuring that no
one is left behind. I repeat, no one is left behind. The Minister of Finance indicated
in his presentation that the Government is focusing extensively on boosting
economic activity in the construction and housing sectors through an attractive
fiscal stimulus package aimed at encouraging an increase in private sector
participation throughout the value chain.

Affordable housing: Through the accelerated construction programme, a
combined 25,000 new homes will be delivered over the next 10 years. The mix of
housing solutions to be provided will include 10,000 starter homes valued at
250,000 each, with a monthly payment of $925 per month with zero down
payment, or 5,000 affordable homes ranging from 350,000 to 500,000 each, with a
monthly payment of $1,165, all the way to $1,755 with a 5 per cent down payment.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, these financing solutions are attractive and will be in reach
with the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The construction of these new homes will
therefore bring jobs and opportunities for citizens across Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to go on to the Housing and Village
Improvement Programme, which was established in fiscal 2018, to improve
housing and living conditions in targeted communities with neglected infrastructure and poor housing. The Toco/Sangre Grande region has benefited tremendously from the implementation of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development’s Housing and Village Improvement Programme, which is a project managed by the LSA, and more than 46 families have benefited from this programme already in Toco/Sangre Grande. In fiscal 2021, communities targeted for improvement under the fourth phase of this project will include: Wallerfield, Sangre Grande, just to name a few. It is projected that 250 new single-family units will be completed throughout the country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, only last week I had the opportunity to join the hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Development and Member of Parliament in neighbouring Arima in a key distribution under the Housing and Village Improvement Programme. As the Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande, it was truly a pleasure to witness the joy of my constituents who benefited from the HVIP houses. These programmes target the most vulnerable and enable them to break the cycle of poverty, build stronger families and create generations of proud, productive citizens. The LSA has also been very instrumental in fulfilling other parts of its mandate. For example, protecting eligible squatters from ejectment of state land and to facilitate the acquisition of leasehold titles, both by squatters and tenants in designated areas throughout the country. This was done and is ongoing through the distribution of certificates of comfort, notification of statutory leases, registered statutory leases.

Just a few examples of distributions that were made through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, agency LSA: 261 certificates of comfort, 14 in the region of Grande Riviere, two Salybia, 173 in Sangre Grande, 12 in Toco, and 60 in Valencia; 103 notifications of statutory leases, and 18 registered statutory
leases. The Land Settlement Agency has also been engaged in a number of other projects in the Toco/Sangre Grande region. During 2020, the LSA engaged in the following construction projects: Bois Bande, Sangre Grande site A with 203 lots, Bois Bande, Sangre Grande site B with 151 lots. Prior to the Bois Bande projects, infrastructure work was completed in Kangalee, Valencia. An additional drainage and water works were completed in areas such as Pine Settlement and KP Lands. In Sangre Grande alone, 354 families benefited from the Squatter Regularisation Programme and this project will be completed in fiscal 2021. Further to this, LSA will do infrastructural upgrade in the Bois Bande area of Sangre Grande, Site C.

In fiscal 2021, financing under the newly established urban upgrading and revitalization programme is expected, and this project will yield 147 lots. Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the new tenancy policy of this Government, certain categories of squatters were occupants who have been an occupant of state lands in the LSA designated areas and land settlement areas, prior to June 2014, will get security of tenure. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when it comes to housing, this Government really looks after the small man. [Desk thumping]

I wish to go on to agriculture. Mr. Deputy Speaker, another existing opportunity that presents itself in this year’s budget is in the area of agriculture. For the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, the expansion on the food supply has been placed at the top of a national policy agenda. In order to enhance the perception of agriculture and continue to attract the best and bright to the sector, the Government has committed to several initiatives including: one, establishment of a centre of excellence in agriculture and biotechnology; increasing the use of technology in agriculture; investing in precision agriculture mechanization to yield maximum production; upgrade and maintenance of access roads by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.
And we know that persons who reside or represent communities that is agricultural-based, persons tend to have a lot of challenges with agricultural access roads. So, look forward to this, this is on the way. Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the 6th of October, I had the pleasure of joining the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. Avinash Singh, as he visited farmers. I was truly impressed with the technology and innovation that is used in the agricultural industry at this present moment. As Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande, I will work with the farmers, young persons and aspiring entrepreneurs to capitalize on these opportunities that will be available in the 500 million stimulus package in financial package 2021.

3.15 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now move to health care. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of having dedicated health facilities. In this regard the Sangre Grande Hospital will provide primary and secondary health care to over 110,000 persons in the Sangre Grande community and environs. The addition of this state-of-the-art three-story building will create a campus style facility with the adjacent existing Sangre Grande Hospital and the enhanced health centre to improve the quality of service administered by the Eastern Regional Health Authority, ERHA. The new hospital building will include a medical ward, surgical ward, trauma ward and general ward, a high dependency and intensive care unit. The introduction of this hospital will improve access to health facilities, a wider range of services as well as reduce the burden being placed on other existing health institutions. Mobilization works for the new 106 bed facility commence in fiscal 2020 and is scheduled to be completed in fiscal 2022. The sum of $55 million has been allocated in fiscal 2021 for the continuation of this project.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, also in fiscal 2020 under the Medical Equipment
Upgrade Programme, the Ministry of Health, the Eastern Regional Health Authority was able to procure critical medical equipment for several units and departments of the Sangre Grande Hospital. For example, the ICU equipment comprised of three transport ventilators, three critical care beds, four ventilators and one portable monitor. Also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a contract was also awarded for the supply and commissioning and maintenance of a computer radiology system for the Radiology Department at the Toco Health Centre. This project has been completed and will facilitate—improve radiology service to the residents of Toco. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am also pleased that in 2021 other existing public health facilities across the four regional health authorities, RHAs, are also earmarked for improvement such as the expansion of the clinical facilities at the Toco Health Centre.

I now move to public utilities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, another key area that is of concern for the citizen of Trinidad and Tobago is a reliable supply of water. In fiscal 2020 WASA made significant investments for the provision of sustainable water and waste water services throughout the country which includes: Rehabilitation of wells in the Valencia area under the Well Development Programme and the completion of pipeline interconnection works at the quarry survey reservoir. In fiscal 2021 WASA has embarked to drill new wells and rehabilitate the others. These projects will benefit persons in areas such as Arima, Las Lomas and Sangre Grande.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have also taken note that under the PSIP Programme, the construction of the Toco library has been identified to be undertaken by the Ministry of Public Administration. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the decision to put more money in the hands of citizens, many of whom are young people, by increasing the personal allowance to $84,000 has been received with much appreciation by the
citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] This will build on the previous increase in fiscal 2016 and represents a 40 per cent increase in the personal allowance in just over five years by this Government.

Senior citizens. Mr. Deputy Speaker, very often when the budget is read many persons within our elderly population may not fully appreciate that every national budget that is passed in this Parliament contains a sizeable transfer to those over age 65.

[A Member is heard on his cellphone]

This year under the Ministry of Social Development and Family—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, one second. An electronic device. I am hearing a conversation. Marshal. Proceed, proceed Member.

**Mr. R. Munroe:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This year under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, over $3.8 billion has been allocated to support over 100,000 persons who receive senior citizens grants. In addition, given the outcome of the general election all pensioners can breathe a sigh of relief that their NIB pension and moneys at the Unit Trust Corporation will be safe. Mr. Deputy Speaker, our senior citizens truly dodged the bullet in 2020.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the vast majority of people of Trinidad and Tobago and Toco/Sangre Grande are honest and hard-working. They have an appreciation for the challenges faced by Trinidad and Tobago over the last five years and were discerning enough to make the right choice. It is that understanding which is necessary to allow the Government to make the right policy adjustments now in order for our citizens to enjoy a brighter tomorrow. The people of Trinidad and Tobago, Toco/Sangre Grande by extension in making the right choice are assured that they stand to benefit from the new Licensing Office already delivered in Guaico; a new hospital in Sangre Grande and upgrade of health centres in the
constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande; state-of-the-art ferry port in Toco; new highway and bridges; enhanced internet access; upgrade recreational facilities; affordable housing; construction of a new library in Toco. All of these projects are being delivered at a time when the country faces severe economic constraint which underscores the commitment of this Government to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

As I close, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me assure all the constituents of Toco/Sangre Grande that I will not disappoint you. I am committed to working day and night for the remainder of this parliamentary term to improve the lives of all throughout our beloved constituency and country by extension. I thank you. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. Member. I would also like to congratulate you on your maiden speech in this parliamentary Chamber. [Desk thumping] I recognize the hon. Member for Mayaro.

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): [Desk thumping] Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I join in this debate, an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2021. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the voice of the people of Mayaro is somewhat dissatisfied after listening to all the wonderful things that the last speaker, the Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande when he described all the beautiful and wonderful things that is happening in his constituency and I am glad for the people of Sangre Grande.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mayaro continues to be hampered by bad roads, poor drainage, massive flooding; we continue to suffer unacceptable water storages; we continue to have to grapple with dilapidated tourism infrastructure; there is massive unemployment throughout the constituency; we have a collapse in
agricultural road access system; we have land tenure issues going back, 50, 60, 70 years; we have a stillborn Galeota Point Phase 2 Project and as the previous speaker indicated, they have a state-of-the-art port in drawing, we have a state-of-the-art port live and ready for action and it has been put aside by this administration for the last five years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have two collapsed fishing facilities in the constituency of Mayaro; we have an incomplete public library which is wasting away. I have heard the Minister of Communication today said that there is some work that is planned for the facility, I look forward to seeing that. There is a massive housing shortage in the constituency as well, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as MP I will continue to champion these and other issues on behalf of the people of Mayaro in a legal and professional manner. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I get into the substance of my delivery today I must make a few comments on some of the speakers that have spoken before me and I need to dispel some untruths, some misinformation from broken records that keeps playing year after year after year and I feel sadden that I have to come and correct it as well, year after year after year. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me commend the Leader of the Opposition and all my colleagues on this side [Desk thumping] for the clinical, surgical, precise dissertations that have been given throughout these proceedings as we dismantled the budget statement of the hon. Minister of Finance. [Desk thumping] A short while ago the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries like a whirlwind passed through this Chamber like a dose of salt leaving behind the same output as you normally find after having a dose of salt.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am glad that the Minister acknowledged the several
letters that I would have sent to him over the last five years, but I am saddened to say that very little has been done in the constituency of Mayaro which the hon. Minister boasted that he belongs to as well. It is a very sad comment to make indeed. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries spent half of his time chasing the Leader of the Opposition but had nothing to say about his accomplishments for the last five years as a Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister boasted of the agricultural facilities in the Mayaro constituency, but what he failed to acknowledge is that they have collapsed under his watch and he has done nothing about it. [Desk thumping] All this “bad John” talk by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries but he got licks once, twice and I suspect a third time will be in the making. [Desk thumping] But it seems like failure comes natural to this Minister so it is no wonder that he has been rejected twice by the electorate and I am surprised that he is here for the second time in such a critical Ministry such as agriculture.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister defended his Government’s poor performance over the last 50 years in agriculture. Why I ask, if they have done so well, why are packaging houses left to collapse and waste away in this country? Why fishing facilities have been left to rot in this country? The poor design, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the fishing facility which we spoke about in Galeota, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would you believe that that facility was designed under a PNM administration in 2009. It was poor design by that Government that has that facility unusable today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was so surprised to hear the Minister put forward the argument that the PNM seems to be the saviour of agriculture in this country. But I want to tell this Chamber today that the PNM is the actual architect of its
destruction. [Desk thumping] The Minister made some bold comments today concerning some issues of the past and I want to correct it, for not only the Hansard but for the thousands of young people listening to all of us here today. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Patrick Manning Government failed to implement any of recommendations of the Tripartite Committee Report of 1992 and it undermined the very report, his administration did that. With respect to the restructuring of Caroni (1975) Limited, the PNM Government of the day they refused to engage the union’s proposals, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the trade union had proposed a private sector participation in Caroni (1975) Limited where the State would own 51 per cent and 49 per cent of the facility would go to private sector. That report was called the prospects and proposals for the future of Caroni (1975) Limited. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this report was compiled under the chairmanship of Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir and our very own Member for Oropouche East, Dr. Roodal Moonilal [Desk thumping] Would you believe between 2003 and 2010 the then Patrick Manning administration distributed 110 two-acre agricultural plots and zero residential lots to the former sugar workers of Caroni (1975) Limited.

In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to get the lands distribution to former sugar workers the union had to take the Government to court. And Justice Lennox Deyalsingh ruled that all infrastructural works in the lands for sugar workers should be completed by 2008. You know what the Patrick Manning administration did, Mr. Deputy Speaker? They went to court, they challenged the rulings of Justice Deyalsingh straight to the Privy Council. These are the things that have agriculture in the state it is in today. It took a Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration on her very first act as Prime Minister to instruct the then Attorney General to withdraw the State’s appeal at the Privy Council and allow Justice
Deyalsingh’s ruling to facilitate the resumption of the distribution of residential in agricultural lands to former Caroni workers. [Desk thumping] Mr. Deputy Speaker, between May 2010 to 2015 the People’s Partnership Government distributed approximately 6,000 two-acre plots and 2,500 residential leases. [Desk thumping] But the Minister comes here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, kicking and screaming, spewing political untruths in an extremely duplicitous manner. [Desk thumping]

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Madam Speaker, I want to raise a couple of issues that was brought by the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West and when the Minister’s contribution was made he made several claims that I know not to be true and I want to discuss a few of those claims this evening, Madam Speaker. The Minister claimed that the People’s Partnership had no handle on the oil and gas sector. But clearly the PNM seems to have a good handle because they had shut down Petrotrin, they have shut down several plants in the Point Lisas Industrial Estate costing, as I understand over US $3 million per day. Imagine they collapsed their own Dragon Field expansion project. They failed to partner with our emerging energy partners in Guyana and Suriname. Madam Speaker, if that is having a handle on the energy sector I do not know what else is. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I can understand the position of the hon. Minister, the MP for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West because the issue of handles is a problem, because cocoyea brooms have no handle. There is also a mantra and an anthem that the Minister spins like a record every time about the failure of the People’s Partnership to renegotiate gas contracts. But, Madam Speaker, you do not negotiate contracts two and three years when they are on the horizon. [Desk thumping] You do not negotiate contracts one year before a general election. You allow the incoming government an opportunity to set their pace and their targets. Madam
Speaker, that is exactly what was done, but unfortunately the incoming Government has made a mess of the sector, [Desk thumping] they have spoiled the contracts and that is why we had a collapse in energy sector in this country today, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Minister added one new line to the chorus of his song. Over the last five or six years Madam Speaker, it has been blame Kamla, blame the UNC and now the hon. Minister adds blame YARA. The Minister blames YARA for having an aged plant hence the cause for it to shut down. Madam Speaker, the truth is aged plants all over the world have a distinct advantage over new plants. Their cost of production is reduced since capital cost is zero and there is no long term liability for plant and machinery. You have literally paid off for your plant. [Desk thumping] This is why Atlantic LNG is still very competitive in the world LNG markets. Madam Speaker, the Minister came and beat his chest about the great work done prior to 2010 by a former PNM administration. But I want to put on the record, from 2002 to 2010 no new fields were “bidded” out, no new exploration contracts were awarded, drilling rigs virtually disappeared from our waters.

Madam Speaker, there were no new horizon projects when the People’s Partnership assumed office in 2010. Thank God, thank God for the government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar that there was cost correction which is our saviour today, and I mean the gas that is being produced by TROC and Juniper that gave this optic in 2018 which the Minister of Finance loves to talk about, but it was because of cost correction by the People’s Partnership administration that has us here today. [Desk thumping]

The Minister went on to claim that on this side, that is the Opposition, we continue to attack the assets of the State that they are using to pursuit in the fight
against crime. And he is referring to the cutter class vessels and so on. But Minister I want to put on the record we are not attacking the assets, we are attacking your Government and its shady and duplicitous procurement dealings. [Desk thumping] That is what we are attacking, not the asset. Mr. Minister, we on this side we will continue to look at your procurement process until the procurement legislation is made law and it goes into effect.

Madam Speaker, I also had to sit here yesterday and listen to my hon. friend, my colleague, the Member for Port of Spain South and the Member spent most of his time repeating the manifesto promises of the People’s National Movement. And the only thing the hon. Member was able to do was to get the wording of the manifesto in the Hansard. The Member indicated that the PNM Manifesto should be on the best seller list of recommended reading. Unfortunately, unfortunately, Madam Speaker, I stop reading fiction at the age of 12. But I would like to inform the hon. Member that a Baa rating is not something that you aspire to. You have collapsed to a Baa rating. [Desk thumping] For your information hon. Member your Government’s failed economic and fiscal policies collapsed us to that Baa rating. [Desk thumping] And just for information this is one step above junk status, nothing to be proud of, Member.

The Member for Port of Spain South rattled numbers in his contribution quite impressively, Madam Speaker. Clearly the hon. Member has been taking a course from the “Imbert School of Wizardry”. [Desk thumping] I know the hon. Minister of Finance claimed that in another speech that he is a wizard of some sort. But hon. Member, the CSO has had no credible facility to compile and present data since 2018. The CSO by the way, Madam Speaker, is another failed promise by this administration. I would ask, is there something, a motive, an ulterior motive behind the purposeful stifling of the Central Statistical Office? I ask this question,
the Minister of Finance went so far in his own budget statement to distance himself from the CSO data. If you turn to page 4 of the document, paragraphs two and three, and if you would allow me just to read, paragraph two states:

“The latest data from the CSO now shows that from a decline of almost 6 percent in 2016, we restored stability to our GDP in 2018, with growth returning to a balance of 0.1 percent in that year.”

But right underneath the Minister of Finance takes his time to note and I quote:

“On this note, I wish to make it clear that we in the Ministry of Finance do not generate actual GDP data or actual oil and gas production figures and/or make energy forecasts.”

You know what the Minister is saying there, Madam Speaker, “I using the data that they geh meh, if it wrong that is all yuh business.” He has no confidence in his own data and he wants this country to believe when he forecast a part for—what he called it in this budget statement? “Resetting the Economy for Growth” and he does not believe his own data. Madam Speaker, I will be surprised if anybody else in this country believes that data.

Madam Speaker, I would ask the Member for Port of Spain South whenever he, the hon. Member that is, chooses to cross-examine the Minister of Finance he should ask the hon. Minister why is he hesitant to invite the Article IV IMF team to Trinidad. He must ask that question in cross-examination and you will find out why. The hon. Member spoke about this stimulus package for agriculture, but I want to tell the hon. Member that when a Government puts a budget in place and they write a PSIP book and give us it in a bag and it is laid on that table there and we pass it in Parliament it becomes law, and that is a promise that is made to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But this $500 million stimulus package is nowhere to be found. It is not in the yellow books, it is not in the PSIP. That is a promise for a fool, Madam Speaker, and that is what is happening. That $500 million stimulus
package may never come, and the hon. Member is putting himself out on a limb to talk about that. Madam Speaker, we on this side will not buy that. [Desk thumping]

3.45 p.m.

I want to agree with the hon. Member when he says that any plans done successfully will work towards the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to agree with that wholeheartedly. But, Madam Speaker, this administration does not have a track record of delivery and performance. While this Government over the last year and a half has been busy turning sod all over the place, citizens of this country have been having difficulty turning their pots to put food on their table for their children, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I just want to raise one quick issue with the Minister of Education. I have an appeal for the hon. Minister. Minister, I have 26 schools in the constituency of Mayaro and we are in dire need of some support for ICT devices. I know you are doing your best to get some donated through different agencies. Any support that you can put for rural communities throughout the country as a priority it would be very, very important to us, Madam Minister, and I look forward to some support there.

I also want to make a clarion call to you, Madam Minister, to prepare to go to war with CXC if they fail to relook and reassess the grades our 2020 CAPE students. That is creating an uproar amongst some of the finest minds that we have in this country, Madam Minister. I am asking you as Minister to assure the young people of our country that you are on their side and that you will defend their integrity to the end. Minister, you must be aware of the trauma that these students are going through, and I am telling you as Minister of Education you are the last hope in resolving this matter and I look forward for you to take some immediate action on that.

UNREVISED
Before I go into my substance, Madam Speaker, I just have one more commentary for my good friend, the hon. Minister of Labour, and he has had the best delivery on the Government Bench so far. Madam Speaker, I want to commend him because he gave a frank and solid position on the labour statistics in this country. The Minister of Finance would have you believe that we are at 3.5 per cent on the employment rate, and that is a song and a dance that has been happening for the last year and it found its way into the national budget of 2020/2021 not telling the public that this is old data. But the Minister of Labour, good man that I know he is, he made it clear that the CSO data of 2018 cannot be used to gauge the labour climate in Trinidad and Tobago. Minister, thank you very much for setting that record straight and rubbing your own Minister of Finance solid position that his Government’s prudent management of the economy that has kept unemployment at an all-time low. Minister, thank you for your honesty. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, there are some key items that I want to say very, very quickly that caused the presentation of the Minister of Finance to lack depth. It had length. It was long. It was three hours. It had wit. He touched on several areas, but it had no depth, and the reason it had no depth because it did not speak to the issues of the day, the burning issues that the people of Trinidad and Tobago wanted to hear in the budget, and these are very quickly, Madam Speaker: unemployment, job creation, our university graduates, our UTT graduates. Our tertiary educated graduates are asking where are the jobs coming from. That was not addressed, Madam Speaker.

A collapsing SME sector. Madam Speaker, small businesses are closing down every day left and right. Shopping malls are turning into ghost towns, the hotel and restaurants industry in a free fall, and only this weekend some of our
favourite cinemas in Chaguana's gone. These are the indicators that something perilous is on its way, and if the Minister of Finance as the lead policy director of this Government does not make some swift intervention we are in for a lot of trouble, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, there is a huge imbalance to our regional markets in terms of our exports. We just heard from the Minister of Trade and Industry Enterprise Development and I will get to her in a couple minutes. We have had very little or no increase in foreign direct investments in this five years of this administration. Madam Speaker, there has not been one single high-ticket investor in this country in five years. That is a problem. Madam Speaker, I am also concerned that we have had no solid play in the regional energy efforts so far. There is nothing. [Desk thumping] The biggest energy market in the region is in Guyana and Suriname, and it is only this weekend the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—well the real one at least—say, “All yuh go dey nah. I go handle it. When the COVID-19 restriction lift, I going to go and I going to solve this problem.” It is two years too late, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, another burning issue that the people of this country wanted to hear in this budget statement was that of local government reform. Not a single word in the budget statement. And why is local government reform important in the budget statement? Property tax. Property tax, in the best form, should put the money in the hands of local government because I want when I pay my property tax at some point in time in the future, not now, I want to make sure that the money could move “meh” rubbish, clear “meh” streets, fix pothole, put water. The people of this country want their money to be put in their communities to put to good use. [Desk thumping] That is not what this current legislation has. I will reiterate the word or the position of our hon. Leader of the Opposition, that we
will not support the property tax in any form right now under these tight economic conditions. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, our stranded nationals aboard. That is a key burning issue that needed to be addressed. There is no systematic and strategic plans to get them home. They are coming in chirrup chirrup according to the old people, but there are hundreds of them that are literally turning vagrants in a foreign land. They do not have money, they are not getting a subsistence, and if one had been planned well good for them, but they “ain’t” get it yet because every day on Facebook you are seeing another person begging and crying for help. That is something that should have been addressed as policy in this 2020 budget, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, homeowner protection. We have several hundreds of recently unemployed people that cannot pay their mortgages today. Do we allow the banks to seize property; left is right? We cannot, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the State has to have a policy, somehow, to figure how do we protect homeowners in these trying times, because if the Minister of Finance gets it right and he puts us on a path to recovery, well then we could save these homes. So I am asking the Minister to look at homeowner protection. And for those who do not own homes, we have the rental issues. Madam Speaker, we have people who have been tossed out on the streets with their children because they cannot pay rents because they have been unemployed. We have people who could pay but hear what, the landlords want an increase in their rates. Madam Speaker, we need to touch these key issues affecting the people of this country if we want to create a real change in the lives of our citizens.

Madam Speaker, flooding. Flooding is something that I do believe needs to be addressed at a policy level in terms of drainage, in terms of reservoirs, in terms
of retention, in terms of detention. We need to have a purposeful conversation about the drainage authority. These things are what is missing from the budget statement, Madam Speaker, and to round it off water distribution. Too many people, Madam Speaker, are crying out every single day in Mayaro. I am probably WASA. Everyday constituents are calling for help. They are calling for water and you know what I do, Madam Speaker? “Ah beg de man in WASA.” See if he could send a truck. If you do not have the facility to fix the pipelines—I have had WASA employees come and ask me to help them buy elbow and T because their warehouse “ain’t ha” none just to get people connection going. That is the state of affairs in WASA, Madam Speaker. That could not be right, not in 2020. Madam Speaker, with these issues if it could have been addressed by the Minister in his budget statement I think we would be all the better for it.

Madam Speaker, we just had a little while ago the Minister of Trade and Industry and Enterprise Development come and give a very interesting delivery I must say. The Minister is a very gentle person. Her words are always very reassuring. I like listening to the Minister, but unfortunately she is part of a Government where their policies are weak. Their policies are very weak. I call it—when I looked at the budget statement this year, Madam Speaker, you would not believe the amount of rehash, recycle ideas that are plummeted in that. Madam Speaker, I only have to go back to the 2015 manifesto of the People’s National Movement and I could read out every single promise that they made and it has come to naught. Madam Speaker, I just want to call one or two of them: create synergies between energy manufacturing and creative sectors, zilch. This is what the Oxford Business Group had to say:

“Although this has been on the agenda for decades, T&T continues to be reliant on oil and gas to drive economic growth. It must do more to
create”—to diversify the economy.

And this is 2018. So in 2015 a promise was made, in 2018 same Oxford Group, they trash it.

Madam Speaker, they come back in 2015 and the Minister says that the policy of the Government is to create constant dialogue and feedback with all stakeholders in manufacturing, industrial, address challenges, shortage of skilled labours, foreign exchange, reduction of bureaucracy, speedy processing of customs documents, trade labour. Madam Speaker, February 23rd, 2020, a Newsday report, “Central Bank: Non-energy activity…forex still bleak”. Madam Speaker, after five years nothing that was promised in 2015 was delivered. Complete the Tamana Intech Park and Piarco AeroPark, I am still waiting to see “dem two park”. After five years nothing has been done.

Madam Speaker, and I can go on to ’15, ’16, ’17. I mean, it is the same, same issues right around, but if we want to give an assessment of our performance in trade we just need to look at a few things. We have spent as a country $700 million in the Ministry of Trade and Industry Enterprise Development. From 2015—2020, $700 million. And what are the key interfaces that we want to see to know whether we are successful or not? Did we increase our forex from 2015—2020? No! Did we increase our exports especially so to our regional partners? Madam Speaker, I can tell you a World Bank report had that in many of our regional partners we are exporting less than 1 per cent of what we import. So something is wrong with that. So after $700 million we have not corrected that.

Madam Speaker, are we doing better? Are our small businesses doing better? Well obviously no because every day we talk about these businesses collapsing. Madam Speaker, what about this money we keep spending on the cultural sector, the television industry and so on? When you look every year there
is 20 million, 10 million, 15 million and there is no considerable improvement in the industry. Madam Speaker, all I can say is that the industry, the trade sector needs to be revisited, it needs to have a new policy at the end of the day. The Minister complained about low revenues, but he did not offer a frank and serious appraisal of the factors that have been leading to this position that we are in. The Minister did not offer any effective remedies to the problem. All that was done they dished out—both the Finance Minister and the Minister of Trade and Industry and Enterprise Development dished out a series of rehashed plans and programmes that they have been using for the last five years.

Madam Speaker, a critical factor in our current economic condition is a lack of competitiveness in our industrial commodity products, and it was a key issue that was evaded because it does match the everyday mantra of this Government, blame Kamla, blame the UNC. So they refused to look at the key issues and they did not focus on it, and they cannot find a remedy for it.

Madam Speaker, I want to just quickly, in the couple of minutes that I have remaining, to offer the Minister and the Minister of Trade and Industry and Enterprise Development a few suggestions that have come out of the business community, out of the manufactures’ association, that I am asking that they take into consideration before this Bill passes through this Parliament, please pay attention or some specific assistance to small agro processing players. Deal with the issue of timely VAT and other tax refunds. This bond issue will not work. Perhaps they are telling you that in public but quietly they are griping about it. They need their money for working capital, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, an equitable access to foreign exchange that is a big issue. Some people are getting more money easier than smaller players and that is causing a problem.

Madam Speaker, I want the Minister to address the issue of small and micro
enterprises in a very strategic way in terms of getting more of those liquidity support loans into the coffers of those businesses to protect their payrolls, to protect their employees. Madam Speaker, the Minister should consider a reduction or a control of interest rates on those loans, on those payments, those overdrafts, to make sure that the businesses can continue and keep their payrolls going. Look at the deferring of mortgage payments. Madam Speaker, nothing that I mentioned here is news. It is not strange. It is being done by several countries all over the world with a vast amount of success. Madam Speaker, there must also be a focus on non-traditional SMEs with the aim of assisting in poverty alleviation, economic innovation and transmission which is urgently required in this country.

Tax credits, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I would like to see the tax credits being extended to every single registered small business that will invest in technology, go into a paperless system where you have no paper, and they will be able to get some tax credits going forward as well. If we do not create the culture of digitalization innovation from the small businesses, how would our public servants accept the change at the highest level which there is a focus on right now?

Madam Speaker, I want to ask very, very quickly a question on the CBI, what you call the CBERA agreement that— We were told that was signed off by President Bush this week, or last week sorry. But, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: Bush?

Mr. R. Paray: Sorry, President Trump. Sorry, my apologies. Madam Speaker, there is a conversation—

Madam Speaker: Hon Members, settled down. Continue, Member for Mayaro.

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, there is conversation amongst manufacturers not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but throughout the region. They have put their containers on hold because they have been informed that the President has not
signed that document as yet. Although it is on the Whitehall website they have no information. Nothing. The embassies cannot confirm it, and their containers are packed because they are afraid if their goods land in the United States it will be subjected to taxes.

Madam Speaker, I am told from the state department that the President may be considering putting a criteria option, not a full blanket cover, over all beneficiaries of that Act. And I understand as well, Madam Speaker, part of the criteria may be to have a preference to partners who may have had displayed a political strategic allegiance to the United States over the last couple years. That is something we must worry about.

Madam Speaker, the last minute that I have I want to thank you for the opportunity, I want to thank the people of Mayaro for allowing me to return as their MP for another five years. I make the commitment [Desk thumping] to continue working with my constituency. I will work with the Government whenever I have to, wherever I have to, to ensure that the people benefit at the end of the day. I will stand here and I will bring the voice of the people of Mayaro every single time I am invited to do so by you, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker:  Member for Point Fortin.

Mr. Kennedy Richards (Point Fortin):  [Desk thumping] Thank you, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me as I contribute to the financial Appropriation Bill, 2020/2021. I would first like to express my gratitude to Almighty God for life and providing the opportunity for me to stand here today in this august Chamber. Also I would like to thank the people of Point Fortin for entrusting in me to be their new Member of Parliament. As I contribute to this budget allow me to commend the hon. Minister of Finance, Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East, who
on Monday the 5th delivered a package that was relevant and necessary in these tumultuous times. The Member of Parliament for Arouca/Maloney, the Minister of Planning and Development, and this, of course, under the sterling and focused leadership provided by Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley. 

Madam Speaker, you must understand that Trinidad and Tobago does not live in a bubble, and that we are not excluded from whatever is in play around the world. At the start of fiscal 2020 our economic standpoint was shifting into newfound prosperity. It is public record that under this administration, led by the Member for Diego Martin West, unapologetically stabilized the economy, an economy that they met in shambles and disrepute by those on the other side. But the people of Trinidad and Tobago are right-thinking people and entrusted upon a PNM Government to take us out of the miry clay back in 2015 and made the right choice once more in 2020. We were able to strengthen our institutions, we were able to prepare the stimulants for our economy to ready, to rejuvenate once more.

Madam Speaker, those against us attempt to create an unholy and mischievous narrative that before this pandemic there was no growth within the economy, but you will never hear them admit that from the last data as represented by the CSO, as alluded by the Minister, that we were able to restore economic stability from a decline of 6 per cent in 2016 to an impressive return of balance of .1 per cent in 2018. Madam Speaker, you would not hear them mention that inflation was at 1 per cent down from 5 in 2015. No acknowledgment. No acknowledgment whatsoever that our fiscal deficit was reduced to 2.5 per cent of GDP in 2019 compared to 9.5 per cent in 2015.

Madam Speaker, a PNM government will never be distracted by those who have devoid our vision with frivolous ambitions. As much as we
prefer not to talk about it, the reality is that nobody ever had a contingency plan in the instance of this pandemic in 2020. While some may think that Trinidad and Tobago operates within a dome, immune from the effects from the international community, others, in fact most of us, are seeing the deliberate effects of the pandemic almost in every way that we used to live.

We must face the sad fact that we are not excluded from the health risk, the embattled world economy, trade and industry, education and training, all of these and more have been forced to adopt to a very uncertain new normal. However, this administration, having faced the uncertain reality, with quick speed adapted swiftly to lead us into the new normal with vision and focus direction ahead. When the world was going through its collective lockdown in April, the world economic report proclaimed that the advanced First World nations will contract at 8 per cent and all emerging economies and developing countries, where our country and region are aligned, will contract by 3 per cent and 5 per cent respectively.

Madam Speaker, under that background this budget was structured in a time where we are now required to revisit our existing revenue making industries, to perpetuate increase efficiency and effectiveness, investment and develop new and sustainable industries that would not only contribute to the economy in a robust way, but also to empower our people by amplifying their skills through the new opportunities provided.

Madam Speaker, COVID-19 encouraged us to appreciate technology and propel us to take a leap of faith into a digitized 21st Century. The Prime Minister, having understood that we must adapt to survive in this ever-changing society, committed to digitizing the way we govern and do business in Trinidad and Tobago. This commitment is now realized and highly expressed in this fiscal package through tax allowances that will be provided to businesses which invest in
tech start-ups and new tech businesses, and the allowances on businesses that engage in technological solutions and digitization. We would see our people being encouraged to develop these essential digital platforms to ensure that the delivery of government services and the way we do business become proficient striving within a paperless environment.

Madam Speaker, the people of Point Fortin would have realized that the pandemic was directing us into a new digitized economy. In April, when we stated to distribute the plethora of grants and assistance that was needed to help our people work through the lockdown period, many people found it difficult to cash their cheques since bank hours were curtailed, and many businesses adjusted their traffic flow and were even closed. To solve this, under my stewardship as mayor, the borough launched the digital grants developed by a local company that allowed persons to visit the corporation’s website, sign up for a grant. Once that grant was approved, an instantaneous message would be sent to your device, and one can utilize that approval from your device within the essential network in Point Fortin whether it was at a gas station, grocery, or even pharmacy to purchase goods. So the onerous need of having to wait in a long line at a bank can be considered a thing of the past.

4.15 p.m.

With these tax concessions that would incentivize the new digital era, new local, new driven companies, like WiPay and more would now become the utility to everyday life. By the removal of taxes on mobile devices, software, computer accessories, we can see a sustainable future where every sector such as food and beverage, hospitality, communication, event management, education and training standards to be the beneficiary of technological efficiency supported and encouraged by a world-class PNM-led administration. [Desk thumping]
This Government is committed to sensitize every citizen in this country with a new form of technology and even the very vulnerable in our society. The Internet Mi-Fi for students creating mini hotspots, devices for over 45,000 families, expanding the existing Wi-Fi hotspots and Internet cafes to be established throughout the country to ensure that the connectivity be available in remote areas and rural communities. [Desk thumping] So within my constituency, Madam Speaker, from Spring Trace to Buenos Ayres, from Chatham to Granville, from Fullerton to Icacos, all now stand to benefit from this extraordinary initiative.

Take a look at agriculture. Another key element of the budget is the ambitious investment to the agricultural sector. A wise man once said that agriculture is the Archimedean lever which, though it does not move a world, tends to fill it with plenty with moral health and human happiness. Madam Speaker, the $500 million addition to the allocation of a record breaking $1.198 billion speaks volumes. This is yet again a commitment given from the Prime Minister that a PNM-led administration would invest and incentivize the agricultural industry in Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

Stemming from this 70 per cent increase in the allocation to agriculture would now accommodate the requisite technical support for quality management and quantity maintenance and the potential for establishment of various facilities like agro-processing centres throughout the country that would promulgate the industry ensuring that agriculture remains monetized and remains essential and efficient in the local market.

Icacos is home to the coconut estate of the country. Through this one commodity with the new training, support mechanisms that are being implemented, guaranteed state purchasing, provision of agricultural lands, the myriad of tax concessions can now promote a viable coconut industry where we
produce in the south-western capital coconut milk, coconut oil, coconut cream and even coconut rum that can all be processed, packaged and marketed through a boosting local economy, trading with the wider region and penetrating the international community. Madam Speaker, this is just one example of the agricultural community in one community impacting thousands of lives.

Another example is the cocoa industry. Right in the small village of Coromandel, we can now boast of an established cocoa plantation right at the centre of the south-western peninsula, spearheading this is an agricultural entrepreneur and long-time farmer, Jenson Alexander, who has been utilizing the technology advancements through agro-processing and produced top-tier monetized commodities such as chocolate balls, drinking chocolate, cassava flour and plantain flour.

Madam Speaker, Jenson’s efforts are highly acclaimed within the economic market in Point Fortin, however with the stimulus package injected in the budget, we can invest in agricultural-based businesses and entrepreneurs like Jenson where we are shifting the paradigm of dirt-only agriculture to agro-technology, aquaponics and urban agriculture. We can now project an expansion of the cocoa industry in Point Fortin under this PNM administration and provide the necessary platforms for these agricultural service providers to contribute to the national stock, infiltrating the regional and international market.

Madam Speaker, to hear the Opposition speak ill on the Government’s efforts to boost agriculture in a time when we are working to reduce our very high food import bill, an Opposition party who receives and continues to receive its support from traditionally agricultural communities within Trinidad is a total slap in the face for these communities. Those against us provide no useful and sustainable alternative for the development of agricultural sector in Trinidad and
Tobago. However, we should not hold this against them since the PNM is not characterized as a rural or urban party but is characterized as a national premiere institution who acknowledges that in any organism, food is needed for life. [Desk thumping]

And in this country, Madam Speaker, we will do everything in our power to reinvigorate the agricultural industry feeding what we grow, growing what we feed. Point Fortin was considered to be the food basket of the economy through our expansive oil industry. We can regain this accolade through agriculture to reposition ourselves in this new and viable thrust into food and agriculture.

Youth development, education and training. Madam Speaker, the youth are not just the leaders of tomorrow but are the leaders of today and because they are leaders of today, you must appreciate that their input, their contributions, do matter, and we must ensure that what they inherit from us, with their modernized skills and ideologies, would keep the bar high for the development of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, youth advancement stands at the pinnacle of this PNM administration with the establishment of the new Ministry of Youth Development and National Services, wholesomely dedicated to the advancement of the youth cause. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, through the implementation of the new Workforce Recovery Programme organized by YTEPP in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning, that would enable unemployed citizens and young people within the Commonwealth unlimited access to over 4,000 courses with 400 specializations as a conduit to develop, guide and retool their skills, passions and talents that are now required for these individuals to re-enter the labour market, whilst having the requisite qualifications that are relevant, consistent and adaptable to the very competitive economic environment.

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This alongside the surfeit of programmes geared to the youth development provided by successive PNM administrations, young people are poised to be the first-hand beneficiaries of economic prosperity from the revamped agricultural industry. [Desk thumping] The cross section of opportunities within the new digital age and the expansion of a local trade and enterprise development.

Madam Speaker, on the point of education and training, we see education given an awesome mandate in this fiscal package. Certainly it follows the vision of the founding father who understood that the future of this nation lies in the school bags of our children. In the context of education and training in Point Fortin, Opposition forces were mounting the narrative in an attempt to hoodwink the people of Point Fortin that the PNM shut down NESC in Point. To debunk that, NESC had to close its doors because the admission rate was drastically reduced. The intake was little to nothing for the campus to sustainably operate.

However, through adversity arises opportunity and I am currently in talks with the Minister to have NESC programmes be revamped in Point Fortin to attract the youth in the south-western peninsula to develop and monetize their skills. Madam Speaker, the Opposition has no moral authority to comment on education and training development in Point Fortin because they have left the Point Fortin East Secondary School to remain under ruins during their administration. But now I am elated to announce that improvements on one of Point Fortin premiere education institution would be fully realized under this administration. [Desk thumping] They left the children of Fanny Village without a primary school, without a home for their entire tenure and turned their back on the children of Chatham without an inclination of care, but, Madam Speaker, under this administration, that would be a thing of the past and our children would have a place to call a home for their education in the not-too-distant future.
Madam Speaker, this budget has shown yet again its commitment to the development of the south west. Point Fortin is now experiencing an exponential advance to its infrastructural framework propelling the south-western region for a highly robust and competitive economy.

The Solomon Hochoy highway extension to Point Fortin. The highway extension to Point Fortin speaks to the political strength of the PNM for a highway would not just improve the quality of transportation and the road network in the south connected to the rest of the country but the social, economic and fiscal growth being poised for rejuvenation to our constituency and areas surrounding it.

Madam Speaker, the Opposition Leader in her usual rhetoric accused this Government of selling out the nation, lest we forget that it was under her watch as Prime Minister that sold out millions of dollars into the hands of a foreign contractor who abandoned the project upon bankruptcy on the eve of the 2015 general election. [Desk thumping] A blatant injustice meted out to the people of the south whom they also represent. Madam Speaker, if it was not for the strength of our Prime Minister and representation through the Members for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West and San Fernando West, those who thought they could have gotten away with what belongs to the people of Trinidad and Tobago had what was coming for them. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, under that sinking ship of an administration, when they were attempting to construct the highway, not a day could have passed where workers were not striking for payments. Every other day, the project was making the news for work stoppages, protest and turmoil. But the people rejected them, and when the PNM took the wheel of governance, we are seeing this project every day nearing completion. Every day as I leave Point Fortin, bridges, bypasses, paving, are all taking place. Madam Speaker, very soon, you will leave Port of
Spain and reach to Point Fortin in just over one hour, \textit{[Desk thumping]} connecting you in the far north to the south west. And as I said before, PNM performance will beat UNC old talk any day, any time. \textit{[Desk thumping]}

What this highway means to us in Point Fortin is the increased investment into local economy of the constituency. With more traffic in and out of the region, an attraction for new essential businesses, the expansion of the retail and sales industry, the proliferation of entrepreneurship and new forms of businesses being crafted manifesting itself into favourable economic competitive environment. The wheel would now turn. We at the south will now be at the beacon of employment and opportunity shifting the paradigm. In other words, south is love. We know that things were not easy when we had to deal with the Petrotrin debacle but our resilience as a people stood strong and we are now at the threshold of a new wave of opportunity being delivered at our doorsteps. \textit{[Desk thumping]}

Madam Speaker, for decades, the clamour of the people of Point Fortin for the new hospital has been at the centre of everyone’s heart. Unavailability of basic services, limited space, deteriorating structures plagued the people of Point Fortin for far too long. The UNC touted that they built the hospital and because of them, it was completed but, Madam Speaker, I did not know that putting up two billboards, digging some dirt with great fanfare, coupled with uncertain contractual agreements a mere few weeks before an election was an indication of an intention to complete or build. For the UNC to believe that they had a hand in ensuring that the construction, completion and development of our new state-of-the-art hospital is a mere figment of their shallow imagination.

Nevertheless, the people of Point Fortin and certainly myself can now depend on a health care system that would ensure that our health remains our wealth. \textit{[Desk thumping]} The hospital is 100 per cent functional and has been open
for the last few months. This 100-bed facility with expansive departments in hospitality and human resource and the state-of-the-art modernized medical equipment will now be providing hundreds for the people, increasing their need for services like transportation, food and beverage, simulating essential enterprises.

Additionally, Madam Speaker, with the new drive for a digitized way of life, as mentioned before, our hospital is poised to become a leader in medical digitization. Out of abundance of benefits from the health care system utilizing efficient modern technology such as accessing high quality diagnostic systems and cutting-edge technology equipment, we can now rely that those in need of help are treated with the ultimate care without risk of leaving the constituency to other places for simple treatment.

The Mahaica Oval. Madam Speaker, another PNM commitment to the people of Point Fortin is the completion of Mahaica Oval. This historic ground would have been the birthplace of dozens of great national athletes and sportsmen and women all groomed and trained under the legends in the sporting fraternity, nationally and internationally acclaimed right from Point Fortin; and please allow me to name a few. In football, we had the likes of Monty Douglas, recent deceased, Warren Archibald, Leroy DeLeon, Steve David, Wilfred “bong to score” Cave, Leo Brewster; athletics: Alvin Daniel, Jeremy Richards, Machel Cedenio just to name a few, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

This project was another project that was made the laughing stock of sport from the previous UNC administration who thought it better to implement a scandalously corrupt LifeSport programme than to invest into the completion of Mahaica Oval. Impressively, Madam Speaker, in over a year, the oval is now approximately 75 per cent complete. [Desk thumping] You can stand by the hospital on the main road and see the magnanimous pavilion standing tall above
the village. This impressive sporting centre would proliferate a series of economic expansion within the constituency whilst contributing to national development.

The potential of a viable sport tourism product can now be realized. This modern form of economic activity plays an eccentric role in overall travel, entertainment and leisure. Through this, we would see this magnificent architecture be the centre for the community development and enhancement. Furthermore, through the hosting of the national sporting activities would be attracting citizens throughout the country to visit the south-western borough indulging in local economy, increasing opportunities to all our enterprise and business owners.

Added to the national sporting aesthetic is the potential for Point Fortin to hold regional and international sporting engagement. With this new oval, we can see our local football team, the Point Fortin Civic F.C., who would have qualified recently to participate in the CONCACAF regional tournament. Madam Speaker, this is an opportunity where the Mahaica Oval can now host competing countries from Latin America and the wider Caribbean but it does not end there. Since these football teams are not coming by themselves, they will arrive here with their families, they would be tailed by their fellow countrymen and fans. Therefore, conversations of establishing guesthouses, villas and even a 50- to 100-bedroom hotel must be at the forefront.

This postulates an expansive job market for service providers from the output of these investments. The increased air travel and need for hospitality would make a clarion call for new jobs to be established and the increment of taxes and foreign exchange to the national Treasury. All of these stemming from the investment into the development of the Mahaica Oval. And I must commend my colleague, the Member for Tobago West, Minister of Sport and Community Development [Desk thumping] for ensuring that the oval be completed in such a
timely manner.

Madam Speaker, the Accelerated Housing Programme stands as another way in which the people of Point Fortin would benefit under the infrastructural thrust of this PNM Government. Other projects such as the completed Techier Community Centre and the development of the new Point Fortin Fire Station are testimonies that this administration is strenuously committed to ensuring that social, economic, cultural, educational and infrastructural elements of the constituency and by far, the nation remains at the very top of its developmental agenda.

Madam Speaker, as a Member of Parliament for Point Fortin, allow me to use a few minutes to highlight this awesome constituency. I am quite sure that you are aware that Point Fortin is the cultural capital of Trinidad and Tobago. Every year, with 2020 being an exception, we host the highly anticipated borough day celebrations held in recognition of our ascension to borough status 40 years ago. Madam Speaker, this almost month-long celebration is overflowing with pan motorcades, early J’ouvert morning, dozens of cultural shows and spotlights. This package of culture can be further invested by Government to make it the benchmark and yardstick for other communities to use to develop their cultural footprint within the national space, refining and amplifying our national cultural output within the international market.

With that being said as MP, I am a strong advocate for the establishment of a Point Fortin academy for the performing arts where we can house our young and upcoming local musicians and creatives, providing the platform for their talents to be developed and most importantly, marketed and utilized. And legendary icons like Vaugnette Bigford, Louise Lewis, Superblue, Fay-Ann Lyons, Cro Cro, Iwer George, Shaquilla and comedians like Damian Melville and Gillian Smith, among other distinguished men and women who can be properly recognized and given
just due in response to their outstanding contribution to the cultural architecture of our nation. Through the new concessions and incentives provided by the Minister in this fiscal package can now lead into the right direction of carrying the conversation of consolidating our cultural aesthetic to further dimensions of development.

Madam Speaker, the issue of deteriorating roads remains a constant problem that we face in the constituency, the various potholes and leakages that abound. However, today, I am pleased to report that after discussion with the Minister of Public Utilities and Minister of Works and Transport that we would first address the water issue where WASA would undergo the replacement of a 50-year-old main water line within the constituency and we can expect after this upgrade, a series of road surface paving and rehabilitation. Madam Speaker, the La Brea dry dock and ship building complex would also prove beneficial to the people of Point Fortin and this would provide job opportunities to the south-west peninsula.

Madam Speaker, as I conclude, allow me to express my ultimate and sincerest gratitude to the people of Point Fortin. My wife, my children, the constituency executive and the hardest working councillors and aldermen in all of Trinidad, for without whom I could not have been here standing on their behalf today. For 10 years I have selflessly served Point Fortin as a councillor, deputy mayor and mayor and now as the MP, the vision that I had for Point Fortin when I started back in 2010 never one day dwindled or ran cold. I used every opportunity to serve the people of Point Fortin selflessly through humility. Madam Speaker, the people of Point Fortin are resilient and strong-minded. The people of Point Fortin are progressive and a supportive family of a community and the people of Point Fortin deserve the best and they surely chose the best party to lead them for the next five years. [Desk thumping]
I am humbled to deliver my maiden speech in this honourable Chamber and at 33 years old, I want to encourage the young people to drive for excellence. Let your ambitions drive you to succeed and do not ever change to fit in, always stand out. Madam Speaker, with those few words, I thank you. [Desk thumping]

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, as advised by the hon. Member for Point Fortin, this is his maiden speech and I congratulate him. [Desk thumping]

**The Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport (Hon. Foster Cummings):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to join in this budget debate for the financial year 2020/2021. I do so with a deep sense of humility and gratitude. I thank Almighty God for the gift of life, for keeping me and guiding me to this point of my political journey. Although my life in politics in Trinidad and Tobago spans the period of over three decades, I feel like my journey has just begun. I feel rejuvenated and ready to do the people’s business, to represent the people, the proud people, the proud and enterprising people of La Horquetta/Talparo. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, we ran a clean campaign and I have committed to work with all of my constituents, including those of the Opposition party because after we are elected, we are to serve all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I really want to say thank you to my political leader and Prime Minister, not because it is the fashionable thing to do or to say but because he has placed his confidence in me and assigned me a task that many felt was beyond my reach. For that I say to him, thank you. [Desk thumping]

**4.45 p.m.**

I must also say thank you to the decent and God-fearing people of my constituency who placed their trust in me and who placed their trust in the People's National Movement and voted overwhelmingly for a Government that they can
depend on; a Government to take Trinidad and Tobago forward through progressive and forward-thinking and responsible governance. Thank you to the people of La Horquetta/Talparo.

And, Madam Speaker, when I listened to some of the contributions from the other side, I want to say to them, you have just lost the General Election of 2020. The PNM is the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] In case you forgot, you have just been relegated to the seat of Opposition for a next five years. [Desk thumping] And the people of Trinidad and Tobago, in a very smart and sober exercise, elected the most experienced political party in the history of Trinidad and Tobago to govern their affairs. The people had a choice to choose between you and to choose between the PNM and they chose a party led by the very astute Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley to govern the affairs of this country. [Desk thumping]

Let me say, Madam Speaker, that the PNM cares about the future of Trinidad and Tobago. We have demonstrated that over and over again. And if you observe the way this country has been run over the last five years, if you pay attention to how this Government handled the situation when we found ourselves in the midst of a pandemic, the observers would say that the PNM has done extremely well in Trinidad and Tobago. I say thank you to Trinidad and Tobago for once again electing the People's National Movement as the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I paid some attention to a contribution made a short while ago. And Madam Speaker, you know, the story of Caroni (1975) Limited is one that is very close to me, because I come from central Trinidad and my father worked at Caroni (1975) Limited. So as a student, I paid particular attention to the history of this industry. It is from this industry that the funds to fund my education and those of my siblings would have come from the sweat of my father who was a
labourer at Caroni (1975) Limited. And so I recall from my readings, that in 1975, when the then Taitt & Lyle ran into problems that the Government of Dr. Eric Williams bought 51 per cent of that company in order to save the jobs of those who were engaged in that industry at the time. [Desk thumping] And even though Taitt & Lyle maintained the management of the industry at the time, even then the company started to accrue losses.

And Madam Speaker, following that, for years after year after year, Caroni (1975) Limited ran at a loss. And let me just share from a column written by Raffique Shah that was published on July 20, Wired868. And Madam Speaker, this is a gentleman who has experience in the sugar industry. At one time he even represented the farmers. Here is what he had to say. Let me just share part of it with you.

“By 1992, Caroni had accumulated debts amounting to approximately TT$2 billion. Patrick Manning as prime minister decided to act decisively”—and—“appointed a Tripartite Committee...”

And further in the article:

“Based on the”—report from this committee—“the Manning Government wrote off Caroni's $2 billion debt, giving the company a new, debt-free start.”


That was the story of Caroni (1975) Limited at its time.

Madam Speaker, and eventually the Government decided to take action for this loss-making enterprise. Coming out of that probably what can be described as one of the best separation packages in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, the
settlement to former Caroni (1975) Limited workers involved gratuity payments, a service residential lot and a two-acre parcel of agricultural land. That is PNM policy. And in the usual attempt at courthouse politics, the UNC sought to take the Government of the day to court in an effort to demonstrate to their supporters that they were somehow doing something to represent them. But the policy was a PNM policy. To date thousands of those workers have benefited from PNM policy and been given a residential lot and an agricultural plot.

Madam Speaker, the question can be asked what use has those agricultural plots been put to since then; whether those plots have been put into service; whether they have been cultivated; whether they have been put into production. That is the question that must be asked. What I do know is from reports in the media, that many of those lots have been sold by the former workers of Caroni (1975) Limited. That is the reality, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, so that when Members of the other side tell the story of Caroni (1975) Limited, they must do it in a manner that sends the correct information to the population of Trinidad and Tobago. The PNM has consistently, from Dr. Eric Williams, to Prime Minister Chambers to Prime Minister Manning and to our current Prime Minister, supported the workers, and now former workers of Caroni (1975) Limited. We continue to do so, and that is what the Agriculture Minister put on the *Hansard* earlier on in his contribution.

Madam Speaker, the country, as I said earlier, made a decision, and they made a decision not to return to the period of 2010 to 2015, a period that has been described by many as reckless endangerment of our country resources. The country made a decision to put the future of the country in hands that are caring and will implement policies and introduce legislation that will take our country in a developed status direction.
Madam Speaker, we can only hope, we can only hope that our friends on the other side will take their assignment to Opposition seriously, in a civic-minded way, with the rights and responsibilities that we would attach to such an assignment, not continue to stand in the way of our development, not continue to stand and object to things that, even during their tenure, was a policy prescription designed by them.

I am always amazed to observe the UNC Opposition party stand and object to policies that were their policies when they were in Government. Sometimes almost word for word brought back to the House, and they will object to it almost as though it is a very strange document that they would have never seen before; very, very alarming but the citizens will take note.

Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to say a few words to the people of La Horquetta/Talparo, to the people of La Horquetta, the people of Wallerfield, the people of Greenvale, the people of Talparo, Mundo Nuevo, Brazil, San Raphael, Todd’s Road, Mamoral, Las Lomas, Caparo, Manuel Congo. No matter where you live within my constituency, your needs are my concern. Your needs are of concern to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. I share the vision of the Prime Minister to represent all the citizens without fear or favour, affection or ill will in keeping with our Oath of Office.

As Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport working alongside a very hard-working Minister Rohan Sinanan, we are determined to get the job done, and to get the job done, we will. He has my full support and commitment to continue with the excellent level of on-time delivery and the high quality output that that Ministry has maintained under his stewardship.

Madam Speaker, I wish to commend the Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert, and his team at the Ministry of Finance. Madam Speaker, we must say
thank you to this Minister, because these have been trying times in Trinidad and Tobago and he has, with the support of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, been able to keep Trinidad and Tobago afloat and to keep us on a trajectory that would take us and that would sustain us for time to come.

In so doing, I must also say thank you to the Minister of Planning and Development and her team at the Ministry. We must commend them. When good work takes place all parties on both sides must say: Thank you. Good work. Well done, Minister of Finance. Well done Minister of Planning and Development. Well done Prime Minister. Well done PNM Cabinet and PNM Government for keeping Trinidad and Tobago on course.

And so, Madam Speaker, for giving us a budget that demonstrates an understanding of our circumstances and a vision to take our country forward, we say thank you. We are indeed in difficult times. COVID-19 has changed the world and the new normal will dictate the way we do business moving forward. We all have to adapt to these changes. The support of every citizen is required if we are to rise above the challenges that face us. We can do this, Madam Speaker. We are a resilient people and we have a Government in office that cares about the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I am very excited about some of the provisions in this budget, and the impact it will have on the lives of many of my constituents and many citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. One such provision, Madam Speaker, deals with the development of a digital society and the work to be spearheaded by the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation. Imagine Madam Speaker, moving towards e-identity for every citizen as a means of transmitting data to all agencies. It will be a thing of the past to experience poor support, poor services from the public service because, as we introduce this development, it will
work both for the worker and for the user of these services, facilitating a seamless experience for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, this move will introduce an ease of doing business. It will prevent, it will lead towards the prevention of fraud and forgery and corruption, as citizens will gain access to a wide range of public facilities utilizing new and modern technology.

The benefits, Madam Speaker, will be efficiency in the public service, e-business, e-commerce, e-government, e-banking, First World standard, Madam Speaker, First World standard. These developments, Madam Speaker, will enhance the delivery of a wide range of government services. The Government’s desire is to transform the public sector and to maximize efficiency to increase value to the provider and the users and reduce the economic burden of doing business. We will utilize digital transformation and technology to transform our public service and make delivery of service to the citizen a model of efficiency in this country, Madam Speaker.

We are in the age of digital transformation in Trinidad and Tobago. This change is not only driven by technology but by modernizing our systems and the introduction of cultural evolution in the way that we do business.

Another area, Madam Speaker, is that of agriculture. Agriculture is one of the major interests of many of my constituents of La Horquetta/Talparo. The areas of Wallerfield, Mamoral, Talparo and Manuel Congo, to name that few, historically have been involved in the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago. Indeed many other areas in the rural districts throughout my constituency depend heavily on farming as the main industry.

The stimulus package of 500 million to support the expansion of production and marketing in the agricultural sector is welcome news to many of the young
people in Trinidad and Tobago who wish to pursue agriculture as a career path.

The Government is dealing with land tenure issues and will make idle state lands available to citizens who demonstrate the willingness to get involved in agriculture and the focus, of course, would be on our young people, many of whom are interested in this sector. We aim to make it more attractive to them. We aim to give them the support that they will need. That is to say, to provide the land to make it possible for them to farm, to provide the training, to provide the resources, to provide the agricultural access roads, to provide the funding to make it possible for those young people to enter this industry.

The Government’s previous policy of making the agricultural industry tax free, this initiative will attract citizens to make investments in this sector. This will encourage citizens, as I said earlier on, to make investments in the sector.

I am delighted, Madam Speaker, to introduce these programmes to the constituency of La Horquetta/Talparo and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Prior to this initiative by the Government many persons wanting to get involved in agriculture just did not know how to start. With the programme being introduced at the Ministry of Youth Development and National Services under the very hard-working hon. Fitzgerald Hinds, Member of Parliament for Laventille West, will revolutionize the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government will reintroduce the youth camps. As a matter of fact, I am pleased to support the construction of a new youth camp for the young people of Wallerfield and surrounding areas, as we focus on skills training, as we focus on training for those persons interested in venturing into agriculture. And following that training these persons would be able to access the Government programme of homesteads for those persons who wish to enter into the industry. So not only will they be able to access the land, but they will be able to access a house on the land,
so that their families can get involved in agriculture as well, Madam Speaker. I am very excited about this programme. And moving throughout the constituency, the interest in the programme is just overwhelming.

Madam Speaker, another area of this budget that is quite exciting is the provision of low-cost housing. It is PNM policy at work, the question of low-cost housing. The PNM has the record of constructing the most public housing in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. And when others had an opportunity, the housing moved from low-cost housing out of the reach of those who are most vulnerable in the society. A cost of a house moved from $350,000 to an alarming $850,000 to $1 million; taking it completely out of the reach of those who are most vulnerable and those who should benefit from it. This Government, through policy, is bringing the cost of the house back where it should be, accessible to those who are most in need of it.

The work being done at the LSA, Madam Speaker, is one that really is worthy of commendation. The regularization programme of the Land Settlement Agency, and a programme that we should all commend is the HVIP programme.

Madam Speaker, I recently visited a community that we must soon find a name for because it is a squatting community that is referred to as the Gaza in Jacob Hill, Wallerfield. And if they call the community the Gaza, you can imagine why. And families cried for joy, as members of the LSA who have done their research, who have done their homework moved into that community to regularize some of these families, put in proper infrastructure, drainage and introduce this HVIP, which is the Village Improvement Programme, and demolish some of these shacks and give some hope to the people living in these conditions, constructing starter homes, two-bedroom starter homes.

Many of these families never had proper facilities before the intervention of
the LSA. Students unable to study because of no electricity, no running water, no toilet facilities and you could feel the joy of the residents of these communities as the LSA introduces the HVIP programme. I commend the board and management of the LSA for the work that they have been doing. I commend the Minister of Housing and Urban Development for the work that they have been doing at the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

Madam Speaker, we are on the right track. Through the policies and programmes in this budget for 2021, Trinidad and Tobago can be assured that although we are in trying times, the PNM has the experience, the PNM has the talent, the PNM has the skill, the PNM has the determination, and this Government will take us safely towards the future development of Trinidad and Tobago.

I once again extend congratulations to the Minister of Finance for a budget well done and well-presented and I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I recognize this as the maiden contribution for the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo and I wish to congratulate him. Member for St. Augustine.

Ms. Khadijah Ameen (St. Augustine): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I want to thank you for this opportunity to join in this debate on the budget 2021. Madam Speaker, before I get into my debate, it is with humility that I acknowledge the people of St. Augustine and I give my commitment as their newly-elected representative in this Parliament. I express thanks to the Leader of the Opposition for the opportunity to serve the people who are dear to my heart.

Madam Speaker, at this time in our debate, today is the third day and I am actually surprised at the lack of enthusiasm from several key players in the Government, and I think that really is reflective of the lack of enthusiasm that
Trinidad and Tobago feels about this Government.

I entered this debate sensitive to the anxiety of the constituents of St. Augustine on the East-West Corridor and in the wider Trinidad and Tobago who are seeing food prices and the cost of living, who are hoping that the cost of living would get more affordable; people who have been evicted from their homes because they can no longer afford rent. Rent assistance grant applicants are on hold indefinitely and those who are lucky are finding it is now three months instead of six, a cut the PNM made quietly under this heartless Government.

The contributions from those opposite seem to be from an alternative reality. They are not grounded in reality at all and that disconnect from the people is hurting the citizens. Madam Speaker, there are families who are struggling to put food on the table and parents who are scraping to purchase electronic devices so that children can access online learning. I want to take this opportunity to thank the businesses and generous individuals who have stood with us as we in the St. Augustine, as well as in the UNC, have tried to reach out to those in need without the assistance of this Government.

5.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker, it has been tough, but I gave the commitment to St. Augustine that we will continue to stand with you. Madam Speaker, in this regard, I wish to take this opportunity to bring to the Parliament, for the attention of some of our Ministers, some needs of the constituency. I begin with Curepe Presbyterian School. This school was over 80 per cent complete—between 80 and 90 per cent complete in 2015. It is now covered in vines, snakes, rats, roaches. It is affecting the residents nearby and Curepe is a very densely populated area. For five years, this structure has been left to rot. It has been vandalized and that had nothing to do with COVID. It will now actually cost the Government more to repair and
refurbish that structure than it would have cost if they completed the structure that was started under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government and delivered it. [Desk thumping] In the long run, the State pays more for all these schools that have been abandoned and neglected by this Government.

In this 2021 budget, I did not see an allocation for the completion of the school and I am hoping that the hon. Minister will have some good news for the people of Curepe and in fact, the entire Presbyterian population in Trinidad and Tobago. So, during the standing finance stage—but certainly there will be another occasion when consideration can be given to provide relief to those students and teachers who are very cramped, and they have been doing well, academically.

I want to take this opportunity to appeal for the Minister responsible for community development, for the community centre in Bamboo No. 2 to be refurbished and for one to be constructed in Oropune. The population of Oropune has grown tremendously and they have no community facility.

Land regularization: I heard the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries mention his work with farmers and how important land regularization is to this Government. I call on the Government and I stand ready to work with the authorities for lands to be regularized in Bamboo, in Pasea; for squatter regularization in Dookiesingh Street and in Piarco; for regularization of agriculture lands in Orange Grove, Macoya and Maloney, so that farmers can get leases. They will be able to hold farmers’ badges and feed our nation, and play a critical role in our strategic objective of feeding the nation local content. If this means anything to you, you will ensure that you work with the Members of the Opposition who represent farmers and represent constituencies that feed the nation. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, even the speaker before me, the Member for La
Horquetta/Talparo mentioned LSA regularization in his constituency, and I saw a news article and I paid particular interest because it was the UNC Government led by Basdeo Panday that made squatter regularization a law in 1995. And it was a Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government that brought the amendment to that law in 2013, that allows the Member for La Horquetta/ Talparo to boast of regularization in his constituency. [Desk thumping] And I hope, I hope that squatter regularization is not a political issue, but it is a social issue, and I call on you to work with the Members of the Opposition who represent people in squatter communities who are willing to be regularized.

I move very quickly to Oropune. Oropune is near to the airport for those who know. And there are long-standing compensation issues in Oropune. There was a relocation of residents with the expansion of the airport in the year 2000 and payments for compensation started in the year 2011, under the then People’s Partnership Government. Most of those people were paid but there are 41 outstanding owners, landowners to be paid and they have to be paid by Caribbean Airlines. A speaker before me mentioned, and it was in a Newsday report where with the CEO of Caribbean Airlines paid himself a half a billion-dollar bonus. And there are so many issues with Caribbean Airlines, so, “ah feel if yuh cud give yuhself ah half ah million”, you could deal with the people who you have been owing since the year 2000. So I ask for this issue to get some attention.

In Oropune, Madam Speaker, the original Oropune development was expanded by HDC under different governments. In 2018, this area was one of those areas that was devastated by the flood. It was unfortunate. The hon. Prime Minister visited several areas and when he came to Oropune, he reached to the gas station in Piarco and spoke to the media, but he did not go in to see the devastation. And I really wish he and his entourage had done that. And I do not think that those
appropriation have an appreciation as they do for what took place in Greenvale. But it was almost the same thing that happened in Oropune. I do not know if it is because Greenvale falls in a marginal constituency and all this Government cares about is votes. [Desk thumping] That is discrimination and we spoke earlier about political discrimination—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

Ms. K. Ameen:—and discriminating by constituencies but I want to move— I want to move, Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Ms. K. Ameen:—to ask for more funding—

Madam Speaker: The Member for Arouca/Maloney rose on a point of order. Member.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Yes, Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6) on the use of the term “discrimination”. It is imputing improper motives.

Madam Speaker: Member, I will just ask you to withdraw that and I think you could find another way to say that exact thing that you would like to convey.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would just want to reiterate that I would not—

Madam Speaker: You did not withdraw.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes, I withdraw. I am not accusing the Government of discrimination at all. I am saying very firmly that there should be no discrimination when it comes to dealing with these issues. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I think it is people who know these communities know that more funding and more resources have gone to Greenvale than have gone to Oropune who suffered the same flood and even the wider constituency. So I say to the Government, the election is over, so your priority in terms of spending resources in areas where—
marginal constituencies and so on, I think now you can afford to deal more fairly, now that the elections is over, hopefully. So I trust that the deteriorating roads in Oropune that have been deteriorating because of the flooding, this would come under HDC.

So the Member for Arima, I want to ask her to work with us to also deal with the lack of recreation spaces. There is a very active Police Youth Club doing wonderful things but they do not have a space to function. In fact, there is no proper full recreation facility because the HDC at the time as a developer did not put in these facilities. There is no community centre. There is also no space for small and local businesses. So, for example, there is a lady who was selling phulouri from her apartment just to her neighbours, and she got a letter from the HDC because commercial activity is not allowed in these areas.

Under the People’s Partnership, commercial spaces or community malls were established and we have one in La Horquetta. So I want to request from the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, a collaboration with HDC, to facilitate small and micro entrepreneurs from these communities, and it may apply in other places outside of St. Augustine constituency to allow residents to generate incomes in these tough times. There are also vacant plots that can be used for kitchen gardens and I have a very active group of young people there who would love to meet with you and get your permission to execute their ideas. And I hope and trust that you would give them that.

Madam Speaker, flooding. The Minister of Works and Transport spoke earlier and I know he gave on overview. You know, on Friday, while the Member for St. Joseph was speaking, while he was on his legs, we were seeing reports of flooding on the Eastern Main Road in St. Joseph, so he may not have had the benefit of knowing that to mention it in his contribution. But the flooding along the
Eastern Main Road, it affects the St. Joseph constituency, St. Augustine, as well as Tunapuna and it is a perennial problem and we are seeing it in other areas now. The Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West would have mentioned it. But I want to ask the Minister of Works and Transport, and I want to ask those Members on the other side, whose constituency is affected, to come together and let us have this issue properly dealt with. You cannot only run out there in your boots when it is election time and then forget about it when you win. [Desk thumping]

We have outstanding works on the river banks and the floodgates in Bamboo. My neighbouring St. Joseph is also affected by that. We have need for a flood gate by the Guayabal River in Valsayn South where you can have up to six feet of water, water covering cars because of water flowing in. And I thank those residents for showing me what those options are, and I ask that we work with the authorities to get that done.

The Blackman Ravine in Curepe. In Curepe and Spring Village, those areas are flooded because of that work, that Blackman Ravine and the interchange in Curepe. It is a big national project. Everybody looks at it from the highway but it has had negative effects on the community. And I want to appeal to the Minister of Works and Transport, this project is not completed until the issues that affect the local residents and particularly, the flooding is dealt with. The Trincity area in Orange Grove, up to yesterday, Madam Speaker, we are sitting in Parliament here and the highway in Trincity is flooded, cars cannot go through and this is happening regularly after a short rainfall.

I also want to ask that, on behalf of my constituents, to raise one matter that has to do with banking and finance. Madam Speaker, when the lockdown first came in because of the COVID pandemic, the Prime Minister made an announcement, a suggestion that banks provide a moratorium of about six months.
And it was relevant to businesses, homeowners with mortgages, people with car loans and in fact, anyone with a loan from the bank.

And what is happening now is that that six months has passed but different banks have different rules and guidelines in their policies. So, at the end of the period, some banks may have a high interest rate. At the end of the period, there is a demand for that applicant who could not afford to pay that loan payment during the six months, to now pay with interest. And of course, in many cases, their source of income has not been restored. So, just as the policy was initiated based on the Prime Minister’s plea, even though banks are private entities, certainly the Government can make an intervention on behalf of the citizens to ensure that the banks are not taking advantage of our citizens in this time of the COVID lockdown.

Madam Speaker, Saint Augustine was theologian and philosopher. And this takes me into another area that I am passionate about which is tertiary education and skills training. In the year 2012, the Cabinet appointed the St. Augustine Education City Committee with a view of creating a growth pole around UWI and the St. Augustine campus, where there are over 70 other education institutions ranging from primary, secondary, and tertiary, technical and vocational and so on. Sadly, the work of this committee was scrapped by this visionless PNM Government. But we have seen so many initiatives brought by the People’s Partnership that were guided by international best practices when it comes to tertiary education and skills training being thrown by the wayside.

The Minister of Youth Development and National Services spoke in his contribution and, you know, just the way he used the phrase and he said, “digitalization is about young people”, and I am wondering if that is the reason you stopped giving young people laptops? If you claim that digitalization is about
young people and then you go on to boast that there were three young people in your campaign, then it tells me a lot about how this Government views young people, and the inclusiveness of young people.

So, under this Government, what we have had in the past five years is NESC as one of the leading providers in technical and vocational training in this country being stymied. Madam Speaker, there were three NESC centres were closed under this PNM Government, including the Point Fortin centre. Mayaro centre may also close because of cuts in funding. And you know, there was a JSC meeting of state enterprises where the chairman of MIC was pleading with the Government, because MIC was being deprived of funding, and in fact, he said they had 50 per cent cuts over three years and they very well might have to send home people. In other words, more jobs to be lost under this PNM.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Trade and Industry Enterprise Development also spoke earlier, and in fact, I saw a wonderful documentary where that Minister was boasting of the cocoa industry in this country, and the international chocolate industry and how Trinidad’s cocoa is one of the best. But the Cocoa Research Unit in Trinidad and Tobago has also had a tremendous cut in allocation. And I want to implore, Madam Speaker, that research and development is a key part of pushing our cocoa industry forward. And I ask the Government to reconsider how they are doing—because that is a very sensitive niche market, and I heard previous Ministers mention it, but however, in the actual allocation, you have less money for it. So you are saying one thing but we are seeing on the books something completely different.

Madam Speaker, I think every successive Government before this one, up to 2015, recognized the value of education, whether it was primary, pre-primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational. And I think the incompetence of the
previous Minister of Education has eroded decades of progress in tertiary education in Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] I really do hope that under the present Minister, who is the MP for St. Ann’s East and the Minister in the Ministry, who is the MP for D’Abadie/O’Meara, there will be some improvement.

Madam Speaker, the GATE. Prior to dollar for dollar and GATE, many middle income and working class families could not access tertiary education. And while, for instance, students living in rural communities, students suffering from chronic medical conditions, students being orphaned or belonging to single-parent homes are some of the factors that prevent young people from accessing—or people in general, from accessing tertiary education. The major factor in preventing access is the prohibitive direct and indirect cost of tertiary education. And GATE subsidizes 100 per cent of the tuition expenses at the graduate level and 50 per cent for selected post-graduate programmes.

You know, Madam Speaker, in the run up to the general elections, the hon. Prime Minister declared at a public meeting that GATE was a PNM programme and he said, “Why would the PNM want to interfere or shut down a programme like that, that the PNM created?” Well, I was happy to hear that the programme would not be shut down. But in July of 2016, the hon. Prime Minister also reassured the UWI Mona Campus students, “You are in the medical field, you ought not to worry.” That was his quote. And a year later, Madam Speaker, this Government has deceived the nation. GATE was cut by $50 million in the year 2017. So, in 2015, they campaigned and they said, “Do not worry.” In 2016, once again, “You ought not to worry.” And by 2017, it was cut, cut, and more cut. GATE was cut and it was cut by $150 million in 2018. Madam Speaker, this is a betrayal of the PNM’s 2015 promise in their manifesto to this nation.

The People’s Partnership kept our manifesto promise to secure and expand
GATE, and the education landscape experienced unprecedented reform. Under a government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, GATE was expanded to $650 million annually. GATE became more inclusive and it now includes technical and vocational education and training which is a critical component of personal development. GATE was made more accountable under our government through the enforcement of using students GPAs. So you must get a certain GPA, maintain a certain GPA for GATE to continue funding you. So that students were not just flunking out and going to more courses. GATE auditing and monitoring was strengthened for public and private institutions. The GATE eService was introduced so that students could apply online. That was introduced by a government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

And you know what? At that time GATE was aligned to certain sectors of national development based on the Government’s priority. So all of these changes supported a very robust and relevant tertiary education system. And what you had, what the effect was, an increase in participation.

In 2010, there is a 42 per cent participation in tertiary education. And under the leadership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar, by 2015, the Government had surpassed its target and reached 65 per cent participation in tertiary education. And, Madam Speaker, we did that while reducing wastage and abuse and increasing the efficiency of the programme.

And you know, nothing is wrong with a new Government changing priorities based on the economic conditions, for example—or based on your own strategic objective. But what is your objective? Have you identified areas that could be supported by GATE that would create a workforce to better achieve your objectives? This Government has cut GATE for students over the age of 50. This defies the notion of lifelong learning.
There have been utterances from the Government that is causing a lot of concern in the national community about moving the retirement age from 60 to 65. I do not think the Government has articulated enough on this matter. You threw it out in the budget and citizens are now worried. But I ask, if you are going to increase the retirement age, are you going to reconsider GATE funding to persons who are over 50 years of age?

PNM has cut GATE to medical students in the St. George’s University in Grenada, in spite of the Prime Minister’s assurance. The PNM has cut GATE from private institutions and they said that it was because these programmes were not accredited by the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago. But, Madam Speaker, there are many public institutions that are not yet accredited, but they access GATE funding. So the Government has to be consistent and deal with that. I also see that the Accreditation Council has not gotten much in the budget and there is still work for them to do. So I plead with the Government to be consistent when it comes to GATE funding across public as well as private institutions.

Madam Speaker, the PNM also introduced a means test when it came to GATE. Now, that might sound good, but what does it translate into? It translates into students paying at least 25 per cent of their tuition cost if the household earns less than $10,000 per month. So a household with a mother employed as an OJT, earning $6,250 at the undergraduate level and a father working taxi, for example, earning about $4,000 a month, will now be forced to find money to pay for two or three children if they are interested in pursuing tertiary education. What is more devastating is that this criteria—it is not clear what criteria they are using to determine household income. An entire two years has expired since the PNM mentioned that in a budget and they are yet to provide the students, the faculty and institutions with the adequate information for them with regard to this policy. That
must be corrected.

Madam Speaker, there is one thing I want to bring to your attention that I do not know if the Government is aware. At present, students for whom GATE has been approved were told by the Ministry—were told by the institutions that the Ministry is not making releases to the institutions. So much so, that in the last semester, a number of students of UTT as well as UWI could not register for new courses or graduate because of non-payment of fees by this Government. Many of them were forced to borrow in order to pay so that they can actually graduate or do their new courses. This requires an administrative fix and I want to ask the Minister to look into this and have it corrected. I am not aware that there is a system to have students reimbursed, so I am pleading it has to be corrected and you must—the suppression of funds from the Minister of Finance is the root cause of this problem. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I want to move very quickly to a recommendation. When it comes to tertiary education, the Government may be quick to say, “Listen, things bad, COVID, we had to cut down expenditure.” But education is one of those areas that you cannot cut down in a way that it cripples the next generation. The United Nations has some recommendations and it includes:

To—“Protect Education Financing and Coordinate for Impact”
These are recommendations to assist governments and stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent the next generation from being negatively impacted. It continues:

To—“Build Resilient Education System for Equitable and Sustainable Development”
To—“Reimagine Education and Accelerate Change in Teaching and Learning”

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Time does not permit me but connectivity and removing barriers are also among the recommendations and again, we can mention the laptops.

But, Madam Speaker, there is no doubt that every sector of our life is affected by this global COVID pandemic. We are being called upon to be innovative in every sector. One of the areas that I felt that the Government missed an opportunity to be innovative in this time is local government.

5.45 p.m.

I want to begin by outlining some of the ways that we on this side believe the local government could play a role during the COVID pandemic. The sanitizing of public spaces such as markets, schools, fire and police stations, public washrooms, recreation facilities, homes for the aged, the dissemination of information on public health awareness, placing signage in public spaces, delivering information to homes and local government—local economic development.

Madam Speaker, regional corporations are in charge of marketplaces, but they also regulate vending and further, I think they must be encouraged and supported to create spaces for temporary vending in active spaces within towns, within cities, within busy areas in our communities, “so that the lady in Oropune would not get a letter from HDC,” if there are proper places provided for local economic development through our regional corporations. Due to job losses, we have seen a number of persons, we have seen the emergence of small and micro enterprises, such as, food vending, sale of produce, plants and craft, and municipal cooperation should be given funding to facilitate local economic development within their region. But you know, Madam Speaker, there was not a single mention of local government in this budget, it seems as though it is only for local

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government elections that local government is important to the PNM. [Desk thumping]

In 2015, they had a PNM Manifesto and they promised local government reform. In 2016, there was a local government election, and again, promises and a lot of talk on their platform and nothing materialized, PNM again. There were 14 fancy town meetings where the then Minister spoke about devolution of power, and more resources, and greater autonomy going to regional corporations, “eh heh”? In 2019, nothing happened after that you know, and in 2019 when there was another local government election, again they started the campaign about local government reform. And up to today, local government reform is not a reality under the PNM. I want to ask this Government to stop “mamaguying” local government. [Desk thumping]

When we were in government, there were a number of things that we did to empower local government. We gave councillors offices, we ensured that they had a full complement of professionals in each corporation, [Desk thumping] regional corporations received the monies allocated to them in a timely manner. [Desk thumping] What is happening under this Government now, is a suppression of funds. So even the measly allocation that regional corporations are given in the budget, they are not being given the full amount, again, a stifling of local government. Self help used to function in tandem with local government; that does not happen again. The T&TEC and the lighting of many recreation grounds, that was a collaboration that hardly ever, if it does happen at all. At present workers in the local government corporations are working on a 2013 salary. Did you refuse to negotiate and pay these people because of COVID? This incompetence was taking place long before COVID. So, these issues that we have in local governments now
are not happening because of the pandemic. It was happening long before. There is a huge disparity in the funding in regional corporations.

Madam Speaker, do you know that the three top funded corporations in this country are PNM corporations, and the three lowest funded are UNC held corporations? That, Madam Speaker, will cause people to believe that there is discrimination in the funding of local government bodies and the size of these regional corporations vary, but when you compare the amount of money they are allocated for different things, I can tell you now in Princes Town, the allocation for each person is $1.80 per day, $1.80 to do everything, collect garbage, clean their drains, fix their roads, clean their cemeteries, and so on. While in Port of Spain, it is $16 a day. That is based on the allocation from each corporation. There must be fairness and equitable distribution of resources of funding.

Madam Speaker, local government has been—I spoke of the suppression of funding already. Municipal police, this Government also boasted about recruiting municipal police officers and I want to ask, “Where are you going to put them?” Very few corporations have full police stations, they do not have the vehicles, the money allocated for the accommodation of these municipal police officers, they are in cramped spaces. The moneys for allocation of uniforms, the vehicles, training, equipment, it must be commensurate with the strength of the force. So, in this budget though, Madam President, I think it was only San Juan/Laventille that got 1.5 million in their Development Programme for a municipal police station and most regional corporations got 500,000. “I do not know what police station you are going to build with 500,000, and why you expect a regional corporation”—that is abuse that, Madam Speaker, must stop. The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government must develop a comprehensive plan for municipal policing,
together with the 14 regional corporations and ensure that they are adequately supported.

The burden for the neglect of the Government often falls on local government. You do not fix agricultural access roads, there is flooding, there is no water, it is regional corporation that is called upon to give the support. You know, the Minister of Public Utilities in his maiden contribution, said that the UNC burdened this country's taxpayers with the cost of desalinated water. I want to tell you in case you were not around, it was under the UNC that people actually had water in their pipes in this country. [Desk thumping] It is very clear, Madam Speaker, that the PNM does not care about empowering local government. Their cuts in local government have had nothing to do with COVID. They have been abusive of local government long before the COVID pandemic. [Desk thumping] It is very clear that the PNM continues to break their promises at will.

Madam Speaker, the “blame Kamla” rhetoric has a “sell-by date” and it has expired. What we are witnessing is this Government's transition into the “blame COVID” rhetoric stage. And all of it is because of their mismanagement and incompetence, which started long before COVID.

We could sugar coat it how we want, Madam Speaker, the citizens of this country are the ones who feel the hurt. Just because, and every speaker has been talking about the election results, I want to tell you and I want to warn every Minister of Government, you took an oath to this country. Just because people voted for you does not mean that they deserve you to abuse them. Just because people voted for you does not mean that you could do what you want now because you are in charge.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6) please.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, we are not abusing anybody.

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Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, every political party that contests—

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine, two Members rose on a point of order and again, as I say I understand the difficulties of being inside of there and understanding what is going on out here. I believe Member for Arouca/Maloney rose on Standing Order 48(6). Okay, and that is with respect to something being inflicted by the Government on people. I will ask you not to go there and say it in another way that will be more parliamentary please. So withdraw it and say it in another way.

Ms. K. Ameen: Okay, thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, just because people vote for a government—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, was that withdrawn?

Ms. K. Ameen:—deserve to be abused by that government. I am not accusing the Government of abusing—

Madam Speaker: I am on my legs and as I understand the difficulty.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yeah.

Madam Speaker: All right, but I guess it is something we have to adjust to, all the new normals we talking about. Okay, so one, I have asked you to withdraw it, I have asked you to say it in another way, what you attempted just now I do not—in my view is not, again, acceptable.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I was not accusing the Government of abuse, I just want to be very clear and I do withdraw that. I do humbly withdraw that, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: And what I am saying is, I will accept that nothing any Member says is intentional, okay, so I do not need to explain that. I have asked you to withdraw, you withdraw. There is no need to explain, just move on, thank you.
Ms. K. Ameen: Right. Madam Speaker, every political party that contests an election aspires to be in government, some more realistically so of course, than others. Trinidad and Tobago is a democratic state. Every creed, race and gender must find an equal place in Trinidad and Tobago. The role of the Opposition is to be critical, the role of the Opposition is to question the Government.

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine your time is now expired. Member for Tunapuna.

Mr. Esmond Forde (Tunapuna): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is interesting to know that I entered this debate at this time, to speak after the member for St. Augustine. You know, we would have entered the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation at the same time in 2010, when she would have been the Chairman of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, and I, the then councillor for the electoral district of Auzonville/Tunapuna. You know, to sit here and hear her speak about local government and local government reform, when she was the Chairman of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation for three years and fully well aware of the operations of the municipalities of Trinidad and Tobago.

Local government, as we know operates on a daily basis day to day, your councillors are the first point of contact. And she spoke there just now, the hon. Member spoke just now, giving the notion that local government does not exist in Trinidad and Tobago. Municipal Police, there are Municipal Police at all 14 Regional Corporations in Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation has its fair share. All locally based contractors. The regional corporations do not have to wait for the legislation. You can tender for the contracts and you can receive your contracts in your particular electoral district from the necessary regional corporation. That is already operational at the municipalities.
6.00 p.m.

She spoke about—the hon. Member spoke about recreational grounds. If you know of any recreational ground as of today that is not lit in Trinidad and Tobago, just write your local government councillor. [Desk thumping] Just write your local government councillor and an assessment and feasibility will be done, and they will decide if the particular ground will be lit. But come here today, talking about politics and about who is on this side and who is on that side. The Member is a learned local government representative from since 2010, but wants to score cheap political points here today.

Truck borne water supply: The Member spoke about truck borne water supply. If the Water and Sewerage Authority cannot deliver, again, you can contact your councillor, contact the necessary regional corporation and request a truck borne water supply from your regional corporation. That does not need any reform, that does not need any legislation and it also definitely does not need a local government election in order for that to happen in Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

The Member mentioned, again, COVID-19, the coronavirus pandemic and, you know, speaking about sanitization and so on. All government offices, spaces are readily having sanitization taking place on a daily basis once you are entering the particular organization. Signs are placed at strategic locations in order to ensure that all COVID-19 protocols are observed. Social distancing is practised, pressure testing is done at all government agencies as well as public and private offices throughout Trinidad and Tobago. So, again, my learned colleague, I am not sure where she would have received her information.

But, Madam Speaker, as I stand in this honourable House to make my contribution for the sixth occasion to an Appropriation Bill, I give thanks to the
Almighty God as I make my contribution on the Budget Statement of 2021. As always, we must not be too heavenly minded to forget nor neglect those that are earthly based with us. Madam Speaker, I must extend my gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley for his willingness to have me accompany him into the recent election 2020 battle as the representative for Tunapuna [Desk thumping] and to the voting constituents of my beloved Tunapuna for their vote of confidence in having me continue representing them in this honourable House as their Member of Parliament. [Desk thumping] I thank every 26,000-plus constituent of Tunapuna, whether you voted for me as the right choice or whether you did not vote for me, I am your representative today. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, in my five previous contributions to the debate on budget statements, I have always emphasized on the characteristics of the Tunapuna constituency, its resources, potential resources, the historical and continued demonstrated willingness of its people to engage in innovation whether in thought, words and surety in deeds—be it the workers of the now defunct Orange Grove Sugar Estate; individuals like Prof. Desmond Waithe; economist, Lloyd Best; pianist, Winifred Atwell; renowned singer, Carol Addison; footballer and former MP of this honourable House, Mr. Edward Eddie Hart; [Desk thumping] not forgetting, most recently, and recently demonstrated by Exodus Steel Orchestra, who successfully staged a worldwide pan competition festival in the height of the COVID-19 assault on our world.

Madam Speaker, in addition, I must also congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development on their excellent Budget Statement 2021 presentation, “Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation”. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, as I recall at the beginning of my contribution to
the Appropriation Bill in 2017, I said, and I quote:

“May I boldly say that transformation is on the way.”

In the language of Calculus, we were then defining the underlying assets of Trinidad and Tobago’s economy as we were going forward. The seemingly immovable plantation economy, the plantation of oil and gas is being rolled away to reveal the new future. In this new era, Madam Speaker, the light being shown is blinding—those who continue to sit in the old paradigm of traditional mercantile-based economy backed up by our energy. Madam Speaker, nevertheless, those who are willing to step into an era of innovation, production, import and export replacement and exports generation are being readied to undertake the race to the new place of promise.

Madam Speaker, we, the constituency of Tunapuna are like Joshua in this journey. We have heard, we have acted, we trust our leader Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley and we are assured the vision is attainable. [Desk thumping] We will not adopt any negative posture and suffer the consequence that we will receive the promise. Madam Speaker, little did I know that two years hence, it was no longer a case of willingness but critical for all to adopt for survival and prosperity in Trinidad and Tobago.

The hon. Minister of Finance, in his 2021 budget presentation, clearly articulated the plan of action for the nation for the next fiscal period. In so doing, the budget rooted in the economic realities that are before us, driven in no small measure by COVID-19, the coronavirus pandemic, and has clearly illustrated that going forward is not to be business as usual.

The budget has however, charted a clear way forward for growth and sustainable development of Trinidad and Tobago, highlighting the importance of, and I quote from the budget:
1. Embracing the digital economy.

2. Bringing agriculture at the centre of our diversification drive.

3. Creating an enabling environment for micro, small and medium enterprises across all sectors.

4. Eliminating the obstacles to the ease of doing business in both the public and private sectors.

Madam Speaker, and doing all of this while ensuring that the most vulnerable and marginalized in our society, are not left behind, and I repeat. The vulnerable, the needy, will not be left behind. For this, Madam Speaker, I would like to congratulate again, the hon. Minister of Finance and the hon. Prime Minister for their vision and foresight. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I will now outline just some of the many benefits to the measures outlined in the Budget Statement of 2021 that will accrue to the constituency of Tunapuna. Now, I speak on behalf of the constituency of Tunapuna but, again, all these measures are for all 42 constituencies in Trinidad and also Tobago—all 41 constituencies, sorry about that. All 41 constituencies in Trinidad and Tobago. It is in this regard that my contribution to this debate will be prioritized in the areas of critical interest to my constituents of Tunapuna.

Madam Speaker, Tunapuna, the constituency, can sociologically be classified as a residential community with a high concentration of educational institutions and religious bodies. It is a constituency with a high population density and a relatively young population, with roughly one half falling under the age of 35 years and a significant portion of this group falling within the age group of 10 to 19 years.

Today, Tunapuna is a thriving and rising commercial centre with significant presence from our nation’s top financial institutions. A government administrative
complex, shopping malls, major businesses and facilities and a major Tunapuna Market. Madam Speaker, at this time I will identify the various headings where these benefits are going to be achieved.

The National Statistical Institute. Madam Speaker, the underlining theme of this budget presentation is our entry into the fourth industrial revolution. It is described as the blurring of the boundaries between the physical, the digital and the biological systems. We cannot aspire to enter in and succeed in an environment where the currency is data—and when I say “data”, big data and plenty of data, Madam Speaker—without a properly functioning statistical institution for the collection, collation and distribution for such important data. Therefore, we must congratulate the Finance Minister on this initiative to revive and strengthen the National Statistical Institute.

Madam Speaker, we are of the view that the presence of such an institution is critical for achieving the objectives of transforming our economy. The absence of such an institution might have been in the past, a major contributing factor in the deterioration in our ease of doing business index worldwide, among other factors. Madam Speaker, the absence of such an important institution in our drive to become a digital society of e-government, e-commerce, e-savvy and e-this and e-that would have only led to an e-flat and, of course, an e-disaster. Madam Speaker, this statistical institution or a similarly properly functioning institution was critical in the past and, without a doubt, continues today as we go into the future. [Desk thumping]

I now go to manufacturing. Madam Speaker, the budget speaks to this sector in terms, and I quote, of being the:

“…the digital catalyst for achieving economic transformation and diversification, consolidating in the process a focus on new and niche
markets...for exports.”

Madam Speaker, as is said in the vernacular, and I quote, “This manufacturing is right up we Tunapuna ally.” We have always been a supplier of labour to the manufacturing businesses of the Greater Tunapuna Chamber of Commerce from the old time days, be it the Orange Grove Sugar Estate, the Macoya Industrial Estate, the Trincity Industrial Estate and now we have the eTecK Industrial Estate, all on the fringes of Tunapuna. With the additional incentives being made available in the agricultural sector, we anticipate, Madam Speaker, an upsurge in production by all holders of agricultural leases and lands in the Caura Valley, the Orange Grove and Macoya Agricultural Estates, thus giving rise to increased processing, production, packaging and delivery opportunities for local and foreign investments, foreign exchange and additional employment for all constituents.

Madam Speaker, the already implemented and presently in place manufacturing incentives are:

1. The Electronic Funds Transfer Window.
2. Customs and Excise Voluntarily Compliance Programme.
3. The tweaking of the Value Added Tax system.

An addition of a bond-based refund mechanism and the proposal for the new National Special Economic Zone Regime, will just cater more positively for our economy’s growth and development in the future.

Madam Speaker, this only adds benefit to the Tunapuna constituents where sustainable employment is of a concern. The proposed National Special Economy Zone is significant, important and of critical interest to my constituents, both in terms of employment options and investment opportunities for businesses, again, of the Greater Tunapuna Chamber of Commerce—business opportunities,
especially for the SMEs in the areas such as garment manufacture, distribution, appliances, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, herbs and medicinal plants.

Today, Madam Speaker, I offer to you and this House the Tunapuna/St. Augustine strip. I know and fully well understand the area of which I speak has been designated the education city along with St. Joseph. We have no problem with such plans and the designation. However, with the incentives outlined in the budget and the drive towards an innovation driven economy, we foresee the benefits of these measures resulting in clear, positive spill over effects to the constituency of Tunapuna in agriculture, services and the manufacturing sectors. Madam Speaker, all we are proposing are outward expansions into implementation, innovation, inventiveness and economic spaces for the germination of new ideas, new businesses and production to maximize our diversification thrust with humans at the forefront.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to agriculture. Madam Speaker, the positioning of our agriculture sector as a key pillar of our economic transformation is reflected in the measures outlined by the hon. Minister of Finance. And, again, it was enhanced earlier this morning by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. These measures include:

1. Making agriculture a tax-free industry.
2. The introduction of the 500 million agricultural stimulus package.
3. The centre of excellence in agriculture and biotechnology.

Madam Speaker, these three main measures will contribute, in no small measure to the revitalization of the once well-thriving cocoa plantation in the Maracas and Caura Valleys. This will enhance farmers’ productivity thereby creating jobs in the communities and export markets for our prized Trinidad and Tobago cocoa.
I now turn to infrastructure and construction. Madam Speaker, we are particularly motivated by the policy proposals of the construction sector, for example:

- “delivering quality healthcare through improved health facilities, including new and refurbished hospitals;
- facilitating safety in road transport through the roll-out of a network of roads and highways as well as bridges and walkovers—all built at internationally accepted standards;”

And colleagues and the listening public, I am actually quoting from the Budget Statement of 2021, page 51.

- “improving the supply of water and addressing wastewater issues;
- building educational capacity through a mix of school systems; and
- expanding our housing stock at affordable prices.”

All quoted in the Budget Statement of 2021, “Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation”.

Madam Speaker, in the area of facilitating safety and road transport through a roll out of a network of roads, highways, as well as bridges overpasses and walkovers, Madam Speaker, in this regard, Tunapuna is eagerly, and I repeat, eagerly awaiting the continued and commencement construction of the proposed UWI, Pasea Village, Macoya Gardens and the Orange Grove Churchill Roosevelt Highway overpasses which will improve the traffic and transportation situations in the Tunapuna constituency through improved entrance and exit roadway network access. And, Madam Speaker, those four areas identified: UWI intersection, the Pasea Village intersection, the Macoya Gardens intersection and the Orange Grove intersection, all traverse the Tunapuna constituency. So we look forward to those
construction projects in the very near future.

Madam Speaker, my Government, our Government, under the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, has illustrated its ability to complete all these highway projects effectively and also efficiently, while yielding significant cost savings in the process. And to quote the hon. Minister of Works and Transport, and I quote, “we are doing more with less”. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, projects such as these, as well as the plans for the future construction of the Tunapuna/Caura/Tacarigua Bypass Link Road with a bridge over the Caura River will significantly improve the traffic congestion situation in the Tunapuna constituency and the East-West Corridor. The other aspects of these infrastructure and construction policy and projects proposals of interest to my constituents of Tunapuna will be dealt with later in my contribution.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to “Human Capital”. Yes, that is a heading in the Budget Statement of 2021, “Human Capital”. Madam Speaker, it is not by chance or malice intent that I have always described the constituency of Tunapuna as a residential bedroom community. One of the defining characteristics of man and woman, in this case, is that there is an innate connection to their place of rest and abode. Madam Speaker, Tunapuna constituency is gifted with a unique beauty of panoramic views. Just go to Mount St. Benedict, go into the Caura Valley, and also unique micro climates in the Maracas Valley and also St. Michael Village in the upper St. John Road area. In the days when sugar was king, Tunapuna was a natural resting place for all persons employed in the surrounding and adjacent manufacturing industries. We could refer to the Orange Grove Estates, we can refer to the Macoya Industrial Estate and also the Trincity Industrial Estate.

With the coming of the imperial college of agriculture, its expansion into the University of the West Indies—UWI in St. Augustine—with the resulting allied
and associated institutions, Madam Speaker, Tunapuna continues to play the same role as yesteryear, that of the preferred place of occupancy and residence. This, Madam Speaker, has served to generate additional demand for residency and living space in the constituency of Tunapuna.

Madam Speaker, on entry into this honourable House and continuing up to today, I have always emphasized on the availability and intellectual capacity of our human capital in our communities, most persons who are permanently domiciled in the constituency with a significant portion holding transitory positions over a five to 10-year period. Madam Speaker, you may be asking what they have to do with human capital. That is the question.

However, Madam Speaker, the hon. Finance Minister, in his proposals for human capital has offered many opportunities—listen to me, some of our senior citizens out there, our professionals, our past educators—the hon. Minister in his proposals for human capital has offered many opportunities. He has also called for innovation and inventiveness, given the national worldwide environment, post-COVID-19 pandemic and has outlined in the budget statement the measures towards achieving these goals and objectives.

Madam Speaker, many of us have heard and even referenced many places and areas where consistent application of intellect to existing and projecting future problems resulted in solutions: new industries, manufacturing processes and products with the attached spinoff and value added to economic benefits.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to crime. Madam Speaker, I have always alluded to my Tunapuna constituency of having a tradition of going beyond the boundary. Yes, going beyond the boundary. I am not going to take an ostrich position of burying my head in the sand and refuse to recognize that we have a youth problem. As any other area, with some of our youth, some domiciled as well
as a significant portion transitioning due to our large secondary school educational population and the employment factor.

However, Madam Speaker, juxtaposed to this is a significant portion of our permanent human capital population being retired, and many still have a desire to share their experiences, knowledge and know how, possess the required skills for its transfer to our young people through actually face-to-face exchanges, nurturing and mentoring and real-life experiences.

Madam Speaker, the current and future environment has given a clarion call that there is no business as usual. Some processes must change, new processes must be added. Some must be eliminated and the new processes made for the development and application of our human capital resources. We propose to bring some of our willing retirees and professionals, surplus personnel from the educational and other sectors, subject to the youth needs and requirements. They must interact with some of our troubled youth population, for that is needed by our nation at this time, Madam Speaker. We intend to use the seemingly disregarded and so-called unused human capital to add new value to our Tunapuna constituency and our nation as a whole. We are leaving no one behind, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] We are leaving no one behind. The Ministry of Youth Development and National Service will play a pivotal role in this further development.

I now identify the youth category specifically. Madam Speaker, in related vein, the 2021 budget has a clear focus and a role for our children and youth in the new development thrust, focus ranging from and, again, I quote from the Budget Statement 2021:

1. Measures to protect our youth with the introduction of increased penalties with the selling of alcohol and tobacco cigarettes to them.
Very important.

6.30 p.m.

2. Measures to spur their educational development by outfitting them with laptops and tablets and the related Internet support systems.

3. Measures to encourage youth involvement in our economic transformation with incentives provided to invest in tech startup and new technology business, as well as measures aimed to making agriculture more attractive to our youth of the nation.

Fourthly, Madam Speaker, another measure for the youth:

4. Measures with the introduction of Mi-Fi Internet online services for 45,000 homes, catering especially for our children and students in mind.

Madam Speaker, investing in our young people will always be an asset. To this end, the maximizing of our already existing Member of Parliament for Tunapuna office youth advisory desk to advance the measures outlined above as well as others will be a priority for my constituency going forward.

Let me take this opportunity to outline two initiatives in this context, Madam Speaker. They are: one, Madam Speaker, the Girl Guides’ Hut in Tunapuna. The Girl Guides’ Hut in Tunapuna, it was lease land given by the hon. Dr. Eric Williams, the father of our nation, where they have received 100-year lease back then in order to operate Girl Guides in the constituency of Tunapuna. The building, unfortunately, probably about 20 years ago was demolished and nothing was ever done on the piece of land. However, thanks to, again the Minister of Finance and the line Minister for ensuring that the Girls Guides Hut commenced construction, September 2020, where a new building will be constructed on the property of the Girl Guides’ Hut. And, Madam Speaker, this will be a catalyst and a resurgence for the Girl Guides and also Boys Scouts in our Tunapuna...
constituency. Thank you.

Two, another youth development initiative will be the development of the young people cultural talent. We plan to model and use the Birdsong Music Academy as launch pad and precursor to the establishment of the Tunapuna centre of performing arts. The Exodus Steel Orchestra and other music, dance and drama schools in the constituency will be identified to ensure a holistic approach to the development of this centre. Those are two major youth investments that we will be looking at in the near future in the Tunapunua constituency.

I now proceed to housing. Madam Speaker, the attractiveness of Tunapuna over the years have led to a situation of a lack of land space for residential housing expansion, combined with issue of squatting, encroachment on the forest reserves with accompanying environmental degradation. Madam Speaker, where lands for expansion existed, private developers have already purchased and developed, and continue developing such lands. The cost of these developments is generally outside the financial capability of most traditional Tunapuna residents and their families. Madam Speaker, the Finance Minister, in his presentation, has offered a variety of great incentives and avenues which I am certain, if accessed in the required manner, will result in the meeting of all identifiable accommodation needs of our Tunapuna residents.

Madam Speaker, the people’s representative and staff would endeavour to continue to inform, assist and guide our constituents to the most applicable or incentive for the attainment of adequate, affordable and decent housing for their families. Madam Speaker, some of housing incentives under the Housing Development Corporation include 25,000 homes in the next 10 years, broken down as follows: 10,000 HDC starter homes valued at $250,000 each, with only a monthly payment of $925, and added to that zero down payment; two, 5,000 HDC
homes are between 350,000 to 500,000 each, with a monthly payment of only $1,165 to $1,755 with a down payment of 5 per cent. Thirdly, Madam Speaker, 5,000 HDC middle-income homes valued between 65,000 to 900,000, with a monthly payment of between $2,285 to $3,160 and a 5 per cent down payment. Fourthly, 5,000 HDC units targeting young professionals, with the units valued between 1 million to 1.5 million and a monthly payment of $3,510 to $5,265 with a 5 per cent down payment. It does not stop there, the Land Settlement Agency will be resourced to construct homes costing less than $250,000, utilizing their experiences from the Housing and Village Improvement Programme.

Madam Speaker, while the private sector will be encouraged to mirror Government’s effort by delivering a further 10,000 housing units over the next 10 years, the small and medium contractors initiative will roll out three bedrooms and two bathroom homes at a cost of less than $500,000. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, that is the right choice. The people on August 10th made the right choice. [Desk thumping] Additionally, Madam Speaker, 20 per cent of all state housing construction projects would be reserved for small and medium-sized contractors in all constituencies, all 41 constituencies.

In summary, Madam Speaker, Government understands that a successful response to the huge fiscal deficits brought on by COVID-19 will require a vigorous effort to get the Trinidad and Tobago economy growing at a decent rate. Therefore, Madam Speaker, budget ’20/’21 has paid so much attention to key sectors, including manufacturing and agriculture. The budget describes the manufacturing sector, and I quote from page 15:

“…the digital catalyst for achieving economic transformation and diversification…”

In other words, Madam Speaker, driven by the private sector and supported by the
Government, the manufacturing sector will play an important role in generating the revenues and the foreign exchange which much is no longer expected from our energy sector.

Madam Speaker, the manufacturing sector will be aptly supported by the agricultural sector to which the budget has made a substantial allocation for 2021. The main aim here will be to make the country more self-reliant in providing food for ourselves and to make a major savings in the use of scarce and foreign exchange. Madam Speaker, with the emphasis in the budget on growth and innovation, the 2021 budget has consolidated the Government’s position on the digitization of the economy and the society. The budget has stated very clearly that, and I quote from page 12 of the budget:

“...going forward our developmental model must be anchored on the newly emerging digital economy.”

Understanding that, that the digitization will have to focus on the young people and in particular, our students who now must be educated remotely at home. Madam Speaker, in keeping with the Government’s commitment to be caring for the population, the extensive provision was made for the country’s social protection system to respond to the onslaught of COVID-19, guided by the report of the road map team set up by the Government.

The 2021 budget has increased provision for the vulnerable in several areas. For example, the salary relief grant has already been extended to December 2020 for some workers who would have lost their jobs. Madam Speaker, the budget as presented to the national population, the plan of action for moving our nation forward post-COVID-19. It is a plan that is firmly rooted in the Vision 2030 development strategy and informed by the tremendous work done by those who have contributed to the COVID-19 road map response and way-forward reports.
Madam Speaker, the 2021 budget has outlined the key pillars on which sustainable growth and development will be achieved. These pillars would describe the role for our sectors and the required environments have outlined the key elements of what we can describe as an innovation ecosystem.

Madam Speaker, through the benefits that budget 2021 will bring to agriculture, manufacturing, business, education, culture, sport, youth, housing, the Tunapuna constituency is well placed and poised to be an example of the successful roll out of such an innovation ecosystem.

In conclusion, Madam Speaker, once again my congratulations is extended to the Minister of Finance and his team at the Ministry and all other contributing Ministries in the preparation and delivery of this Budget Statement 2021. Madam Speaker, I thank you also for the opportunity provided to join this debate and speak on behalf of the constituents of Tunapuna of whom I am proudly representing in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, again, may God continue to bless Trinidad and Tobago, and I thank you again. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Tobago West. [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Sport and Community Development (Hon. Shamfa Cudjoe): Thank you, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I want to start by saying, the MP for St. Augustine that was the last presenter for the Opposition, would have spoken about a lack of enthusiasm, lack of enthusiasm in this budget debate. Madam Speaker, if you look on the Opposition side, you will see only two Members of the Opposition. [Desk thumping] There are 22 Members of Government, 19 Members of the Opposition and only two Opposition Members in the House; talk about poor representation and lack of enthusiasm. [Desk thumping] They do not even have the decency to make themselves present in this Chamber to pursue the business of the people they claim to love and represent, Madam
Speaker; talk about lack of enthusiasm [*Desk thumping*] and poor representation.

They show themselves in this Chamber only when it is their Members to speak. They do not care what happens in the debate, where the debate is going and you want to tell us about lack of enthusiasm [*Desk thumping*] and poor representation, Madam Speaker. You have the opportunity, people have entrusted you to serve in the highest forum of the land and no leadership, [*Desk thumping*] no sight of their leader for days, Madam Speaker, and you want to talk to the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago about lack of enthusiasm.

Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to thank you for this opportunity to contribute in the fiscal 2020/2021 budget debate. And as I do so, allow me to join my colleagues in congratulating you on being elected to serve as the Speaker in this august House ensuring fairness, order, decency, [*Desk thumping*] and sophistication in conducting the people’s business. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to stand before you this afternoon representing the people of Tobago West under the beautiful and bountiful banner of the People’s National Movement. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, the people have studied, they have carefully assessed and it is in exercising their wisdom and political acumen that they have chosen the People’s National Movement. [*Desk thumping*]

We on this side, Madam Speaker, are humbled and grateful indeed for the opportunity to lead Trinidad and Tobago during these uncertain times. Whenever the country is in trouble, history would show that they call on the People’s National Movement, [*Desk thumping*] because they know that we would operate in the best interest of our people and our economy. We will safeguard the Treasury. We will provide opportunities for everyone and that their children’s future is safer, brighter and better under the hands of the People’s National Movement, so despite the bunk and the balderdash sold to us by the other side, it is a fact and it is simple
as that, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

I want to thank God for our wise, right-thinking people who rejected chaos, confusion, trickery, treachery and “trappiness” on August 10\textsuperscript{th}. Madam Speaker, they came, they gave cash, we rejected that. They bullied our Members on social media, the people of Trinidad and Tobago rejected that. They used their political platforms to make nasty and desperate attacks on our candidates, Madam Speaker, the people of Trinidad and Tobago rejected that. They tried to bribe with hampers, roof repairs, they furnished our homes; there are people in La Horquetta right now sitting on their Courts furniture [Desk thumping] looking at this debate, Madam Speaker. We took all they had to offer and we run them because we love the PNM. [Desk thumping]

So, Madam Speaker, even the racist advertisements portraying black people are sufferers and beggars, Madam Speaker, the people of Trinidad and Tobago rejected that. They rejected the hypocrisy, Madam Speaker. Years, decades in this country, you have areas like Siparia, Caroni East, Caroni West that had gone with UNC representation for decades uninterrupted, some of them have never seen their MPs or heard from their MPs. Nobody has a problem with that, but from the time PNM constituencies marched out and they showed their loyalty and their solidarity with the PNM, “PNM is a cult. It is blind loyalty. They are racists.” Madam Speaker, our people of Trinidad and Tobago, they rejected that.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I will just ask you— because again, I caution that when we adopt things that we hear outside, it is our own when we say it here. So there is a particular word you used there, I would ask you to withdraw that word and either find another way to say it or to press on.

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Madam Speaker, I am not sure which word is it, hypocrisy? [Crosstalk] Okay. I withdraw that word, Madam Speaker.
Madam Speaker, this victory does not belong to PNM loyalists, it belongs to the right-thinking citizens of Trinidad and Tobago [Desk thumping] who know that serious times call for sober and sane leadership, and I want to commend the people of Trinidad and Tobago for minding their business. Madam Speaker, I wish to express sincerest thanks to the people of Tobago West for selecting me to represent them once again. I came from the bowels of these people. I belong to them. They raised me, moulded me and they continue to support me in performing my duty as I do so wholeheartedly and selflessly. I extend myself to them. A special thanks to the people, especially the young people who kept walking with me every single month in and out of election season. To the older women who brought bhaji bush and fruits, to those who showed up and stayed in long lines to simply make their way to the front or to my office to say, “Keep on pushing”, to the pastors who called to pray, to the little children who asked me to sign their copybooks, Madam Speaker, I extend heartfelt thanks to the people of Tobago West.

I say, to God be the glory, great things he has done because he knows the only thing worse than COVID-19 is being led by the UNC in COVID-19. [Desk thumping] He never leaves his children to suffer so he spared us and blessed us with a Moses of our own time. [Desk thumping] I want to take this opportunity, Madam Speaker, to thank the hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, for his intelligent and inspiring leadership. He has been committed, consistent, reliable and resilient, solid, sober and sane leadership, and [Desk thumping] that is what we need at this time, Madam Speaker, leadership that we can trust. Under his firm yet careful hands and his fierce yet meticulous watch, we have managed to keep the ship of state afloat, even changing the direction, making the difficult decisions and taking the necessary action towards economic recovery and safeguarding our people. Right leader, right time, Madam Speaker.
Careful planning, we have developed a road map. Even during elections season we put the brightest minds of this country together to ensure that no matter who wins the elections, this country is going to have a plan to help us to resist the shock of this trying time. That is the nature of the People’s National Movement.

[Desk thumping] That is the way we are made up. That is the essence of the PNM. Madam Speaker, we faced this new fiscal year with well-thought-out plans and policies, armed with a manifesto, Vision 2030 and a road map for post-COVID recovery, that is leadership, Madam Speaker. And to date, the Opposition or “government in waiting”, as they call themselves, is yet to present an alternative plan of their own. There are still working on the logistics of building a dome, Madam Speaker, the people rejected that.

Madam Speaker, I want to salute our Ministers of Finance and Minister of Planning and Development for having done what many other leaders are having difficulty to do at this time. COVID has taken the world by storm, bringing economies to their knees, and no one shall escape. Our Minister of Finance has delivered a fair, balanced, reasonable and practical budget for a time like this. Countries like Barbados and the United Kingdom had decided to forego the delivery of a budget presentation to their population because the situation is just too unpredictable and too fluid. To the Ministry of Finance and your team, I congratulate you on a job well done. This is an economic masterpiece, as was said by my colleague earlier. We stand ready to cooperate, ready to contribute and ready to follow your lead as we work to achieve sustainable development and as we brave this storm together.

The UNC remains relentless in trying to change the narrative, trying to fool the population and embarrass their intelligence. They said the economic troubles started before COVID, and you know what, Madam Speaker, they might be right,
because when we assumed duties in 2015, we were in economic turmoil. We had funds to run the country for only three days. Public institutions were denigrated and the right-thinking public servants were emasculated. We inherited an ungovernable society, beaten, bruised and abused with no money to run this country, Madam Speaker. They looked on hoping that we will fail. They looked on laughing, waiting for chaos and confusion, hoping that we ended up in the hands of the IMF, like many of our Caribbean brothers and sisters—

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker—

Hon. S. Cudjoe:—but we weathered the storm.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, on a point of order, 48(6).

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, five years standing, we are still here due to sound leadership and prudent management. Against the backdrop of depleted revenues and the worldwide pandemic, we have bred new life into our economy, managed our own business, administered our own medicine to the point where we face unprecedented global turmoil with this whole COVID situation and we were able to keep the economy running, providing opportunities and incentives for the business community, expanding our social safety net to the envy of our neighbours and the upset of our opponent, Madam Speaker. That is leadership, People’s National Movement style.

So, yes, the economy had been in trouble and it started with the UNC, well before COVID. The PNM stepped in, turned things around so that we can deliver a decent budget to satisfy the needs of the nation. Madam Speaker, if the money stolen in the Desalcott situation had been returned, we would be in a better position today; we might be able to balance the budget. Madam Speaker, if the LifeSport
money had been returned, we would be in a better position today. We could have managed our budget. Colour me Orange, Hoop of Life, and if they did not move a fire truck for $9 million, Madam Speaker, we might have been in a better position to balance the budget and better serve the Trinidad and Tobago. But even against the backdrop of these trying times, this Government continues to deliver.

We are working with a smaller pie, therefore, everybody gets a smaller piece of that pie. Nobody is ever happy in getting less, but we must be mindful of the reality and make every effort to live within our means. I am thankful that we are still in a position to keep our population employed, to provide proper and affordable health care, to educate our children, to expand our social programmes and to still advance all development agenda.

As it relates to Tobago, Madam Speaker, we got a smaller piece of the pie because it is a smaller pie and we all have to be prepared to take the cuts and to make the sacrifice because we are all in this together. So we received 4.3 per cent of the budget and the limit, as it relates to the dispute resolution committee for the Tobago House of Assembly Act, spoke to a lower limit of 4.03 per cent and an upper limit of 6.09 per cent. Madam Speaker, that is supported by over $700 million in projects to be completed by other Ministries under the Sixth and Seventh Schedule of the Tobago House of Assembly Act. We are grateful for the opportunity to borrow and that was granted to us by this PNM Government after years and years of requests made by the Tobago House of Assembly.

We can now pursue our projects in a more wholesome and predictable manner. Madam Speaker, we can speak to projects and programmes being run by the central government in Tobago and a host of other support to the Tobago House of Assembly. The indoor facility, the indoor sporting facility is finally being built thanks to this Government. [Desk thumping] The Dwight Yorke Stadium, Madam
Speaker, has been refurbished. The Hillsborough dam is finally being desilted [Desk thumping] to improve our ability to provide proper water services to Tobago. I remember going to Mason Hall Government School and we talked about expanding the capacity of the Hillsborough dam. Here I am, 38 years old and this is now happening under the hands of this Government, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

The southwest waste water project, which I would have negotiated on behalf of the Tobago House of Assembly in 2011, has been delivered by the People’s National Movement, Madam Speaker, and we are expanding that project, taking that project up to Signal Hill. Madam Speaker, the agricultural access roads project being delivered by the Government in Tobago. In Tobago, we had access to the same COVID relief offered in Trinidad and then some. So, Madam Speaker, the business grants to our Tobago businesses, we moved from $25,000 in grants to $50,000 per applicant.

Agricultural grants through the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and through IDB, helping our farmers to modernize their farms and to improve agro processing.

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We had access to the food cards and the social support, both from central government and from the Tobago House of Assembly. We got two bites of the cherry. The same for the Rent Relief Programme.

Madam Speaker, $50 million in support for tourism stakeholders to promote digital technologies and to improve their marketing capacity, to improve their properties and to upgrade their tourism plans. Thanks to our Minister of Finance
and this Government.

Our health sector in Tobago had been supported by an additional $55 million. Our credit unions in Tobago they had been supported with $10 million in liquidity support programmes for small businesses. And we are a part of the FCB Loan Support Programme which provides up to $300 million in help for small businesses impacted by COVID-19.

Madam Speaker, as I make my contribution, I remember the contribution of the Member for Moruga/Tableland who is not in the House at this moment, but I am hoping she is somewhere out there listening. The Member spoke about the economy in Tobago and tourism in Tobago being dead. Somebody “gas up” this Member to mark me and to speak on Tobago issues. A lot of what she did not know about, and I wish in their caucus sessions they would have taken the time to educate the goodly Member.

The Member spoke to Tobago’s tourism being dead. I want to know if they did not remind the Member about when they were in government that they did nothing, precious nothing, to support the Tobago House of Assembly and tourism efforts in Tobago.

It took this People’s National Movement Government to do the expansion of the airport project, the only airport that we have in Tobago. I can remember, Madam Speaker, we were in Opposition at that time, when the former Prime Minister who is now Member for Siparia would have announced naming the Tobago airport the ANR Robinson Airport. They dragged former Prime Minister and President Robinson down to the airport in his wheelchair, he was very ill, and they made promises about expanding the airport. They then cordoned off that airport and gave us Tobagonians the impression that work was taking place there, and years later nothing, precious nothing took place at the ANR Robinson Airport.
When this Government made the announcement that we are going to go ahead to acquire the funds and proceed with this project because it is so important to tourism, which is the mainstay of the Tobago economy, the Opposition cried out that that was too much money to spend on an airport in Tobago. I remember being Minister of Tourism and being unable to attract international flights like Virgin Atlantic, who called upon us year after year to improve the airport facility and to improve the amenities at the airport, and we had to pay exorbitant prices in order to attract flights to Tobago. This Government decided to make that investment, even against the backdrop of trying economic circumstances, because we do not provide lip service to Tobago, we put our moneys where our mouths are and we deliver for the people of Tobago.

I want to continue because she also raised the Tourism Upgrade Programme.

**Madam Speaker:** The honourable.

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** The hon. Member who is not here at this moment unfortunately. The Member did not. She raised the Tourism Upgrade Programme. Under the—

[Interruption]

**Ms. Ameen:** Madam Speaker, I just want to seek your guidance if this would qualify in terms of 48(6). Some Members have to be outside the Chamber, so it is coming across as though the suggestion is that the Member for Moruga has left.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so I understand the observation of the Member for St. Augustine. It is a practice that Members on both sides point out that Members are not here. I do not think it is a practice that really is something that should be encouraged. Also we are mindful of the fact that we do have limits on numbers in the Chamber. So while it does not qualify under Standing Order 48(6), I think it is an observation that we should be mindful of, that we have limits on numbers on both sides being present in the Chamber. Okay? So please be guided by that.
Hon. S. Cudjoe: Thank you, Madam Speaker, I do not know if the goodly Member is aware that the Opposition is entitled to 12 Members on their Bench, and right now there are 9. And as I say again, Madam Speaker, the Member is not in the House at this time. I hope she is somewhere listening. I have the right to say that.

Hon. Member: “Where you was whole day? A-A; you outta timing whole day.”

Hon. S. Cudjoe: I want to proceed by saying, the goodly Member would have—

[Interruption]

Madam Speaker: All right. Listen. If each side accuses the other of the very thing that the other one is saying should not be done, we would get nowhere. The point is taken that there are limits and whether one complies within the limits or not, you know, I do not think that is something that should detain us or permit us to fall into error and disturbance with respect to what is going on here. The point has been made in terms of the limits. If the Member goes on to point out about the capacity has not been met, I think that is factual. Let us proceed.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I hope I can get some injury time. So as I was saying that Member for Moruga who I hope is somewhere listening, had raised the Tourism Upgrade Programme. Madam Speaker, I can remember the Tourism Upgrade Programme under the years of the United National Congress who posed as a partnership from 2010 to 2015, did not provide access to that programme to Tobago stakeholders. I came as Minister of Tourism in 2015, and in December 2015 took a note to Cabinet in order to extend that programme to Tobago stakeholders, so they could benefit from the Tourism Upgrade Programme. So when they talk about tourism is dead, they need to speak also about their contribution during their time of leadership.

I want to move to the Government Loan Guarantee Programme for tourism.
stakeholders in Tobago. It took this Government and this Minister of Finance to expand that programme to provide better and greater access to the tourism stakeholders in Tobago.

Allow me to move now to the issue of land titles and registration in Tobago. Because during their time of government they promised that to the people of Tobago. And I could remember the former Prime Minister, in the Member for Siparia, would have journeyed to Tobago, established a committee and brought people down to MIC in the Bon Accord area, and handed them empty, plain sheets of paper, telling us that that is land titles, and when they opened it, it was nothing, precious nothing.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, 48(6).

Mr. Lee: The Member is imputing improper motives.

Madam Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Madam Speaker, when “de people” opened “de paper” it had nothing on “de paper”. It is this Government under this Attorney General that is now working on that project. In order for that project to go you had to have money to make it run, and it is this Government that would have acquired the finances from the IDB. And the Attorney General in his contribution would have spoken as to where they are now in the “lotification” and in doing the software system to pursue and to deliver this project. So when you talk about tourism is dead in Tobago, remember the landowners and the tourism stakeholders who did not have a deed to go to the bank to access loans to advance their businesses. Remember the empty pieces of paper that you gave to these poor people down at MIC.

Madam Speaker, she also raised the interisland ferry. I could remember the interisland ferries leaking, limping I should say, limping along, and it took this Government in order to fix that situation. We are now in a place where we are
looking forward to purchasing, to having two ferries that were purchased for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Even against the trying economic background, the Government saw it fit to improve those circumstances for the people of Tobago. So the *Buccoo Reef* is going to make its way to Tobago very soon, and so will the *APT James*. And it took this People’s National Movement Government to do that. [Interruption] So when you talk about economy suffering in Tobago, [Desk thumping] and poor interisland ferry, remember your deeds and remember while you are over there.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Barataria/San Juan, while you are not familiar with this House, you are an experienced parliamentarian. If you want to make an interjection there is a particular way that you are well familiar with. Okay? Please continue.

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Madam Speaker, the people of Tobago, and I stand with this Government, we are ready to support the expansion and strengthening of the Tobago economy, so we can stand side by side with Trinidad and even excel and surpass Trinidad in areas of our significant advantage. Of course this has to be supported by our cries for achievement of greater authority and autonomy over the island’s development and our people’s business. Our Government remains committed to supporting and delivering internal self-government for the people of Tobago. This Bill will come to the Parliament during this session, and we look forward to the support of the Opposition and the Independents, because we cannot do it alone.

So to my good friend from Moruga/Tableland, who is not in the House, who I hope is somewhere listening. Since you and your colleagues care so much about Tobago, I want you to find it fit to field one candidate for the Tobago elections sometime, and not hide behind Watson Duke and the PDP. If you care so much
about Tobago, take this opportunity and have a Tobago Senator on your Opposition Bench in the Senate to advance the people of Tobago’s business. And you care so much about Tobago? I want you to support us at the Joint Select Committee, and then support in this House for this Constitution (Amdt.) Bill. Do not tell us, show us that love, show us that care. Stand with the People’s National Movement and this Government in our pursuit to deliver internal self-government for the people of Tobago. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I want to turn now to sport. I would have served as Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs in the previous Government, and in this Government I am serving as Minister of Sport and Community Development. The sport portfolio has remained with me, and I am grateful. Nelson Mandela has said sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way, like little else does. So sport is a powerful force, contributing to social change, economic transformation and promoting physical health, happiness and well-being on a personal level.

I can attest to that. I played lawn tennis in primary school. I played football in secondary school, and as an adult I am an active long-distance runner. I have done the UWI half marathon. I have done the Sea to Sea half-marathon more than once. Between October and December I would clock over 70 miles in virtual races. [Desk thumping] Supporting total participation in sport and advancing the participation and involvement of women, asking women to get active once again.

So I smiled when Members of the Opposition, especially the MP for Princes Town, who was assigned to mark me in the last session, and the Member for Moruga/Tableland, who has now been “gassed up” to shadow me in this session. They try to score cheap political points in questioning my competence in sport for the entertainment of their puppet masters. [Interruption]
Ms. Ameen: Madam Speaker—

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Madam Speaker, the only sport—[ Interruption]

Ms. Ameen: Madam Speaker, I just again want to be guided by you, if the use of “gas up” is offensive and insulting language according to 48(4).

Madam Speaker: Member, I will ask you to withdraw that word and find something more parliamentary. [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Madam Speaker, who is being egged on or encouraged to mark me. If that could even be done, Madam Speaker. The score—

Madam Speaker: You have withdrawn the word? [Laughter] First, I will just ask you to withdraw the word. I know what has happened. It has been a long couple of days and I guess Members need a little release. But I am on my legs. I have asked you to withdraw the word. You have withdrawn the word. Okay.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Withdrawn, Madam Speaker, and I withdraw once again. So the Member for Princes Town who had been assigned to mark me in the last Parliament, yeah, [Laughter] and the Member for Moruga/Tableland, they could laugh all they like, Madam Speaker, who have been chained up to mark me in this session. [Laughter] I laugh when they throw these words, because I know the only sport the Member for Princes Town could beat me in is moral, and the only sport the Member for Moruga/Tableland could beat me in is running.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, 48(4). What kind of language is that? [Laughter and crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South, are you seriously raising a Standing Order? [Laughter] Overruled.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I do hope I get some injury time. [Desk thumping and laughter]

They say nothing has happened in sport, but take that from UNC supporters
who believe that performance in sport is Hoop for Life, Malabar gangs warring over ghost projects in the name of youth development through sport, LifeSport, where people had to flee the country to save their lives, a math teacher being paid millions to deliver math classes for ghost students. I guess if there is no programme—

**Ms. Ameen:** Madam Speaker, 48(2), that matter is before the court at this time.

**Madam Speaker:** You are raising the sub judice?

**Ms. Ameen:** Yes, the mention.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, please proceed.

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I guess if the sport programme does not support pilfering, then there is no performance in sport as they think. *[Desk thumping]* Over the past five years our athletes have performed outstandingly, winning medals, breaking records, making history all over the world. That did not just happen, it took the hard work from these athletes and the sporting fraternity. It took the support of this Government.

When I assumed duties as Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs two years ago, we hit the ground running and launched a new sporting policy geared at developing sport and developing our people and our economy through sport. Our national sporting policy speaks to developing each sporting discipline, and advancing the business of sport. We would have added a very important feature to this framework, and that is the rewards and incentive framework to the policy, that when our athletes medal at the highest level of regional and international games they are rewarded. We have distributed over $9.8 million in incentives to these athletes over the past two years.

We have contributed to sporting entities over $170 million in support from NSOs, National Sporting Organizations, to community groups, to providing
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Hon. S. Cudjoe (cont’d)

support to elite athletes, to providing support to athletes who are doing programmes for their development, and the support from the Government has been steadfast. [Desk thumping]

We have upgraded our sport facilities, from work at the Dwight Yorke Stadium, minor works at Hasely Crawford Stadium, Mannie Ramjohn, Ato Boldon. And we are working on preparing Ato Boldon as we prepare to host the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2023. We would have done work to the different swimming pools in the communities. We are now building new facilities and doing work on facilities that had been a work in progress for some time. The Aranguez Recreation Ground we would have just delivered. We are working on Marac Recreation Ground, Grande Riviere. Building a swimming pool in Morvant, a swimming pool in Maloney, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] We have delivered a swimming pool to Laventille where we are working with the schools and working with the students in helping your young people learn to swim in an Olympic style, top class pool. [Desk thumping] That is delivery, all under the hands, the loving caring hands of the People’s National Movement. [Desk thumping] I want to thank the Ministry of National Security and the Defence Force for providing that assistance and for helping our young people through those programmes.

We continue to host international sporting activities, because we have the facilities. In the rural areas and also in the central areas we have hosted PCAT, a Pan American tournament. We have hosted Junior CASA with the Squash Association. We would have hosted the Pan Am games in Tobago as it relates to dragon boating, and we continue to spread our sporting programmes throughout our schools. We want to focus and sell Trinidad and Tobago as the place to play and the place to host sporting activities.

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We would have successfully hosted the CPL. [Desk thumping] I can remember Members of the Opposition, including the Leader of the Opposition, Member for Siparia, who is not in the House today—I hope she is somewhere listening—I remember them objecting to us hosting the CPL. We were able to host the CPL in a very successful manner, [Desk thumping] and sporting entities throughout the nation and the Caribbean are now using our CPL programme of CPL protocols as a template to host their sporting activities. [Desk thumping] We look forward to hosting the Commonwealth youth games in 2023; Trinidad and Tobago has won the bid. This is part of our sport tourism initiative as we expand business through sport, and expand our economic offerings through sport. We have improved incentives for the business community to encourage them to provide that necessary assistance to athletes and so on.

This COVID pandemic has brought nations to their knees, and it has put a major halt in many sporting calendars. I think this provided an opportunity for us to focus on the rules of play. Focus on utilizing sport in the community to help our young people and to promote peace, to promote total participation in sport for women, for people with disabilities and so on. It gives us the time to focus on our sporting entities; to do work with them as it relates to advancing the business of sport: helping them to manage their books, training in succession planning. It allows us to work with our athletes in money management, life skill training, preparing them to speak to the media, and getting them ready for when we are able to go out and play again.

Madam Speaker, it helps us to help our sporting entities to establish a better online presence. It allows us the ability to spend time on research and development, recognizing that science is important in sport, and what you put in is exactly what you are going to get out of it. You would have seen that based on our

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investment in our national cycling team and their successes over the years. We continue to improve our infrastructure so that we can host more games.

I turn now to community development. We continue to build and refurbish community centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago. These tangible assets provide a facility for communities to congregate, to meet, to plan, to convert their ideas and creative intuitions into programmes and projects. It encourages strong bonds throughout the communities and a sense of community pride.

We continue to run training programmes in our communities, and to help our different areas to improve their ability in ICT. Quite recently, last week, we would have opened the Carenage Access TT centre. I am very proud to be a part of that project with the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, where we would have transformed our homework centre into a place where the people from Carenage and environs can come and get free Internet access, participate in Government programmes and get the necessary training that they need for a time like this. We intend to spread that programme throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we intend to develop festivals and to utilize sport as a means of developing our communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago, to advance the work of the mediation services. They play a very, very important role in engendering peace in our communities, in providing training to parents and peers so we can live in a more harmonious way. Our training department, our Public Education and Sensitization Department has done a wonderful job in training people to do just about any and everything. Identifying their skills, developing their skills and monetizing their skills, because it is about entrepreneurship and helping our residents of our communities to make a proper contribution to our economy, and to lead proper lives where they can finance
themselves and their families. We have plans to support community activities and sporting activities throughout our communities.

Madam Speaker, the Best Village Trophy Competition is a very important part of the community development portfolio, and we use that as a means of promoting our culture throughout our communities, and getting our young people to just get out there and keep the culture alive. A new programme had been introduced under the Prime Minister’s Best Village Trophy Competition, where we are encouraging people to grow what they eat. It is called, “Grow it Yourself”, Madam Speaker.

Another part of this Ministry that I am very excited about is the National Commission for Self-Help, that time and time again continues to provide much needed support to our people in times of emergency; helping them in times of natural disasters; helping our senior citizens and those who are unable to support themselves, to improve their homes and improve their living conditions. It is under this Government that National Self-Help was allowed or resumed in Tobago. When the UNC had lost the election with the TOP in Tobago in 2013, Tobago was cut off and it took this Government to reintroduce the National Commission for Self-Help to Tobago, where Tobagonians could access that service, and we are grateful for that.

So we the people of Tobago, and specifically the people of Tobago West, we stand with this Government in advancing developments in Tobago. We understand the times that we are in. We are thankful for being able to benefit from the programmes of this Government, and we will continue to choose the People’s National Movement over and over and over again.

My final word is to the young people of this country. You would have seen this Government go above and beyond the call of duty to put things in place,
programmes in place for you to access to better yourself. I call on you to position yourself, to mind your business, to start a business, to do what you ought to do and to remain committed to building yourselves and your community. We have done our part by providing the programmes. Get involved, do your research, position yourself and come out of this era better.

We remain committed to the people, all the people of Trinidad and Tobago, [Desk thumping] the old and the young, those who would have voted for us and those who would not have voted for us. We are a people for all, and that is why we are here today, and we remain committed. We reaffirm our commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I want to thank our Prime Minister and thank all my colleagues for the assistance that they have offered. We remain committed and true to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I thank you, Madam Speaker. May God bless you and may God bless our nation.

**Madam Speaker:** Leader of the House.

**ADJOURNMENT**

**The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):**

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday the 14th day of October, 2020, at 1.30 p.m.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 7.28 p.m.*