

SENATE

Friday October 23, 2020

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**CORONAVIRUS****(MEASURES ENFORCED IN PARLIAMENT)**

Madam President: Hon. Senators, welcome back everyone. Hon. Senators, in an effort to ensure that we continue to safeguard ourselves against exposure to the coronavirus, additional safety measures have been effected in this Chamber. I wish to draw your attention to the two speaking booths that have been installed for your use on either side of the Chamber. Members desirous of speaking without their mask shall remove same when inside the booth and put them back on before exiting. I wish to remind you that the requirement that face masks be worn at all times in the Chamber remains and the exception exists only when speaking in the booth. As a result, Members who choose to speak from their desks must have their masks on. Hon. Senators are advised that the sanitizing of each booth will be undertaken immediately after use.

Finally, in partial response to the installation of the speaking booth, effective today all Senators will be accommodated in the Chamber at any one time. This means that the three minutes grace period for assembling to vote in the event of a division is no longer in effect. I thank Members for their cooperation.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES**(ESTABLISHMENT OF)**

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

UNREVISED

“October 16, 2020

Dear President of the Senate, ,

Establishment of Joint Select Committees

At a sitting held on Wednesday October 14, 2020, the House of Representatives agreed to the following resolutions:

1. ‘Resolved:

That in accordance with Standing Order 64(1)(c), the Cannabis Control Bill, 2020 be referred to a Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020.’

2. ‘Resolved:

That in accordance with Standing Order 64(1)(c), the Constitution (Amendment) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2020 be referred to a Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020.’

3. ‘Resolved:

That in accordance with Standing Order 64(1)(c), the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020 be referred to a Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020.’

4. ‘Resolved:

That in accordance with Standing Order 64(1)(c), the Representation of the People (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill, 2020 be referred to a Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020.’

I request that the Senate be informed of these decisions at the earliest convenience please.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

The Hon. Bridgid Mary Annisette-George, MP

Speaker of the House”

TRIBUTES

(MR. SELWYN JOHN)

Madam President: Hon. Senators, as you are aware, former Sen. Selwyn John passed away on Tuesday, September 29 2020. I now invite Members to offer their tributes. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you very much, Madam President, for the opportunity to pay tribute to a former Senator, stalwart, icon in the trade union movement of Trinidad and Tobago and the region, Madam President.

Madam President, for those of us—and we all are employed—who enjoy the fruits of the collective bargaining process in Trinidad and Tobago, for those who enjoy daily-paid or monthly-paid pensions related to their employment, leave benefits, medical, maternity benefits, NIS, workmen’s compensation, time off for union activities, Cipriani Labour College, the tripartite movement, occupational safety and health—the list is long—in all of those things, Selwyn John has left a legacy.

He was one of the original class, born in 1936, the year before a very eventful year for labour in this country. He grew up having experienced the Second World War and the effects of that and having seen the development of Trinidad and Tobago in that context, through colonialism, republican state, independence just before that.

Selwyn John had a very distinct voice, and many times growing up, knowing that my father was in the Ministry of Agriculture, I knew many times he had to cross paths with Selwyn John during the day. NUGFW has a very large footprint in the Ministry of Agriculture, and many times alongside Selwyn John, we would find our colleague Jarrette Narine, who would move from being a NUGFW organizer, a shop steward, into a Local Government Councillor and eventually one of my predecessors in this Ministry. They formed a very strong alliance. To this day in this Ministry is, as any other Minister speaking today in the context of NUGFW, will talk about the healthy relationship we all have with the union. He had a distinctive voice, unscripted, able to speak on any matter with a sense of assurance and confidence. But when the time came for collective bargaining he had a very threatening voice and a threatening disposition and I have seen it many times on the TV screen as I passed by going up, and I understood it well.

Selwyn John continued a tradition of some of the best trade unionists in the country coming into the Senate, following Vernon Glean and Carl Tull, Mahadeo Jagmohan from our side, Michael Annisette, Independent James Lambert, Vincent Cabrera and our colleague Sen. Wade Mark, amongst a lot of other trade unionists who have served in this House, and in the other place.

His loss is a significant loss to Trinidad and Tobago. He died at age 84 and retired from the union in 2020. Following his retirement he moved on to serve the Presbyterian Church and to serve the country in other ways and for all of us who are working people in this country, we enjoy what we enjoy because in 1950, as a 15 year old employed as a cleaner, Selwyn John joined the NUGFW union, and became a trade unionist. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, according to Bob Nesta Marley:

“The greatness of a man is not how much wealth he acquires, but in his integrity and his ability, to affect those around him positively.”

End of quote. These famous words uttered by Bob Marley truly mirrored the life lived by Comrade Selwyn Alfred Gordon John whose earthly journey came to an end on Tuesday 29 September, 2020.

Comrade Selwyn John served as the President General of the National Union of Government and Federated Workers for four consecutive terms, 1986 to 2000. He was well recognized as an outstanding trade union leader nationally, regionally, and internationally. Madam President, Comrade John served in this Senate as a Government Senator during the Fifth Republican Parliament from November the 27th, 1995, to the 3rd of November, 2000. He was a recipient of the Chaconia Medal Gold which he received in 1992 in recognition of his service to trade unionism.

Comrade John displayed many of the cherished values which appear to be in short supply in today’s society, namely integrity, honesty, respect, selflessness, trust, and genuine care. He was a committed and dedicated trade unionist and leader. He was fearless and indomitable. He always promoted and defended the rights and welfare of his members and the working class. Selwyn John, Madam President, was authentic and genuine. He proved that workers can win once they are organized, determined and well led. Without workers society cannot operate, nor function.

Comrade John was an ordinary man who lived an extra-ordinary life and in whose footprints will forever—will remain forever and indelibly stamped on the sands of time. He was simple, humble, compassionate, and caring. Comrade John provided selfless service to all those persons who approached him for help and or

assistance, never turning away anyone. Selwyn was like a virtual walking encyclopedia, with a memory as long as an elephant, tracing the history, development and modernization of the trade union with his younger colleagues.

Selwyn John was in the forefront of the struggle, Madam President, for the United Labour Movement, working diligently to unite the two factions in the movement. He became, Madam President, the first General Secretary of the National Trade Union Center. Selwyn John, as a visionary and strategic thinker, helped to choreograph a new role for the trade union movement in his quest and drive, to improve both the working and living conditions of the people he served.

He played an extremely leading role in the establishment of the NUGFW Construction Company, which was a joint venture between NUGFW and SWWTU in the construction of hundreds of housing units for the membership of these two unions and, I dare say, other members of other trade unions. Those houses, Madam President, were sold at a reasonable price to the workers and represented a true and living testimony of the commitment of Selwyn John to the advancement of the working class.

Real Spring Valsayn and Lopinot were two locations chosen to construct houses for the membership of the working class represented by these two powerful unions.

10.15 a.m.

Madam President, Selwyn John played a pivotal role in establishing a medical plan for all the daily, hourly, weekly and fortnightly-rated employees of his great union, as well as establishing offices in several rural communities for the workers to assemble in order to conduct union work, thereby strengthening labour relations and interaction between workers and their officers.

Comrade Selwyn John was a standard bearer, a warrior, a fighter and a servant of the working class. He was truly and genuinely a representative of tens of

thousands of ordinary people. Madam President, known for his tireless commitment to the working people, particularly those whom he represented in NUGFW, Selwyn will be sorely missed. Selwyn John, a devoted family-oriented individual, a father, a husband, a grandfather, who allocated the necessary time to his family.

Madam President, it is with a deep sense of grief and a profound sense of loss that we mourn the passing of this trade union giant, and extend our collective condolences and sympathies to the family, friends and close associates of comrade Selwyn John, former Senator of our Parliament. Gone but will never be forgotten. Trinidad and Tobago is dimmer today without Selwyn John in it. May his soul rest in power and eternal glory. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Madam President. On behalf of the Independent Members of the Senate, I wish to express sincere condolences to the wife and other family members of the late Mr. Selwyn John, who passed away on September 29, 2020. He was a Government Senator in the Fifth Republican Parliament from 1995 to 2000.

Having started from humble beginnings, where he was a primary school student of the San Juan R.C. School, followed by the secondary school Vedic College in Curepe. He furthered his studies in terms of labour union matters in places like University of Montreal, the University of Oxford and Labour Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. As already said, he served in the trade union movement for several years, having started with the NUGFW at the tender age of 15, rising up the ranks becoming General Secretary for several years before being elected as its President General in 1986.

He served the union in a full-time capacity for 50 years until stepping down in 2000. He was the first General Secretary of the National Trade Union Centre of

Trinidad and Tobago. He was awarded in 1992, the Chaconia Medal Gold for his involvement in the trade union.

From the reports, from the research that I did, Mr. John had many attributes, some of which have already been mentioned: a devoted family man, an astute trade unionist and a trusted member of his community. These are some of the expressions from persons who knew him well, taken from different articles and from other well-wishers on the sites that I checked.

A former worker of the NUGFW applauded him for his loyalty, dedication and commitment. He was further described as a man of integrity—already mentioned by Sen. Mark—and he had great impact on the lives of his members.

This is what a neighbour said of him:

What an original, what a gentleman. Thank you for being so kind and generous to my family. Thank you for being a wonderful neighbour to so many.

And at the sermon, Rev. Daniel Teelucksingh had this to say about him:

“Selwyn John was very concerned about”—about the working class at the—“the lowest level and he sat among them, identified with them, unconditionally, and walked with them.

They elected him over and over again—as a demonstration that, ‘the working class trusted him in all their struggles, their whole life and future.’

While he served as a Senator”—he—“was never a politician. His business was not the business of the party that elected him to the Parliament, his calling was with the workers.”

And this is what his daughter had to say:

“...he experienced so many different aspects of life that he appreciated

people's differences and others whose outlook tended to be more conservative.

He had friends of all backgrounds, faiths and belief and could walk with leaders and kings while keeping his feet on the ground finding this true passion to help the downtrodden, those in need.

...he had many achievements, but the greatest achievement was being a family man.”

The daughter continued:

“I was fascinated that daddy could be this fierce warrior, fighting tooth and nail for the victimised and disenfranchised and that same man with the lion's roar at the union would melt at the sight of his wife, children and grand children.

He was a lion and lamb in equal parts. The gentlest of gentlemen, and the shrewdest and strongest crusader.”

Madam President, our nation has lost a true patriot, a man with many characteristics that we can learn from and follow. He has left a good legacy. May his soul rest in peace. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Members, permit me to join with you in paying tribute to the late Selwyn John. He was of humble beginnings and he capitalized on every opportunity life presented him to improve not only his life, but the lives of those whom he served. By doing so, he made an enormous impact on the trade union movement and on workers throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. He served the trade union movement, his country and his family selflessly for all of his life. Trinidad and Tobago has been privileged to have had such a person serving in the Senate.

(SHERANNE SAMUEL)

Madam President: Hon. Senators, as you are aware, Ms. Sheranne Samuel, Procedural Clerk Assistant in the Office of the Parliament passed away on Sunday, September 27, 2020. I now invite you to offer your tributes.

Sen. Nigel De Freitas: Thank you, Madam President. It is with great sadness and regret that I rise today to bring tribute upon the passing of one of our own, Ms. Sheranne Samuel, a young women who for more intents and purposes could only be described as a shining light, a young person with a bright future.

Her list of qualifications shows the kind of drive and ambition she possessed and exactly what we lost in a young daughter of Trinidad and Tobago. A Bachelor of Laws from the University of London, a Master's of Science in Development Studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science, a Diploma in Public Relations from the UWI School of Business and Applied Studies, a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History and Psychology and International Relations from the University of the West Indies.

When you look around this Chamber, you see parliamentarians and politicians whom in the course of their duties will touch the lives of others, but in rare moments you hear of those that touched the lives of politicians. This is one of those moments. Colleagues, you will remember her smile when you walked into the joint select committee meeting room. You will remember her commitment to those she served as a Secretary to the Committee in the Cannabis Control Bill and the Private Security Bill. There is not a person in this Chamber, past or present that would not attest to her work ethic and her quiet resolve. In an institution that exemplifies the best of Trinidad and Tobago, she rose to be an exemplar of what this institution is about. In it, she was not just an employee, she was a colleague, she was a friend, she was family. Sometimes in life we make plans and try to

execute them in our timing, but our timing is not God's timing, and on September 27, 2020, God's timing called her home.

On behalf of the Government Bench, I extend condolences to her friends, to her family and to her parliamentary family. She is with the angels. May her soul rest in peace and rise in glory. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. A gentle giant has tragically fallen. A simple individual who performed complex tasks and with a deep sense of purpose and sensitivity is gone from this Earth forever. A tireless and selfless public servant who worked albeit in pain and discomfort for the people of this great country has literally evaporated into thin air. What a monumental tragedy to befallen not only her family, but her working colleagues and the country.

Madam President, we have lost one of the best human beings that any social being would have liked to be on this Earth: thoughtful, caring, humble, selfless, intelligent and hard-working. As President Barack Obama said in his tribute on the passing of the late and great Nelson Mandela, and to which I would like to rephrase:

She no longer belongs to us. She belongs to the ages.

Let us pause and give thanks to our dear sister, Sheranne Samuel, whose contribution to our civilization will forever remain indelibly etched on our collective consciousness. Let us celebrate her short, but quality life whilst she traversed the stage of life. May her extraordinary soul find eternal rest in the arms of the Almighty God and may his angels soar to the heaven providing her with everlasting comfort and peace.

Sheranne Samuel joined the Parliament as an OJT in 2009. She was initially assigned to the committees unit as a researcher. She showed a great promise and was promoted to Procedural Clerk Assistant. She left briefly in 2013 to attend the

London School of Economics and returned to the Parliament. Sheranne was then assigned to serve at the table of the House of Representatives as an Assistant Secretary to several joint select committees, including the one I served on, Public Administration and Appropriations Committee.

She is a Rotarian, she was rather, a Rotarian and a member of the Rotary Club of Port of Spain Central. She engaged, Madam President, in a lot of charity work with the Rotary Club and would usually use her lunchtime on Thursdays to attend meetings and other Rotary events. Her mother, Susannah Joefield, is an international marathon runner, who always made time to prepare meals for Sheranne and walk with her to work at the Red House on many mornings. Her brother Shirvan Samuel is a fire officer and the father of Sheranne's only nephew, Malique and niece Mali. Sheranne and her brother Shirvan shared a love for Carnival and Desperadoes, the steelpan movement organization from her area and their area.

Sheranne's significant other, Gyasi Adams, met at London School of Economics and were best friends and partners. Sheranne would often say that although she was an avid supporter of Desperadoes, her heart was in Renegades of which Gyasi is a member.

Madam President, I wish to express our deepest condolences to her mother Mrs. Susannah Joefield, Mr. Shirvan Samuel, Mr. Gyasi Adams as well as her Rotarian and parliamentary colleagues. Sheranne Samuel, young and gone too soon. Rest in peace, Sheranne. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Paul Richards: How do you pay tribute to a life in a couple minutes and do justice, especially a life that has been able to accomplish so much in such a short period of time. In many words that come to mind, when we as persons who have interacted closely with Sheranne Samuel and her with family would use to describe

her: loving, caring, dedicated, professional, integrity, intelligent, diligent. Her life, though short, has left an indelible mark on not only us in this Parliament in this Chamber and the other place, but certainly on the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Many times they see the work that we do. They see our presentations, our participation in joint select committees and other parliamentary activities, what they do not see, most times, is the hard work, long hours and dedication of the Parliament staff in this honourable House and the other place. Sheranne Samuel was a shining example of public service at its very best. As a professional, as an ambitious, beautiful, intelligent, dedicated young woman who certainly had the benefit of an astounding support system from her family, her mother, her brothers, her extended family circle who certainly have to be commended for their contribution to raising and contributing to the development of this shining example of the promise of the youth of Trinidad and Tobago.

Very often, we do not pay enough homage to this kind of young person. We do not see them regaled on the front pages of the daily newspapers or in the media. We do not see the examples of what the young people in Trinidad and Tobago can and are doing. But she, Sheranne Samuel, is a shining example of that. Our colleagues, the Vice-President, Sen. De Freitas and Sen. Mark outlined her academic achievements at the University of London, the London School of Economics and Political Science, UWI School of Business and Applied Studies and, of course, The University of the West Indies. Included in her accolades are the many awards she was honoured to receive at UWI, including the Neville Hall Prize for history's most outstanding level 3 student in 2009; the Eric Williams Prize for Excellence in Capitalism and Slavery in 2009 also; prize for topics in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009; the best overall performance in African History and the African Diaspora in 2009; the award for First Class Honours in 2009; the prize

for imperialism since 1918, which she received in 2008 and the prize for African Civilization in the year in 2007. She was the beneficiary of Postgraduate Scholarships Government of Trinidad and Tobago from 2013 to 2014 and the Elsa Gouveia Scholarship in 2011.

She served on many parliamentary committees. Her quiet, diligent demeanour belied a drive for almost perfection and a grace and charm that encaptured us all. She certainly made a significant mark on all of us in this Chamber and, by extension, on the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the region. Hers is a story, a shining example of what a family and a village can do in raising a child and a human being in the right way. She is a shining example of the kind of citizen we want in Trinidad and Tobago and what we can accomplish when we put our minds to it and when we have the kind of support.

Her overseas parliamentary activities included the 64th Westminster Seminar on Parliament Practice and Procedure, London; Regional Staff Development Workshop in Grenada, the Fifteenth Plenary Assembly of Pan-Americans and 46th Meeting, the Board of Directors in the British Columbia, Canada and in 2018 the International Professional Development Programme for parliamentary staff.

She also took time to volunteer in spite of her academic prowess and her employment demands, including in the Rotary Club of Central Port of Spain, a member since 2017 and the Rotaract Club, Central Port of Spain, as a founding member in 2005. The positions she held included: Past President, President, Vice-President, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, International Service Director, Community Service Director and Membership Development Officer, and I can go on and on. I do not think we had seen the best of Sheranne although we did in her work. I think she had a lot more to offer, but as my colleagues have said, man

plans but God plans better.

We are grateful and appreciative to her mother and her family and those who have contributed to her development for sharing her with us. We thank you for what you have done in terms of raising this wonderful young woman. We also send our condolences and our sympathies and prayers to her family and colleagues.

And, in closing, I would like to suggest, because very often we pay tribute and honour in substantial ways to parliamentarians, but the Parliament supportive staff are not usually the recipient of this. The suggestion is to possibly rename a library in the Parliament in her honour so that her good works and her contribution can be remembered for decades to come.

On behalf of the Members of the Independent Bench, I send our condolences and our prayers to her family. May she rest in peace. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Senators, Sheranne Samuel first served in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago some 11 years ago. She has been a dedicated member of the Parliament family who brought joy and inspiration to her colleagues. She epitomized professionalism and dedication. While we grieve for her, and make no mistake, we are all grieving and are acutely feeling her loss, we are grateful that she chose to be a part of our team.

Listening to Sheranne's academic achievements, we know that she would have flourished anywhere and, perhaps, in undertakings more remunerative than in service to the Parliament, but her sense of duty to her country was so acute that she elected to let her bucket down with us and our lives are made all the better for it. Although her life was unfortunately cut short, the impact that she had is enormous. We thank her mother for raising such a beautiful young woman and we thank Almighty God for the life of Sheranne Samuel.

Hon. Senators, I would ask that you all stand as we will now observe a

minute of silence for Sheranne Samuel and for Selwyn John.

The Senate stood.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I now instruct the Clerk to convey to the family of Selwyn John and to the family of Sheranne Samuel, the sentiments that have been expressed here today.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2020

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2021, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage be taken later in the proceedings. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Question put and agreed to.

10.45 a.m.

PAPERS LAID

1. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Mayaro-Rio Claro Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2009. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Mayaro-Rio Claro Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2010. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

4. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Princes Town Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
5. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Princes Town Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
6. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Princes Town Regional Corporation Chairman's Fund for the year ended September 30, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
7. Parent and Consolidated Audited Financial Statements of the Point Lisas Industrial Port Development Corporation Limited for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
8. Annual Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
9. Consolidated Audited Financial Statements of the National Flour Mills Limited for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
10. Annual Administrative Report of the National Investment Fund Holding Company Limited as at December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
11. Value Added Tax (Bond-Payment Refund) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
12. Corporation Tax (Small and Medium Enterprises Loan Guarantee Programme) (Exemption) Order, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
13. Corporation Tax (Small and Medium Enterprises Loan Guarantee Programme) (Exemption) (Amendment) Order, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

14. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Environmental Management Authority – Environmental Trust Fund for the year ended September 30, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
15. Annual Audited Financial Statements of Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited for the year ended September 30, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
16. Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago to the High Court pursuant to Section 44E (7) of the Central Bank Act, Chap. 79:02 (As Amended) with respect to the Progress of the Proposals to Restructure CLICO, BAT and CIB for the quarter ended June 30, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
17. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Twenty-Fifth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre Management Company Limited for the years 2010 to 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
18. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
19. Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
20. Draft Estimates–Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
21. Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

22. Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the financial year 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
23. Draft of Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
24. Social Sector Investment Programme 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
25. Public Sector Investment Programme—Trinidad 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
26. Public Sector Investment Programme—Tobago 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
27. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
28. Review of the Economy 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
29. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into the policies for the promotion of Non-Traditional Methods of Farming including Digital Farming Technology. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat)*]
30. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
31. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Tourism for fiscal 2018. [*The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell)*]
32. White Paper on the National Cultural Policy of Trinidad and Tobago 2020 to 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell*]

33. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts for fiscal 2018/2019. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell*]
34. Summary Courts (Fees) Rules, 2020. [*The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal)*]
35. Civil Proceedings (Amendment) (No.3) Rules, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal*]
36. Petty Civil Courts (Amendment) Rules, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal*]
37. Administration of Justice (Electronic Monitoring) Rules, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal*]
38. Ninth Annual Report of the Police Complaints Authority for the period October 1, 2018 to September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal*]
39. Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Windscreen and Window Tint) Regulations, 2020. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan)*]
40. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Works and Transport to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago Subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan*]
41. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Works and Transport to the Twenty-Sixth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial

- Statements of the National Helicopter Services Limited for the financial years 2008 to 2014. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan*]
42. Annual Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards for the year ended September 30, 2018. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)*]
 43. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
 44. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Consumer Awareness, Empowerment and Protection Systems. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
 45. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Twenty-Eighth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the National Export Facilitation Organization of Trinidad and Tobago (exporTT) for the fiscal years 2014 and 2015. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
 46. Response of the Tobago House of Assembly to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into the Policies for the Promotion of Non-Traditional Methods of farming including Digital Farming Technology. [*The Vice-President (Sen. Nigel De Freitas)*]
 47. Response of the Tobago House of Assembly to the Thirteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an Inquiry into the Efficiency

- and Effectiveness of the National Emergency Ambulance Service. [*Sen. N. De Freitas*]
48. Annual Report of the Police Service Commission for the year 2019. [*Sen. N. De Freitas*]
49. Annual Report of the Public Service Commission for the year 2019. [*Sen. N. De Freitas*]
50. Annual Report of the Teaching Service Commission for the years 2018-2019. [*Sen. N. De Freitas*]
51. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago Subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years. [*The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein)*]
52. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to the Fourteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an Inquiry into the Financial Oversight and Financial Management Systems at Municipal Corporations. [*Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein*]
53. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to the Twenty-Seventh Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the Rural Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial years 2012 to 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein*]

54. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Public Administration to the Twenty-Eighth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the Examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2018. [*The Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West)*]
55. Response of the Personnel Department to the Twenty-Fourth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial years 2012 to 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. A. West*]
56. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne)*]
57. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to the Seventeenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an Inquiry into Persons living in Poverty and Extreme Poverty in Trinidad and Tobago with specific focus on Vulnerable Groups. [*The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox)*]
58. Response of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to the Twelfth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an inquiry into the Sexual Exploitation of Children in Trinidad and Tobago

- with specific focus on Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. [*The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan)*]
59. Annual Report of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board for the period 2017/2018. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 60. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of National Security to the Eighteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an inquiry into the Treatment of Migrants with specific focus on the Rights to Education, Employment and Protection from Sexual Exploitation. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 61. Response of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to the Eighteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an inquiry into the Treatment of Migrants with specific focus on the Rights to Education, Employment and Protection from Sexual Exploitation. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 62. Response of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to the Thirtieth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination of concerns raised in the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial years 2016, 2017 and 2018 with specific reference to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (MEEI) and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations in the Fourth, Fourteenth and Twentieth Reports of the Public Accounts Committee. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 63. Administration of Justice (Electronic Monitoring) Regulations, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 64. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an

- inquiry into the Current Provisions for the Education of Children who require Special Education Programmes and Services in Public Primary and Secondary Schools. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
65. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the Sixteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an inquiry into Male Academic Performance in Public Primary and Secondary Schools. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
66. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the Sixteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an inquiry into the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT). [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
67. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the Eighteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an inquiry into the Treatment of Migrants with specific focus on the Rights to Education, Employment and Protection from Sexual Exploitation. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
68. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Planning and Development to the Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an inquiry the Current Provisions for the Education of Children who require Special Education Programmes and Services in Public Primary and Secondary Schools. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
69. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Planning and Development to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into the Flood Alleviation and Control Measures

- for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
70. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development for the period October 2014 to September 2015. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 71. Annual Administrative Report of the National Trust for the year ended September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 72. Annual Administrative Report of the National Trust for the year ended September 30, 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 73. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Planning and Development to the Twenty Sixth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Environmental Management Authority for the financial years 2010 to 2012 and the Authority's expenditure and internal controls for the years 2010 to 2018. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 74. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Public Utilities to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago Subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 75. Annual Administrative Report of the Water and Sewerage Authority for the period 2014/2015. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 76. Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (Amendment to the First Schedule) Order, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
 77. Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (Vesting) (Amendment to the First Schedule) Order, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]

78. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago Subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
79. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an inquiry into the Current Systems and Procedures for Regulating the Operations of Pharmacists and the practice of Pharmacy in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
80. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Thirteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an Inquiry into the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the National Emergency Ambulance Service. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
81. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Consumer Awareness, Empowerment and Protection Systems. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
82. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Twenty-Third Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on an Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of InvesTT Limited for the years 2014 to 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
83. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development to the Seventeenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on the Inquiry into Persons living in

- Poverty and Extreme Poverty in Trinidad and Tobago with specific focus on Vulnerable Groups. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
84. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development to the Eighteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on the Treatment of Migrants with specific focus on the Rights to Education, Employment and Protection from Sexual Exploitation. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
85. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
86. Annual Report of the Registration Recognition and Certification Board for the year 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
87. Annual Report of the Registration Recognition and Certification Board for the year 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
88. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Communications to the Twenty-Ninth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Library and Information System of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial years 2009 to 2011 and the Authority's expenditure and internal controls for the years 2009 to 2018. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
89. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to the Thirty Fourth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the Examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]

90. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to the Sixteenth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission for the financial years 2012 to 2015. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
91. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago Subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
92. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to the Thirtieth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination of concerns raised in the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial years 2016, 2017 and 2018 with specific reference to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (MEEI) and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations in the Fourth, Fourteenth and Twentieth Reports of the Public Accounts Committee. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]

BUDGET SPEAKING TIME

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, further to the Motion passed on August 29, 2020, in relation to the speaking time during the period of the COVID pandemic, and following discussions with the leader and coordinator of the benches opposite, I beg to move that the speaking time as set out in Standing Order 43(1) be restored for the duration of the budget debate only.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam President: Before I call on the Minister of Finance, may I just advise

everyone to check your electronic devices. They should be on silent so that there will be no interruption of the proceedings. Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2020.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam President. I beg to move:

That a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2021, be now read a second time.

Madam President, as we navigate Trinidad and Tobago through the COVID-19 pandemic for this budget presentation and for this Appropriation Bill, we have chosen the theme, Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. These are unusual and challenging times which require all of us to adopt a dynamic approach in our thinking, in our policymaking, the way we manage our institutions and how we go about our daily lives. Before I continue, Madam President, I spoke in the other place for over three hours, however, my time in this honourable Senate is limited to 45 minutes, and it will not be possible to be as expansive as I was in the other place. Accordingly, I will simply highlight key plans and programmes for fiscal 2020 in this statement and my colleagues will expand and elucidate on their individual areas of responsibility. In particular, I have asked the Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation to take charge of this Bill after I take my leave of this Senate.

Madam President, the International Monetary Fund has projected that global output for 2020 will contract by 4.9 per cent on average, with the largest contractions taking place in advanced economies. The Trinidad and Tobago economy is now projected to contract in real terms by 6.8 per cent in 2020. With improvement in 2021 driven by a recovering global economy and our emerging

digital economy, inflation is likely to continue at very low levels in the coming years in the vicinity of 1 per cent. Since the onset of the pandemic in March, fiscal policy has provided significant support to our economy. We have utilized public borrowing to limit the impact of the virus on the income of our citizens, as well as drawdowns from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

This approach is identical to other advanced and emerging economies in the world which have adopted a similar strategy to the pandemic , borrowing today to negate the loss of output and jobs in order to strengthen the economy for the coming years. We are now projecting a debt to GDP ratio at 80 per cent for 2020 in the context of the fiscal and social support provided for COVID-19 and economic contraction. However, we believe that the public sector debt is manageable and affordable, and once our economy recovers this ratio could return to the pre-crisis level of 65 per cent by 2023 to 2024. We are thus focusing our medium-term fiscal policy approach to target the primary fiscal balance in 2022, and a reduction in the fiscal deficit from 5.5 per cent of GDP in 2021 to 2 to 3 per cent of GDP in 2023.

Madam President, we continue to accumulate significant financial buffers and at the end of September 2020, our foreign exchange reserves were US 7.3 billion and the assets in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund totalled US 5.7 billion. The net asset value of the HSF was still higher in September 2020 than September 2015, despite withdrawals totalling US 1.6 billion over the period. Madam President, strong institutions are critical for sustainable economic development. In keeping with this philosophy the establishment of both the Revenue Authority and the gaming commission will benefit the country in the areas of tax collection and tax compliance. It is estimated that the efficiencies brought about by improved revenue collection can reduce the tax gap by as much as 5 billion per annum or

more, while the regulation of the gambling sector will also generate much needed taxes.

Another important institution that will aid this country in the achievement of our development goals is the National Statistical Institute. As part of our institutional strengthening agenda we will also be assessing the national insurance system with a view to ensuring that we can continue to provide our citizens with pension security. In this context to address the shortfall between expenditure on benefits and income, the feasibility of extending the retirement age to 65 will be examined. The Government will also be proceeding in fiscal 2021 with the work required to allow the collection of property tax which is a fair and equitable tax based on property values.

I turn now to Agriculture. Over the past 10 years we have seen a decline in the contribution of agriculture to our national gross domestic product, it now stands at less than 1 per cent. This trend must be reversed. Accordingly, the expansion of our domestic food supply is being placed at the top of the national policy agenda beginning with the establishment of a \$500 million agriculture stimulus programme in 2021, continuing in 2022. This injection in the agriculture sector, which represents a 70 per cent increase over the budgetary allocation for 2020, demonstrates our commitment to stimulating this sector.

The stimulus programme will include accelerating education and training in industry best practices, providing critical infrastructure and facilities, increasing awareness campaigns, promoting behavioral changes in local production and consumption; investing in productivity-oriented research and technology, strengthening linkages between agriculture and the manufacturing and tourism sectors, developing industries which produce bioethanol, biodiesel and biogas from

organic wastes; deepening integration within the private sector by connecting micro and big businesses to create a strong agribusiness ecosystem; encouraging the private sector to invest in agriculture, investing in livestock farming technology, developing aquaculture and providing a wide range of initiatives which will make the sector more attractive to farmers and encourage the participation of young people.

These initiatives are intended to improve our food security, mitigate against the impact of shortages and supply chain disruptions, reduce the net food import bill and increase the contribution of agriculture to GDP. With respect to public administration, the pandemic has brought with it a paradigm shift which has never been seen before in our lifetime. This is why our investment in digitization and technology, together with a renewed thrust in improving Trinidad and Tobago's ease of doing business will prepare our country to compete in this digital age. Our survival and future development depends on our ability to quickly adapt and to effectively balance the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic with the need to maintain and improve our economic capacity. Accordingly, we are moving towards digital enablement of the economy, and the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation will lead this change that will reshape the way we serve the citizens of this country. We have mandated the creation of an electronic register or e-identity for every citizen to facilitate data transmission to all agencies. We expect this initiative to streamline processes, promote efficiency and eliminate waste and duplication.

We also propose to develop an e-governance ecosystem which will include a new Government service delivery model that will allow for passports, driver's permits, tax returns, business registration, social grants and licensing arrangement

transactions to be done online. A new automated construction system known as the DevelopTT Automated Construction System will be developed to expedite all government transactions associated with building/construction. And a national single electronic window will be developed thereby reducing processing time for business-related services.

Other initiatives include: student broadband availability, digital procurement solutions, digital mobile money solutions, free public Wi-Fi, nationwide 4G and 5G networks and development of a national digital database. To facilitate this quantum shift we have already removed all taxes on laptops, notebooks and tablets. The removal of taxes on other electronic devices and accessories will follow through the Finance Act in December 2020. We also intend to provide the necessary resources to develop and provide a tech investment fund and a tech promotion and development company to assist tech start-ups and new tech businesses, and incentives to entrepreneurs engaged in software and mobile application development, user interface design, call centre operations, quality assurance bug testers, animators, visual effects and electronic media, as well as tax credits for businesses which invest in tech start-ups and new tech businesses, technology solutions, digitization, which create employment in the technology, particularly for young people.

In the area of construction: The strategic use of construction for infrastructure development will be utilized across sectors, including health, education, transport, public utilities and housing as a driver of economic growth. Our construction programme will subscribe to key pillars such as smart growth using a smart growth scorecard made up of key performance indicators to measure the adherence of the development projects to the desired planning and design

principles and alignment to the national agenda. Smart plans and land-use regulations will be enhanced by overhauling the land-use policy and regulations and standards currently used by the Town and Country Planning Division to ensure compatibility with the aims of the new framework and the immediate adoption of the National Spatial Development Strategy and the Municipal Local Area Plans.

Fiscal incentives for the private sector and several public infrastructure projects will be used to stimulate the industry, including the completion of the Solomon Hochoy Highway extension, the Churchill Roosevelt Highway extension to Manzanilla, the Valencia to Toco Highway, the fast ferry port in Toco, flood mitigation, coastal zone protection works, the San Fernando Waterfront Redevelopment Programme, the Port of Spain Redevelopment Programme, the redevelopment of Skinner Park and the urban renewal and revitalization programme.

With respect to housing, Madam President, we remain committed to serving our citizens particularly at the lower-income level. To address the gap in availability of housing we will utilize our accelerated construction programme to deliver 25,000 housing units over the next decade; resource the Land Settlement Agency to construct additional houses costing up to 250,000; invite the private sector to partner with us in the provision of an additional 10,000 units and make it easier and less time-consuming to access tax incentives for private building and housing development and the obtaining of approvals. We will also capitalize on small and medium contractors' initiative. Our initiative is already in progress to produce houses costing less than 500,000, and to boost small and medium enterprises, reserve 20 per cent of all state housing construction projects for small and medium contractors.

To meet the housing needs of individuals and families along income spectrum, we will provide 10,000 starter homes valued at \$250,000 each; 5,000 affordable homes in the range \$350,000 to \$500,000; 5,000 middle-income homes valued between \$650,000 and \$900,000; and finally, 5,000 housing units targeting young professionals with units valued between 1 million and 1.5 million. In leaving no one behind we will also provide housing improvement and repair grants, concessional home construction and land purchase loans, housing start grants, refinancing of mortgages at concessional rates, and fully develop land for housing. We estimate that with these programmes the sector would receive a boost that will generate 20,000 jobs per year.

With respect to health, I am pleased to report to this Senate that our health infrastructure has met the needs of the country while effectively managing the COVID-19 pandemic. While our immediate priority is to manage the pandemic, we are also proceeding with planned infrastructure works for the modernization of our health facilities. Among other facilities, state-of-the-art services are already being offered and will be offered by way of the newly constructed Arima and Point Fortin Hospitals; the Sangre Grande Hospital, now under construction; the Couva Hospital and Multi-Training Facility; the new Port of Spain General Hospital, Central Block, now under construction; the new Linear Accelerator facility at the St. James Medical Complex and the new Diego Martin Health Centre.

With regard to Social Development, when it became evident that we had no choice but to close our borders and implement lockdown measures earlier this year, we fully understood the impact that these measures would have on our citizens, especially the poor and vulnerable. However, we were confronted with difficult choices between life and livelihood, health and economics, public safety and the

free movement of citizens. We chose life, health and safety. It is because of these decisions that we are all here today, alive, engaging in a debate in this honourable Senate.

Madam President, in recognition of the hardships our citizens have faced since March, we have disbursed 25,101 grants under the food support programme at a cost of 17 million; 51,493 grants to individuals who have lost income or had their incomes reduced; under the food support programme at a cost of 221 million, 20,497 grants at a cost of 31 million to households which previously received meals from the School Feeding Programme; 42,451 grants as income support to current beneficiaries of the public assistance and disability assistance programme at a cost of 22 million; 81,284 grants to 33,897 individuals who had lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced, amounting to 130 million in salary relief or income support grants; 2,818 grants to senior citizens who had not yet received their pensions at a cost of \$12 million; 488 grants at a cost of 1.5million to individuals who had not yet received their disability assistance grants; 1,400 emergency hampers; 25,000 food vouchers, which included fresh produce, poultry and a grocery voucher; rental assistance grants to 4,322 families at a cost of 22million; 30million to religious bodies for food distribution, which in turn distributed 49,330 hampers to needy persons; one-time fuel relief grants in an amount of \$2,750 to 1,747 owners of maxi-taxis, 647 taxi operators; 343 grants of \$5,000 each to cultural artistes; cash grants of up to US 1,000 to 300 nationals stranded overseas; income tax refunds to 25,095 individuals; VAT refunds to 5,011 small- and medium enterprises with a VAT cycle threshold of up to 500,000; VAT bonds amounting to \$3billion to 461 companies with up to 10million in refunds; zero interest Government-guaranteed loans at a cost of 22 million to 151 small- and

medium enterprises; concessionary loans up to 60 business owners through the credit union loan facility; 684 grants to microenterprises under the Micro-Enterprise Grant Programme; US \$75 million to the special import forex window to 124 importers of essential items and \$2 billion in Government payments to contractors and suppliers.

With respect to Tobago, we provided \$50 million to fund the Tobago Regional Health Authority with COVID-19 expensive; 5 million to assist small businesses; a further \$50 million to provide grants to Tobago hoteliers for hotel upgrade and other support. And our support to the vulnerable does not end at our COVID-19 support programme. We are continuing. We are building a database to identify the most vulnerable in society so that their needs become priority. Hence, we are prioritizing the development of an integrated community first responder system which will identify those households headed by single parents, the elderly and older siblings, vulnerable persons who live alone, those who care for persons with mental health challenges and shelters for displaced women, children and men.

To improve efficiency a national social services e-card system will be introduced to track vulnerable persons and families, modernize the delivery of social support programmes, encourage the use of locally produced goods and develop a register of agencies and individuals supportive of the vulnerable population. This card—electronic card—will minimize abuse and double-dipping within the social services sector and ensure that those who really require assistance actually get it.

With respect to youth, cognizant of the role that some of our young people are engaged in antisocial activities, the hon. Prime Minister has established an entirely new Ministry dedicated to addressing this challenge. We are targeting

youth who reside in at-risk communities which is why we have established a community recovery committee comprised of eminent psychologists, educators and community activists. Through this committee, which is advisory in nature, we are determined to address the issues that generate crime and lead to economic deprivation.

With respect to human capital, this is a critical element for economic growth and individual prosperity. As part of the digital transformation agenda we will be undertaking a systematic upgrade and enhancement of all ICT systems in the education sector. In fact, Madam President, since 2015, this Government has taken steps to incorporate ICT in education with development of the ICT in Education 5-Star plan. The expansion of infrastructure to support ICT in schools and most recently the delivery of devices and connectivity to the student population via our Adopt-a-School Initiative. I take this opportunity to commend the private sector, Madam President, and those public-spirited individuals who have answered the call to support this initiative by donating over 15,000 laptops and tablets for our needy students. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, the number is closer to 18,000.

These efforts will continue with the provision of 50 million in the 2021 allocation for the acquisition of computer devices for students in need, the restructuring of the curriculum to effect ICT integration, the continued training of teachers for the new ICT educational environment, modernization of the physical infrastructure at all levels from early childhood to tertiary institutions, and the commissioning of the UWI south campus, the operationalization of the newly constructed UTT Tamana Campus and the upgrade of other UTT campuses. All of these initiatives will aid in the development of our human capital over the short to medium term and prepare educators and students for the new digital methods of

teaching and learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

With respect to Public Utilities, it is unacceptable, Madam President, that there are many citizens who still do not enjoy a steady supply of water. To address this process, we have established a high-level committee to determine all of the issues which adversely affect the efficiency of the Water and Sewerage Authority and to make appropriate recommendations by the end of next month, November, for a reform of our water sector. We must also as a country face and confront the fact that we can no longer afford to subsidize WASA to the tune of over \$2 billion per year.

With respect to safety and security, among the numerous initiatives that will be undertaken by the Ministry of National Security in this fiscal year, in order to crackdown on the illegal importation of narcotics, illegal firearms and other contraband through our nations ports will be the establishment of a specialized multi-agency border and port interdiction unit. We will also facilitate the transformation of the riverine and coastal patrol unit which will patrol our watercourses and prevent illegal activities from taking place in those locations. We will facilitate the decentralization of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service through the establishment of divisional command centres which should reduce response time, improve monitoring and coordination of events, exercises and patrols and approve accountability of every patrol and action taken by offices.

For the vulnerable groups in our society, we are in the process of resourcing all divisional offices of the police for the special victims department which comprise the Child Protection Unit, the recently formed Gender-Based Violence Unit and the Sexual Offences Unit. And for our hard-working police officers, we commit to the establishment and construction of a new police service headquarters

which is expected to improve policing operations. We also commit to establish the much needed Trinidad and Tobago Police Service medical facility to provide critical care to our officers.

In the energy sector, recent challenges posed by the global energy industry, such as declining oil and gas prices and oversupply of petroleum products, exacerbated by declining rates of production, necessitate that we develop our remaining oil and gas resources in a cost-effective manner.

11.15 a.m.

Madam President, our energy sector is undergoing a major transition, which commenced in 2015, following the collapse of commodity prices. The reform process includes the restructuring of Petrotrin, which was a billion-dollar loss-making enterprise now transformed into a self-financing subsidiary, including the Heritage Petroleum Company Limited, which is dedicated to exploration and production, and has in its first year made a profit of \$1.4 billion and contributed \$820 million in taxes to the Treasury, and the Paria Fuel Trading Company, responsible for importing and distributing all categories of fuel, which is also profitable. With respect to the refinery, the Government is engaged in negotiations with Patriotic Technologies, and barring unforeseen circumstances, we hope to satisfactorily conclude a sale and purchase agreement for the refinery by the end of this month, October.

Additionally, the following are in place: planning and execution of production from the Manatee Field, which is separate and apart from the Loran Field—Manatee is on our side, Loran on the other side; a gas pricing regime which establishes long-term viability for our up-streamers and down-streamers; stabilization of gas production and significant foreign investment in the exploration

and production of both oil and gas. We also plan to improve the investment climate in the energy sector by reviewing the Petroleum Taxes Act with the objective of simplifying the existing fiscal regime, by reviewing the application of the supplemental petroleum tax, particularly for small producers and mature fields, thereby stimulating investment and job creation; strengthening our cost competitiveness in downstream petrochemical production; exploring opportunities for access to and sharing of common gas transportation and processing infrastructure, developing Trinidad and Tobago as a regional hub for energy services; restructuring the Eximbank to provide financing for Caribbean energy sector projects undertaken by local Trinidad and Tobago companies, and promoting public/private partnerships with tax incentives to support the export of energy services.

On the renewable energy front, we are in the process of developing the use of renewable energy in accordance with our commitment under the Paris Accord, via a project to deliver 112 megawatts of power to the grid, which will be the largest solar project in the Caribbean; and pursuing the introduction of green petrochemicals through the substitution of hydrogen from the natural gas reform process, utilizing steam, a waste product from an existing power station to operate a new turbine.

Reform of the liquid petroleum products sector. For the past 15 years, Madam President, the expenditure on fuel subsidies has totalled \$25 billion. However, a critical analysis of the subsidy impact on the national community has revealed that subsidies disproportionately benefit the higher income groups. Accordingly, in the context of current and projected oil prices, which are stabilizing at significantly lower levels than in the past, the liberalization of the

fuel market is proposed.

Under this arrangement, targeted for introduction in 2021, the fixed retail margins for all liquid petroleum products will be removed and petroleum retailers and dealers will be allowed to fix their own margins. Wholesale margins, however, will remain fixed for the time being. An appropriate but reasonable tax will be introduced to compensate for the current fuel surplus that is generated on the sale of gasoline because of depressed oil prices. The net result should be little or no increase in the price of motor fuels at current oil prices. However, it must be noted that if the price of oil recovers, the price of gasoline and diesel will naturally increase proportionately. For transparency, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries will post the changes in the refinery prices of gasoline, diesel and kerosene on a regular basis. However, the price of LPG will remain under the subsidy mechanism.

The deregulation of the liquid petroleum fuel market will lay the foundation for strategic investments to keep the industry efficient and competitive, and place petroleum fuel retailers on a self-sustaining basis. Further, all gas stations currently owned by NP will be offered for sale to the private sector, with first preference given to existing dealers and concessionaires.

With respect to manufacturing, this is perhaps one of the most important industries in our country. For this reason this Government will not waver in our support for the manufacturing sector, and we will continue to provide fiscal incentives and concessions for employment creation and investment in the sector. We are committed to establishing the electronic funds transfer window, which will remove the need for paper and physical presence to conduct business with the Customs and Excise Division. We are committed to improving the ease of doing

business. In the other place I gave some of the unacceptable times for doing business in Trinidad and Tobago.

We will expand the remit of the Eximbank to assist and foster the growth of the manufacturing sector. We will develop a national quality policy to ensure that whatever is produced in Trinidad and Tobago meets established standards, and in particular, to assist our manufacturers to expand into and penetrate overseas markets, we have allocated the sum of \$50 million to the Ministry of Trade and Industry for overseas market development and promotion. [*Desk thumping*] A very welcome development.

With respect to Tobago, this Government will continue to respect the Tobago House of Assembly's autonomy, as it relates to managing the affairs of the people of Tobago. As central government we will continue to support the THA in its projects planned for Tobago. We will partner with the THA to implement projects managed by the central government in Tobago, and we will continue to commit ourselves to ensuring that the people of Tobago enjoy the highest possible standard of living.

With respect to tourism and transportation, active construction of the new ANR Robinson International Airport terminal is scheduled to commence in January 2021, while design work on this project is already well underway. We believe that this new state-of-the-art, modern airport terminal when completed will transform the economy of Tobago. We are also transforming the sea bridge with the acquisition of two new modern, state-of-the-art fast ferries, the *APT James* and the *Buccoo Reef*, which are scheduled to arrive here in the near future and will revolutionize interisland sea transport.

With respect to COVID-19 relief in Tobago, we have partnered with the

THA to provide specific measures geared towards alleviating the hardship in the tourist and business sectors, as we understand that the Tobago economy was especially hard hit by the pandemic. The measures include the Tourism Accommodation Relief Grant, business relief grant, business relief loan, relief grant to tourism industry ancillary services, and a four-year soft loan facility with a two-year moratorium for small, medium and micro businesses, and a liquidity support loan programme through the credit union movement.

Madam President, we assure the residents of Tobago that these measures along with many other initiatives will continue until our economy recovers from this debilitating pandemic. And further, we are in active discussions with the THA to see what else can be done to assist Tobago businesses and Tobagonians in general during this difficult period.

I now turn to public/private partnerships. Given our present economic situation, in light of the adverse effects of the pandemic, we understand that business cannot continue as it once did. We must therefore think outside the box, design alternative strategies and solutions to ensure we optimize the revenue received and that goods and services remain accessible to everyone. In this context, we are increasing our efforts to engage in public/private partnerships.

Every year, millions of dollars' worth of products pass through the Port of Port of Spain, however, there are constant complaints about its efficiency. Further, there has been a decade's long global phenomenon which has seen the private sector given the responsibility for port operations, where national port authorities serve as regulators and facilitators under an arrangement known as the "landlord model". Accordingly, after years of successive governments attempting the public sector model of port operations, unsuccessfully, we have taken the decision to

adopt a similar approach. The Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago will thus retain its regulatory and asset management functions, but the operational and commercial aspects of the port will be outsourced to a private investor.

I now turn to *Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure*. The budgeted revenue for 2021 is predicated on an oil price of \$45 per barrel and a gas price of \$3 per MMBtu. These assumed oil and gas prices are in line with the projections of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the United States Energy Information Administration and the International Energy Agency.

Based on these assumptions, we are projecting total revenue of 41.364 billion, oil revenue of 9.265 billion, non-oil revenue of 31.193 billion, capital revenue of 905 million, and the total expenditure net of capital repayments and sinking fund contributions, \$49.53 billion, a little below 50 billion for fiscal 2021.

Despite our present fiscal constraints, our expenditure has increased marginally for 2021, with a view that the growth momentum must be sustained with associated economic impacts and benefits for our society.

Major allocations of expenditure include: education and training, 7.973 billion; health, 6.050 billion; national security, 5.227 billion; works and transport, 2.956 billion; public utilities, 2.091 billion; rural development and local government, 1.642 billion; agriculture, 1.198 billion; housing, 1 billion.

Madam President, as we create the necessary conditions to put our economy on a growth path, we propose to utilize a variety of financing options for the fiscal deficit. We will access financing on the domestic and international capital markets, and from international institutions. We will also secure non-debt-creating financing facilities through strategic asset dispositions and public/private partnerships, and withdrawals from the HSF if and when required.

I now turn to the fiscal measures. The measures presented in the budget for this fiscal provide for the following: Firstly, technological transformation. Removal of all taxes on mobile and digital equipment, mobile phones, software, computer accessories and peripherals, computers, notebooks, laptops; a tax allowance set at 150 per cent with a cap of 3 million for businesses which invest in tech start-ups and new tech business; a tax allowance set at 150 per cent with a cap of 3 million for businesses which engage in technology solutions and digitalization; a tax allowance set at 150 per cent with a cap of 3 million for businesses which create employment in the technology industry, particularly for young people.

And now innovation: Internet Mi-Fi for students, for those who have no access to the Internet. We are going to distribute a mobile IT device called Mi-Fi, a small mobile device—some of you may be familiar with it—which we intend to distribute to 45,000 needy students and households, based on need. [*Desk thumping*] This will allow persons who do not have Internet capacity to use Internet-enabled devices. Wi-Fi hotspots and Internet cafes—we are expanding the existing Wi-Fi hotspots and Internet cafes, particularly in remote areas of the country.

To incentivize the private sector, we are waiving tax on imported construction material and other construction material for approved building projects.

We are waiving stamp duty for first-time homeowners. We are increasing the stamp duty threshold for residential properties, below which you pay no stamp duty, from 1.5 million to 2 million. This amendment will save first-time homeowners up to \$28,000 in stamp duty, will benefit up to 1,000 families per

year, and will encourage the private sector to invest in housing development.

Again, to incentivize the private sector, the Property Development Allowance, allowing approved property development companies to claim as a deduction, 20 per cent from the present 15 per cent of the capital expenditure incurred in the construction of commercial, industrial or residential buildings that are completed on or before December 31, 2024.

Tourism accommodation upgrade project: We will extend the existing grant incentive to 2023, for eligible tourism accommodation facilities. Wear and tear allowance for plant and equipment; we are increasing the allowable rate of wear and tear of plant and equipment from 25 per cent to 30 per cent. Again, to incentivize the private sector.

With respect to illegal quarrying, we have decided as a deterrent to increase the penalties, fines and custodial sentences for illegal quarrying—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, I am almost finished—by 200 per cent, and to disqualify any company trading in illegally sourced quarry material from participating in government construction projects.

With respect to praedial larceny, consistent with our thrust in agriculture, we are increasing the fines, penalties and custodial sentences by 200 per cent.

With respect to the supplemental petroleum tax for onshore oil producers, small producers, we are increasing the threshold for the imposition of the supplementary petroleum tax for small onshore producers to \$75 a barrel from the current 50.

With respect to motor vehicles, we are removing the tax and duty concessions on the importation of private motor cars on January the 1st, 2021. Tax

concessions for commercial and industrial vehicles and public transport vehicles will remain in place. We are reducing the permissible age of imported foreign-used cars to three years, and reducing quotas for both used cars and new cars.

To deter people from smoking, we are increasing the excise duty and import duty on tobacco products by 20 per cent. To deter people from selling alcohol to minors and tobacco, we are increasing the penalties for selling alcohol and tobacco to minors, by 200 per cent.

With respect to luxury foods, to discourage people from importing luxury foods, we are imposing value added tax, which is not now imposed, on unprocessed foods of any kind, and we are going to impose value added tax on luxury foods such as lobster, escargot, smoked salmon, strawberries.

We also have an innovative programme, a workforce recovery programme, it is a Commonwealth of Learning Coursera Workforce Recovery Programme, which will be administered by YTEPP. This programme will provide 4,000 courses and 400 specializations to young people and the unemployed, under-employed and displaced workers.

With respect to small and medium enterprises, we are amending the Corporation Tax Act to incentivize small businesses to list on the stock exchange.

With respect to creative and sporting activities, we are increasing the current tax allowance of 6 million to 12 million for corporate sponsorship of nationals in the local fashion industry, audio visual or video production, for the purpose of local education, entertainment, local production companies in respect of their own productions, as well as for companies which sponsor sporting activities, and events for sportsmen or events in art and culture.

And now the pièce de résistance. Finally, a fiscal stimulus in the amount of

\$750 million to assist lower income groups to weather the storm of the pandemic, we are increasing the personal income tax allowance from 72,000 to 84,000, thus giving 250,000 taxpayers an additional \$3,000 per year in disposable income after tax.

Madam President, this budget is all about achieving growth and embracing change. Change in the way we conduct our business; change in the way we develop our entrepreneurial skills; change in the way we expand our labour force, as we push towards diversification of our economy; change in the way we move forward as a country, as we embrace the digital dynamics that surround us; change in the way we improve the health and care of ourselves and our families; change in the way we embrace the initiatives to align our consumption patterns to take advantage of locally produced goods, and strive to become a healthier nation and achieve a higher standard of living. It seeks to address the needs of many varied groups and sectors across the country and the economy. It is truly a bold and innovative step forward.

Madam President, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you very much, Madam President. On behalf of the alternative government, led by the distinguished Leader of the Opposition and MP for Siparia, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, I would like to begin my contribution by reminding this Senate that contrary to the false narrative unleashed in this Senate by the hon. Minister of Finance, COVID-19 did not crash our economy; the Rowley Government did.

Over 100,000 workers were dumped on the unemployment garbage heap by

this uncaring and insensitive Government, long before COVID took its first life on March 12, 2020. What we have witnessed is a rehashing of a train of several recycled PNM broken promises which have never materialized. It is safe to suggest that after all the failed PNM manifesto promises, budget '21 may well be described as a performer charade with the outcome already locked in or locked up.

Madam President, the cruel reality of life tells us that the people are hurting. The people's spirits are broken. The people are jobless. The people are homeless and penniless. The people are hungry and living in relative and absolute poverty. Under this uncaring administration, people's dreams have been shattered, and their hopes blasted. This is the naked reality in our sweet T&T.

No laptops for some 65,000 children. The GATE is about to be closed. Collective bargaining has been frontally attacked and assaulted by this anti-working class and anti-trade union Government.

Madam President, we have estimated that over 260,000 citizens are currently living under the poverty line. The number will be pushed further upwards as a result of these draconian and austerity measures recently rolled out by this Government. The only thing that this Government seems to be good at is selling out our people's assets to their friends, financiers and families, to ensure their pockets are filled whilst the people starve and wither away.

This Government does not seem intelligent enough to know how to manage, diversify and promote sustainable development. All this Government has done is tax and tax the poor and the middle class, to enrich themselves and their financiers.

Madam President, this PNM method reminds me of the infamous slave trade when traitors sold their own people for a few pennies to the merchants of death in the west.

The Government has become the handmaiden of the parasitic oligarchy, and is seeking to marginalize the working people into a state of permanent subservience and perpetual poverty.

In the last five years, our beloved people have been subjected to an avalanche of falsehoods, distortions and deception. Madam President, may I give you an example.

The Government perpetuated a massive hoax and falsehood when it stated in its 2021 Budget Statement on page 17, that in 2020, the fiscal deficit stood at \$16.8 billion or 11 per cent of GDP. Madam President, when we look at the *Draft Estimates of Revenue for the Financial Year 2021*, on page 5, it reveals that the real deficit is not \$16.8 billion, but 23.1 billion, with borrowing representing 16.5 billion and extraordinary receipts representing \$6.6 billion, giving a total financing of 23.1 billion, and not the 16.8 billion stated in the Minister's budget statement. The extraordinary receipts showed a drawdown from the country's Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and probably the sell out of state assets, inclusive of CL Financial.

Madam President, this 23.1 billion does not include moneys owed to the business community through VAT payments over \$4 billion to \$5 billion. It does not include the amount of money owing to contractors, which could be over 1 billion or 2.

Madam President, it is our considered view that the people made the wrong choice, and will tragically have to live with the consequences of their action. People must never forget that the freedom to choose one's government carries with it the responsibility for the consequences of one's actions on election day. We are confident that there are thousands of people today who are regretting staining their

fingers for the PNM. We must all remember that elections carry their own consequences.

Madam President, the oppressive measures introduced in budget '21, will inevitably result in a widening of the income and wealth gap, between the haves and the have-nots. It is now absolutely clear that the PNM Government is firmly placed in the back pocket of the rich, powerful and mighty oligarchy.

There has been a philosophical shift in the policy framework of this Government in a rightward direction. No policy or package of fiscal measures will ever succeed without the trust and confidence of the people. This PNM authoritarian, top-down, oppressive, Washington-based, IMF-inspired austerity measures on the backs of an already overburdened and broken population, will ultimately backfire and fail. Indeed, the PNM will eventually be consumed by its own internal rot and the fire of its own decrepitude.

There has been absolutely no dialogue, no citizen engagement, no public consultation with the people and their representative organizations whatsoever, on any of the fundamental and far-reaching measures enunciated in the budget. Madam President, the measures are disjointed, poorly designed and will not achieve the ultimate objectives. The PNM is the wrong choice for this country, and is clearly on the wrong track.

For four consecutive years there has been negative economic growth, beginning in 2016, continuing in '17, '18 and '19. These all occurred long before COVID-19 in March of 2020. Do not blame COVID-19 for this PNM's incompetence, corruption and mismanagement of the nation's economy.

11.45 a.m.

The PNM crashed this economy long before COVID-19. Madam President,

we have had the worse managed economy since 1995 under this Rowley-led administration. Madam President, may I inform you that the new philosophy guiding this PNM Government was recently articulated by no other person than the Prime Minister. In an interview on the *Morning Brew* sometime ago he was asked by the host: How does this Government intend to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor? Hear what the Prime Minister said in response, Madam President, and I quote:

There is nothing wrong with the rich getting richer but the poor must come out of poverty. It is not a see-saw anchor where one has to go down for the other to come up. You must find a way to encourage the rich to become richer because in getting richer, they, the rich, create opportunities for the poor.

Madam President, in other words, the Prime Minister publicly embraced the backward, discredited philosophy of inequality and privilege which has manifested itself in some of the worst forms of modern-day oppression and exploitation of the majority by the minority.

Madam President, because of this philosophy today, almost one billion people, globally, live in extreme poverty and experience daily pains of hunger and starvation. It is an incontrovertible fact that there exists, Madam President, an inextricable link between poverty, inequality and the quality of a nation's democracy. The cost of inequality, if not addressed, will lead to class conflict, class warfare, growing unemployment and massive dislocation.

Madam President, there are some major concerns surrounding this anti-poor people's budget. The budget lacks substance and appears unrealistic. In the circumstances, the Government will not be able to finance many of its social

programmes. The 8.2 billion deficit excludes the capital payments and sinking fund contribution. The Minister must disclose the value of the capital repayments and the sinking fund contribution so that we can deal with the true deficit expected. It makes no sense presenting inaccurate numbers for us to debate. The correct numbers are essential for an intelligent understanding of the Government's policies and fiscal measures.

Madam President, another major issue is the expected increase in revenues of 7 billion over last year's and the basis for this is difficult to accept given the decelerating economy. Madam President, a deficit more in the region, not of 7 billion but maybe 15 billion may be, in fact, more realistic when we analyse what is taking place.

Madam President, under the PNM, the country's net public sector debt has increased from 70.3 billion or 39.8 per cent of GDP in 2014, to some 121.1 billion or 81 per cent GDP by the end of September 2020. GDP has also declined from 176.6 billion in 2014 to 150 billion in fiscal 2020, a decline of 15 per cent. COVID did not crash this economy, it is the mismanagement by this Government that caused it, Madam President.

Madam President, the Minister was silent on details on how the financing gap will be addressed, and we are left to wonder if the Senate is just to accept his word and leave the sources of financing to guess work. Madam President, the Minister was also silent on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund as a source of funding but the HFS may be the major source of funding for the deficit, thereby further depleting the HSF much faster than the citizens expect.

Madam President, the budget has no real diversification plans. The budget is designed to accelerate from where we stand, the introduction of the International

Monetary Fund programme and this will surely come as we are seeing manifestations of these programmes. Where are the Government's plans for sustainable job creation? The budget was not convincing in this regard, Madam President, and what we can further expect is the rapid deceleration of the economy under this Government's watch.

Madam President, let us look at some of the fundamental economic realities facing this country under this Government. Persistent decline in GDP, 6.3 minus in 2016, minus 2.3 in 2017, minus 0.2 in 2018, minus 0.2 in 2019, and according to the Minister, minus 6.8 in 2020. Persistent balance of payment deficits, persistent primary balance deficit, a collapse in the country's gross foreign exchange reserves, down to less than 8 billion today, foreign direct investment is in negative territory. Madam President, unemployment and underemployment, both are on the rise. We have estimated, as I said earlier, over 100,000 people, jobless. The country's ease of doing business has worsened under this incompetent regime from a rank of 66 in 2014 to 105 in 2020. The labour force participation rate has worsened, Madam President. Today, it stands just at 59.1 per cent. We need to be around 72 per cent.

Madam President, income inequality and wealth disparity have worsened under this Government. Madam President, do you know that 73 per cent of wealth of this country is owned by less than 0.02 per cent of the population, which is just over 28,000? The credit ratings of this country have been downgraded to virtual junk-bond status by both Standard & Poor's and particularly, Moody's. The perception of corruption index is clear and is having a negative impact on both domestic and foreign direct investment. Madam President, let us turn to the brutal assault on the working class and the trade union movement by this Government.

Madam President, in assault after assault, the working people have been under severe pressure by not only this PNM Government but past PNM Governments. Madam President, in a drive to systematically dismantle, weaken and subvert trade unions in the country, what have we seen? We have witnessed, Madam President, hammer blows after hammer blows. Aviation Communication destroyed by the PNM, known as ACAWU. All Trinidad destroyed because of the PNM shutting down of Caroni. SWUTT, Steel Workers Union weakened because of the disappearance of the ArcelorMittal. TIWU weakened by the PNM's policy. The SWWTU is targeted for destruction with imminent privatization on the port. The PSA is under pressure not only with the freeze of jobs, re: vacant posts, but also, the Government's intention of dismantling the Board of Inland Revenue, the VAT office and the Customs and Excise department. The powerful vanguard, OWTU, has been weakened by the hammer blows of this Government, they shut down Petrotrin, retrenchment at UTT, retrenchment at Lever Brothers and the imminent closure of NP, weakening this very mighty and powerful vanguard of the working class. The CWU, hammer blows; 800 workers gone, TSTT. Madam President, whether it is Amalgamated contractors or NUGFW, the situation is the same. And when we look at the fiscal measures announced in the 2020 budget, Madam President, we are seeing more blows for the working class in this society.

Madam President, the Government has threatened to close down the foreign used vehicle industry. If that happens, 6,000 workers gone. The Government has threatened to privatize the port. If that happens, 1,500 workers gone but the Prime Minister gets a special executive grant for overseas travel, retroactive.

Madam President, PH drivers will be in trouble with the closure of the foreign used market and fuel increases as a result of the removal of subsidies.

Thousands of jobs are in jeopardy with the freezing of those vacant posts in the public service. Madam President, the Government must tell us how many workers retire every year in the public service and in the public sector? We understand it is between two and 3,000 people. When they go, are you going to fill those positions? Tell us, Madam President.

Madam President, in spite of what the Minister of Public Utilities wants to say, the Government has reduced allocation to WASA by close to \$700 million. We estimate 3,000 workers from WASA have to go, Madam President. Jobs are going to be threatened at T&TEC, the postal services. Madam President, the National Gas Company, because they have now become a ghost of themselves from a billion-dollar making company to less than 300 million; that is the state.

Madam President, what about the digitization and automation of the public service? That too will result in thousands of workers going home. The systematic freezing of wages and salaries in the public sector. And now, the Minister of Finance has stated there will be no collective bargaining with public sector trade unions and trade unions, generally, because the Government has frontally attacked and assaulted the collective bargaining process.

Madam President, where are we going? And then, the Government seeks to impose this dreaded property tax on the people. Where are we going, Madam President? We cannot continue under this Government in the way that this country is proceeding. They intend to increase the retirement age at NIB from 60 to 65 years. Madam President, not only that, they intend to increase contribution rates from 13 per cent to 16 per cent and then to 25.5 per cent. They intend to put a freeze on NIB retirement pension at 3,000, and if you go at the age of 60, you get 6 per cent less. Only when you reach 65 would you get your 3,000. Madam

President, these are the realities that are facing working people in this country. And they now want to do like Patrick Manning, when he was there, integrate old-aged pension with NIB retirement pension. That is what the former Prime Minister attempted to do when he was there.

Madam President, that is not enough, they have privatized NP. They are now selling the gas stations to dealers and concessionaires. So they have removed fuel subsidy after they brutalized the people and now say, go on the open market, Madam President, and whatever the price of fuel is internationally, you must pay for it. Madam President, this is a travesty in this country. This Government is an excuse for a government.

Madam President, the Minister of Finance talked about 72,000 to 84,000. Madam President, that is crumbs falling from the table of the master. What is that going to do to people and for people? Madam President, so they intend to privatize NP; 500 permanent workers will go as a result of privatization.

Madam President, that is not all. You know what the Government has done, Madam President? They have given an undertaking in the budget to give a concessionaire who is renting space in a gas station the right to own that gas station. The only concession that we know in those gas stations is the advisor to the Prime Minister on the Roadmap Committee, a chap called Christian Mouttet. The KFC, they are the concessionaire. So, who are you giving gas stations to? Dealers or concessionaires? You are about—the PNM is about friends, families and financiers; that is what the PNM is about. And they want us to support this budget? How can we support this budget?

Madam President, they intend to privatize the port and give it to who—some Chinese company or some French company. Madam President, I looked

through the PNM manifesto for the privatization of the port, the privatization of NP. Madam President, I am looking, I cannot find it. It is deception after deception. They mamaguy the population, they mamaguy the working class. They got the working class to vote for them and now, Madam President, instead of the workers firing the PNM on August the 10th, the PNM is now firing the workers; that is what is going on. But the workers must stand up, get up, rise up and defend themselves and defend their interests against this wicked Government called the PNM, Madam President. This Government is up to no good when it comes to the people of this country.

Madam President, may I tell you, the sell-out of the century is our energy sector. This Government has been totally and completely outmanoeuvred by the powerful oil giants, BP, Shell, EOG, Madam President. They were involved in direct negotiations led by the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Security. Madam President, you know what is the end result of that? The price of natural gas to down-streamers gone high up and the profits of the up-streamers gone right up, they have crushed the Point Lisas Estate and they have closed down several petrochemical plants, putting workers on the breadline, Madam President, because of their incompetence.

Madam President, they went ahead without our intervention, without consultation, without our participation and they gave a renewed licence extension to several oil majors. Assets under the law that are supposed to come back to us, Madam President, they give it back to these oil giants. This is almost equivalent to treachery against the people of this country.

And now you are coming to tell us, Madam President, we must pay tax, property tax. They have sold out our jewels to the big companies in the oil sector.

Madam President, I want to tell you that there are alternatives that the Government could have used but they did not go there, “is pressure”, pressure on the poor, pressure, and pressure on the middle class in this country. Madam President, this Government could have done the following. There is a publication called the Global Financial Integrity report. It revealed that Trinidad and Tobago is losing US \$6 billion a year as a result of misinvoicing, underinvoicing and overinvoicing. Why does the Government not go there and get money that is going through illicit financial flows? They are not going there.

Madam President, I can tell you, I followed the Spotlight on Energy. Poten & Partners told the country that these oil majors, particularly those located in the Atlantic LNG, robbed this country of US \$6.5 billion over a five-year period, Madam President, through transfer pricing. The Government said they are going to bring legislation to deal with transfer pricing. Up to now, we have not seen legislation. Instead of that, Madam President, instead of getting back US \$6.5 billion for us, you know what the Government does? It gets a \$1 billion instead, and they hail that as an achievement.

Madam President, I think the time has come for us to have a criminal, forensic investigation into the purchase of two Cape-class vessels which the Government is claiming is costing us \$600 million and that is costing the Australian Navy TT \$300 million. Where has the next \$300 million gone? We need a criminal, forensic investigation into this matter.

Madam President, I can tell you, it hurts me because I meet people every day, they are hungry, they are starving, they want help, their children want laptops, they come to me and they want help. The PNM “eh” doing nothing for the poor, only for the rich. They have refused to do what, Madam President? The public

procurement Act. Dust in the place. Madam President, I would like the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to tell us, instead of removing the fuel subsidy on crude products, why do you not put it on gas products so we can get lower electricity rates? This Government does not care about the people, they do not care.

Madam President, there are two issues I want to raise before I close. The light bulb issue. I think we need a criminal investigation into this one. We understand a company called Emitter Energy Inc., Madam President, is the manufacturer. When we examine and we investigate, Emitter is not the manufacturer. Emitter is a place or is located in a house in North Carolina. The owner is a fella called Seepersad Lyman. Madam President, we want a criminal investigation into in this matter of the so-called LED lightbulbs in this country.

The other thing, Madam President, I think it is important for us to pay attention to—Madam President, on national security. I want to deal with national security and want to ask the Prime Minister to answer some questions in this Parliament on this matter. Madam President, you and I have been reading about something called “Drug Sou Sou”. Right? And the question that people are asking is, why has the Government taken so long to take action on this matter? Madam President, I read in the *Newsday*, and no one has denied it so far that three PNM politicians—

Madam President: Sen. Mark, you have five more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark:—three PNM politicians are involved in this “Drug Sou Sou”. I would like the Prime Minister to share with this country the names of these three PNM politicians, Madam President? We understand from our sources that came to us that before the general election, members of the DSS were approached by these PNM politicians, according to our information, and given money so that they can

buy votes from the people on election day. These are issues that are coming to us, and we want the Government to tell what role they have to play in DSS. Whether DSS was a slush fund established by the PNM to bribe people for the elections? That is what we want to know. The PNM must tell us that, and the Prime Minister rushing to take charge of investigations. I “doh” know if the Prime Minister is a police. What is the Prime Minister doing in police business? Right?

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order, 46(6).

Madam President: Sen. Mark, you are—I am just going to advise you, your language is becoming increasingly more inflammatory, so just—you have a few minutes, just mind that please as you finish.

Sen. W. Mark: A few minutes. Thank you very much. The 2020/2021 budget has totally emasculated the working class. The Government is still without a plan, still without a vision. Plans have been scripted for them by their kingmakers, Madam President.

Madam President, the PNM stands for “promises never materialize”, broken recycled promises, all you get from them every year. I want to say in closing, as the alterative government, the UNC stands ready and willing to continue the struggle to promote the genuine aspirations and dreams of the people in their relentless quest for the creation of a more just, equal and peaceful society. In our struggle against the popes—I am saying the struggle—in our struggle against the popes of modern-day oppression and exploitation, let us place the Rowley Government where it rightfully belongs, Madam President, in the dustbin of the nation’s history. [*Desk thumping*] We in the UNC will continue to stand for equality and equal opportunity for all.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: I am on a point of order.

Sen. W. Mark: The PNM—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon:—46(4). On a point of order, 46(4).

Sen. W. Mark:—stands for inequality and privilege. Madam President, out of this long political darkness, a brighter day will come, the sun will rise again and we in the UNC will get this nation working again. [*Desk thumping*] The UNC represents the future, the UNC is the future, forward ever, backward never. Thank you very much, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine. As we await Sen. Deonarine entering the booth, I just want to remind Members about the Standing Orders, about language and also, about the need not to shout because—as I keep saying—the acoustics are very good in this Chamber, so there is absolutely no need to be raising your voice when you are delivering your contributions.

12.15 p.m.

Sen. Amrita Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. As you know, I am always pleased to contribute on debates on Appropriation Bills as it is one of the very few times that I have the opportunity to speak on the macroeconomic stance of the country and carve out some suggestions going forward in terms of sustainable economic management.

Madam President, my approach to this debate today will be one focused on the Government's ability to meet or achieve its macroeconomic objectives as outlined by the Minister of Finance in the context of the challenging economic environment which we currently are thriving in. As usual, Madam President, I have many recommendations, and I hope that it fuels fruitful bipartisan discussion in this honourable House today, and the oncoming days. Now, in a nutshell, the Minister tried to strike a balance between the policies to stimulate the economy and

tackle the threats to our debt and external sustainability by kick-starting the fiscal consolidation process. This is all in an effort to regain macroeconomic stability, something that the Government has been trying to achieve even before the pandemic. As a result the Government has outlined an ambitious medium-term fiscal framework.

Madam President, to prevent the catastrophic economic fallout, safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of the people in Trinidad and Tobago has cost the country a deficit amounting to 10.7 per cent of GDP, and sent the debt to GDP ratio to an unattainable—or an unattractive, sorry, 80 per cent of GDP. And this is in the context of compromised revenue generation. Just to give some interpretation to these figures. In nominal terms, the *Review of the Economy* tells us that the net public sector debt in fiscal 2020 increased by \$18 billion, external debt by \$4.7 billion, and contingent liability by \$3.3 billion. This increase in external debt is an increase of 4 percentage points in just one year. This additional debt accumulation from fiscal 2020, has sent our original estimate for debt servicing from 8.6 billion to \$10.1 billion in fiscal 2020, and now according to the *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure*, it is now estimated to cost the country \$11.3 billion in this fiscal year. Madam President, this accounts for 7.6 per cent of GDP and 27 per cent of our revenue. If we look at it from expenditure terms, it accounts for 22.7 per cent of our total expenditure in this fiscal allocation. And this does not even take into account the overdraft facility at the Central Bank for which we are currently paying approximately \$1.3 billion on an annual basis. Furthermore, as expected and as a result of the pandemic and disruptions in global supply chains, our external position has also worsened.

However, Madam President, this volatility in the external sector came before

the pandemic. This stress was building up in our external accounts. Our energy exports earnings fell by 18.8 per cent in the last quarter of 2019, while non-energy exports fell by approximately 17 per cent in the last quarter of 2019. This is data according to the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. And it is also important to note that this has resulted in a balance of payment account which has been in deficit since 2015. Now, due to the ongoing terms of trade shock that happened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is estimated that the current account will go into deficit accounting for at least 3.3 per cent of GDP in this fiscal year. This is according to estimates by the International Monetary Fund that were published on the World Economic Outlook Database. That is approximately \$4.9 billion. Now, I expect these estimates to worsen a little further given that the Minister of Finance's estimate for the contraction of the economy is around 6.8 per cent, whereas the IMF World Economic Outlook forecasted that the country's real GDP growth would contract by 5.6 per cent.

Now, the reason why I am mentioning these statistics, Madam President, is just to emphasize how much money we have lost from our external account in revenues through a decline in exports, and to understand that the build-up of debt, especially foreign debt coupled with the loss in revenue, our debt sustainability and external sustainability are threatened. Now, I know the Minister is comforted about the foreign reserves position that the country is currently in, and to some extent I do agree. Our foreign reserves, if you take the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund into consideration as well, accounts for almost more than 50 per cent of GDP, and our external debt has a maturity in approximately six to seven years' time. But, Madam President, it is important to note that the 7.5 billion in the international foreign reserves is—approximately 2 billion comes from or accounts for disbursements

from external lending agencies that have been placed into the fund so that we can utilize the finances to finance the deficit. So, Madam President, what I am trying to get at is that we are in a situation where the external debt increased by 4 percentage points. Our current account balance will become in deficit. Our overall balance of payments account has consistently been in deficit for some time and we are operating in an extremely tight foreign exchange environment that is expected to further tighten. All of these factors are contributing to something we economists refer to as disequilibrium in the foreign exchange market, such that it requires intervention by the Central Bank currently to intervene to supply approximately one-third of the market demand for hard currency.

Now, I know the Government has ruled out relying on a devaluation to solve these problems, and the Government's decision is based on understandable reasons. One, the potential inflationary pass-through effects on the economy; and two, our non-energy sector right now is very susceptible to negative economic shocks, even more susceptible making it more volatile than even the energy sector. As such, alternative ways are being pursued in this Appropriation Bill to stabilize imports. For example, we have the increase in the motor vehicle tax, the imposition of the quota on the importation of motor vehicles, extension or expansion of the VAT base to include luxury imports, just to name a few, Madam President.

But the question remains, Madam President, whether these short-term measures to ease the forex outflows are sufficient. While some measures would indeed ease the drain on the foreign exchange reserves, and I have previously listed them, there are some of these measures that could be foreign exchange depleting in the short-term. While we stimulate investments through tax incentives in these multiple sectors that we have identified for diversification, for example: the tax

waiver on construction material for approved building projects, incentives in the manufacturing sector, incentives in the creative sector, incentives in the digital sector, and tax breaks on all IT equipment; while these are very much needed incentives to stimulate the economic investment in the economy so that we could probably hope to follow a route of Keynesian economics and have the multiplier effect manifest in the economy—but what these diversification initiatives do in the short-term is that it would take some time for these sectors to become viable exports so that we can export those products to earn foreign exchange. Until then, these measures will be forex depleting.

And then we also have the situation where we are hoping that some of the policies outlined in this budget would lead to a rebound in economic activity, and right now, given that the consumption patterns of the country—consumption and production patterns of the country are heavily reliant on imports, then we will definitely have another increased import should there be any turnaround in the economy. Let us say for example, if the energy sector rebounds. So, therefore, in the short-term, unless there is some significant turnaround in the energy sector, maintaining the exchange rate becomes more and more difficult. And, Madam President, I know the Minister of Finance knows this, hence the reason he is taking these hard decisions to place some sort of limitation on the physical imports via the negative lists through demerit goods, increasing the taxes on demerit goods and also the luxury goods, and also increasing the forex ration through the forex window.

So, Madam President, in the interim, what I am saying is that the external disequilibrium in the foreign exchange market is building up, and the longer the economic situation remains the same, unless there is significant turnaround in

energy revenues it creates more and more pressure to maintain the exchange rate. Now, I am not hoping for anything negative for this economy. Madam President, I really hope it does not reach to a situation where over the medium to the long term we may be left in a position where we have no choice but to do an official correction. I really hope it does not come to that. If we take, for example, the case of Suriname. Suriname, just this year in September of 2020, had to undergo a massive devaluation. A 90 per cent devaluation because of the length of time that they took to deal with the foreign reserve situation that they had and they ended up with a chronic shortage of USD in their economy. So as a result, they had to do an official correction, and immediately within less than a couple of days the inflation rate skyrocketed. As a matter of fact, the IMF is predicting that inflation in Suriname is going to reach to approximately 105 per cent. The cost of basic goods and services is going up, and also we have a situation in Suriname where the price of fuel has increased by almost 50 per cent.

So, Madam President, what I am trying to say is that once the exchange rate is misaligned, what tends to happen is that a parallel market emerges. A parallel market where you can go and purchase foreign exchange illegally. You could get—you know, you see some stores selling it for like 8 USD to a dollar. They have the signs stuck up on their doors. So, when this parallel market emerges, it emerges just so that they can correct the disequilibrium that exists in the market. And right now the current parallel rate in Trinidad estimates that the exchange rate is overvalued by at least 20 per cent. Now, businesses who are sourcing foreign exchange from the parallel market, and I am sure that is happening, they would not absorb this higher cost by themselves. What tends to happen is that they intend to incorporate that cost in their pricing strategy and then pass it down to us regular

customers who are consumers of their services, their goods and services.

And, of course, Madam President, we are the ones to bear the brunt of that. So, what I am saying is that to deal with this situation we have two policy options. One, is that we could keep kicking the can down the road and hoping for a strong rebound in the energy sector. In this scenario we try alternative measures to reduce the rate at which reserves are depleting until the energy sector rebounds. Economists commonly refer to this as an internal devaluation. It is not an official devaluation of the exchange rate. Should the energy sector not rebound and economic stagnation or economic decline continues for an extended period of time, then unfortunately we will be at risk for doing a massive official devaluation, which would have severe socio-economic effects in terms of the inflation pass-through effect on the country. The second policy option is that we take a pragmatic approach and adopt micro-devaluations within whatever international buffers that we have. In the short-term, we adopt gradual micro adjustments, and we are one country in the region who are fortunate to have the luxury to do such an adjustment within the comfort zone of a high foreign exchange account.

This would actually give time for the population's consumption and production patterns to adjust accordingly. And, in the meantime your fiscal policy would need to integrate with this policy so that you have a situation where you provide incentives for the various sectors, just like we are providing incentives in these different sectors to facilitate the diversification process. This is a proactive policy stance, Madam President, and it really tries to put things in place to support the other sectors while you try to gradually adjust your exchange rate. I do not know, perhaps the hon. Minister of Finance is maybe setting the stage for this. I do not want to introduce any sort of speculation, but it is just my suggestion based on

my knowledge. But the main concern, and the Minister keeps repeating it to us, is that devaluating the exchange rate has an impact on standard of living and the cost of living in the country, and that is what we are trying to avoid. However, Madam President, through an internal devaluation, like what we are trying to attempt to do right now, some of the measures outlined in this budget, the measures to stabilize imports, the measures to reduce expenditure, the measures to raise revenue would have some serious knock-on effects on the standard of living, and mostly on the middle and lower class population. We all know this.

Cost of living is going to increase, because right now we have in the short-term the country's production and consumption patterns highly reliant on imports, and then I explained the situation with a parallel exchange market emerging that allows for producers to incorporate higher prices in their pricing strategy. And then you have the situation where further imposition is going to be placed on restricting the imports of luxury goods. Now, I would like to stick a pin here and just caution or mention to the Minister that careful consideration needs to be given when coming up with this list of luxury goods because in the absence of an updated household budgetary survey, the Government may not be adequately informed of the current consumption patterns of individuals in the country.

Now, I did not hear the Minister make mention of apples and grapes today, but I know mention was made in the budget statement so I would still mention this. Apples and grapes, hon. Minister of Finance, through you, Madam President, are no longer luxury goods. Over the years, they have become a normal good in Trinidad and Tobago, and therefore I do not think this should be going on a luxury list to help curb the foreign exchange problem. Do not send us back to the days where we see apples and grapes for Christmas only.

Furthermore, Trinidad and Tobago has a chronic non-communicable disease problem that the Minister of Health has been working assiduously in trying to manage over the past couple of years. The diets that surround the management and prevention of NCDs usually consists of foods that are highly imported; nuts, wholegrains, non-hydrogenated oils, low sodium foods, cereals, pasta. Maybe that is why a lot of the cereal—we have a high cereal import bill, because most of the wholegrain cereals that are consumed are imported. So, I would advise the Minister to sit with the Ministry of Health when he is coming up with this luxury list so that you do not have a situation where you end up with conflicting priorities.

Furthermore, work needs to be done on updating the household budgetary survey so that the country is more adequately informed for policymaking based on the current consumption patterns of individual. Also, when you come up with this list from the household budgetary survey and you see the type of consumption that individuals have, and if the consumption, most likely is the case, is highly reliant on imported goods, you can sit with your manufacturers and find a way to incentivize them to produce these local products, for example, wholegrain cereals. Just some suggestions, Madam President.

Now, I want to mention a few words on the special forex window. Now, I read in the budget that this special forex window will be extended for another 75 million to purchasers, to suppliers, or essential imports. For example, to supermarkets and other entities, but I am not sure what is the mechanism in place to ensure that these businesses do indeed purchase essential items with this forex. The point I am trying to get at is that you have a situation where you have scarce allocation, you have a scarce resource, which is the forex, that needs to be allocated amongst a lot of needs, and then sometimes when you go to the

supermarket you see a wide range of imported vegetables and fruits rotting on the shelves. So, it is essential that, you know, we have a monitoring mechanism in place for the purchase of these essential items through the special forex window.

So, Madam President, what I was saying is that, because it is difficult to get exchange rates, and the prices of goods and services have been increasing, the cost of living would most likely increase, and then also through the introduction of luxury imports, costs of goods and services would increase there as well. But cost of living is also going to take another hit from the increased motor vehicle tax, liberalization of the fuel market and property taxes. This is a severe hit on the middle class population of the country—on the middle class population. On one hand you are relying on the energy sector to rebound, but when it does you would have a liberalized fuel market that the middle and lower class population have to bear the brunt of. But also, you run the risk of this liberalized fuel market resulting in rippling effects on prices throughout the country. Plus, you have hiring freeze in the public service, for which recent graduates and middle income persons again would have been prime beneficiaries. So while you have the middle-income earners who benefit from this increase in the income threshold to \$7,000 per month, on the other hand you have the middle-income earners having to take a huge hit with respect to having to pay residential property taxes, and fund all these other costs that I have been mentioning, including the potential for higher utility rates based on the exercise that the Minister is conducting, and also based on possible revision of the retirement age.

So, Madam President, while the concern with an official correction of the exchange rate is a deterioration in the standard of living and increase in the cost of living, the measures in this budget that are being implemented to kick-start the

economy and kick-start fiscal consolidation so that we can rebalance our fiscal accounts and attain those medium-term fiscal targets that the Minister outlined in his budget presentation, the standard of living would reduce to some extent in Trinidad and Tobago. That is even without the devaluation.

Now, Madam President, I would like to move on to the attempt at diversifying the economy as outlined by the hon. Minister. So, Madam President, I would say this and I mean this most respectfully. Diversification has been on the forefront of this country for many years, many decades. Diversification, we have been there, we have failed and we have failed miserably with the exception of diversifying the downstream petroleum sector. While diversification is on the agenda again, I have three main questions. These are: One, has there been an analysis of why previous attempts at diversification have failed? Two, what is there to convince us that this time around when or if the comfort zone returns, that the commitment to diversifying the economy would not diminish? With some strategic investments during the past boom years, Trinidad and Tobago's digital economy would have been in a position to withstand or at the forefront to withstand these trying times that we are being presented with amid COVID-19. My third question is, what are you doing to build the capabilities of the public sector to commit to your diversification agenda? And this goes beyond institutional strengthening, the TTRA, the NSITT. We are talking about building capabilities within the public sector to ensure that they commit to the diversification agenda.

Madam President, the Minister of Finance identified quite a few sectors for diversification. I counted them, 11 sectors. But what I failed to see, and perhaps the Minister can point me towards it, I do not see a comprehensive framework in place to achieve competitiveness in these sectors that they become sufficient foreign

exchange earners. These are the details that we should be presented with to show that are committed to the diversification agenda. So, searching for details, Madam President, I looked at the PSIP and I saw outcomes were identified but there are no details on the process that we would be adopting to reach there. So, you see, Madam President, we have a habit of identifying solutions and then trying to achieve that solution without interrogating the problem, in many instances.

I could give one example. For example, we have all these plans with the agricultural sector which I commend and I hope they come to fruition. But one of the main problems is praedial larceny and the inability of the Praedial Larceny Squad together with the TTPS to work with farmers who are being challenged with this problem. Increasing the fines for praedial larceny will help, but does it solve the problem? Also, I looked at the PSIP again, and I identified outcomes we want to achieve, the impact we want to make, but I am not seeing the outputs, the outputs that we would use to track physical progress. Perhaps it is something that the Minister is introducing in this fiscal year. To just give an example: I see in the PSIP there is an allocation—oh, no, my apologies. I see that there is an outcome we want to achieve. We want to increase the value of non-energy FDI by \$30 million, TT \$30 million. But what exactly, I did not see what exactly we are working towards. Immediately off the top of my head utilizing a vertical logic analysis, you could see that the outputs that you would be looking at are institutional strengthening of InvesTT, you would be looking at possibly development of an online investment calculator for potential investors interested in the country, you will be looking at aftercare support services for companies who have already invested in the country.

Another example, yes, you want to increase the value of non-energy exports

to some US \$900 million, such that it achieves an output valued at more than 19 per cent of GDP. But, Madam President, do you know that the petrochemical sector accounts for 9 per cent of that 19 per cent in nominal terms? So is it that we are focusing on those components outside of the petrochemical sector? Also, how are you going to rationalize to enhance the services of exportTT beyond the provision of subsidized training? The main problem is encouraging companies to overcome the barriers such as information gaps to allow them to take that last step, to do that extra work, to commit to fulfilling the sometimes very tedious requirements needed to export that product.

12.45 p.m.

It is a severe challenge in the agricultural sector, getting to that point where you have to overcome those barriers to qualify you as a farmer to export. Sometimes it is not just about reaching to a point and realizing that you have surplus on your market, so you might as well export some of it. No. The requirements to enter the European market, for example, requires you to adopt certain practices from propagation of the product; propagation of the harvest. So, while training or auditing companies for export readiness is important, if we are serious about this diversification thing, you need to drill down at the micro level, hold the hands of these firms to get them at a point where they learn how to do this. And this is where you need to be allocating your money.

Now, I heard the hon. Minister of Finance, while piloting the Bill, indicated that 50 million is being allocated for overseas market development. But when I looked at the PSIP, probably I missed it, Madam President. The PSIP indicates that \$5 million is going towards building export capacity. Is this enough? From this allocation, how many firms are you able to target so that you get them to a point

where they can actually export a product in the non-energy sector? That is the type of outputs for tracking progress—physical progress I am talking about, Madam President. This is where the moneys that we would have probably been saving from—we would save from having the hiring freeze in the public service could have gone to, allocating to help build the export capacity because this is a priority, right? I mean, we are trying to build competitiveness and improve productivity in the non-energy sector.

Another example, and this goes with monitoring and evaluation and our ability to access whether we are successfully progressing with respect to diversification. On page 196 to 197 of the PSIP, it indicates that the Government intends to strengthen monitoring and evaluation requirements of the PSIP projects. But, Madam President, I do not understand how this is going to happen because what we have is a chronic human resource problem in the National Transformation Unit, in the Ministry of Planning and Development, who is responsible for evaluating the PSIP projects. And there is also a capacity issue. So, these things need to be addressed, Madam President, if we are serious about diversification.

So, just to summarize my diversification point, what I want to say is that with repeated attempts at diversification, it is less than optimal to have different target lists produced for different entities, with little domestic knowledge of how the targets were identified and with little domestic capability to evaluate the targets. Diversification needs to be championed from the top by the hon. Prime Minister who appoints a team to work on establishing domestic targeting mechanisms and list of targets for Trinidad and Tobago. I know your minds may be immediately going to the Recovery Committee but it extends beyond this, Madam President. It extends to a point where you are collaborating with other

teams, those responsible for doing the work in building the non-energy exports. Perhaps it could be export, perhaps it could be Invest, Farmers Association, Creative, everyone needs to collaborate and come on board. It requires commitment to their agenda in the form of a multi-month workshop where local officials work iteratively in teams to find solutions to pressing problems, learning as they progress and releasing new capabilities in the process.

There is a name for this, Madam President. It is commonly referred to P-D—

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine, you have five more minutes.

Sen. A. Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President. It is commonly referred to as P-D-I-A. It is a Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation Process. It is an approach developed by Harvard University to solve economic complexity. It was successfully adopted by two countries that I could think of at the top of my head, Sri Lanka and Algeria, and the Harvard team worked alongside these countries to assist them in achieving their diversification agenda. So, Madam President, until we adopt a problem-driven approach which promotes ownership and championing from the top, this diversification objective will continue to be setting ourselves up for repeated failure.

So, Madam President, at this point, I want to move on to, very briefly, on the labour market and human capital. So, what I want to say here is that the focus should not only be to propel growth but to also improve the welfare of citizens. What we have to guard against is hysteresis in the labour market from developing. And when I say hysteresis, what I mean is that the longer we take to identify persons who have become unemployed and get them into meaningful employment, these persons begin to lose their skills and eventually feel unsuitable for the labour market. And when the labour market fully resumes then we have a problem with a

very low labour participation rate.

So, Madam President, I would stop here at this point and I would like to just conclude by saying that I really do not envy the job of the hon. Minister of Finance at this point. These are trying times, compounded by multiple economic challenges occurring in succession. I urge the Government to take the difficult decisions sooner rather than later. We do not want to end up in a situation like Suriname. Now is the time for politicians to work together, elections are over and we have a five-year window to put aside the animosity and concentrate on securing the future of our human capital and prosperity for our country. Thank you, Madam President.

[Desk thumping]

The Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you. Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to participate on this Bill, to address the issue of the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2021. Before I start my substantive contribution, Madam President, permit me the opportunity to respond to a couple of issues that were raised by the two previous speakers.

Sen. Mark went on quite a bit about the impact of the Government's inactivity and poor management on the state of the employment in Trinidad and Tobago. I would like to remind Sen. Mark, in case he has forgotten, and the rest of Trinidad and Tobago in fact, that we are in the middle of a pandemic and it is having deleterious impact not only on the economies of the world, not only on the health of people throughout the world, but on the economies of the world. There are spikes in unemployment in almost every country and looking at a report issued in the *BBC Business News*, based on information secured from the IMF on the 29th of June, 2020, this is the impact in some major countries. In Japan, the

unemployment rate rose from 2.4 per cent to 3 per cent; in Germany, it rose from 3.2 per cent to 3.5 per cent; in the United Kingdom, it rose from 3.8 per cent to 4.8 per cent; in Canada, it rose from 5.7 per cent to 7.5 per cent; in France, it rose from 8.5 per cent to 10.4 per cent; in Italy, it rose from 10 per cent to 12.7 per cent, and in the United States of America, the unemployment rate rose from 3.7 per cent to 10.4 per cent.

In the middle of July of this year, there were 30-plus million Americans receiving unemployment relief. So, increase in unemployment has nothing to do with the state of the Government's handling of the economy and of the COVID pandemic. In fact, the Government, as we would have indicated on several occasions previously, made every effort to ensure that people remained in the jobs, they terminated no public servants, we met with the private sector, we provided relief to ensure that businesses to the extent, that they could continue. So, the Government has made every effort to keep people in jobs but some loss of jobs were inevitable. What we are trying to do is ensure that that loss is a short term as possible and in the meantime, we are seeking to continue to support those people who have suffered.

There were also a lot of complaints on the state of the economy. Again, this is a global pandemic with global impact. The IMF has issued statistics that show that, as a result of the pandemic, GDPs of several countries have gone into the negative, up to minus 60 per cent in some cases. Trinidad and Tobago actually is on the lower end of the scale. So, notwithstanding the fact that we came into the pandemic with an economy that was less than robust; notwithstanding the fact that the Government made every effort to support the people most in need and the businesses most in need, we have managed to keep the ship relatively stable and

we are continuing to try our best to do that.

Sen. Deonarine indicated at one point that we were—it looked as though we were kicking the can down the road in the hope that the energy sector will rebound. We are hopeful that the energy sector will rebound because Trinidad and Tobago does have the benefit of having that asset and we do hope to continue to reap the benefit of that, the fruit of that, but we are certainly not kicking the can down the road. As more and more Ministers come up and present their plans for the next year and beyond, you will see that everybody has a mandate in each of the sectors to focus and grow the economy, change the society, develop and learn.

[MR. VICE-PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

So, while we continue to work towards building up and revitalizing the energy sector, we are about doing a lot of other things to, yes, achieve the diversification that has been the subject of discussion for quite some time.

So, Mr. Vice-President, let me switch to my main topic of concentration for today, digital transformation. When I was given the honour of being appointed the Minister of Public Administration as it then was, in August of 2019, and I was asked, having regard to the fact that you probably have less than a year in office, what do you plan to do? I indicated at that time that it was my intention to focus on ICT because I thought it was an area where the public service needed to give more focused attention. Little did I know that a couple of months later, ICT would become front and centre, not only in the Trinidad and Tobago space, but in the global space.

I participated in an international panel discussion yesterday morning hosted by the International Telecommunication Union and the whole focus of the discussion was about the plans, the impact of digitalization in each country that

was represented around the world and how we are going to leverage that platform to develop and to grow economies, the world society, teach our children and so on. It is a huge and significant focus, globally, and it is similarly a significant focus in Trinidad and Tobago. This is demonstrated by the fact that one, not only was the Ministry renamed to reflect the importance of digitization platform to the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, but also, in the tripling of the PSIP and the increase in our overall budget for 2021. The Ministry has been charged with the responsibility of introducing the e-identity into Trinidad and Tobago and digitalizing the public service.

Now, it is not that there has not been a focus on the digital space before. There are lots of agencies within the Government that have made a lot of progress in this area. We have the courts that have introduced e-filing and a suite of other e-services, and are meeting virtually. The Land and Companies Registry is about to embark on the receipt of e-payments. The IRD allows for e-filing, we are working on introducing e-payments there. We have the recent launch of the UTurn System in the Ministry of Works and Transport. We have the easing of the passport application process. We have DevelopTT that was recently introduced to assist in the planning process within Trinidad and Tobago. We have the Ministry of Trade and Industry continuing to work to ensure the smooth operation of the Single Electronic Window, and those are just a few examples of the various things that have been happening in the digital space.

But the problem that we have been having, why, in my view, why members of the public continue to complain about the state of service in the public sector is that all of these transformations have been happening in silos. Ministries work independently, they do things individually, as a result of which there is overspend,

there is no taking advantage of the economies of scale. And so, every time you have to go for a service in a different Ministry, you have to essentially restart the process, establish who you are, bring in your documentation, satisfied then that another Ministry would have done what they needed to do to allow you to get that service, which is why we have opted to introduce the two mandates, which is: the e-identity which allows you, once you have an e-identity, to be easily recognized by any government service and eventually, we trust any service provider so that you will not have in future, every time you need to enter into a transaction, to prove who you are. Your e-identity will give you easy access to government services because your identity is easily identifiable.

It also allows the government sector to be more proactive in supplying you with your needs because with an e-identity, your needs are known before you ask, as they say, and therefore, we can become more proactive. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will not have to wait, for example, for a baby born with a birth defect to come in to make an application. With interoperability, relevant information will be made available to the service providers so that a child who is born with a physical defect, with a mental defect, if the state agency that is charged with the responsibility of assisting such a child will be advised through the interoperability system, that that need exists. So, we could more proactively serve our constituents.

Digitalization is what we are about, not digitization, and I am often asked to explain what is the difference between the two. You digitize records, you convert records from hard copy to soft copy, that is digitizing. Digitalization, on the other hand, is the use of technology and digitized records to impact how things get done, how stakeholders are served. So, it is not just about turning copies of documents

into soft copies, it is about reengineering processes with the citizen, the customer in mind to make things easier. So let me give an example.

My colleague in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation said to me that he went into the Inland Revenue during— almost to the end of the amnesty period. He had to make a payment of land and building taxes. And as some of you would be aware, the lines going into Inland Revenue at that time were long because there were a lot of people seeking to take advantage of the amnesty. So, he joined the line and probably waited in line for an hour or two and when he got to the top of the line, he was told, “No, this is not the line for payment.” Now, the Inland Revenue is largely a digitized space but without the reengineering of the processes to make life easy for the customer, you still have problems like, you have to get to the right line to get the service done. In countries that have gone the digital route, a philosophy that has been adopted by a lot of them is, there is no wrong door. Whichever government building you end up in, your needs can be met there because of the level of interoperability, and that is what we are aiming for.

So, the digitalization process in the public service, we are taking a multipronged approach. We are seeking to expedite the digitizing of records because this has been going on for forever and we need to get it done, so we are seeking to do that. We are putting the right hardware and software in place to accommodate this increased storing of records and the exchange of information between agencies. We are fixing the e-payment challenges because we have been talking about e-payments for a while, we need to get that done. We are addressing the issue of cyber security, which is very important. We are reengineering processes to make them citizen-centric. The objective must not be, this is the

process and this is how it is done. It is, how can we most easily and efficiently assist you because that is why we are there. We are retooling and retraining public servants so that they are aware of their new role and they are aware of their new approach to treating with their customers and, of course, this must all be supported by proper legislation. So, it is quite an enormous task and we are planning to approach them simultaneously, so as we get to the end point, we have the proper architecture for the smooth operation of the digitalized public service and the use of the e- identity.

So, the various aspects that we have to address include improved broadband access. As the Prime Minister would have indicated during the height of the pandemic when the lockdown was at the optimum, our plan was then and continues to be, to leave no one behind. And how does that apply to digitalization? If we are moving towards a digitalized space, we have to ensure that all citizens continue to have access to the services that are being offered, so that they must have access to broadband, they must have access to devices to allow them to do that or they would be excluded.

A more topical interest at this point is students. We are forced to teach our students at home now, exclusively, because we have to maintain social distancing for some time to come, but even after that changes and we can allow our students to go back to school, the Minister of Education has pointed out that the plan is to move towards blended education. So there would be a combination of face-to-face learning and distance learning. So that would continue to the indefinite future which would mean that we have to ensure that our students have Internet access and devices. So, what are we planning to do in that space?

We are embarking on an exercise to ascertain the current gap in coverage.

The last one was done in 2013 and one is now overdue, so TATT, working along with the CSO, will embark on that project and come back to us with information on where the gaps are in the coverage of broadband. In the meantime, we are continuing to close the gap by extending broadband coverage in underserved areas that are not the target of our service providing companies. So TATT, through the Universal Service Fund, is about to provide coverage in Brasso Venado, Los Atajos, and St. John's Parish in Tobago. That should happen shortly.

During the pandemic, because of the increased use of the broadband services, because of work from home and distance learning, to ensure that people were adequately covered and supplied with proper broadband, TATT provided free of charge for a period to the service providers, additional spectrum. We have extended that use—that provision of additional, and this is free of charge, additional spectrum until the end of the year. And for more long-term purposes, we have given the service providers access to additional spectrum going forward which, of course, they would pay for to ensure that we have proper coverage. I do not know how many of you noticed it but, for example, the day the schools reopened, I noticed the quality of Internet calls like Zoom and Team and so, dropped. But the service providers also picked up on that and they have paid attention and the quality of those calls are better. We have to continue to ensure that we maintain them at a high quality and improve the quality because life will continue to be, at least in part, conducted through these means going forward.

Continuing to close the gap, we have been rolling out the TTWiFi project. We have free Wi-Fi available on some buses. As new buses come on, we will continue to roll that out and we will also put them on existing buses. We have free Wi-Fi at the PTSC terminals in Port of Spain, San Fernando and Chaguanas; we

have it at the Ferry Terminal in Tobago and at the Water Taxi Terminal in Port of Spain. During the course of this year, we plan to add 60 more spots—free Wi-Fi at 60 more spots in libraries, health centres, government centres and we are also working with the service providers to encourage them to apply their corporate social responsibility programmes towards providing additional free Wi-Fi. TSTT has already accepted this challenge and done so at the savannah and Woodford Square, and we are working with the others in the hope that in every major center, we will have an area where free Wi-Fi is available to the public. So, we are continuing to work on that.

Notwithstanding that roll out, we do understand that there will continue to be challenges in underserved and vulnerable communities, where even if free Wi-Fi exists, there are persons who may not have devices. So, what we met was, what we called “access centres”. There were five of them, we added one recently. Those exist in Penal, Marac, Cumana, Guayaguayare, Todds Road and we recently added Carenage to that. During 2020, there was a total of 13,202 service interactions in the five centres. Having recently opened Carenage, we are heartened to learn that the interest is very high and there has been quite a bit of traffic in and out.

Now, what these access centres provide is free Wi-Fi to people who have devices, also devices to people who do not and we have staff, mainly from the area where the access centre is, who train you, help you to access government services, help you to do research and that kind of thing. It is very popular among our elderly who would not have had easy access to such devices during their normal learning years and they are also very popular amongst students who are looking for the opportunity to get access to do research and finish their papers and so on.

1.15 p.m.

So the plan is to continue to build these access centres. We have 13 more carded for 2021, and the areas that we have identified so far are Beetham, La Pastora and La Horquetta. The Telecommunications Authority using the Universal Service Fund will also roll out five both in Tobago and in Trinidad. So we will continue on that path. The hope is to have at least one access centre in each constituency because in each constituency we have underserved areas, but to ensure that they are provided where the needs are greatest. So that is what we continue to do.

Access to devices is also a key issue especially in these times when many people are working from home and at the same time their children are being schooled at home. So access to devices is important. Even in those households where devices exist, traditionally there has not been a need to have a device for each individual in the household. Now there is such a need because while the parents are working 8.00 to 4.00, the children are in school from 8.30 to 3.00. So it has become more and more necessary for each individual in the household to have a device. So what the Government has done is to seek to make those devices more affordable by reducing or removing the taxes on importation of the devices because these devices are imported. So that makes it more affordable.

But recognizing that even with affordable devices there are people who will not be in a position to buy, we are seeking to make devices available to all students who are not able to buy them. The Minister of Education estimated that there was a need for about 68,000 devices between primary school and secondary school. We have been fortunate to get assistance from the private sector. People have really been stepping up and helping. The Telecommunications Authority using the Universal Service Fund is actually today engaged in a ceremony with the Ministry

of Education to hand over 10,000 devices for students, and the Ministry of Education has received funding from the Minister of Finance to fill the gap that is left after the private sector, citizens, individuals and corporate, and TATT have left.

TATT, Telecommunications Authority is also embarked on an exercise to provide devices to persons with disabilities, hearing and visual disabilities. We are providing them with subsidized devices to allow them to more easily communicate, receive and send information. So that is ongoing and we are doing that in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the NGOs that assist and focus on that group of citizens.

At Ministry of Public Admin and Digital Transformation our job will be to ensure that all citizens are digitally ready, that they have the technology, access to Internet and a device or devices, that it is affordable, and that the citizens have the digital skills to transact business online. So not only are we dealing with the broadband, dealing with provision of devices and affordability of devices, we have spoken to the service providers about how we treat with the issue of affordability of the service. We are also supplying, as Minister of Finance indicated earlier, Mi-Fis, which is the individual Internet devices to students to help them with access, but we also plan to embark on a—not an education, but a sensitization programme to get people thinking more digitally, to get them focused on getting themselves ready for the new world.

Now, when we look at the issue of diversification and opportunity, I am firmly of the view that digitalization of Trinidad and Tobago via digitalization of the public service and encouraging the private sector to get more digitalized as well, we create opportunity for diversification. So let me for a minute talk to the

techies as we call them, among us. Our techies, these are people with an interest in ICT, help us to identify our ICT needs, to acquire technology, to configure technology, to support and maintain technology. They develop software, databases, manage security, restore our systems. We cannot have effective and efficient users of digital products without the techies. And so, as Minister of Public Admin and Digital Transformation, I want to encourage our students with an interest in this area to pursue that interest. We need those who already exist, and we will need more than currently exist. So if you have an interest in this area, I think it is an area that provides you with significant opportunity and I encourage you to pursue that interest.

In our two-year digital agenda we will be seeking to ensure adequate training and development opportunities are in place to build a strong tech labour market. iGovTT, which is an agency of the Ministry, has already embarked on a plan to contribute to that through what they call a hackathon. It is a competition where tertiary level individuals are engaged in competition to develop apps. I attended the closing ceremony of the one that was held last year. I met a lot of eager, enthusiastic and bright youths in our tertiary education system, and the hackathon was as a resounding success. The winning teams developed apps that were workable and that are now currently being developed and deployed for use starting with the Government service and hopefully beyond on that. We identified in the hackathon individuals interested in working in the area and we actually employed some of them through iGovTT.

In addition to that, we had a programme for 12- to 15 year-olds last year in the World Telecommunication and Information Society Day in May 2020, where those students learned to code in the online app development workshop hosted by

the Telecommunications Authority in partnership with CARIRI. The Ministry of Public Admin is currently engaged in a project with the International Telecommunications Union for the development of a digital innovation and competitive ICT eco-system for Trinidad and Tobago. I have held initial conversations with the Minister of Education and the Minister of Youth Development and National Service, both with a view to offering more opportunity for learning and work in the space of technical applications and we will have further discussions.

We are talking about encouraging that kind of activity through scholarships and bursaries, through the introduction of programmes that steer children in that area. What I would—the Ministry of Finance also in supporting this area has provided tax relief to companies in the private sector that are pursuing this opportunity as well. There is a \$9 million allowance, maximum, in respect of the creation of jobs in the tech space, digitalizing businesses, new tech start-ups, and we are providing exemptions to companies that list on the stock exchange, and it is a perfect opportunity for tech start-ups to get financing other than through the traditional loan approach. And so through that suite of support we are hoping not only to develop our students in that area so they could come in to jobs that will become more and more available as we digitalize Trinidad and Tobago, but I really am seeking to encourage youngsters who have an interest in this area to look beyond finding a job and look towards starting businesses in the tech area. There are tons of opportunities.

I am aware of at least two or three Trinidad businesses started by young people that are doing very well throughout the Caribbean. They are making a name for themselves, and I will continue to encourage our citizens to do more and more

of that. This I see as an opportunity for growth and development, this I see as an opportunity for diversification, this I see as an opportunity for earning foreign exchange. As I indicated earlier to Sen. Deonarine, we are certainly not kicking the can down the road. We are focused on the areas of diversification and this in my view is one of them. When I look at the stats from countries that have gone the way of digitalization, those stats indicate that not only does digitalization save expenditure for the Government, and I mean significant expenditure, it also generates additional income and it generates foreign exchange.

I spoke recently to the then Minister of Digital Transformation or whatever it is called in the UK, who spearheaded the UK Transformation and he said in the first year they saved in excess of £400 million. Later on after the digitalization was improved, the health sector alone saved £2.4 billion because of digitalization. Those—not at that level because we do not have that level of expenditure, but that kind of economic impact on digitalization will be a tremendous fillip for Trinidad and Tobago, and this is what we are seeking to achieve.

So—

Mr. Vice-President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. The work from home is something that is here to stay and I think that it is something that should be encouraged. It has a positive impact on our families. When we get past the prospect of having to stay home 24 hours a day, seven days a week, when we go back to “normal life” and we can come and go more freely, having parents work from home some days of the week must improve the relationship between them and the children. Digital transformation is not just technology. It is very much about people and how we work. We at the Ministry will work with the Minister of

Labour to develop a national remote work policy.

And finally, Mr. Vice-President, before I wind up let me just mention briefly the impact on the economy. We have seen COVID produce very positive impacts on the economy because of the enforced stay home position. There are swans swimming in the canals in Venice. I do not know if anybody has ever seen that in the past. The level of pollution has disappeared and so on because there is less traffic on the road, there is less use of paper, there is less travel generally, and that has had a positive impact on the environment, and I am hoping that we do not get back to a time where the traffic is so ridiculous in Trinidad and Tobago that we drive out of our driveway and we cannot move. But we recognize that going into a digital space will have some negative impact potentially on the environment as well.

So that we are proposing to work with the Ministry of Planning and Development to develop a policy to ensure that we are as green as possible going forward. So things like reusing computer components, refurbishing computer devices, responsible e-waste disposal, reducing electricity consumption on devices using power management technology, reducing toner for printing, et cetera, having more smart buildings, establishing green ICT metres. So this is a plan so that we are doing this in a responsible environmentally friendly manner.

So digital T&T, Mr. Vice-President, in closing, is first and foremost about digital citizenry, using digital infrastructure, creating value in business in an environmentally friendly way, and most directly in respect of the Government improving the efficiency and user friendliness of the Government to ensure that citizens are properly served by the people it has put in charge of its business. So, Mr. Vice-President, I am very excited about this opportunity. I think it holds a lot

of potential for Trinidad and Tobago and we will do our best to get us there. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Minister of Trade and Industry.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President, and again I want to thank you for the opportunity to join this debate on the fiscal 2021 Appropriation Bill. Firstly, I must congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance for his very, very detailed and insightful presentation with the appropriate theme Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. I also would like to thank the Minister of Planning and Development for her input into the development of this year's budget. I thank both of their teams as so very often we forget the people behind the scene and I know that they have all worked very diligently in us realizing this good budget.

Again, on August 10th, the people of Trinidad and Tobago made the right choice by electing a government under the leadership of the hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, who has inspired us since in office and will continue to do so and lead this Government as we really set the economy and the country on a path of growth. Again, I would have, Mr. Vice-President, spoken extensively in the Lower House about diversification, on creatives, on the services sector and on manufacturing as well. Today, I am going to go back into manufacturing as this sector is really poised for growth and I am going to leave the creatives and the services behind. These are both very, very good sectors that have been doing well. The services sector I will just say that we are placing extensive support and the focus on it as it already contributes significantly to the GDP of this country and hires the most people as a sector, and it is certainly one that is poised for exports particularly when one looks at the cadre of efficiencies and the cadre of

persons that we have developed involved in the energy services sector.

In the creatives as well we have done extremely well. I hope many of you would have seen the film that focused on our Trinidad and Tobago, The Amazing Race, that 3.5 million people looked at on that particular night showcasing our country, our beautiful country Trinidad and Tobago.

I go into my contribution, but before going into the substantive matter I spoke in the Lower House about the preservation of foreign exchange supporting the Minister of Finance especially as I am involved in trade. And I made the point that this country has been spending more foreign currency than it earns on an annual basis. And it is good to know that my contribution generated national debate on this particular matter and I will go into it because it is important that I clarify. And the fact that I have intended to make and I make now again is that there is still a serious reality check that the country must make on the urgent need to adjust our priorities when it comes to foreign exchange expenditure. And I made the point and I reiterated the position that during January to September 2020, the value of purchases of US currency from the Central Bank by all of the authorized FX dealers in the financial sector was US \$940 million.

Again, so as I said, I spoke on the drain, it is so very important. I can tell you at 5.30 on an evening if ever I am at home during the week and certainly on the weekend I am certain to see that FedEx flight coming in to Trinidad without fail and even during COVID without fail, and that reminds us of the amount of foreign exchange that we are consuming, and they are probably the principal courier service in Trinidad and Tobago. There might be about 20 of them and that alone signals to us the amount of foreign exchange that we spend in this country. But one major drain on FX is our demand on food and beverages, and I had made the point

and I raised the figure that according to CSO the value of food imports was \$5.6 billion. And what I did in the Lower House—and you will see where I am going with this—I gave, I itemized some of the broad categories of food imports under this TT \$5.6 billion.

So I spoke about the fruit and vegetables bill of \$1.1 billion. I also spoke about cereal but I spoke about cereal and cereal preparations. The very broad category of cereal and cereal preparations. I did not speak about the other categories, but yes they are all cause for concern. Dairy products and bird's eggs, 878 million; meat and meat preparation, \$731 million; coffee, tea, cocoa, spices. Why, when we produce coffee and cocoa, \$218 million? And a whole lot of other categories including fish, 301 million, and miscellaneous preparations, 782 million.

And again, I want to emphasize that when I spoke about cereal and cereal preparation I mentioned the very broad category. In the same sense that under vegetables and preparations of vegetables, you would have had potatoes at 256 million and a whole lot of others. And under fruits and preparation of fruit, you would have had apples and grapes at \$102 million; plus apples, fresh, diced and fruit juices, \$48 million; nuts 97 million. In the same way you would have had that breakout, there would have been a breakout, there is a breakout as a matter of fact for cereals and cereal preparations. So the statement that I made is in fact a statement of fact that the very board category of cereal and cereal preparations is a whopping amount of 1.1 billion, and I spoke to two of the factors inside of there, which was one of them I mentioned again 180 million spent on biscuits, breads and pastries; at \$28 million on mixes and doughs. We should not be spending money.

I made the point we should not be spending \$28 million on mixes and doughs when in fact we produce flour here. Frozen dough is but fat and flour and

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water; and again biscuits, bread and pastries we are so much of a creative people in this country there is no reason why we should be importing that extent of biscuits, breads and pastries. And I did say this to CNC3, eh. They told me that they were going to speak about it. I said, “Let me tell you this a very broad category and it does not cover cereal alone”. So they recognized that, but they still did a little bit of an exposé on prepared cereal which—and prepared cereal is still, considering that we are manufacturing our own. Considering that we are manufacturing cereal we still import 62 million in foreign brands of cornflakes, and cereal, and prepared foods and so on. So in that broad category then you would have wheat and so on that we use for the mixing of flour and also the input into the preparation of the local cereal.

So I thought I will—I mean, I did make a statement of fact and I want to make sure that my point is not at all lost, which is, that we are still spending too much on these foreign products. That we must think again about buying local and supporting our locally manufactured goods. It is about conserving foreign exchange. It is also about the possibilities. It is also about the possibilities that exist in manufacturing, in agriculture, in agro processing, in import substitution. It must be up front and centre and so on. Look for the opportunities. As we talk and as I highlight the figures, look for the opportunities. I thought I would bring this clarification which perhaps would have been in their excitement in one of the newspapers, one of the media houses, to confine it to cereal alone and not cereal preparations as well.

I want to spend more time on this occasion on the opportunities with regard to the SMEs in this country, and the Minister of Finance would have spoken to opportunities not only in the manufacturing sector, but certainly in the tech sector,

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

in agriculture, agro processing, in services for SMEs. Today, I will focus a little bit on the SMEs and their ability to expand the exports and I will then go in further into the manufacturing sector once again, and I really do recognize the SMEs that are exporting. You have no idea but we tallied 184 non-energy exporters that are over \$1 million. Only surprisingly, and these would only be your traditional exporters, only 11 of these firms, 11 of the 184, actually export more than \$100 million.

Surprisingly though, 55 per cent of these exporters, 102 of them are SMEs between \$1 million and \$5 million. So I would say there are about 150 of them under \$25 million and I am looking at the even smaller amount, 102 of them are exporting between TT \$1 million and TT \$5 million. And that brings me to the point with Sen. Deonarine because she talked about building export capacity and capabilities and these are the ones that would help. Whilst the larger manufacturers would provide a fillip for quicker gains in exports as they already scaled up and so on, this is where the potential lies and in the 102, in the 150, that can really do with the support from the Government.

So as I was saying, I am going to speak a little bit more about the manufacturing sector, and why? Because it remains key to diversifying the economy and creating sustainable jobs, ushering the kind of growth that we actually need. It is of paramount importance and it has to be driven by the private sector and facilitated by the Government. So the sector is the third largest contributor to the GDP behind oil and gas and also—but, of course, first of all the services sector employing about 52,000 persons and, of course, with substantial plans to increase this amount. As I said contributing about 19.4 per cent of GDP. We are focusing, and the Minister in the budget did speak extensively of the

support that Government is giving to the manufacturing sector, particularly to the SMEs.

I was listening to the Leader of the Opposition and I can tell you listening to—because on the platform she spoke a lot about 50 new jobs— 50,000 new jobs, 50,000 new jobs. In the three hours I heard nothing about how the Opposition would have intended or revised some plan as to how they would have raised 50,000 jobs. But I am saying there are 50,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector which are sustainable jobs, and the plans that we are proposing together with the TTMA and other interested parties, the private sector, we are going to set this sector on a path of growth.

1.45 p.m.

I want to say of course that the TTMA, Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association, their goal is to double manufacturing exports in targeted manufacturing subsectors such as food and beverage, paper products and mineral products and by that I mean, the mineral products, I am talking about chemicals like paints and thinners, industrial compounds and so on and their aim is to double this. It is \$3.3 billion as at 2018 to an estimated \$7.2 billion by 2024 and in doing so, what we will be doing in giving our support to this is expanding employment and increasing the sector's contribution to GDP, and of course, increasing exports, earning foreign exchange and so on.

But secondly—yes, firstly the TTMA and their goal—the goal is also to support the wider non-energy sector. Those are the sectors within the manufacturing exports that can grow and which we will lend our support to. So the average annual exports would be \$13.6 billion but that includes, of course, some of the imports that are redistributed to the region which is our second market. But in

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terms of manufacturing, the non-energy exports are valued at \$11.2 billion and of course, it is across several sectors including, number one, iron and steel and metal products. That will be like your iron ore which is produced by Nu-Iron, 41 per cent and then food and beverages, 25 per cent. You are talking about your aerated waters, your non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages as well, all of the aromatic bitters. Paper and paper-related products, 4 per cent doing extremely well into the Central American region and of course chemicals and other related chemical products.

And only yesterday, I am having a long conversation with Castello Limited. Whilst this includes all your bleaches and detergents and ethyl alcohol and so on, they were bringing to my attention that they are in fact exporting aluminium sulphate, which is made for WASA and so on, that now is being exported to Jamaica and other parts of the region. Printing and packaging and all of these corrugated boxes and so on, 3 per cent.

But there are some smaller sectors that we feel can grow and are poised for growth. Furniture at 1 per cent; wood and wood-related, 0.2 per cent; clothing and textiles, 0.1 per cent and I spoke in the Lower House about the garment industry and what we are doing to support the garment industry and of course, agro-processing at 0.1 per cent. I know Minister Rambharat would speak a bit. Again, the focus is on agriculture and agro-processing over the next five years. Again, I want to go on to speak about the markets that we have already penetrated, 120 of them. There is the need for us to focus more on further penetration in these very same markets and in other markets as well.

I can talk about growing the sector but I cannot do so unless I acknowledge the challenges which are faced by the manufacturers and if we have to help them, it

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means that we must identify and stay with them with regard to their challenges and ensure that we are supportive in fixing, in finding the gaps and of course, doing everything that we can to support this sector. I want to say that the Ministry of Trade and Industry and also the Government listens to the private sector. There is an excellent working relationship with the private sector. This is with the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association, the Chamber of Trinidad and Tobago, AMCHAM, the confederation of all of the Chambers in this country and I am talking about from Sangre Grande to Point Fortin to Couva to Tunapuna. We speak very, very, very often, I can tell you that.

In addition to which, apart from the relationship, the work of the recovery committee also addressed and highlighted some of these challenges which we identified again through the TTMA and the other organizations and of course, the Budget, we would have also addressed some of these solutions to some of these challenges and gaps in the manufacturing sector. And I am going to say what they are and own along with the rest of the private sector what we have to do about it and certainly it would be improving our production capacity. If we want to grow our exports, we must improve our production capacity. We must find new and niche products, also drive research and development and improve the competitiveness of the sector, enhance the human resource capacity, improve access to finance, expand export growth to traditional and in non-traditional markets and improve the ease of doing business, particularly for international trade. So I spoke to the series of recommendations that have come out of our discussions with the TTMA and of course, through the Budget and we are on our way. We are on our way to dealing with these and I am going to address how we are going to fix these issues.

I want to say though, before I get into them, that our Trade Policy 2019—2024, through empirical analysis would have identified a series of products that given their unique characteristics, we think that these would be poised for growth in that Trinidad and Tobago possesses comparative advantages with regard to these areas and I want to say what they are because in as much as we talk about challenges, we also talk about opportunity. And these would be in the very same food products including the agro-processed products; beverages, both the alcohol and non-alcoholic; and also again, in the paper and paper-related products; high-value manufacturing which is electronic assembly, the steelpan, et cetera; glass and glass-related products; textile and garment manufacturing; cosmetic production; plastics and rubber products; furniture and other related products and, of course, pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals including medical marijuana; downstream aluminium production and of course, other ferrous products including iron and steel.

So I spoke about the absolute strategy that is needed to address the challenges and to get the manufacturing sector on a path of growth. I spoke about the work of the recovery committee and therefore ensuring that there is that overarching goal among interested parties to transform the manufacturing sector into one that is globally competitive, productive, innovative, and of course, using advanced technology and environmentally-friendly practices.

The Minister of Finance in the Budget—and as I address the question of improving production capacity and promoting new and niche products but there is no way that you can address production capacity and so on and then you do not have a marketing programme and enough reach in terms of marketing to get those products out. The Minister announced this \$50 million programme for the overseas

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market promotion and development and Sen. Deonarine identified that she did not see it in the DP, the Development Programme, but it is there in the Recurrent because this is likely to be an expenditure that will continue over time, so it is in the Recurrent. It might be the last Item in the Recurrent Expenditure, you can find it there.

And what it is about, if I were to just in a nutshell say, this is about getting our best quality product that the world wants on the ground in those external markets and I will break down what this \$50 million would do. A big part of that would be for international certification. I will tell you why. Because we can produce the goods but it is not necessarily that our domestically produced goods would meet the standards and product compliance by the overseas buyers and their international franchises.

So it is a must that we focus on international certification and you would be surprised to know that this is a very, very expensive endeavour. It will take considerable time and money on consultancies, infrastructural changes, equipment upgrades and acquisition are actual certification costs. And I tell you that because to do the certification for the National Flour Mills, it took us almost \$2 million and we are just about at the point of certification. Naturally, for a smaller organization, it is going to be on an average of about 600,000 to 700,000 but they are not going to have the capacity to do that and this is what this programme will help them to do.

Yes, it is important for the SMEs, it is also important for the large. They may have their wherewithal but they can still, I think, use some kind of subvention because they were the ones who I had said before would really be the fillip for increased exports and so on and to really produce the larger volumes that are

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required to really have an impression on the contribution to GDP, and the certification is wide and it depends on the country and the type of product that you are producing. So there is the good manufacturing practice.

One that you might be familiar with is the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points which is HACCP; International Organization for Standardization; the Food Safety Modernization Act; the British Retail Consortium; Safe Quality Food Programme and I could go on and on. And I am saying it is not only for the food and beverage sector but it is also largely for the cosmetic sector as well. So it is costly and as I said, a large portion of this would go towards helping SMEs in particular and also perhaps to some of the larger ones as well or medium to large.

This 50 million will also go towards co-financing programmes and yes, Sen. Deonarine, you would have seen in the DP, a \$5 million allocation for co-financing but we have been doing that. We have been helping a number of firms, maybe 40, 50 firms, it is not enough and therefore if we are really going to bolster exports, we have to focus on expanding the co-financing activities and of course, giving a greater extent of financial assistance and this is towards their intellectual property registration in overseas markets, product testing, shipping of samples and so on and also, let me not forget, attendance at trade shows and including virtual trade missions which we are doing quite a bit of at this time, even during COVID. I have asked the TTMA and the exporTT to focus on doing these virtual missions. Each of them should easily be doing a virtual mission per month.

This funding as well is going to also help us with our market access and the establishment of trade facilitation offices and assignment of trade attachés in key markets. So I can tell you in the very short term, we would wish to establish a TFO and we know the success of the TFO in Cuba. We are going to do one in Central

America, either Panama or Costa Rica and we are doing the analysis to decide on which one and to have this office operational in the shortest order.

We are also very keenly interested again on working our Jamaican market, including the development of the DR market, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In the first instance, we want to ensure that there is a trade attaché in Jamaica who could understand these markets very well with the view to then doing the analysis as to whether a TFO is going to help us. Then, again, a trade attaché, we are looking at again for the Guyanese and Surinamese markets. These are extensive markets with great potential and as we establish a mission/embassy there, again, we want to look at putting a trade attaché there as well. We are going to also focus on building export capacity from this fund in Tobago in collaboration with the THA because we want to support firms there to become more export-oriented and internationally competitive. So that is what that is about.

But in growing the sector, in looking at controlling foreign exchange, et cetera, some of the areas that we have to look at as well and I will name two of them. One of them is promoting and supporting our domestic and regional supply chains and by global value chains I mean referring to the wide interconnection between actors and activities required to bring a product from raw materials to a final product ready for consumers. And I will give you an example of what I mean.

For instance, Nu-Iron in Trinidad makes DRI which is direct reduced iron which is exported. It is part of the final product. It is exported to the US to their parent company to make the final product. And the point I am making is you do not have to produce a final product but you can import a component in a regional supply chain or also an international supply chain. I am saying looking within our region, I mean, we can be importing green plantains from Dominica or St. Vincent

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or St. Lucia to process plantain chips in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is what I am thinking about when we start thinking about commercializing sweet potatoes and so on. We may not have enough production here, there might be production in the region, it is about getting that initial product input from them and doing the rest of commercialization of the value chain in our country. So the point I am making is individual countries do not produce all the components of a product but it is important we can play a part in the production process of the final product.

The other thing that we must look at too as well is the importance of increasing the linkages between primary product, when I say so, primary agriculture production, retail and distribution trade and the local manufacturing sector and in doing so, what we intend to do is to develop a comprehensive profile of the raw material needs of manufacturers and identify the local or regional source of inputs for our manufacturers, thereby satisfying import substitution. That is what we are talking about. And collaboration with the private sector and the Ministry of Agriculture again, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, we also want to have a platform for domestic and regional buyers and sellers and investors so that we can conclude business deals that would strengthen the production linkages and create these new value chains.

A case in point, I had a discussion with a large franchise holder who was importing oil. I said but why would you be doing that when we are in fact producing oil. He said it is too expensive. I then went to the oil producer here: why are you not selling to our franchise holder, he said well he is not going to pay my price. The thing is what we did is put them at the table and at the end of the day, one party started buying locally-made cooking oil from the other party, we saved foreign exchange and of course, we developed that partnership and so on. And we

have to do all of these things when we talk about building capacity and increasing exports and so on.

I just want to mention also about the opportunity in terms of developing the green industries and just giving some examples, for instance, the assembly of solar panels, the manufacture of green and biodegradable products as utensils and so on, food containers, all of the biodegradable packaging. All of those opportunities are there as well.

And as we talk about boosting production, I spoke quite a bit about the spaces and I am not going into that now. The Phoenix Park Industrial Estate which will be finished in 2021; the Moruga Agro-Processing Park which is now complete and so on. But in addition to that, it is important that we provide the incentives and I said that I will give you a little idea of how this new special economic zones regime will benefit the persons, not only in manufacturing but of course, in all of the other areas that are geared for further diversification. I say further diversification.

And so this new SEZ regime is really aimed at enhancing the international appeal of Trinidad and Tobago's economic zone regime. It replaces the existing regime and of course, it is transformational and developmental in nature and it really supports our diversification agenda. So it is going to consist of an incentive framework which would be very attractive and really geared towards boosting all of these sectors that we have spoken about in terms of diversification. It is very wide-ranging so it will cover zonal activities as free ports, free trade zones, it will cover some industrial parks, specialized zones, development zones, et cetera.

So hopefully, we have this legislation before the Parliament by the end of the year, early next year and the reason why you perhaps are not seeing it in your

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budget as yet is once we get the legislation passed, then of course we go towards building out the special economic zones regime and in the mid-year review, we would have a true perspective before you.

Again, as I speak about zones and parks, we must, I would say, cause e TecK to transform and upgrade its existing industrial parks to ensure that all of the additional security, the lighting, the drainage, all of the modern infrastructural features would be there. Of course, we want to review some of the long-term leases—review the terms of the leases and we want to be able to offer tenants a more predictable longer-term arrangement but of course, this must be in line with our diversification objectives.

I had said that I would speak about the list of trading goods because it is so much of a threat to manufacturers and I am speaking about particular products like tobacco and alcohol cleaning agents, would you believe even pharmaceuticals. And so for instance, you have a number of Chinese cigarettes in the market with Chinese writing, this is in contravention of the law. There are a number of cleaning agents sold on the highway with absolutely no information on ingredients and so on, no caution or anything like that. So it is the reason why we have to focus on this because this illicit trade undermines public health, it contributes to tax evasion and it really creates an unlevelled playing field for those businesses that are legitimate.

Now, I want to say and this is a scourge that is all over the region and I, again, give my commitment, commitment of the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the other agencies and Ministries that are involved, to commit to changing this very illicit environment. I will tell you that WITCO has said that the illegally-traded cigarettes constitutes about 5 to 10 per cent of the local market and that tax

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evasion from illicit trade in tobacco we understand as well should be as high as \$30 million in 2020. The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber tells us that 22 per cent of all imported spirits are imported illegally and therefore major players in the alcohol industry have had losses on account of this of approximately \$60 million in 2019. So these are the issues. I spoke about challenges and confronting them, we have to confront this and we really have to task, as I said, the Ministries, the border agencies, increase the surveillance as well, the seizure of these products as well and we must restrict these illegal commodities.

So we have come up with a comprehensive action plan which we would take in the form of a Cabinet Note but it will be largely about strengthening the capacity of the regulatory and enforcement agencies to detect these illicit trades and of course, to enforce the necessary penalties and it is about modernizing the legislation and enforcing the national standards for the products that are affected and of course, increasing the consumer awareness. It is a very, very targeted approach and I want to thank the TTMA and the police for the work that they have done so far with regard to enforcement. We will be approaching this ill fulsomely as we go into this fiscal.

We are going to continue to drive research and development—

Mr. Vice-President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—through the Research and Development Fund at exporTT. Of course, there is a facility in the Budget for the adoption of new technologies which involves new technology solutions as well for manufacturing and small and medium-sized and large manufacturing as well. We are going to accelerate the implementation of our national quality policy. That is super important for building competitiveness, ensure that we establish and we are well on

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our way to doing this, we established our accreditation body which will improve and transform the national quality infrastructure of this country. We are going to enhance our human resource capacity, we are working in conjunction with the TTMA to introduce a national vocational training strategy and also a national apprenticeship programme as well designed along the German ones.

With regard to improving access to finance, we spoke about the mobilization of financing on the stock exchange and there are a number of other grant facilities that are also available. Time does not permit but what I am going to do and it is particularly for Sen. Deonarine with regard to the expanding of exporTT. I am going to put out a release on that so you understand our very targeted approach in terms of modernizing exporTT including developing all their performance indicators, developing the products and services that they do, ensuring that their electronic client management system really works.

As I close and before I close, the previous speaker, my colleague, Minister West, Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation would have spoken about the ease of doing business and what we are doing. You know of course, if you had looked on the website of the World Bank, you would see outdated August 27th that the World Bank identified a number of irregularities with regard to the “Doing Business” report of 2018 and 2020. So you will realize that some of the figures given by them would have been wrong and they have committed—it is there on the website, August 27, 2020, they are conducting a systematic review and assessment of the data changes and an audit of the processes for the collecting and reviewing the “Doing Business” report.

That does not stop us from moving with alacrity to dealing with the ease of doing business. The Minister would have spoken about from the governmental

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approach, I want to say that through the Single Electronic Window, we would have had some gains. Particularly, I am very proud of it, together with the Ministry of Planning, the e-construction DevelopTT has already been rolled out and will be rolled out in full by the end of fiscal 2020 reducing the time that it takes to make your online applications and so on.

We are continuing as well with our efficiency in terms of business process re-engineering particularly as it relates to trade, import and export. I think I spoke about the consultant which we had on board from the UK and we are well on our way to ensuring that in fiscal 2020, there are seven recommendations we are going to deal with and this is online payments for all the relevant Ministries and agencies. I am going to put a release out about this as well. We are working with e-maritime to ensure that there is a port community system. We are in the midst of finalizing the request for proposals and a consultant will soon be here to develop this PCS which will ensure the inter-operability between the agencies of the port and the SEW and of course, the ASYCUDA systems at Customs.

I want to thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Charrise Seepersad: Mr. Vice-President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2020. It will be naive to assume that an annual budgeting exercise is inflexible and can solve all the economic woes of the country together with hardship, health and mental afflictions of citizens. In economic crises, social policies fail, not people, but the tendency to use external factors as impediments and the need to cut funding and increase taxes on already struggling businesses and households without protest from citizens is what governments do in most, if not every case. So the people must accept responsibility for the faltering economy and shoulder the inequality

arising from inadequate social policies.

Like all global economies, Trinidad and Tobago has been compelled to grapple with the unprecedented and adverse health and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The combination of the pandemic and the oil shocks have generated substantial losses to the local economy. It has transformed every aspect of our personal, community and national life. The reality is that the world to which we have become accustomed and the world as we know it have changed.

In his Budget presentation for 2020, the Minister of Finance spoke about “Stability, Strength and Growth”. In 2021, he is “Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation”. It was also factual to state that the economy was not in a good place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In his 2020 Budget presentation, the Minister of Finance acknowledged that the economy was stagnant or growing marginally. A reset in technical terms usually means rebooting or restarting a device to remove or fix a problem. In my view, the system needs a general overhaul, replacement and renewal as detailed in the Roadmap to Recovery. The Prime Minister also spoke of change knowing that change is difficult and does not come without astute and prolonged change management.

2.15 p.m.

Literally overnight, citizens’ lives and livelihoods have undergone radical change for the worst. Surely, this is not the change envisaged by anyone. COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, and was officially recorded in Trinidad and Tobago on March 13, 2020, in the middle of the 2019/2020 fiscal year.

The Government was forced to take immediate and short-term measures to address this critical health event, including closure of the country's borders,

wearing of face coverings, work from home, et cetera. As a result of these restrictive measures, global economies have been severely negatively impacted. To reduce the day-to-day burden on lives and livelihoods, governments intervened to provide support, including cash payments to businesses and citizens.

For Trinidad and Tobago, the impact of COVID-19 and the decline in energy prices have resulted in the deficit for 2020 increasing from the original budget of \$5.6 billion to \$16 billion. The deficit was financed by a combination of withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and borrowings.

Mr. Vice-President, given the uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, the Government has budgeted another deficit of \$8.2 billion for fiscal year 2021. However, we have not yet been provided with the strategy for easing restrictions, including the reopening of the country's borders, schools and businesses such as bars and cinemas. This is a serious omission since these decisions are fundamental to formulating the country's fiscal plan. Businesses urgently require this information to make decisions on their future operations.

Fiscal 2021 revenue is projected to be \$41.4 billion. I would welcome some clarification from hon. Minister of Finance, since on September 28, 2020, it was suggested that revenue above \$40 billion would be difficult to achieve under the most optimistic scenario.

Non-oil revenue is projected to be \$31.2 billion or 14 per cent higher than fiscal 2020 estimated. There are several challenges with respect to tax revenue for fiscal 2021, including:

1. Reduced traditional tax base because of lower corporate earnings in 2020.
2. Increased personal income tax allowances which result in a reduction of

\$750 million in taxes.

3. Increased wear and tear and other capital allowances would mean a reduction in corporate taxable income and therefore, less taxes.
4. Considerable administrative hurdles to overcome before the revenue authority can become a reality.

Further, achieving budgeted non-oil revenue without one-off revenue sources would be a significant achievement in fiscal 2021. While these are estimates, I have doubts on how realistic or achievable they are.

Total expenditure for fiscal 2021 is projected at \$49.573 billion or two and half per cent lower than fiscal 2020 expenditure of \$50.832 billion. Fixed expenditure is projected to be \$42 billion or 85 per cent of total expenditure.

Discretionary expenditure is what is left after fixed expenditure has been satisfied. This is projected to be \$7.573 billion or 15 per cent of total expenditure. This shows the precarious nature of fiscal expenditure. The fiscal deficit for 2021 is projected to be \$8.2 billion or 5.6 per cent of gross domestic product. This would be an improvement over the projected deficit of \$16.8 billion in fiscal 2020, which represents 11 per cent of GDP and it is the third largest deficit since 2016.

The revenue projections are subject to more downside risk than the expenditure side. Therefore, the deficit could widen further. Funding for the 2020 fiscal deficit includes, drawdowns from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, domestic and international borrowings, and asset sales. Funding options:

One, Heritage and Stabilisation Fund: The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund remains a readily accessible source of funding, provided by the recent amendments in the withdrawal criteria in the Miscellaneous Provisions Act, No. 09 of 2020, should the projected fiscal provision deteriorate.

Two, borrowing: The 2020 fiscal deficit is expected to be financed primarily from debt, from multilateral agencies, domestic and international capital markets. Debt to GDP, which measures how much a country owes, relative to how much it produces, increased significantly in 2020. Initial projections were 73 per cent, were revised to 77 per cent on September 28, 2020, and the most recent projection is now 80 per cent. The Minister of Finance has suggested that the debt to GDP ratio could be reduced to 65 per cent by 2024, with favourable economic developments. However, Mr. Vice-President, in the current environment of deficit spending, high fixed expenditure and subdued economic growth, it is likely that debt to GDP would be in the region of 80 to 85 per cent in fiscal 2021.

Three, asset sales: Two asset sales initiatives were highlighted in the budget 2020/2021 presentation, privatization of the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago and the sale of gas stations owned by the Trinidad and Tobago National Petroleum Marketing Company Limited.

Privatization of the Port Authority: The organization is expected to be under new management and ownership by the end of fiscal 2021. The private sector operator is yet to be named. A streamlined profit-focused Port Authority could lead to operational and efficiency gains, beneficial to both importers and consumers. However, these improvements can only come with additional investment requirements, resulting in increased operating fees, which will invariably be passed on to port users and consumers. Ensuring that the operations of the Point Lisas Port Development Corporation, PLIPDECO, are consistent with the operations of the port handling operations of the Port of Port of Spain could result in unplanned investment requirements and/or organizational adjustments.

Two, sale of gas stations owned by NP: As part of the liberalization of the

liquid petroleum fuel market and the reform of the liquid petroleum product sector, all gas stations owned by NP would be offered for sale to the private sector. Priority for purchase would be given to existing dealers and concessionaires. No details have yet been provided as to the timing and expected value of the sales.

However, the disposal of service stations should enable NP to focus on bunkering and distribution of fuel to its service station network. New entrants should be encouraged to enter the market and foster increased competition. This benefits both the industry and consumers. Current profit margins of about 6 per cent by owners should increase to about 10 to 20 per cent, depending on the cost of supply and operating overheads. However, one casualty in reducing operating cost is labour.

Termination of the fuel subsidies: Related to the liberalization of the liquid petroleum fuel market, fixed retail margins for all liquid petroleum products will be removed effective January 2021. Fuel price will now be floating.

The Minister of Finance indicated that for transparency purposes, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries will post the changes in the US Gulf Coast refinery prices of premium gasoline, super gasoline, diesel and kerosene on the first day of each month. Several factors including, partial regulation, market structure and taxation are likely to influence the outcome of this initiative and its related impact on the economy. The implications of an increase in diesel fuel prices, the backbone of commercial and public transportation, could be a substantial increase in the cost of transporting goods if left fully unregulated. This will result or translate into increased cost for goods and services.

Government's accounting system: Mr. Vice-President, the Government accounts are prepared on a cash-based system, which does not accurately reflect

the true indebtedness of the Government.

The Exchequer overdraft is one of many exclusions that contribute to an inaccurate picture of the country's actual indebtedness. The Exchequer overdraft, which stands at \$41.38 billion as at September 30, 2019, is not included in the public debt position of Trinidad and Tobago. Interest is payable on this liability and the debt must be repaid. The cash-based system also excludes liability such as government-to-government debt obligations which start to come due in 2024 and 2025.

Government current liabilities to contractors and trade suppliers: Future liabilities for current commitments, state enterprises obligations and refunds, including tax and VAT. Recommendations:

1. Government must undertake a comprehensive review of all Government debt to understand the size of current and future liabilities, obligations and upcoming payables. This includes debt that will be incurred from government-to-government arrangements and other commitments with delayed repayment terms or moratorium periods must be explicitly stated and monitored as part of total public debt. This is crucial to the development and successful execution of a debt management plan.
2. Implement an internationally-recognized public sector accounting system, so that the Government accounts are prepared on the accrual basis of accounting.

Procurement legislation: Mr. Vice-President, it goes without saying that in the current economic climate, prudent financial management is crucial. This includes proper asset management, maintenance programmes for buildings and infrastructure.

The Office of the Procurement Regulator has directors and staff members who are a cost to the Trinidad and Tobago taxpayer without, as yet, any demonstrable direct benefit to the country. Therefore, the procurement legislation must be implemented to allow for transparency and accountability in all Government spending. This is a key mechanism for reducing corruption and rebuilding trust in doing business with the Government.

National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago: Having access to data by both public and private sector entities is crucial to making sound business decisions. At the present time, the Central Statistical Office is not able to provide the data required, since the current system obstructs the CSO from gathering and disseminating this data.

A National Statistical Institute Bill introduced in 2018 was, in 2019, referred to a joint select committee. The NSITT is envisaged to be legislatively robust, autonomous and independent to effectively coordinate the national statistical system. Finalizing and implementing a modern and powerful National Statistical Institute needs to be prioritized in this fiscal year.

Increase in personal income tax allowance: Effective January 01, 2021, the annual personal income exemption limit will be increased from \$72,000 to \$84,000. This measure is expected to benefit approximately 250 taxpayers and result in approximately \$750 million less tax collected. It is based on the belief that the multiplier effect from this money being spent will outweigh the loss in direct tax collection. The anticipated economic benefit of additional consumer spending power from this increased allowance, however, can be offset by other measures announced, which may have the effect of increasing the cost of living.

For approximately 350,000 persons earning below \$7,000 a month, this

increase in personal income tax allowance provides no benefit. However, they will be sharing the general burden of price increases. The livelihood of this lower income group stands to be more severely impacted.

Income tax on pensions: Mr. Vice-President, in my view, most retirees are being victimized by continuing to pay taxes on fixed income pensions. Like the lower income group of 350,000 persons, they will be faced with same dilemma of shrinking monetary value due to inflation and increased prices. They have worked most of their lives and surely have paid their dues. Paying taxes erodes their already small pensions.

Water tariffs: Mr. Vice-President, as part of an overhaul of major public utilities, the operations of the Water and Sewerage Authority are to be reviewed. This includes a tariff review. The current annual \$2 billion subsidy to WASA and its debt position are unsustainable. The report on WASA's operations due by November 30, 2020, could bring higher cost of water to both businesses and residential consumers.

Water rates across the Caribbean, based on a 2018 report of 2015 prices by the Regulated Industries Commission, revealed that Trinidad and Tobago paid US 27 cents per cubic meter of water, roughly 400 per cent below the average cost of US \$1.35 per cubic meter in Barbados and Jamaica. While a 400 per cent increase in water tariff is unlikely, the disparity in rates between Trinidad and Tobago and its Caribbean neighbours points to the possible adjustment in cost that could soon be borne by consumers with possible inflationary pressures.

Electricity tariffs: Tariffs for electricity supply are also to be reviewed. An increase in the electricity rate for 500,000 consumers is likely. Data shows that Trinidad and Tobago's energy cost is currently US 5 cents per kilowatt hour, 460

per cent lower than the average cost of US 28 cents per kilowatt hour in Barbados, Bahamas and Jamaica. A 2017 publication estimated the full cost of electricity in Trinidad and Tobago is approximately US \$0.12 per kilowatt hour. Based on these estimates, electricity tariffs could possibly double should the power subsidy be eliminated.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Adjustments to utility rates in Trinidad and Tobago could reduce disposable income and discretionary spending, negating the potential benefits from the earlier mentioned income tax allowance increase and create broad inflationary pressures in the economy.

Property tax: Property taxes are expected to be introduced in fiscal 2021. The expected revenue boost to the State is unclear. The estimates of revenue for fiscal 2021 project property tax at \$10 million. In the September 28, 2020, conference, however, the Minister of Finance suggested that property tax could contribute as much as \$1 billion. Like utility rate revisions, the introduction of the property tax, however small, could have the effect of reducing disposable consumer income.

Competitiveness and the ease of doing business: Reforms must continue to be implemented to a significantly improved Trinidad and Tobago's competitiveness, which includes ease of doing business that would allow the private sector to invest and lead to economic growth and job creation, so that there will be a reasonable level of local business activity, import substitution and exports.

In the World Bank's ease of doing business 2020 rankings, Trinidad and Tobago ranked 158 out of a 190 countries for registering properties, 174 out of a

190 countries for enforcing contracts and 166 out of 190 countries for payment of taxes. These indicators support the experience at public offices, frustration and high cost of doing business. While many processes can now be done online, it is only up to a point. In some cases, aspects of the process must still be completed in person.

The Global Enterprise Registration network gives Trinidad and Tobago's business registration website a three out of 10 for its Single Electronic Window and 4.5 per cent out of 10 for providing information on how to register a business. Clearly, there is room for significant improvement.

An integrated digital infrastructure is critical to enable cashless transactions for businesses and to create opportunities for new entrepreneurs. It is crucial that Trinidad and Tobago move to a fully digital environment in the shortest possible time.

The impact of the global digital economy is a serious threat to Trinidad and Tobago's economic activity. Amazon, Netflix, Goggle, Twitter and Facebook, for example, are taking away media market share from businesses while having no local, economic footprint. They drain foreign exchange without significant cost. They simply create digital platforms and provide connectivity among consumers and accrue wealth to the platform owners. This activity has provided the platform owners with massive amounts of personal data on consumers and with data mining, produced profiles for marketers. These digital platforms are designed to exploit world consumers via the Internet.

The Government should be concerned about how to get some of this wealth-generating activity of the digital economy by creating a global value chain, which includes building platforms and devising a system to get taxes from these

platforms locally. Modernization and amendment of the legislative framework, as it pertains to e-commerce, is critical.

Digitization has already been accomplished in the private sector. Digitization of the public sector still has to be fully implement. If the Government wants people to use the Internet and self-service facilities, every citizen must have a unique e-identity. Data portability is necessary for passing documents from an individual to the Government instead of paper going from office to office. Proper Internet access is critical.

Business processes must be re-engineered and the mindset of public officers transformed to radically improve the customer experience at public sector offices. Digital transformation alone is not a substitute or panacea for good service by public service officers. Continuous training and developmental education, including reskilling and upskilling, must be a part of the service fabric if excellence in service by all service providers is to be achieved.

Environment pollution: Madam President, climate change is a profound threat to global economic growth. It is now time to immediately ban non-biodegradable, non-compostable containers and single-use plastic containers such as straws, packaging material, bags, and bottles. Care must be taken to ensure that the substitutes are environmentally friendly.

The beverage container legislation must be enacted and recycling implemented on a national scale. This legislation has been languishing in draft form for many years and there has been no political will to move this forward into law. However, our citizens must take responsibility for their unchecked and rampant dumping of garbage along roadways in neighborhoods, and into the rivers and seas. This cannot continue. It signifies that our society is prepared to tolerate

and encourage such behaviour by the failure to take measures to ameliorate the degradation after our environment. We should not be in a position that in 2020, there are reports about the unacceptable and dangerous levels of sewage being discharged into watercourses and the sea; the very sea that our population seek to enjoy for recreational purposes, that is before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Government must give serious consideration to implementing a plastic tax on all companies that continue to use plastic products. The funds from this tax can be used to fund recycling plants. River courses and waterways should have strategically placed traps to collect all debris such as disposable containers. And litter wardens must be resurrected.

Plastic pollution: In a report published by *Forbes* magazine on September 19, 2019, Trinidad and Tobago has been named as largest producer of plastic waste per capita, 3.7 kilograms of plastic waste per capita per day; the largest in the world, and almost six times more than Kuwait, which is in a distant second place.

Madam President, plastic pollution has worsened in recent times and at the centre of the crisis is the inadequate waste management. We see this plainly in the recent floods in the country. There is always a flood of rubbish. There are also massive patches of plastic building in the seas around Trinidad and Tobago. This pollution translates into cost including, cost to the Government and citizens as a result of flooding, lost productive man hours, increased insurance cost, and so on. At the present time, there is no significant incentives to motivate people to become more energy efficient or to shift to renewable energy sources. Some suggestions include:

1. Remove duty and taxes on all renewable energy equipment such as PV panels, wind, wave and steam turbines.

2. Ban the importation of incandescent and fluorescent lightbulbs.
Fluorescent lightbulbs contain harmful mercury.

Renewable energy: Madam President, switching to renewable energy generation in the medium to long term will reduce Trinidad and Tobago's reliance on imported fuel and demand for US dollars. Fuel imports in 2018 was US \$1.76 billion or 21 per cent greater than the total amount of non-energy exports for that year.

The economics of renewables are such that it is impossible for oil and natural gas to compete with, in the medium to long term. The cost of running electric vehicles on solar or wind power is dropping rapidly. It is projected that the only way gasoline cars can compete with the renewable energy-powered cars by 2020 to 2024, is if the price of oil fell to US \$11 or \$12 per barrel. The total life cycle cost of owning an electric vehicle will be cheaper than that of owning a gasoline fuel car. Already on our streets, we have a growing number of hybrid cars. Other environmental benefits include not breathing polluted air, not having huge oil spill and not destroying a livable planet.

Education: The school system has been built on systemic inequalities. It is elitist and irrelevant to the needs of a country in the 21st Century. The inadequacy of the education system is being imposed on our children. The system promotes prestige schools and the belief that attending these institutions is highly revered. In this case, redo rather than reset is more appropriate. We need radical reform of the education system where it is every child's right to attend secondary school and all secondary schools are of high standard and provide quality education, where every child is literate and can find a place to grow and earn a decent livelihood. There would always be exceptions but life in the underworld must never be our first

choice.

The Concordat agreement between the Government and religious bodies has created further inequalities. The principles of those secondary schools have the right to choose 20 per cent of the children who take the SEA exam to enter Form 1. Parents are going to try to get the children into what they consider to be the better schools. So, generally, the so-called best students attend prestige schools, while everyone else goes to the lower stature schools.

A reformed education system is one of the solutions for disadvantaged communities. A free education system has not solved the social issues associated with delinquents, drug abuse and stunted opportunities. This is a failed education system where CSEC passes are valued above all else without adequate technology and strayed education options. Students emerge from this system with literacy problems and insufficient life skills.

Make the education of special needs children a priority: Madam President, historically education of special needs children have been largely ignored or treated in a haphazard manner. Many of these children have little or no access to formal education. Fully implement the inclusive education policy. It was started in September 2019, for one term. Children with special needs can then attend a government school, access education in an environment with teachers who are trained to deal with their needs. They can be given an individual education plan and have special aids and therapy services.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced both businesses and educational institutions to embrace the concept of work and learn from home. Educational content is widely available on the World Wide Web. Goggle it is the fastest way to financiers. YouTube has videos to show you how to do everything

and Wikipedia has replaced the old encyclopedia for detailed information. However, online development, availability and presentation of local educational content are in the embryonic stages. Vision, creativity and distribution of local content for lifetime skills must be a priority in any educational syllabus going forward.

Special institutions for technical and vocational skills in artificial intelligence for example are required in the digital age.

2.45 p.m.

So, COVID has created the opportunity to move from the comfort zone of: why change what is not broken to why not build a better country? The infrastructure for countrywide digital delivery and access is still inadequate, but I guess quality takes time. Hopefully, availability of enabling digital technology will be put on the front burner.

Agriculture: Managing the country's food supply in the face of COVID-19 and the global energy crisis is seen as critical. Successive governments have attempted to jump-start the thrust in local food sufficiency with minimal results. Food imports in 2019 were approximately \$5.67 billion. If we are to substantially reduce the bleeding of foreign exchange and the country's reliance on food imports then sustained and concerted efforts by the sector are mandatory.

Agriculture must embrace modern methods of technology-based farming to provide the nation with an inadequate supply of products. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will recognize the barriers to sustainability: consistent losses to farmers arising from floods, theft and funding. Also, the scale and unit cost of production and local quality as compared to imports is not competitive.

Madam President, the Government must manage the economy extremely prudently in our COVID battered world to avoid economic crisis including: balance of payment problems, unstable economy, low or negative economic growth, and debt servicing requirements. Failure to do this could mean Trinidad and Tobago will have to seek financing from the International Monetary Fund and other agencies with imposed dreaded conditionalities and economic policies, which usually force governments to reduce spending and take decisions such as formal currency devaluation. Thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs.

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Thank you, Madam President. I am honored to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill for the fiscal year 2021 following the presentation of the budget by the Minister of Finance under the theme: Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. This budget represents a progressive approach to address our country's challenges, and it places Trinidad and Tobago on a direct and well considered path to recovery, as we grapple with the unprecedented economic and social ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic combined with low oil prices.

In this context, Madam President, and noting the magnitude of the issues before us, I seize the opportunity to congratulate the Minister of Finance on the budget he presented, which is a balanced approach to providing support where it is needed and the taking of some tough decisions where necessary. I also commend the hon. Minister of Planning and Development for the effort that has been expended by her Ministry and her team, and express appreciation for the vision and acumen that has been exercised in bringing forth the overall budget.

I also congratulate my colleague Ministers for their significant efforts and

their pertinent contributions to the budget exercise which have provided a panoramic view of the accomplishments of the Government thus far, and complemented the Appropriation Bill by also providing prescriptions for securing and maintaining Trinidad and Tobago's development gains. I have noted some very informative contributions in the debate here thus far, Madam President, apart from one which was a bit of a radical time walk journey by one Senator. I would not go any further with that.

Madam President, at this point I would like to place on record my sincere appreciation to all staff members of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs for their efforts to build on gains that have been made to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago maintains its high profile in the regional hemispheric and international spheres. I wish to commend in particular the staff of our overseas Missions who have been keeping our offices operational in the face of unparalleled difficulties [*Desk thumping*] and in many cases threats to their personal well-being, and who were called upon to assume additional responsibilities and continue to be called upon to assume more and more responsibilities, as is their duty, as the impact and scope of the COVID-19 pandemic became manifest on a scale that most of us cannot comprehend or imagine. My thanks to those members of staff and their families who continue to experience profound discomfort of living in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic; and we can all relate to that, Madam President.

For the fiscal 2021, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs has been allocated a combined total of \$259,926,955 for recurrent expenditure and expenditure under the PSIP and the IDF. While this does represent a reduction in the Ministry's allocation from the sum allocated for 2020, this Ministry will engage in continued cost effective operation while ensuring that it meets its various

mandates and responsibilities on behalf of the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago at home and abroad. The Ministry will work diligently to ensure that the required quality of service, foreign representation and high standard of diplomatic advocacy is provided to our country. Our vision is to sign everything that we do with excellence.

Madam President, critically important elements of the role of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs are: the building and improving of relationships, establishment of partnerships, and the creation of linkages that support and aid in the achievement of this country's development objectives. The Ministry continues to engage with regional hemispheric and international entities to that end, and continues its participation in discussions and negotiations that must yield tangible benefits to this country and its citizens. This administration recognizes the need to improve our relations with Caricom and the Ministry's engagement within fora of the regional organization was heightened to this end.

Among the first and important tasks, Madam President, was to repair the relationship with Jamaica. In July 2016 the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago undertook an official visit to Jamaica, and among the main outcomes of that visit was an action plan reflecting the spirit of renewed partnership between our two nations and that created the stimulus for further cooperation, renewed ease of interaction between the countries through consultation and the dialogue that followed and that continues to this day. Today, that relationship is not just repaired but it is now exemplary and in pristine condition.

Madam President, in alignment with the overall policy, direction, and imperatives of this administration, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs has pursued and contributed to T&T's deepened engagement within the Caribbean

community including hosting meetings of Caricom. One such meeting, the 18th Special Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government, was held in December 2018 to address the advancement of the Caricom Single Market and Economy, the CSME. Two of the significant outcomes of that meeting, Madam President, were the expanded categories of persons who would benefit from the arrangement, and exchanges with representatives of the private sector, the eventual result of which has been the establishment of the Caricom Private Sector Organization incorporated in 2019.

Trinidad and Tobago also hosted the 19th Special Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of Caricom on Security. Madam President, the Ministry has also contributed to meaningful engagement between this country and its international partners beyond the region. For example, the Ministry facilitated the official visit by the Prime Minister to Beijing, the People's Republic of China, one significant outcome of which was the signing of an MOU between our two countries within the framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

This visit was followed by a working visit from May 20 to 26, 2018, and tangible results were obtained from these visits, and I would outline some of them during my discourse. As the Minister of Finance has announced, one of these was the fast ferries including the *APT James* which will soon go into service. The outcome of this high level engagement has also been two Cape-class patrol boats which will increase Trinidad and Tobago's ability to patrol and protect its borders. The impact of these when put into service needs no description or explanation and this is yet another example of high level diplomatic work yielding tangible value to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Bilateral relations, Madam President. In terms of bilateral relations as part of its thrust towards deepening relations with our regional partner, particular within the Caribbean community, the newly reestablished High Commission of T&T to Guyana in Georgetown began its work at the beginning of the fiscal year to begin the task of resident representation in Guyana. Further, in keeping with its commitment to support Caricom member states, the Ministry facilitated our participation in the Caricom election observer mission to Guyana.

I now turn to an account of the Ministry's stewardship of our wider hemispheric bilateral relations. Madam President, the Ministry continued its engagement with the United States of America during the year under review and in doing so facilitated a number of requests for technical information and assistance from line Ministries. The Ministry has also coordinated the participation of Trinidad and Tobago officials in a range of law enforcement and security training programmes within the United States of America. Of special note is the visit to Washington DC by our hon. Prime Minister during the period September 11 to 15, 2019, to engage in meetings with high level officials of the legislative branch of the US Government.

Subsequent to the participation of my predecessor, the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, in the ministerial dialogue on hurricane preparedness and disaster resiliency in the Caribbean which took place in 2019 at the US Southern Command in Miami Florida, the Acting Deputy PS in the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs also participated in the first working group meeting of the US Caribbean resilience partnership held in Bridgetown Barbados. And a number of activities emanated from those participations.

Madam President, I wish to highlight that in 2019/2020 the Government also

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granted approval for an additional two years of the Status of Forces Agreement between the USA and Trinidad and Tobago which entered into force on January 01, 2020, which will expire on December 31, 2021. The agreement serves to strengthen the excellent relationship between Trinidad and Tobago and the United States of America in matters of regional and national security.

Madam President, our diasporic organization has also been engaged in mobilizing assistance to the education sector in Trinidad and Tobago. And we have agencies such as the Trinidad and Tobago Diaspora Associations Network, based in the US, which established an education committee which works very closely now with our Ministry of Education, again, demonstrating the value of our high level diplomatic action to benefit the citizens and the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, with respect to our relationship with other key bilateral partners, the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs met with the hon. François-Philippe Champagne, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada in February 2020 in Barbados, in the margins of the 31st Inter-Sessional Meeting of the Conference of the Heads of Government of Caricom.

Subsequently, in June 2020 the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs participated in the inaugural meeting of the Canada Caricom Dialogue of Senior Officials. Some of the areas that were discussed and came out of this were: public health, the response to COVID-19, travel and tourism, hurricane preparedness, long term financing of development issues, season agricultural workers programme, Canada's visa policy framework and areas of collaboration and technical cooperation.

Madam President, the Canada Caricom Dialogue and follow-up technical

meetings resulted in the identification of a number of areas of continued engagement such as visa, education, technical cooperation, and the resumption of safe travel and tourism between Canada and the Caribbean. Madam President, further afield, His Excellency Dr. Paul Byam presented his Letters of Credence as Ambassador, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

In terms of participation in initiatives regarding the situation in Venezuela the hon. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and the then Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs participated in the meeting of the Montevideo Mechanism on the situation in Venezuela in Mexico City, Mexico. Trinidad and Tobago continues to enjoy robust bilateral relations with a variety of states throughout Latin America.

One such country is Chile and the agreement between the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Republic of Chile on the exemption of visa requirements for holders of diplomatic and official passports has entered into force. Both countries have also deepened cooperation in other sectors such as education, when Cabinet accepted the Government of Chile's offer to provide Spanish as a foreign language training for public servants in Trinidad and Tobago. A five-week course was held at the Ministry of Education in 2020 and there were 45 participants from a range of Ministries. Trinidad and Tobago and Chile have also enhanced cooperation in the area of trade and in April 2020 the Government approved the General Framework Agreement for the negotiation of a partial scope agreement between our two countries.

In terms of cooperation with countries within the wider Latin American region over the recent period the Government of Columbia offered the 5th edition

of its Spanish language training for diplomats and public servants of this country and a total of 115 of our officials from 10 Government Ministries participated. There is now a new phase of programme delivery focused on online Spanish learning due to the situation which we are all aware of with COVID-19.

And again, Trinidad and Tobago has formally accepted the Government of Columbia's offer for further training in this regard, and collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Embassy of Colombia here. And, by mid-September 2020 a total of 183 officials have enrolled in this particular course administered by Colombia that commenced on October 01, 2020, demonstrating an increased level of interest for the current editions. Five Ministries are participating in that course. Madam President, again, an example of the value of our high level diplomatic efforts to the public servants and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Since this nation's independence in 1962, Trinidad and Tobago has always been distinguished by consistent engagement with the wider global community. In terms of our engagement with Asia and Africa we wish to highlight that notwithstanding the reprioritization of many countries' national agendas and reallocation of resources due to COVID, there are a number of key accomplishments on the bilateral agenda for countries in the African, Asian, Middle East, and Pacific region.

The Prime Minister of this country visited did a state visit to the Republic of Ghana in March 2020 on the occasion of the 63rd anniversary of its independence on March 06, 2020. The participation also of the hon. Stuart Young, Minister of National Security, and Ms. Nicole Olliviere, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and also the DPS in the Ministry of Finance in the One Road Initiative, China-Caribbean Conference held by the Government of the

People's Republic of China and the Government of Grenada in St. Georges, Grenada as well must be referenced.

There was also the conclusion of the framework agreement on the provision of a concessional loan for the development of the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate project between the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the government of the People's Republic of China in the amount of ¥688 million. The conclusion also of an economic and technical corporation agreement in the amount of ¥100 million toward the implementation of the National Forensic Testing Centre and mutually agreed projects on January 07, 2020.

There was also the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Republic of Ghana, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on air services on March 08, 2020 and the Ministry continues to work to advance a number of draft bilateral agreements, and air services agreement with the United Arab Emirates, air services agreements with Qatar, and a double taxation agreement with the United Arab Emirates. A lot of work is going on, Madam President.

In terms of our multi-lateral relations, in keeping with the renewed commitment to the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) expressed by Member States of Caricom, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs continues to facilitate the participation of this country in the initiatives of CELAC being coordinated by the Pro Tempore presidency of Mexico.

Madam President, over the period June to September 2020 the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs continue to facilitate Trinidad and Tobago's participation in the initiatives of CELAC coordinated by the presidency of Mexico. To this end, we have participated in a number of initiatives, presenting the opportunity for this country to engage in regional collaborative efforts to combat

the spread of COVID-19 and to mitigate its impact. Among these are Trinidad and Tobago's participation in a regional clinical study on the dermatological effects associated with COVID-19, we are part of that study. And also, a special video conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of China, Latin America, and Caribbean countries on COVID-19 held this year. One of the main outcomes of the later meeting was the announcement by China of the establishment of an additional loan facility of US \$1 billion to assist countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in their COVID-19 response.

Madam President, those meetings convened to focus on promoting international cooperation and universal access to treatment and vaccines for COVID-19 which are subject—I am sure is of great concern to all of us. Therefore, I submit that this country's persistent presence at the table and active participation in this type of encounter as facilitated by the Ministry that I have to honor to serve with, underscores this Government's recognition of the fact that international cooperation is not only useful in addressing international challenges but rather it is indispensable. Again, diplomacy bringing value to the citizens of this country, and I want to reference our especially close collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs during this particular period of challenge.

Madam President, in 2005 Noble Laureate Muhammad ElBaradei reminded us in June 2020, cooperation is not only an ethical imperative but it is also an existential one. On September 24, 2020 this Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs attended the 20th Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States within the framework of the 75th period of sessions of the UN General Assembly. A delegation noted that

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Trinidad and Tobago will assume the Chairmanship of Caricom in January 2021. [*Desk thumping*] I repeat, in January 2021 Trinidad and Tobago will be elevated to the chairmanship of Caricom and we will represent this nation at that level with excellence.

On August 26, 2020, the Government of Mexico donated 16 ventilators to Trinidad and Tobago and its neighbors to assist with COVID-19 efforts. Madam President, additional evidence of our consistent engagement may be found in the signed agreements at conventions that Trinidad and Tobago has acceded to in the fiscal year 2020. And there are several of them. I have already mentioned a few, but we have also signed the Instruments of Accession to the treaties of the World Intellectual Property Organization which was signed by this Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs on September 3rd, and also the Rome Convention 1961, International Convention for the Protection of Performers, Producers of Phonograms and Broadcasting Organizations.

There was also the Beijing Treaty on Audio-Visual Performances 2012, otherwise known as the Beijing Treaty. This Treaty strengthens the local audiovisual industry which is labour intensive and employs scores of performers, technicians, musicians, and other creators or entertainers and creators. This is another example of your government working for you and of high level diplomacy bringing value to the work that you do.

Madam President, I want take this little opportunity to pay tribute to two of our creatives and cultural giants that we lost during the COVID-19 period. One was Sam Boodram otherwise known as the “Lion of Cumuto” and the other was Dennis Hall, two icons, “Sprangalang” of course.

We also signed the Singapore Treaty on the law of trademarks and the

Marrakesh Treaty to facilitate access to published works for people who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise print disabled, which will improve availability and access to print material and consequently increase involvement and promotion of cultural and social activities for persons with disabilities. Again, our differently and specially-abled citizens, my friends, high level diplomacy bringing value to your lives as well.

We also signed the Instrument of Accession to the Madrid Agreement Concerning International Registration of Marks—[*Interruption*]—not that Mark—Marks, which was signed by the Minister of Foreign and Caricom affairs on September 22, 2020. So our publishers and developers and other creatives, we are also working for you. This represents tangible evidence of positive outcomes that are redounding to the benefit of our citizens, through the pursuit of smart, strategic, and synergistic engagement of the Ministry that I have the honour to lead in both bilateral and multilateral fora.

The Ministry through our respective missions to the United Nations in Geneva and in New York continues to provide support and work to facilitate the participation of our delegations in international meetings and events. One key example was the 25th Session of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Our country's participation at this meeting is indicative of our continued commitment to addressing climate change and pursuing sustainable development as a small island developing state.

We have always adhered to the bedrock principle of gender equality and equity. I am therefore pleased to report that through our representation abroad the Ministry has tangibly contributed to the strengthening of our multilateral engagement and commitment to promoting gender quality. And this was evidenced

in one facet by the election of the then permanent representative to the UN for T&T in New York, my dear friend, Her Excellency Penelope Beckles as the Head of UN Women, very significant achievement. [*Desk thumping*]

With respect to consulate affairs with specific reference to assistance to nationals in distress, Madam President, the Ministry has administered humanitarian assistance to nationals of Trinidad and Tobago who are normally domiciled in this country, but who were stranded overseas when our borders were closed in our national effort to avoid the spread of the novel coronavirus.

In keeping with the instructions of the Ministry of Finance, the disbursement of those funds were suspended at the end of September due to the closing of the financial year.

But Madam President, the Ministry recognizes there are still nationals abroad who require urgent assistance and we have requested and we have now received approval to extend this financial assistance for at least three more months until the 31st of December and we will monitor and respond accordingly with the support of the Government and the Ministry of Finance.

3.15 p.m.

Madam President, the Government is mindful of the plight of citizens abroad. We know the sacrifices have been many, and we are mobilizing more relief. I have personally written to each overseas mission of this country, to be more accessible, to be more generous and admonish them to be more open to rendering as much assistance as is possible, because that is what is required. The Ministry also provides other services in the Consular Division, including the verification of medical practitioners overseas, help with location of missing

persons, assistance for fishermen, and also support to overseas missions on consular issues, human trafficking, asylum seekers, et cetera.

Madam President, under the Public Sector Investment Programme, the Ministry will continue its institutional strengthening and capacity building project to strengthen the foreign service and complete the development of standardized policy guidelines for all our missions overseas. These activities are designed to build and expand capacity at headquarters and overseas as well. Across the globe, national and international organizations have been forced to adjust how they do business, how they serve clients, how they interact with stakeholders due to COVID-19 and we are no exception. And we have been making the requisite adjustments. Saddened to say that we have had several infections, among our staff, both at headquarters, and at our overseas missions. Yes, Madam President, we have had several infections among staff at our overseas missions, and thank God, they are all alive and doing well, even those who were infected by COVID-19. Just another example of the sacrifice our citizens are making in service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I want to answer a very brief question. What does the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs do in this administration? What does he do? It is not just putting on a suit and smiling for a camera. Since August 25th, since being sworn into office, I have had meetings with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Guyana; with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey; with the Minister of the People's Power for Foreign Affairs of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship of Argentina; with Baroness Sugg CBE, Minister of Overseas Territories and the Sustainable Development of the United

Kingdom; also met, multiple times, with the High Commissioner for the Republic of India to Trinidad and Tobago; with the Ambassador of the United States of America accompanying the hon. Prime Minister. Also met with the Ambassador for the Federative Republic of Brazil, with the Chargé d’Affaires, the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China ; also met with the country representative for the IDB. Also met with the coordinating director of the Caribbean Meteorological Organization.

I have also met with the most noble Secretary General of Caricom. I have also met with the Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China. Also met with the executive chairperson of the Emancipation Support Committee. I have also met with the High Commissioner of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland to Trinidad and Tobago. I have also met with the Ambassador of the Republic of Peru. I have also met with the Ambassador of Guatemala. I have also met with the Ambassador of the Republic of Panama. I have also met with the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Spain. I have also met with the representative of the Apostolic Nuncio. I have also met with the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. I have also met with—these are separate meetings, Madam President.

Also met with the Ambassador of the Republic of Chile. Also met with the Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States. I have also met with the Senior Director of the Western Hemisphere Directorate of the National Security Council of the United States of America. I have also met with the adviser of the Royal Court of Saudi Arabia. I have also met with the Chief Executive Officer of AMCHAM, to name a few.

Madam President, [*Desk thumping*] the Ministry—just speaking about since August 25th, has also hosted the signing of the Draft Framework Agreement with

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Chile, which is a key step for increased trade with Latin America and I salute my colleague, the Minister of Trade and Industry of leading that process. We have also—the Ministry has also hosted recently the handing over ceremony of personal protective equipment to Min. Deyalsingh, donated by the Embassy of China. My first site visit was to the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Cultural Cooperation with the Indian High Commission. We also hosted the handing over of protective equipment by the Ambassador of Korea. I was also honoured to be hosted at the official residence of the United States Ambassador to a working luncheon. And since swearing in and I have also signed over 43 Caricom Community Skills Certificates, empowering our Caricom people to get ready for post 19—post COVID-19. How much more time, Madam President?

Madam President: Twenty-seven.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Excellent.

Madam President: I am sorry, you finish at 3.27.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Not so excellent. [*Laughter*] Thank you, Madam President. [*Crosstalk*] Yes, thank you, Madam President. So, accounting for our service, [*Desk thumping*] accounting for our service and giving example of how this Government is leading the country. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President: We need to hear the Minister as he is about to start his last five minutes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: You are very kind, Madam President. No, I am not going to allow them to interrupt. Madam President, I have also had the honour thus far to deliver speeches to the High-level Plenary Meeting to Commemorate and Promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.

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Also delivered speeches to the commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China; also delivered speeches to the 23rd Intersessional Proprietary Meeting for the 26th Ordinary Meeting of the Ministerial Council of the Association of Caribbean States. Also delivered speeches to the high level event to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations. Also delivered speeches at the Annual Ministerial Meeting of the informal Ministerial Network for the International Criminal Court on the 23rd of September 2020. Also delivered a speech to the Commonwealth Ministers of Foreign Affairs Meeting on the 14th of October, 2020. Also delivered a speech to the 20th Ministerial Meeting of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you. Also delivered a statement at the Dialogue of Heads of Delegation with permanent observers to the Organization of American States, October 19th. Also delivered a statement at the Plenary Session of the General Assembly on October 21, 2020. Also, since swearing in, Madam President, this Minister has also represented the Government at the dialogue with Permanent Observer countries of the General Assembly of the OAS.

There was also a virtual meeting with the International Committee of the Red Cross and their head of delegation in this region. Also a ministerial level meeting of the Ministerial Network for the International Criminal Court in the margins of the UN High Level week. Also the 29th meeting of National Coordinators of the Committee of Latin American and Caribbean States. Also the 20th Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers Meeting which I also addressed. Also the 50th regular meeting of the General Assembly of the Organization of Americans States as head of delegation; and also there was a video conference with

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Caricom, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the Minister of National Security and the Director CDMA.

Madam President—oh, and in addition, [*Desk thumping*] the 13th Special Meeting the Council for Foreign and Community Relations (COFOR). That one was via video conference. Madam President, these activities in less than two months of service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago via this hard-working Government in an energized and dedicated Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs.

Madam President, the proud Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is also using its robust diplomacy to advance six candidatures at this time. We have a candidature for the re-election to the Council of the International Seabed Authority. We have a candidate at the International Criminal Court. We have a candidate for Interpol as well, a former Assistant Commissioner of Police. We have a candidate at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. We have a candidate for the United Nations Security Council. Trinidad and Tobago has announced its candidature for membership on the Security Council of the United Nation for the period 2027 to 2028. And this country has also announced its candidacy for the presidency of the 78th United Nations General Assembly for the period 2023 to 2024. Advocacy has already been initiated.

The conclusion, Madam President, and to the people of this country, if you are hearing my voice today, you are blessed to have survived a pandemic that has decimated many countries around the world. This Government will continue working for you. This Government will continue providing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] We have a head of Government who gets it, Madam President, who understands crisis mitigation, who understands science,

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and who understands people and who takes his responsibilities seriously. And, finally, this nation has a Government that definitely has the experience, the fortitude, the wisdom, the backbone, and the good judgment to see us through any challenge and any crisis.

With these few words, I thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial. [*Desk thumping*] [*Interruption*] Sen. Lutchmedial is about to start her contribution. Sen. Mark. Sen. Lutchmedial.

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Thank you. Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to join in this debate on the Appropriation Bill for fiscal 2021. Unfortunately, after listening to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I feel tired on his behalf. I have—Madam President, I did virtual court with my daughter sitting on my lap this week. That is the only boast I have bought.

Madam President, for the last three weeks we have heard speaker after speaker dissect and analyze and sometimes attempt to defend this budget presentation and the policy documents that we were presented with on October 5th so I do not intend to traverse all the matters that have already been discussed ad nauseam. However, as I indicated in my maiden contribution back in August, I do intend to bring some of my professional and personal experiences to bear on these debates so that perhaps the Government can understand how their policy and legislative measures that they are proposing affect the lives of ordinary citizens.

Madam President, when one listens to these debates and budget presentations and spotlight presentations, and so on, one would easily believe that Trinidad and Tobago was some booming state on the cusp of greatness and economic prosperity until the COVID-19 pandemic finally was acknowledged sometime around mid-March. You would never believe that the Trinidad and

Tobago that the Minister Finance speaks about pre-COVID is the same country that has consistently dropped in its ease of doing business ranking, that has been steadily—has had a steady trend of negative foreign direct investments, a debt to GDP ratio that is now somewhere at an astounding 80 per cent. One is forced to question oneself and say but wait, this is the same Trinidad and Tobago that has been downgraded by every internationally recognized credit rating agency? Because the Government has creatively utilized a disastrous pandemic to disguise four and a half years of sheer incompetence and failure, which has created hardship for people. Only a government without any real plans or policies to effect positive change would adopt a continuous chorus of blame the way this Government has. “Blamed COVID” is the new “blame Kamla”.

When you sit in this Parliament and you hear speakers talk about the unacceptable ease of doing business ranking, Madam President, sometimes I wonder but who was in charge? Because they talk about it like if it is somebody else, some, some imaginary force that was controlling this thing. You would never believe that it is the same Government for the last five years presided over our “skating down” of the ease-of-doing-business ranking and it has made us so unattractive to foreign investors.

3.30 p.m.

Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago, that we have been living in for the past five years, has been mismanaged. One economist called it the worst managed economy in the world. But all the while, the Government blames the previous Partnership Government for everything that goes wrong, throwing around words like, overspending and then corruption, corruption, corruption. Baseless allegations, yet to be proven against any member of the Partnership, and we know

not everybody in the Government has been so fortunate. But, in any event, what the Government has been pedalling as overspending, while they do these presentations is what I call improvements in the lives of citizens.

When the Government was given another five-year term, one would have expected the blame game to stop and decisive action to start, especially in the face of the challenges that we are facing now. But, no, they have instead upped the rhetoric. Madam President, unlike this budget and the five preceding fiscal packages delivered by this Government, the Partnership administration did not set out to decimate the hard-working economic engine room known as the middle class. After this budget, the middle class of Trinidad and Tobago has moved from endangered species to almost extinct.

The Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government and even the Basdeo Panday-led UNC Government, wanted to see a more equitable distribution of wealth in this country, and took policy decisions aimed at uplifting the most vulnerable in our society. [*Desk thumping*] We created opportunities for growth and prosperity for all. We were not about helping the rich get richer so that poor could pick up the crumbs that fall from their overladen tables. We did not have any Ministries with words like “digital transformation” in it but we put laptops in the hands of every secondary school student and it was snatched away by the PNM Government.

We opened the doors to education, created jobs, made home and car ownership a reality for the average citizen, when previously those were luxuries enjoyed only by the privileged. I remember not so very long ago when I went to university, it was the greatest comfort to my parents to be able to buy, in those days, it was B14. Now I think it is the Aqua. It is the most affordable vehicle on the foreign used car market that you could give to your child. When I went to

school there were girls who went to school with me from Rio Claro, Cedros, Point Fortin, Mayaro, who could never afford to pay the kind of rent that you had to pay or to live on campus. But their parents were able to get them a foreign used car, and they could work part-time jobs and attend university.

The UNC Government at that time opened up an entire industry that not only created opportunities for people to own businesses, but created opportunities for children to access services like education that they could not access before. [*Desk thumping*] And now this Government, instead of having better traffic management plans, instead of decentralizing services, instead of doing a host of other things that they could do to remove cars from the road, they have decided to make space for Porsches and Range Rovers by depriving poor children from rural communities from owning a lil Aqua. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam President, when we look at the destruction of the once booming Point Lisas Industrial Estate, the massacre of our major forex owners and the failure to deliver on any meaningful promises, we know that our economy crashed long before COVID came. The lights went out on the Petrotrin refinery, plunging so many of our citizens into economic darkness before any of us knew what COVID was.

The COVID pandemic landed upon us whilst we were already experiencing economic strangulation at the hands of this Government who, through its criminal incompetence, negotiated a gas price in Houston that brought the petrochemical sector to its knees. If COVID killed this economy, PNM was like the pre-existing condition or the comorbidity that contributed significantly to our demise. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, they have presented a budget to this House without

reference to any current data on the most significant issue affecting this country, at the moment, and that is unemployment. They had an entire Spotlight and come here and talk about—they have 2018 figures bandied about as it that in any way reflects what is our reality. And the word “reality”, you will hear it repeated over and over in the course of my contribution, because I think what we need is a reality check. And without even having any meaningful statistics and making no apology for it, they come again to say to recycle the old talk about a National Statistical Institute. For five years we are hearing about National Statistical Institute and you are still coming here with no National Statistical Institute and no statistics. And the reality is that the Government is attempting to use COVID as the reason for every single one of its failures.

It has failed to deliver on its promises. It has failed to take into account the needs of the most vulnerable and it has failed to protect our economy from external shocks by adopting any diversification strategy worthy of mention. And now they come to Parliament and tell us, “hear what eh?” not us, but the whole country: “Tings bad, is everybody else fault, not really ours. Yuh just have to accept that this is how it is right now and make sacrifices.” But in asking the population to make sacrifices, they are not being honest and forthright about what they have done and what they intend to do. They punctuate this oppressive budget with meaningless rhetoric, throw around blame, engage in political gas lighting, keeping the population distracted. And the most brazen of all the antics employed has been to list achievements, most of which are still pie in the sky promises which we hear about year after year, manifesto after manifesto, budget after budget, but we are yet to see any benefit from them.

Madam President, I know that around the world, there is a concerted effort

to be more eco-friendly and environmentally conscious. I did not realize that Government recycling old promises and ideas was part of that movement. This budget has absolutely nothing in it to reignite the economy, which has been in contraction for as long as they have been in office. All we see in this budget is more pain and suffering for most of those who are already struggling. There are no real plans for rebuilding and creating sustainable revenue streams, only a regurgitation of tired old promises that are yet to and which may never actually materialize.

So, Madam President, one by one, I wish to raise just a few issues which I believe are pertinent to this debate and how Government has spent our money and what they intend to spend our money on in the year to come. Madam President, the first matter I want to speak about is the property tax. Regressive taxes, such as property tax, disproportionately affect low-income earners because a larger percentage of your income goes towards paying the tax that is applied at a fixed rate against the asset that you own. I did not make this up. This is an accepted fact in the whole world of taxation. So, simply put, if two people own properties assessed at the same value, they pay the same amount of tax, even though one might be a businessman who has a variety of investments, multiple income streams, whereas the other might be a retired public servant living on the same fixed pension for the past maybe 10 years, grappling with every increasing food prices and failing health. The second person I have described there, will feel the pain of this tax. And what makes this property tax even more unfair and unjust, is the fact that the revenue being collected is going straight to central government, and will not be used directly to improve the standard of living for those in the municipalities from which the tax is collected, because pie in the sky number one,

was local government reform. We just heard them saying, it is now going to a joint select committee. Today, the Speaker of House wrote to say that they intend to send it there. Five years we have been hearing about local government reform, nothing, but they are charging full speed ahead, even so far as wanting to contract valuers now, to speed up the collection of property tax.

So the Government can tout this tax how much they want by referencing well, everybody in the world pays property tax and so on. Well, when all over the world you pay your property tax in a foreign country, it is applied to the roads, schools, hospitals, utilities, law enforcement and even the public libraries right there in your community. What the Government is proposing is to collect tax from everyone regardless of their income earning capability, use the taxes however they see fit with no guarantee of a direct or tangible benefit to the taxpayer. So, the pensioner in San Fernando would be paying for the Prime Minister's residence in Tobago. The former Trinmar employee who is now jobless in Point Fortin, would be paying tax on a house he is desperately trying to hold on to in order to fund, what one of the Members in the Lower House has dubbed "the fairy tale port in Toco" listed as an achievement in the budget statement, when the highway leading to the imaginary port is yet to be delivered.

What is even more troubling is that the Prime Minister has attempted to ease the backlash from the public by misleading them into thinking that it is only property owners who are going to feel the pinch of this tax.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, I would ask you please, you are imputing improper motives when you speak—what you just said. So I would ask you to withdraw it.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I am guided. Madam President, they are trying to say that

there are only property owners who would have to pay taxes. This is entirely disingenuous because, in 2018, the same Government brought amendments to the Valuation of Land Act and the Property Tax Act to capture persons who are occupiers and not owners. It was asked and answered right here in this House, and the Government said that it was their intention—and they made it very clear—that even squatters and persons with less than perfect title to the land that they were living on would have the property assessed and would have to be taxed.

Furthermore, Madam President, a point that has been conveniently glossed over, is that when commercial, agricultural and industrial property tax come on board, the manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers are going to pass that property tax on to the same consumer that is paying the residential property tax. So the fixed-income earner, the pensioner, the clerical officer in the public service trying to find money to buy a laptop for his child, is going to feel the blow of that tax about four times.

Madam President, the Government talked us to death about the impact of COVID on the economy. COVID-19 so bad, it getting blame for economic contractions that was happening years before the virus existed. Yet, now, in the face of massive job losses, business closures, the uncertainty in the job market, the Government has committed itself to inflicting this burdensome tax on the population.

Revenue generation is important, but more concerted efforts to improve revenue collection from people who are actually have jobs would have been a far more even-handed approach. Not to mention, the UNC proposal, which was to create jobs and, therefore, collect revenue under a pay-as-you-earn system and not the pay-as-you-own or, in this case, pay-as-you-occupy as well.

The proposed property tax takes no account of generational wealth, which is a very common scenario in our society. There are several communities, for example, in south where I live, where land that was purchased at \$2.50 per square foot in the 1980s now valued at \$250 a square foot, and the persons who bought in the 1980s are retired, living on their pensions or the occupiers are people who were lucky enough to inherit it. But they are asset rich and income poor, because of the state of this economy, and they now have to bear this burden and it is nothing short of oppression.

Now, when we speak about oppression and unemployment, one cannot help to spare a thought for the hundreds of port workers, NP workers and even WASA workers who are now at risk of losing their jobs. I do not care who say what while the fridge door was closing, they are all at risk and it is a frightening thought. [*Desk thumping*] But far more frightening than that is the fact that after five long years and promise after promise, the Public Procurement and the Disposal of Public Property Act is yet to be fully proclaimed and operationalized. Madam President, that law, brought into existence by the Partnership Government was designed to ensure accountability and transparency, minimize the likelihood of corruption in the exact type of transactions that are now being contemplated by the Government with respect to the port and the NP-owned gas stations.

But, Madam Speaker, earlier this year, when pressed about the languishing procurement Act, the Minister of Finance is on record as saying that he needed to look at some amendments to treat with government-to-government arrangements and public/private partnerships. I printed the articles and I brought them, because I could not believe that as early as January, this is what they had in mind. This was reported back then and lo and behold, here we have the Government talking about

public/private partnerships in the context of our port. So it appears that they not only want to hand over the port to the private sector, but they also want to do so without the scrutiny of the Procurement Regulator by either leaving the Act unproclaimed in full or watering it down to ensure that they could run amok and do as they please without being held to account.

Madam President, many of the interest groups who have come out in support of these measures like selling the port, they licking their chops waiting to get the hands on the valuable state assets. They must not be allowed to perpetuate what is known as state capture. And the only way to ensure that this present intellectually bankrupt administration who, instead of finding ways to modernize port operations and create a profitable state enterprise and preserve the jobs held by the people of East Port of Spain, prefer to give it away on a fire sale after neglecting it for years, is to ensure that they do not fall victim to state capture and rob the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. We must ensure that this legislation is fully proclaimed in its present form without any dilution, the Office of the Procurement Regulator is fully operational and it has the resources to effectively perform its functions.

I want to tell trade unions, the JCC and all the other bodies who have been clamouring for years to bring this legislation, the People's Partnership Government answered that call in 2014. We brought it, because we are not afraid of transparency and accountability. You handed it over to them. So now, its value and efficacy is under threat at a time when it is needed more than ever. So it is your duty, as well as ours, to remain vigilante and ensure that valuable State assets are not given away while the law collects dust on the statute books.

Madam President, another law and another body that will become very important now, given the announcement made in this budget, is the Fair Trading

Commission. Again, this law languished since its enactment in 2006. The Partnership Government proclaimed the relevant part to establish the commission in 2014 and it is only, I believe, in February of this year that the rest of the Act has now been proclaimed. For the people who are watching this debate, I want to explain what a Fair Trading Commission is. That is the watchdog body that must investigate and take action to prevent anti-competitive practices and the formation of cartels and the use of price-fixing measures to obtain unfair advantage.

Madam President, I am very reliably informed that the commission, despite having a fully appointed board of commissioners, an executive director and top-tier managers, is yet to hire any staff that would actually conduct investigations envisaged by the Act and to conduct the type of surveillance necessary to detect and prevent anti-competitive practices. Furthermore, the legislation only requires that a merger between enterprises whose assets exceed \$50 million obtain the permission of the commission. Now, why is this important? Well, several small companies can acquire fuel stations, and then with tools such as overlapping directorship, share transfers and other mechanisms, we can see the emergence of an oligopolistic fuel market with price-fixing features. One does not have to look further than the financial services industry to see that it is quite possible, given that the capital output to acquire a fuel station presents a significant barrier to entry. In layman's terms, only a few big, rich people have the resources to buy up gas stations, and they could get together and set a higher price than if you have a truly competitive market. Like the port, which was suffered, the small margins that dealers were forced to accept over the years, mean that many of them were breaking even at best.

When the country went into lockdown earlier this year, the Dealers

Association was begging NP for credit. Who then can really afford to purchase these stations which sit on some of the most viable real estate in this country? The answer is not many. And if a few who can purchase are not properly monitored, policed and regulated well “crapaud smoke all ah we pipe”. Because once the price of fuel goes up and, more so, if it is artificially high, again, is the consumer that is going to take the jamming.

I was not at all heartened to see that in this year, a slightly smaller allocation in the budget was given to the Fair Trading Commission, which is a fledgling organization which needs to be able to spread its wings. One can only speculate whether getting the FTC up and running will be near the top of Government’s list of priorities. I would also suggest that that 2006 legislation, be given a comprehensive review in light of the vast developments in anti-trust law since its passage. The Government boasts that it would not allow cartels and price fixing to become a reality when the fuel market is liberalized. Well, we would like to see you all walk the talk for once.

Now, Madam President, I want to move on to speak to some other areas, areas which were extensively dealt with in the contribution by the Attorney General in another place, and those are areas such as the court, the Registrar General’s Department and the development of the City of San Fernando. I feel fairly confident that I could speak to those matters. I am a regular user of the court, of the Registrar General’s Department and I actually live in San Fernando, unlike him.

Now, I would deal with San Fernando first, because that is one of the easier ones. Madam President, I like to watch the show on television. It is a satirical commentary, news commentary, called “No Laughing Matter” with a young

journalist and he always talks about—he makes fun of things that are going on. There was one episode in particular that he had where he spoke about the red book of fairy tales. But when I saw this book [*Book in hand*] I said: “But A-A, I have to call Akash and tell him I found the red book of fairy tales.” Because in the red book of fairy tales [*Desk thumping*] under achievements—now there are lots of things listed, and the Opposition Leader dealt with quite a few of them—but there was one in particular about the San Fernando Waterfront Redevelopment Project.

Well, I was so curious about how this made its way into this red book of fairy tales as an achievement, because I drive by the waterfront every single day. And so far, all they have done, is widen—not even widen the road. They have not even put down no pitch on the road as yet. They dig it up. You pass there every day, you are seeing all the dirt pelt on what we call the Broadway Cemetery in San Fernando. It was horrendous. But, I mean, I do not know, this Government does not even care about the living far less the dead. They are desecrating people grave. Everybody grave stone falling down—

Madam Chairman: Sen. Lutchmedial, please. You are going a little too far and I would ask you to just refine your language a lil bit.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I am guided. Madam President, in the course of trying to rush a project, they turned the sod right before election day. So far, I did my own enquiries and investigations. Several aspects and components of this project, they are still doing stakeholder consultations to prepare an EIA, the Environmental Impact Assessment, and they still have to get Certificate of Environmental Clearance. I went and I did my own investigations. There is a company that has been contracted to do part of the EIA process, and they have not even began the cumulative part of the EIA process. So, they do not even have the permissions that

they need to begin this process, but they list it as an achievement. Madam President, it is a Government that has absolutely nothing to boast about that can boast about an achievement for a project that is yet to even really get off the ground.

Now, let us talk about the courts and the justice system, because this is another area that the Government has congratulated itself for its extensive work. Madam President, when one hears that level of brag that you are listening to and it was something like this. They talk about Tower D, Princes Town, Fyzabad, Siparia, San Fernando, 75,000 square feet of Magistrates' Court space in San Fernando and the Family Court in the old St. Joseph Convent Cluny Building. When I hear these things, I think that I am in Wonder Land, because just before—a few weeks before the election, I saw the sod being turned for the San Fernando Magistrates' Court, site preparation work has now begun. The project is in its infancy. No foundation has been poured.

Princes Town is a rental building, yet to be opened. Another building like the one rented in Fyzabad for the Children Court with absolutely no parking facilities, it was not built to accommodate a court, so it is now being fitted and retrofitted to make it appropriate and fit for use. Since March last year, I believe it was, the Southern Assembly of Lawyers, held a meeting to find out what was happening with these buildings. We were given assurances, nothing has happened. A lot of money has to be spent to outfit these buildings, sounds familiar, but the thing about it is that when you put a substantial amount of money to outfit a building, it is very easy to justify the renewal of the lease when the rent is up and it has to be renegotiated.

Now, up until COVID, and the commencement of virtual hearings, people

from the Victoria East district, which stretches as far as Barrackpore had to journey to Rio Claro to attend court, and this situation has been going on since 2017. We are doing the virtual hearings now, so that has actually created some ease for people instead of travelling to court, but there has been no effort to get the Princes Town court up and running. So, as I indicated before, the southern assembly, we have also been assured, through the association, that the old post office in Siparia has been identified for new court facilities. Up to July, I was at the Siparia Court, not a floor board has been changed.

Madam President, a report was laid in this Parliament about the adequacy and sufficiency of Magistrates' Courts, and absolutely not one single recommendation has been implemented, at least as far as I could say in the courts that I visit. Bathroom facilities for attorneys are dilapidated outdoor facilities at the end of a car park. You line up with John and Jane Public. As a prosecutor, you walk into the bathroom and you meet up with the accused persons that you are prosecuting. The cell in the courtroom is so small that the prisoners have to be cuffed together and march up and down High Street in Siparia on a morning, back and forth from the police station.

The AG, I know, he would say that well, we are having virtual hearings now, so we do not have to bring prisoners. But the fact of the matter is that might be so for standard preliminary appearances and case management but, from time to time, when you have actual trials carded to take place, prisoners are going to be brought to the court. We need better facilities at the Magistrates' Court. So, please, let us not confuse what has been done or what has not been done in the last five years with what you are promising to do in the next five years to come.

We are all too familiar with the book of fairy tales. The creation of the

Children Court has been fraught with practical difficulties for attorneys who practise in San Fernando, in south, I should say in general. Long delays at the court prevent you from attending to any other business back in San Fernando where most people have their active practice. The building, again, as I indicated, not designed to be a court, is quite unsuitable. No separate passageway for judicial officers to make their way into a hearing room. It is quite a shock to the system when you see a judge moving through a waiting room full of lawyers, victims, accused persons, the family and everybody else to gain access to and from their chambers. But that is the level of accomplishment that the Government boasts about with respect to the Judiciary and creating courtrooms. Well, rooms do not create justice and having a room does not mean that it is appropriate for the needs that have to be met.

And I speak about prosecutors, and I think it would be remiss of me not to mention the continued hardships being faced by the Office of the DPP. I had the privilege of starting my career some 13 or 14 years ago at the Office of the DPP. The job of a prosecutor is a physically, mentally and emotionally draining one and it is really truly the definition of public service. Now, again, the Government boasts about creating space, providing staff and it pats itself on the back for all the marvellous work that it has done. Well, how then does one explain the issues listed in the press release of the DPP this past week? You see, my information is that whilst more lawyers have come into contract positions, there is still an alarming shortage of support staff and facilities.

I remember my days very well, returning from court from Rio Claro and Point Fortin, sometimes 3.00, 4.00 p.m. in the afternoon and then you start copying documents for yourself to prepare bundles to go to court the next day. And I

believe that it is still that way now, even worse, because the few administrative and support staff are now stretched between many more lawyers. My colleague from Barataria/San Juan in the other House, the other place, also worked at the DPP's Office, and he would have raised the suitability of the accommodation that has been chosen for the DPP's South Office at Gulf City Mall. Now, I agree that larger accommodation is needed, but I cannot for the life of me comprehend why a high security environment, where police officers and state witnesses have to attend on a regular basis, would be placed in a mall. I cannot comprehend why the home base for lawyers who are in court all the day would be so far away from the courthouse requiring attorneys to drive in quite a bit of traffic back and forth. Attorneys in private practice in San Fernando cherish the tiniest bit of office space in the precincts of the court because of the convenience and use of the library facilities and so on. But the Government took a decision to place the DPP lawyers away from the legal hub of San Fernando.

Now, you see, Madam President, a budget is about spending money, taxpayers' money and when you spend taxpayers' money, you have to be able to show that you are accomplishing what is in the best interest of the taxpayer, not the mall owner, not the owners of any of the buildings you want to rent. There are huge allocations in the budget for outfitting these spaces, so I presume they would be moving soon. I cannot see how navigating one's day between Gulf City Mall and the court district in San Fernando during, let us say, Christmas traffic time, could be of any use and the best use for your scarce resources.

Apart from physical accommodation and the use of contract staff is also an area of concern. There is no job stability for attorneys who are on contract. Madam President, we cannot look at things in a vacuum. You want staff quickly, but you

also want to attract and retain good quality staff. When people's contracts end, they are put on month-to-month arrangements. When they are ready to buy a house they cannot access a mortgage because they are just on a two-year or a three-year contract. What do you expect to happen? You invest two or three years training them and then they move on to greener and more stable pastures. The People's Partnership Government had actually developed a plan, and even though I was not there at the time, I was still in the public service, and I saw the proposed org structure for the DPP's Office which consisted of specialized units for fraud, sexual offences and capital matters and so on.

4.00 p.m.

It would have allowed the state counsel to find their niche and hone their skills. I am subject to correction on this, but I also believe that the plan would have created positions on the establishment, not contract posts. So what you would have had were career prosecutors being built and being retained and working for the State. Those kind of people are few and far between now. What we have are people who are transitioning, get their feet wet and transition out. Now, why was this plan scrapped? Was it funding or was it because we just prefer to acquire external help? The Member for Oropouche East in another place raised the issue of the privatization of justice. Now, the Attorney General in my maiden contribution gave me a good speaking to about declaring conflict of interest, and so. Madam President, I would like to say upfront that I do represent one of the parties involved in the civil claims brought by the AMBD. So, declaring conflict of interest. I mean, the Attorney General is the subject matter expert in that field, I am thankful for the guidance. But I have no hat in the ring, Madam President, when it comes to any criminal charges, because there is no ring.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, you have five more minutes.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yes. Sixty million dollars later and the independent office of the DPP is still crying out for resources while private prosecution and investigation firms of super SRPs are living large. And we are here on the eve of election hearing, “It coming. It coming. It coming.” We have not seen anything coming as yet.

In this scenario, I do not only read what is said in the newspapers, I also know what it means to stand in a courtroom as a minister of justice, not seeking to secure a conviction or ensure that a charge is brought against a political opponent of my financier, but to see that justice and fairness and the rule of law prevails. There are competent, hard-working men and women in the DPP’s office who hold these ideals every day without seeing half of \$60 million in their lifetime. So when we come here to glorify ourselves about the resources given to the DPP’s department, think about how far \$60 million could go in ensuring that more indictments are filed, better working conditions for the staff and more administrative support is given in the new digitalized environment that they are apparently required to function in.

Renowned Senior Counsel at the criminal bar, Mr. Israel Khan, today wrote about the new criminal practice rules that came into effect in 2016 that shifted a substantial amount of work off of the Judiciary and to the prosecution and defence bar. Now, the Attorney General has administrative responsibility for all of these institutions and yet they are kicking the can of blame around, and he says this is robust and transparent discussions. Well, it was transparent only for the fact that it brought to life some very frightening statistics. There are over 900 indictments waiting to be tried that are more than 10 years old, and this is in a country where

the detection rate is something like 30 per cent. Could you imagine if we solve more crime what would happen in the justice system and we had more indictments being filed? How can we boast of accomplishments when this is our reality?

Madam President, the digitalization—I will just run quickly—of the RG’s office is another one that presents several concerns. This week there was a sensitization session for attorneys, many of whom reached out to me saying that this system is fraught with difficulty. It is difficult to use. There is no guarantee as to the accuracy of the information that you are getting and many attorneys have concerns when they perform searches using the new system that is being rolled out what will happen, and if they will be held liable for errors and mistakes, because there is no information being given about the checking of the data that is being put onto the system. You boast about credit card payments, but I can tell you, not all of the services you can pay for with a credit card at the moment and several of the transactions that you can start online, you still have to go into the office and carry in the hard copy and do certain things in order to complete the transaction.

Madam President, I want to just talk about the repatriation of nationals very quickly, because the right of return is a principle in international law which guarantees everyone a right of voluntary re-entry into your country of citizenship. It is linked to the basic fundamental human rights which we have enshrined in our Constitution. We have adopted and ratified the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights since the late 1970s. Article 12 of which deals with re-entry into your State. It does mention that you can take certain steps when it is in the interest of various things, such as public health, but a very important clause says that:

“No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to”—re-enter—“his own country.”

And that is the most significant aspect of this argument, the arbitrariness.

Madam President, another piece of legislation that the UNC Government had brought was the Freedom of Information Act, and under the Freedom of Information Act I was able to obtain, through a client, some of the criteria and we asked for the policy that guided the granting of exemptions to enter this country, and the fact is that they are just a list of factors that they take into account. There is no proper policy or waiting, and it is clearly just how the Minister feels about the situation. Now, Madam President, I have read stories that are heartbreaking of people becoming sick while abroad and having to access health care, very expensive because they have no health insurance. I have also read stories about a child whose mother died here and the father being away and the father cannot return to be with their nine-year-old child. And, Madam President, when you read that and then you compare it to someone who left the country to take up a job during the pandemic and then miraculously got an exemption and came back because they were off working on a yacht and then they applied and they came back home, one has to wonder if this is just a simple arbitrary exercise.

We have had foreign government officials extend great sympathy to our nationals whilst our Government treat them with contempt and offer little more than automated email responses while persons are suffering financially, mentally and emotionally. Even the manner in which the funds are distributed, we do not know what is the policy, we do not know what is the criteria when you distribute funds to nationals who are stranded abroad. Madam President, the *European Journal of International Law* has published an article entitled, “The right to enter his or her own country”, and it examines the right of countries to limit entry during the COVID-19 pandemic. And one of the phrases, and I would have read more if I

had the time, but I would say that it concluded by saying:

“It is difficult to conceive of any circumstance where it could plausibly be said that the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic require a State Party to interfere with the right of an individual to enter his or her own country when that individual can be screened on entry, monitored closely for 14 days after arrival and, if necessary, isolated and quarantined for a period of time.”

So everyone has recognized, Madam President, including our neighbours in St. Lucia—

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, your time is up. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yes, please, Madam President.

Madam President: The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Avinash Singh): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, thank you once more for the opportunity to contribute in today’s debate, and today’s debate is dealing with a Bill, an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2021. Madam President, before I go into the meat of my contribution let me declare my interest. Unlike Sen. Lutchmedial, I will declare my interest at the start of my contribution. I am a registered farmer and I have been producing food for this nation quite before my political offices, Madam President. So with that out of the way, Madam President, [*Desk thumping*] I would like to go into some of the points raised by my hon. colleague in her contribution.

Madam President, Sen. Lutchmedial in her conversation today spoke to a number of things, and while we would excuse the goodly Senator for not being

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here to know that the local government reform, you know, it is at a very advanced stage, we would excuse her. But I would like to share with her what has been taking place, and I want the Opposition to take heed and pay attention to what is about to happen. In fact, Madam President, we have 14 consultations already on local government reform. A report was laid, Madam President, a Bill was prepared; [*Desk thumping*] we laid a Bill on 26th of June, 2019. It was referred to a joint select committee on the 26th of June, 2019. [*Desk thumping*] We had 16 joint select meetings, including nine public consultations. [*Desk thumping*] A final meeting, Madam President, was scheduled for March 2020, and we all know COVID-19 made it difficult. In fact, where we are, Madam President, a Bill was laid once more on the 14th of October, 2020. [*Desk thumping*] The picture the hon. Senator made here today is that the Government is doing absolutely nothing, Madam President, and I just shared the facts with you so that we understand what is going on.

Madam President, the hon. Sen. Lutchmedial also spoke about the delays in the procurement legislation. I also want to school the Opposition today in terms of where we are with respect to that piece of legislation. Madam President, within the first two months of coming into office this Government laid on September 2016 a Bill with respect to the legislation. Madam President, the Bill was referred to a joint select committee. The process was completed and assented in June, 2016. Madam President, 15 months after coming into Government a second Bill was laid on the 19th of December, 2016, the debate completed and assented on March 2017. Madam President, the hon. President appointed a board in January 12, 2018, and the first employees were hired in July 01, 2018. The first meeting between the regulator and the Minister of Finance took place on the 26th of October, 2018. And,

Madam President, it took three years and one month into government for the regulator and the Minister of Finance to meet.

Madam President, the first submission of the draft regulations was done on November 2018, and there was some back and forth on the regulations, and in September 2019, a draft regulation went to Cabinet. And, Madam President, at this time in point the Regulator is still considering further amendments to the Act. So, Madam President, to paint a picture that this Government is doing nothing with regard to the legislation that deals with procurement is far from the truth. I have just laid the facts. Madam President, when one listened to the hon. Senator's remarks, Sen. Lutchmedial a while ago, they would believe that you are in a story tale, because when I just listened to some of the things mentioned about what the UNC did in their time in office, Madam President, you would think to yourself that if a government was that good then they could never have been voted out of office. [Desk thumping]

The goodly Senator spoke about cheap houses, Madam President, education, and so on, broken promises, but I want to remind the Opposition today, it was the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that voted the UNC out of office in 2015, and they did so once more in 2020. [Desk thumping] So if you did so much good for this country, why it is the ordinary people, the ordinary man and woman on the street, casted their vote against you? Think about it, Madam President. [Desk thumping] The Senator spoke to GATE. Madam President, it is the People's National Movement that invented GATE. [Desk thumping] Madam President, we always sometimes speak about the ordinary man. I just indicated to you that I am a farmer by profession; I came from a generation of farmers. Had it not been for GATE, Madam President, I would not be standing here with a double major out of

the University of the West Indies. [*Desk thumping*] My parents could simply have not afforded to fund tertiary education for me, and I say, “Thank God for a PNM administration.” [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, I am hearing the murmurs about the Panday administration. Yes, Madam President, it was Dollar-for-Dollar. Even Dollar-for-Dollar, my parents could not afford it. GATE took that burden out of my parent’s pocket [*Desk thumping*] and I am here standing proud as a representative of this Government having attained my double majors.

Madam President, Sen. Lutchmedial also spoke about the San Fernando Waterfront and how bad it is, and all the wrong things that is going on, Madam President. Notwithstanding all of that the UNC got a severe licking at the polls, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*] The same Attorney General, being the candidate in San Fernando West [*Desk thumping*] beat the UNC at the polls. So you will come here and you will speak and you will talk, rant and rave—and I am told that the hon. Senator was a part of that campaign and maybe that is why the UNC lost. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I was going to talk about the gas station issue but I would leave that alone because I may have to contain myself where the owners of gas stations are concerned. Madam President, the Finance Minister, in laying the finance appropriation Bill before this honourable House for debate has charged the agricultural sector to be one of the cornerstones in the economic transformation and resurgence of our nation’s economy. Madam President, for far too long the people of Trinidad and Tobago have had to resort to theoretical and empty platitudes of those on the Opposition Bench who only spoke about development within the sector but had done absolutely nothing or very little to prioritize agriculture, [*Desk thumping*] or give it the prominence it truly deserves in a

tangible and meaningful way.

Madam President, this year's budget, however, has made provision by way of an additional \$500 million investment towards safeguarding the resilience of the sector and will no doubt, Madam President, as the theme for this budget implies, reset our economy for growth and innovation. And never before a budget has had a theme resonating so perfectly where agriculture has been repositioned to take us through this very challenging road ahead. Madam President, \$1.198 billion in allocation which represents some 70 per cent increase over the last financial year.

Madam President, exactly one week ago at a commemorative World Food Day event at the Royal Botanic Gardens, I alluded to the Government's Roadmap to Recovery document which outlined among a host of other measures plans to ensure that the country becomes a food secure nation. This I said, Madam President, would demand a shift in our perception of agriculture from being a manually intensive high-risk, low reward activity to one that is essential to the well-being of this country. Madam President, I also stated that the ultimate vision was for agriculture to be regarded as a profitable business entity and that it was quite equally important, and to shift the culture in agriculture into where we would like it to be.

Madam President, agriculture into one where locally-grown food was on the preferred taste palate of every citizen, fast food outlet, hotel and restaurant. And we have heard the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry who has done significant work working with agro-processors in this country, and I commend Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*] At today's debate she spoke to some of the elements of the food import bill and the considerable amount of foreign exchange that goes with it, but, Madam President, at the end of the day it

all comes down to, “grow what you eat, eat what you grow”. If there is a demand for any foreign commodity, there will continue to be a supply.

So I urge my colleagues, Madam President, I urge the population, before you look at the food import bill, look at our plate, look at your groceries, because what you do as an individual reflects on what the importers will do, and, at the end of the day, putting local and fresh and nutritional food on your plate should be paramount, especially at a time where COVID is ravaging the world. Should one of our players, the world players, decide to stop sending food to us, what would we do? The same cereal the hon. Minister spoke to earlier, why not convert that and replace that with some good ground provision, Madam President, sweet potato, cassava, provision, as the case may be? Madam President, the financial injection of resources into agriculture this fiscal will not only change the perception of agriculture, but transform it comprehensively. The progressive digitalization of some 30,000 state land files currently at our Land Management Division will not only be representative of the sector’s increasing innovation but also propel the ongoing thrust of the public service to becoming more efficient through digital transformation.

Madam President, as I speak on land issues, I just want to share an example with you as to how burdensome and the importance of land tenure in any agricultural activity that one wants to get into. While I would leave the details of the land portfolio, Madam President, to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, I want to indicate from a personal point of view, when one looks at what my parents or my grandparents had to endure where land tenure is concerned, if we had land tenure, the timing is important where I, having graduated, came into the stream looking on, wanting to invest, I would just, you know, go to the other

direction. I would not even consider agriculture as a profession. But, Madam President, coming from a family of farmers, you know, I was diligent in committing my profession to producing food, but to the average young person looking on, when you see your parents or your grandparents having to go through these tedious exercises and all of these problems, and in some cases lawyers taking your money because you are already poor, to fast track and to deliver in terms of your land tenure, it is very frustrating. In fact, you cannot access any incentive or subsidy or any grant if you do not have a farmers' registration card, and in order to get your farmers' registration card you have to have land tenure. So you see, Madam President, it is extremely important, and I dare say that this administration understands that and we are certainly putting our money where our mouth is where land tenure is concerned. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, added to this is the Ministry's Agro Incentive Programme which was launched in October 2018, in which funding up to \$100,000 can now be accessed by farmers who needed a particular kind of intervention not previously catered for amongst the Ministry's traditional incentives which I will get to in due course. Madam President, this would lend itself to advancements in technological efficiency, increase production, sustainability, resilience to climate change, and to the overall enhancement of the farmers' health and safety conditions. Madam President, very often you hear persons complain, and in fact you hear many persons who particularly beat their chests representing farmers' interests, always make the call that the Government is not doing anything for the agricultural sector or the Government is not doing anything for farmers or fishermen. Today I want to spend a few some minutes, Madam President, if you would permit, and I want to actually go into some of the details and let this population know the significant

investments the Government would have made in the agricultural sector.

I want to start with the Agricultural Incentive Programme. This programme is a tangible fiscal and non-fiscal package of rebates and exemptions on goods and services offered to the farming community in Trinidad and Tobago. It serves as an indication of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries' commitment to fostering growth and development of various agricultural subsectors in a liberalized trading environment. Madam President, and these incentives, they affect many, many subsects of the agricultural sector. I would just name some: agro-processing, aquaculture; crops such as citrus, cocoa, coffee and coconut; integrated pest management, land preparation, land clearing, livestock; production such as cattle, buffalo, goat, pigs, poultry and rabbits; machinery and equipment; marine fisheries, new farmers grants, post-harvest operation and marketing, protected agricultural systems/security, praedial larceny for agriculture, soil amelioration, soil conservation, vehicles for agriculture and fisheries, waste management, water for agriculture. Madam President, the list goes on and on.

In fiscal 2015 to 2020 under my Government's tenure, the total number of AIP applicants—and AIP, I mean Agricultural Incentive Programme—processed at the Ministry touched 15,189 families at an estimated value of close to \$100 million paid out to farmers, fishermen and the likes in the agro-processing industry.

Madam President, let me turn to flood compensation now. The Ministry provides assistance to farmers whose crops have been lost or damaged to flooding. The aim of this initiative is to support farmers with the replanting of crops. Madam President, over the last five years the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has provided \$37,063,086 in flood compensation to many farmers stretched throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad. Madam President, when you look at

the Agricultural Finance Support Programme or the Agro-Incentive Grant, this administration would have provided some \$2,182,757 thus far to 25 approved agricultural farming holdings or farmers to—as I indicated early—to access grants not normally given under the traditional incentive programme.

Madam President, there continues to be a guaranteed price for rice paddy in this country. To the common man what does that mean? Madam President, rice production remains an area of focus, and in Trinidad and Tobago we continue to produce just around 5 per cent of our demand of our local needs, but, Madam President, in the rice industry farmers are guaranteed a market and guaranteed a price. What that means, you do not have to go and beg somebody to buy your product. You do not have to go and line up in a market. Simply put, you produce any amount of rice and the State's mechanism will pay you and you do not have to look for a market, the State already has that. And \$13,521,505 have been paid to farmers for rice paddy over the last five years. Madam President, often times I also hear persons talk about the goat and sheep, sheep and goat issues where farmers, you know, have to endure problems, challenges, and while I agree, Madam President, I also want to state that through the Government's mechanisms some 7,657,000 pounds of forage given for a very nice price of F-R-E-E to all farmers in the livestock sector; 154 livestock farmers and entities get free grass from the Ministry almost on a daily basis.

Madam President, some 1,382 farmers were able to purchase cattle, goat, sheep at our Centeno Livestock Station at a subsidized cost, and this is new genetic material for those farmers who want to increase their potential in milk and meat production. The Sugarcane Feeds Centre also would have given subsidized animals to some 9,937 farming groups and farmers and individuals in the areas of pig,

rabbit, poultry, sheep. Madam President, the Sugarcane Feeds Centre was also instrumental in providing 37,400 fingerlings in the tilapia industry to farmers wishing to go into that area. Madam President, when you look at the farmers' registration programme one would, you know, believe that this is an ageing sector, yes, but at the end of the tunnel there is light. In the last couple of years we have seen an increase in the number of new farmers' registration. A total of 3,970 new farmers were registered between 2015 and 2020, and there is approximately 17,469 active farmers in the north of Trinidad, and that is the north region; and 7,669 active farmers in the south region. Madam President, that is 25,138 registered farmers in Trinidad. This figure does not take into consideration Tobago, and it does not take into consideration farmers awaiting regularization, and that is a couple of thousands.

Madam President, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries continues to service the farmers and the general population via training. A major component of the Ministry's mandate comprises the provision of training, and over the last five fiscals 682 farmers' training courses were conducted and some 12,106 persons were trained. And these courses were conducted throughout Trinidad in venues in Rio Claro, Princes Town, Point Fortin, Penal, Sangre Grande, Caroni and Curepe, Madam President. We have also conducted 62 mobile training programmes and 1,117 persons would have benefited and trained in different avenues. The persons who received these benefits included farmers, potential farmers, youth and other interested persons and general members of the public.

Madam President, when you look at the outreach programmes of the Ministry, we have programmes and we give training courses in various topics, for example, rabbit production, home gardening. When I speak about home gardening,

Madam President, during COVID, that period of time the country was under lockdown you would find there are so many persons showing interest, Madam President. There was a tremendous interest in home gardening and support, and most Members of Parliament, all councillors, would have been beneficiaries to our Grow Trinbago Seed Initiative, where the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago made available over 50,000 seed packages that we shared for free to citizens of this country. [*Desk thumping*]

And I dare say, I was very happy to see former Member of Parliament for Tabaquite's car trunk on social media posting some 200 pounds of pumpkins that he was going to donate, coming out of this seed drive.

4.30 p.m.

The total Recurrent Expenditure for the Ministry's training and outreach programme from October 2015 to February 2020, was some \$14,102,993, and as indicated, they included programmes in small and gas engine repair, record-keeping, landscape management, pepper sauce making, compost making, setting up an insect zoo, huanglongbing disease training, pest and disease management, agroforestry, value-added selection, repair and maintenance of agricultural spray cans, planting of seeds, cuttings, seedlings, grafting, and the list goes on. All done by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Madam President, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to lead at the Ministry, the Agricultural Services Division, which takes care of all the plant material offered to the country, to farmers, to persons wanting to plant a back yard garden, home garden and the likes.

An annual production target of 384,000 plants per year were approved for fiscal 2015 to 2020. Approximately 1,603,874 nursery plants as well as 118 crates

of vegetable seedlings were produced during the period of time, 2015 to 2020. That was probably more than one healthy subsidized plant for almost every citizen of this country, thanks to the Agricultural Services Division of the Ministry.

Madam President, in terms of seed and vegetable planting material, as indicated, the Grow Trinbago Seed Initiative comes directly from this division, the Agricultural Services Division. An annual average target of 10,000 kilograms of seeds were set over the period, and approximately 37,152 kilograms of seed material were produced for the period, and were given out and some was used in terms of our propagation, and some was sold to farmers at a subsidized cost.

When one looks at germplasm conservation and management, this is very critical at the Ministry because all our fields where we get plant material, the local varieties comprising, cocoa, mango, avocados and assorted food crops, were maintained in good condition, and the facilities, Marper Farms, La Reunion Plant Propagation Station, St. Augustine Nurseries and the Tucker Valley Seed Unit, which is now called the National Seed Bank, this programme seeks to conserve and preserve the crop biodiversity in this country for the benefit of future generations.

Madam President, the commodities produced at this station were sold at a subsidized price which generated a revenue of \$10 million—just over \$10 million, for fiscal 2015 to 2020. In terms of giving a little breakdown and an example of what some of the incentives look like, in terms of the traditional incentives that farmers can access—and this is where I have a problem when farmers and fishermen say that the Government is not doing anything for them, one simply has to look at the figures that the Ministry puts out annually in terms of subsidizing and incentivizing the agricultural sector. And the list goes on: bee-keeping, citrus

establishment, citrus rehabilitation, cocoa, coffee rehabilitation, cocoa and coffee establishment, most notably, machinery and equipment, vehicles—which coincidentally takes up almost all the incentives. Some 2,168 farmers benefiting from \$29 million worth of vehicle subsidies. Madam President, as I have indicated, over 15,000 farmers would have benefited to the tune of over \$100 million in incentives and subsidies from the AIP.

In terms of funding for farmers, I just want to share just the financial year up to September 2020. At the Agricultural Development Bank, the value of loans approved was \$113 million. The value of loans disbursed thus far, \$97 million. The number of new clients, 239, and provided funding for these new clients valued at some \$38 million. Madam President, notably, loans to 170 youth programmes valued at \$19 million were disbursed, a total of 606 loans were approved in 2020. To assist clients affected by COVID-19 loans, deferred payments were afforded to 419 clients. The bank has also approximately just around 200 clients, and food crop is the largest subsector for which funding is provided. It takes some 45 per cent of the value of the loans approved.

Madam President, I just want to turn to NAMDEVCO. In dealing with NAMDEVCO, I want to really congratulate and acknowledge all the efforts of all the farmers, all the fishermen, all the agro processors in this country, especially during the time of COVID. I mean, we are still in COVID times, and I want to pay particular attention and acknowledgement, because, Madam President, not in my recollection, going to a grocery or supermarket, did I ever see an empty shelf. The farmers toiled hard. They endured the challenges and they ensured that safe and nutritional food was on the plates of every citizen of this country. We must say thanks to those farmers who have made that possible. NAMDEVCO is a critical

part of that response during the COVID pandemic.

We continued to manage our farmers markets which are now probably the first choice when going to buy fresh produce, because that is where you get to interact with your producers, the food producers. You get to ask questions. You get to find out from the farmers, well, what chemical did you use to grow these crops? We still maintain the Chaguanas market at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries Head Office, the Debe market, the Diego Martin market, Macoya, Point Fortin, Queen's Park Savannah, Rio Claro, San Fernando and Couva. Again, the benefits of these markets, these farmers markets, fresher and higher quality produce, budding ground for agro-entrepreneurial skills, significantly smaller price spread from producer to consumer.

That is where the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, his concept of farm-to-table really took root, because we saw the numbers trekking to these markets, in fact, outgrowing all the capacities. In fact, Madam President, you would be shocked to know there is a waiting list to be able to sell at these markets because it is so popular. Thanks to NAMDEVCO and thanks to the Minister's intention of having that market spread across the country.

Madam President, in terms of the quantity of goods traded at our NAMDEVCO markets, just for us to have an idea of production in this country—and during these economic and COVID-related times, significant quantities of produce were traded at all our facilities. Just to give an idea, the farmers market recorded a monthly average of 2,281,000 kilograms, 47,663 bundles and 466,358 units of local fresh produce available for sale at the various farmers markets, just in the period January to September. Madam President, this gave a year to date total of 2 million kilograms, 428,000 bundles and 4,000,197 units of commodities traded

average at our markets. Some 1,890 vendors interact on a market day, and some 5,000 to 6,000 persons go through these markets on a monthly basis.

Madam President, in terms of the efforts from NAMDEVCO during the COVID-related time, you would recall we partnered with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, NAMDEVCO coordinated a project to distribute fresh produce hampers to select recipients of food cards. Fresh, high-quality, local produce was sourced from farms registered with NAMDEVCO's farm certification and monitoring programme. The programme underwent minimal processing, so really it was a fresh produced pack. Some 21,330 fresh produce hampers—that is just around 336,000 kilograms in Trinidad and 400 baskets in Tobago.

I just want to stick a little pin here because this point, this impact where NAMDEVCO has dealt with and partnered with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, it really is a modern way of moving the food card system. It is this intention of this Government to put more effort into this because if you move the food card into veggie boxes, the impact is significant. [*Desk thumping*] It is very significant on farm sales and for a farmer I can tell you, that is a massive market for the farming population. I am sure all the farmers would be happy to hear that this programme, because of the traction and because we want to encourage the long-term growth in agriculture—because let us face it, Madam President, which do you prefer, which do the hon. Members in this Chamber prefer? A food card where you can go and buy the same cereal that the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry spoke to, foreign commodities, or a veggie box packed and delivered right here from the local farmers? [*Desk thumping*] That

is where we have to drill down to, where we can actively really make a difference, and give the farmers the opportunity to supply. Because, Madam President, I can tell you, the farmers in this country, they are patriotic, they know how to grow. You just tell them what do you want to be produced and they will get the job done.

Madam President, at the Norris Deonarine Wholesale Market in Macoya, an average of 9,855 vendors would have benefited from that facility, with over 4,500 buyers interacting in that facility.

When you look at the acreage under cultivation—and for those who would like to know what are our food security needs, you would be amazed to know that we have under cultivation, and this is just under the farm certification programme, under NAMDEVCO, some 5,229 acres of crops actively on the ground, which will result in 112,348,645 kilograms of food, fresh, nutritional, ready for the pot, that will be made available, thanks to our farming population.

Our agricultural efforts did not go to waste because we saw production increases in various commodities in this country. The top 10 crops in production, based on acreage of land under production: rice, 485 acres—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Thank you, Madam President. As I said, in terms of the top 10 commodities, we saw cassava, sweet potato, tomato, melongene, all seeing increases, and the acreage as well going under significant production.

So, the agricultural sector is going forward. Notwithstanding all we are doing, we are also going to move the agricultural sector into the modern environment. We spoke to the digitalization, and it is no different at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries where plant material and seeds are purchased by farmers. We are also digitalizing that process. The production of an e-catalogue is

on the way. We are going to be introducing online booking, even e-payments for those plants. [*Desk thumping*] And that is the future; that is the digital age in a nutshell where agriculture is concerned.

Madam President, in closing, I would just like to indicate that the 500 million stimulus package that was offered, hon. Minister Rambharat will go into a lot more detail in terms of that. But just to indicate, the agricultural sector seems very bright, and I want to assure all the farmers and all the fishermen, the population, that we are not just talking about the agricultural sector moving in the First World nation. We are actually putting the money to get it done.

Madam President, agriculture, therefore, is in excellent hands with this administration and this Government because we have a farmer at the helm, hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. And we can all rest assured that any administration willing to put its money where its mouth is when it comes to food security, will also be just as steadfast in ensuring that the advancement of the sector remains on the front burner of our national conversation. Madam President, that is why I am precisely and particularly pleased and happy to be part of this progress in which I stand part of this Government.

Madam President, I thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Vieira.

Sen. Anthony Vieira: Thank you, Madam President, I shall not be long. It has been a long and intense day. I will not use my full time.

We are now in the course of the corona pandemic, and as history shows, while diseases may fade, they are never truly gone. The energy sector which has served us so well for so long is in transition. Not only are energy revenues dwindling, but 2020 may see the end of the fossil fuel industry as we know it.

Last year, at this time, who could have imagined the world we are living in today? We are living in a period of disruption and uncertainty. All of us have made compromises on the way we live, interact and work. Our old way of life is being challenged and it is tempting to want to hold on to it. But we are living on the frontiers of possibility and I would like to think that there are bigger and better things to get to.

What does the future hold? Are better or worse days ahead? Is our future fixed in stone or is it something we can determine? We should use this budget as a lens for looking at the future, and as a key to the future well-being of our economy.

Everyone has their own views on what are the most important parts of the budget but for me, they relate to food security, the need for a different developmental model and the chance to overhaul inept and outdated systems and processes, the transitioning to digital economy, culture and the arts, protecting and developing our blue and green economies, reopening and diversifying the economy.

Madam President, Jack Warner is reported to have said in an interview a couple weeks ago, and I quote:

“Regardless what people wish to say about us, we are still a loving people, a people with a deep sense of affinity for each other...in spite of the many who attempt to divide us, caring for each other is embedded deep within our psyche...

Our people are very...kind and living in a country where people are so concerned about you and are eager and willing to give a helping hand is surely a gift that can only come from God.”

Similar sentiments were echoed by Mr. Errol Fabien not too long afterwards, in the

wake of his GoFundMe campaign being successfully able to fob off bank foreclosure on his home and the Gayelle studio. Their words say a lot of about who are as a people and the same cannot be said about many other parts of the world. Their words help put into focus what budgets should be about. Budgets are about the allocation of resources in service of the highest good of all.

In his budget statement, the Minister of Finance spoke about Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation, that was his theme for the budget and it is the theme for my contribution.

Food security: Food is a necessity. We need food to live. Relying on other countries to provide our food is neither smart nor strategic. Besides being very expensive, as demonstrated by the disruptions to the global supply chain as a result of this pandemic, it also places us in a vulnerable position. We were once self-sufficient in food, and we should be again.

So, it was music to my ears when I read the Minister of Finance's budget statement that expansion of our domestic food supply is at the top of Government's national policy agenda, and Sen. Singh echoes this. But there can be no food security when the efforts of hard-working farmers are undermined by thieves and organized crime. Increased fines and custodial sentences for praedial larceny may be a deterrent, but sentencing comes after the fact. It assumes that there is adequate law enforcement, when that may not be the case at all. More needs to be done for protecting and supporting our farmers. Agricultural law enforcement needs to be strengthened and it may be desirable to have special courts for agricultural and environmental offences.

Proper enforcement of state agricultural leases is also necessary, especially where occupiers are not producing food and they are alienating prime agricultural

land. I am peeved when I go to the grocery to get a guava jelly. I see every kind of jelly: raspberry, strawberry, black currant, but homemade guava jelly cannot be found.

If this is emblematic of the agricultural sector, then there is clearly a need to strengthen the local food value and distribution chains. Incentives to increase agricultural production are useful, but they do not work in isolation. We need a proper ecosystem, where everyone in the local food value and distribution chain can access micro financing, technical and other support.

Reducing the importation of foreign food and fruit products, especially those that are non-essential, should not be done using a guillotine, but on a phased basis until local production can meet demand. A campaign heightening appreciation for our local food might also be helpful, as we transition from reliance on imported foods to locally produced foods.

Now, Ms. Hadad at the Tobago Chamber of Commerce is on target when she says we prefer red tape to red carpet. If we are to improve the ease of doing business, we need to streamline the bureaucracy plaguing business, whether it is in the agricultural sector or otherwise.

Minister West spoke about complaints about the state of service in the public sector. Our regulators should see themselves as facilitators in the service of people, not to frustrate, not to obstruct those whom they serve. The primary purpose of government is not to follow procedures, but to provide service to citizens.

Overhauling our inept systems and processes: I agree with the Minister of Finance that going forward requires a different developmental model. Smart growth and resetting the economy will require removal of inept and outdated systems and processes.

Are we prepared, are we as a people prepared to see things as they are and then reimagine how we might do them over and do them better? Are we prepared to challenge traditional orthodoxy by asking whether our current systems and processes are best for these times, for these circumstances?

There is a word that I came across recently, it is called “isomorphic”. Isomorphic means mimicking and copying the forms of former colonial parents, while unable to reproduce the kind of outputs that worked for them. Too many of our institutions and their systems and processes suffer from being isomorphic.

You have heard the expression “ghost in the machine”, that refers to outmoded code, dormant in a programme which interferes with operations. Profound culture change may be needed to transform our key institutions, including WASA and the service commissions, into more effective operations. We need to exorcize all ghosts in the machine if we want to properly reset the economy for growth and innovation.

Resetting the economy for growth and innovation requires us to rethink education. For example, is a test-driven education the best path for producing an inventive citizen? A lot of what is going on in our schools is not because of legislation, but the result of habit and ritual. We should be ready to reinvent our education system. The lesson of the 21st Century is adapt or perish. Just being good at something is no longer sufficient.

I had records, they were fine, but they were eclipsed by cassettes. I started collecting cassettes, “poof”, gone through by CDs. I built up a huge CD collection, and now iPod has made them all redundant, and now you have the cloud on top of that.

When these mobile phones first came out, having a Blackberry was de

rigueur; everybody had to have a Blackberry. Blackberry is still around, still makes excellent products. Who is wearing Blackberry? Same thing with Sharper Image. These are good products, good institutions, nobody wants them. Malls, once a defining feature of suburbia, are losing favour because of online shopping and new technologies. So you could be good at something, but “it doh mean too much in de 21st Century”; adapt or perish.

We need to be focusing on crafting processes, systems and ecosystems which are appropriate for this time and which will serve us well in the future. We need to identify the roadblocks by asking: Why does this rule or process exist? If a rule or process made sense once, does it still make sense? This country is headed into uncharted waters, and we must find the courage to jettison what is not working and only slowing us down. Our economic outcomes are not written in stone. They will be the result of the choices we make today, which leads me now to digital transformation, IT in business.

In his budget statement, the Minister of Finance spoke about improving governance of all ICT initiatives and an overarching ICT policy. Minister West spoke about digitalization. The digital economy is here to stay and its value chain is going to evolve exponentially, at a rapid pace, with the Internet of things, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, block chain, 5G. COVID—if it has shown one thing, COVID has shown just how essential the digital economy has become, in our personal lives, in business and in the national economy. Organizations across a range of sectors are undertaking digital transformation projects, replacing old technology and manual processes with new technology and digital processes. Even the courts have gone digital.

Removal of taxes on computers, laptops, tablets, yes, that is welcome, but

that is only scratching the surface. Our rules laws and regulations, rooted in previous century thinking, are analogue in nature. They are not keeping pace with the technological, behavioural and competitive challenges of the digital environment.

The ongoing rise of the digital economy demands a reassessment of our telecommunications and broadcasting sectors. They demand a reappraisal of the existing regulatory regime.

5.00 p.m.

The Telecommunications Act was passed in 2001, almost two decades later the world is completely different. The Telecommunications Authority cannot effectively and efficiently regulate participants in the digital sector using analogue systems. If innovation is to be a driver of economic progress, we must also raise IP awareness.

After the Ministry of Education sent out a memo advising principals and schools that copyright in books was protected and should be respected, I was shocked to see an email being circulated by a school teacher encouraging other school teachers to download reading books and work books as soon as possible and then delete the email. The objective being to unlawfully download books and keep for future reference. And I am not going to name the persons involved because I do not want to embarrass anybody but the perpetrators should know that that communication, if acted upon, is an infringement of copyright and it could also be a conspiracy to commit a crime at common law. It also raises doubts about how ethics and the respect for law is being taught in our schools or at least in certain quarters.

IP should not be viewed as a mere legal or technical issue but should be

incorporated in all business strategies. As innovation and the digital economy is carried on the shoulders of IP, local business should be encouraged to tap into, for example, tap into the global-patents database, tap into publicly available technologies. Manufacturers, businesses, learning institutions would do well to utilize the Intellectual Property Office and its extended resources to establish alternate business models built around things like licensing and the use of expired patents to make generic goods. These forms of intellectual property can be used to facilitate a variety of different business models, you just have to find the right one that works for you. Facilitating an enabling environment for the manufacturing sector to flourish should include capacity-building programmes, incentivizing research and growing start-ups. Innovation enterprises should get help in monetizing their IP through an IP-financing system where funding is tied to specific milestones of accomplishment as the business progresses. And funding for start-ups. Funding for start-ups should come with a range of supports including access to corporate-commercial lawyers, accountants and business mentors.

Trinidad and Tobago should aim to establish itself as the IP hub of the Caribbean. We just heard we are going to be charring Caricom next year, let us build on that. Government, our universities and the private sector should work in collaboration to create a hive for IP activities.

A business does not have to be big to be successful. The Italian cottage industry which I see as a model that is very well suited to us as people, us as a culture, they do not rely on big warehouses and industrial parks to produce their top-quality designer clothes, their furniture and leather goods. Italian products are largely produced by micro firms comprising 10 or so people using technologically-advanced equipment to achieve efficient production and high profit.

Culture and the arts: Our artists and performers create a better world for us and in many respects the creative and cultural sector operates as a life blood of our communities. So it behoves us to empower our artistes and their visions so that they may develop their work in the best possible way.

Numerous studies worldwide including the World Intellectual Property Organization commissioned report by economist Dr. Vanus James on “The Economic Contribution of Copyright-Based Industries in Trinidad and Tobago”, demonstrate the impressive contribution of creative enterprises to economic growth and wealth creation.

So the Minister of Finance is on point when he heralds our creative and cultural industries as an emerging critical engine of growth and development. In the short term, COVID relief of \$5,000 though welcomed will not go far. That is akin to the adage about giving a man a fish or feeding him for a day as opposed to empowering him to fish and letting him feed for life.

Creative goods are generally collective goods with value chains and networks. If we hope to unlock the potential of our artistes so they can feed for life, we have to establish the conditions that would give rise to a self-sustaining arts sector, a creative ecology. Now, what does a creative ecology mean? Well, a creative ecology, for example, would mean our artistes being able to live healthy and sustainable lives within their communities. It would mean having clusters, networks, districts like Carla Foderingham’s Creative City Port of Spain project of interconnected and interdependent artists, government agencies, funders and the private sector working together in symbiosis, that is how the art emerges, it is symbiosis. It means giving affordable access to already established spaces such as community centres, NAPA, SAPA, as galleries and exhibition spaces for artists to

promote their art.

We should celebrate our artistes as well, and celebrate them while they are still here with us. For example, *Guinness Book of Records* holder Shemika Campbell who represented us so beautifully the other day with her limbo skills, she should be recognized for her inspiring work in a unique cultural space. Trinidad is the land of calypso, pan and limbo.

Recently Sen. Thompson-Ahye shared a video showing steel pan manufacturing in the United States. She should share that video with everybody here because we need to sit up and pay attention, lest we forfeit the right to paint Trinidad and Tobago as the land of the steel pan. We may have given birth to the pan but unless we upgrade our manufacturing and distribution capacities for the instrument, we may very well find ourselves being eclipsed by others.

As I mentioned earlier, the Intellectual Property Office is an underutilized treasure trove of information and support. The IPO has precedence for start-ups in the creative sector with branding and built-in domain name protection. They have working relationships with international bodies like WIPO and the School for Creative Start-ups, S4S International. That school has trained over 40,000 people in Europe, Africa and Latin America. So the IPO can assist interested persons on how to use entrepreneurship to deliver sustainable, equitable, economic growth. The IPO and their international network can help design creative ecosystems. There is a collation called the Trinidad and Tobago Creative Industries, they have put forward some very interesting recommendations. I would think Government should look at those recommendations, they are worth considering.

We amended the Copyright Act the other day. One of the amendments I wanted to have but it was not included was to extend the life of copyright from 50

years to 70 years. We should extend the life of copyright; that will really bring income for our copyright owners and creators. We have every right to be proud of our artistes, they are exceptional but if the creative and cultural sector is to emerge as a critical engine of growth and development, there needs to be investment, we have to help our artists get better at managing and monetizing their activities or we must recognize that a creative ecosystem is not a collection of single elements operating in silos independently. Ecosystems have symbiosis and they are holistic, whether we are talking about creative sector in the arts or we are talking about agriculture, we need to be designing ecosystems

The blue and green economies: In his budget statement the Minister of Finance said that diversification of the economy is Government's highest priority. And both he and Minister Browne reaffirmed today our commitment to the Paris Accord, yet there was no mention of the blue and green economies. The budget statement touches en passant about targeting environmentally friendly and green technology, about improving the supply of water and addressing wastewater issues and improving land use. But as to the possibility of diversifying the country's economy beyond land-based activities and along our coasts, does not appear to be on the radar. We are island nations for whom the Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Paria represent a significant jurisdictional area and a source of opportunity. The blue economy is the new economic frontier and should be considered as critical to achieving sustainable development. Innovation and growth in the coastal marine and maritime sectors will provide food, will provide jobs, transport, products, through all kinds of things: tourism, yachting, dry docking, ship building, fisheries, aquaculture, blue technology and emerging maritime industries, sea bed and mineral resources, ocean and coastal zone management and

development.

The blue economy is green. China now has a Blue Silicon Valley in Qingdao, a town dedicated to marine science and technology. Chaguaramas should be our blue silicon valley. The Institute of Marine Affairs should be a leading educational centre of marine science, a pilot zone for national marine economic reform. And the same can be said about the green economy which has become an international commercial buzz word, whether we are talking ecotourism, vertical farming, recycling, renewable energy systems, the smart money is going green. The country needs to be forward looking by investing in green infrastructure. Paris Accord, guarding against biodiversity loss and restoring our ecosystems should be a national priority. It is no exaggeration to say that mitigating against and adapting to climate change is humanity's biggest project ever.

Reopening the economy: As I mentioned earlier, diseases may fade but they are never truly gone. The new normal will continue for at least the next two years and life as we knew it may be a thing of the past. The bottom line is, we just have to get better at living with this virus.

Now, in the early stages of the pandemic we knew very little about it, and an abundance of caution was the right prescription. But now that we know more about the virus and about how to keep at bay, we must be mindful to guard against the prescription being worse than what it is hoping to cure.

Citizens understand the need to follow the Public Health Regulations and guidelines and most people are now wearing their face masks, they are practising social distancing, they are sanitizing. So I am hoping that soon we can safely reopen our airports, reopen our restaurants and the economy, even if it is just on a phased basis with protective measures in place. Civil society wants to be

productive, to supply gainful employment and to play its part in keeping the economy afloat.

I am not going to be much longer. Before I conclude, let me say, can we imagine the Fourteenth Parliament looking back at us today? Will that retrospective be one of respect and admiration? Or will it be one of regret and disappointment for our failing to take advantage of the opportunity to build something new, for failing to make efficient use of limited resources for present and future generations? This triple whammy of pandemic, declining energy revenues and the global economic crisis should go down in history as the trigger event for the biggest permanent changes to affect Trinidad and Tobago. It has displaced jobs, created economic havoc but it has also accelerated technological change, new ways of working, travelling, living. It provides us with a rare opportunity to hit the restart button. What are the opportunity costs for not taking advantage of this current crisis, I wonder.

This triple whammy has thrown out opportunities that may not come again in a lifetime. Let us not play this crisis defensively. Let us not just pick up from where we left off as if nothing had happened. If ever there was a time for investing in people, encouraging new business, building something new, now is that time. To get past this triple whammy we need to be creative and collaborative, the focus should be on innovation and the future, not just today's problems. Government must be a helper not a hinderer. The State must help those who have no resources to help themselves and this includes providing the business sector and labour with a strong stimulus package. Fear of red ink must be dispensed with. All of us must work together to transform business and our institutions into more effective operations to repurpose development, policy and investment leavers in ways that

set us up for success. It has been said that the best way to predict the future is to invent it. So let us anticipate a future but we need a clear vision and purpose.

I would like to believe that on the other side of this difficult period lies a new beginning. There has never been a more important time for us to champion the promise of tomorrow. Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): Thank you very much, Madam President. It is my distinct pleasure to join in this 2021 budget debate. Madam President, before I go into congratulating the Minister of Finance, I sat here and I listened to an hon. colleague, Senator, saying—speaking about San Fernando. I have lived all my life in San Fernando, I have served as a councillor, as a mayor, I worked at a corporation for almost 40 years and I ended up in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and it is heart-breaking to say reading from a book of fairy tales that nothing is happening in San Fernando, and that is the furthest from the truth. [*Desk thumping*]

Growing up from small I used to hear, when you want dreams to come true you have to go to Disney Land. But with the Attorney General and the Member of Parliament San Fernando West, the dreams will come true in San Fernando West. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I want to begin by congratulating the Minister of Finance the hon. Colm Imbert for his efficient delivery of the 2021 budget, his sixth for the PNM administration, gearing towards, Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation.

Madam President, this Minister of Finance is a very hard-working Minister of Finance because this country, the economic situation in this country right now is not easy and to make these decisions you have to be strong and you have to think about the people in mind before you make decisions. And I want to take the opportunity to congratulate him, for him to stay focused and for him to take us through this next fiscal year and make sure that the people of this country benefit.

Madam President, I also want to say a special thank you to the Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis because we worked together from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, all the corporations to ensure that we have a proper plan for this year also.

Madam President, I also want to thank a few people before I go into my contribution, for having me—for assisting to have me where I am today. And one of those persons is my father who has passed away. He was a former councillor, a former deputy major and a former mayor of the Borough of San Fernando. And I also want to thank the hon. Patrick Manning, may his soul rest in peace, for giving me the foundation to get into politics to serve the people of this country. Under him, I served as a councillor for nine years. Other people were instrumental in having me where I am but I want to take this opportunity to especially thank the hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley for his continued faith in me to serve a second term as the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government and for his astute leadership which has placed this country in a good stead. His humble beginnings and strong family background which instilled hard work, honesty, integrity and the value for good and sound education.

Madam President, I am the first Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, before there were Ministers of local government and I want to

acknowledge the hard work of some of the strong foundations laid by former Ministers of local government like my predecessor Mr. Franklin Khan, Mr. Kamaluddin Mohammed, Mr. Kenneth Valley, Mr. Jarrette Narine, Mr. Rennie Dumas, Mrs. Hazel Manning, Mr. Gerald Montano and many other stalwarts. It is because of their sterling contributions that I am able to take the baton and further improve the local government fraternity.

Madam President, I want take this opportunity also to thank the Permanent Secretary and the administrative arm of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. I want to thank all the mayors of this country, the 14 corporations, all the chairmen, all the CEOs, the administrative arm, the garbage collectors, the ones who work tirelessly and do not get any recognition. They all contribute to make this country a safe and secure and clean place for us, our children and our grandchildren.

The Ministry Rural Development and Local Government plays a critical role in bringing the much needed goods and services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It is my humble view that the Ministry through the 14 municipal corporations and special purpose companies like CEPEP and RDC has a more direct and constant connection to the citizens than many other arms of the central government. The consciousness not only makes our Ministry pivotal in the effective execution of citizens' national initiatives but also reminds us how important our role in improving the lives of our citizens. Madam President, in 2015, this Government gave a commitment to the citizens of this country to transform the local government landscape so that goods and services could be delivered efficiently to the citizens of this country.

[MR. VICE-PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

As such, for the last five years the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has been reforming its approach to doing things while it awaits the formal legislative amendments. The Ministry continues to develop and implement projects and programmes to ensure that much needed goods and services reach the burgesses and citizens no matter what region, borough or city they reside in.

Mr. Vice-President, I wish to take this opportunity to highlight major projects and programmes implemented under my tenure as I work at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

Implementation of local government reform: Mr. Vice-President, I begin with a vision that our Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley shared with the population in 2015, transforming and modernizing the local government system.

Mr. Vice-President, local government reform has been on the political agenda for over 50 years, almost the same length of time that we have been an independent nation. And I want to call the date for a specific reason and show how nothing good comes overnight, you have to work for what you want.

In the 1500s, the earliest attempt at local government in Trinidad and Tobago was seen with the establishment of the Cabildo in the capital town of St. Joseph. In the 1600s, when the British ruled, the local government system in Trinidad and Tobago was again reformed with the introduction of the English-type municipalities similar to what exists today.

In 1945, further changes to local government system came with the introduction of the county council system. In 1965 the Sinanan Committee was tasked with reforming local government in the post-independence era. Its main findings highlighted the need for greater prominence of local government in national development, decentralization of key functions to local government

bodies, and the need to empower communities to play a greater role in the management of their assets.

In 1967, out of the Sinanan Committee's recommendations, the County Council Act was enacted which consolidated executive positions on seven county councils and clearly identified the roles and functions of local government authorities.

In 1974, local government reform initiatives continued with the Hugh Wooding Constitution Commission. The major accomplishment at this time was the division of the St. George into the St. George East and West, 1980.

5.30 p.m.

In the 1980s enactment of the Tobago House of Assembly Act, and subsequently the establishment of the Tobago House of Assembly further advanced local government reform, and laid the framework on which local, self-governing bodies can contribute and play a meaningful role in the development of communities. This is here under the PNM that the draft Policy Paper on Community Development and Local Government Reform for public comment was published. In 1987 the relevant legislation amendment needed to make local government reform a reality was conducted under the NAR Government.

In 1990 the enactment of the Municipal Corporations Act 1990 took place. These pieces of legislation resulted in the creation of 13 regions and two cities, three boroughs, the expansion of the roles and functions of local government bodies. In 1992 the PNM Government undertook amendments to the Municipal Corporations Act of 1990, and reduced the number of regions to nine, resulting in 14 municipalities. In 2004 to 2010, under the leadership of the late Patrick Manning, former leader of the PNM, several policy documents were developed to

push local government reform forward. These policy positions led to the employment of chief officers in the corporations under contract, the establishment of the Local Area and Regional Planning Unit at the Ministry's head office, tasked with the creation municipal development plans and the establishment of a Disaster Management Unit in each of the 14 corporations with a coordinating unit at head office.

In 2010, the People's Partnership Government continued the thrust of local government reform and created a draft White Paper on Local Government Reform after public consultation. 2015 to present: Mr. Vice-President, from December 2015 to April 2016, under this Government, led by the hon. Mr. Franklin Khan, we had 14 public consultations, were held across the country over 3,675 persons were in attendance. In May 24, 2019, the Miscellaneous Provisions, (Local Government Reform) Bill was introduced into the Parliament by yours truly. As of September 13, 2019, the Joint Select Committee on Local Government Reform convened for 10 meetings; nine public, one private. The Members of this Committee included: Chairman, Minister Clarence Rambharat; then Minister Anthony Garcia; Sen. Khadijah Ameen; Deeroop Teemal, Opposition Member Rudranath Indarsingh; Mr. Esmond Forde, MP, Deputy Speaker; Sen. Paul Richards; former Opposition Surujrattan Rambachan; Minister Camille Robinson-Regis; former MP Ms. Marlene Mc Donald; former Sen. Mr. Daniel Dookie; and myself.

This Bill seeks to amend nine piece of legislation and 11 clauses, inclusive of the Municipal Corporations Act. This Bill is before a Joint Select Committee of the Parliament, where consultations were held with key stakeholders, such as representatives from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Planning and Development, Ministry of Works and Transport, the 14 Disaster Management

Units, the Office of Disaster Preparedness Management, T&TEC, WASA, Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service, various business organizations and vending organizations from Port of Spain, San Fernando, Chaguanas, Arima, Couva, Point Lisas, Palo Seco, Penal/Debe, Port of Spain, again, Princes Town, Rio Claro and Tunapuna. Municipal Police Service was there also; Trinidad and Tobago Association of Local Government Authorities, the 14 municipal corporations, the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, and we go down the line.

We have Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, the Auditor General, Office of the Chief Personnel Officer, Office of the Ombudsman, Public Service Commission, Statutory Service Commission, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Board of Inland Revenue, Office of the Commissioner of State Lands, the Amalgamated Workers Union, the National Union of Government and Federated Workers, Contractors and General Workers Trade Union, and the Public Services Association

On September 25, 2019, a matrix of concerns, amendments and other Municipal Corporations Act, unrelated to the Bill, amendments were submitted to the Minister and the Ministry for review and feedback on key areas. December 04, 2019, a Joint Select Committee on Local Government Reform reconvened for the first meeting to consider the report on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill. Joint Select Committees continued with five private meetings held on February 7th, February 11th, February 14th, March 3rd and March 12, 2020. The latter was postponed and has not yet been rescheduled—which is soon to be rescheduled, Mr. Vice-President, the enactment of this piece of

legislation will mean greater autonomy for the municipal corporations as more powers will be transferred to them. Councils will be able to determine the most rational structures for the corporations to ensure that it can achieve efficient and cost effective service delivery to its burgesses. You may ask, Mr. Vice-President, why is this? Because we believe at the Ministry we must always put people first.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

My role in this administration is to be a catalyst for change so that the lives and the living conditions of our people can be improved.

Madam President, while the legislative amendments are taking place, the Ministry has focused on other areas that embodies local government reform which are lined with 10 pillars, and the 10 pillars are: Security and funding; local government bodies would be allowed to keep certain taxes, residential and revenues collected within their boundaries to use for their own development. Property taxes be will now be collected by the municipal corporations. Madam President, I remember growing up as a child, I used to hold my mother's hand and my father's hand and walk from where I live on Coffee Street down to the warden office to ensure that we pay tax, and that was a long time ago. And, I have been in this business of local government for almost 40 years, and whatever government comes into office, all corporations keep saying they never have enough money, and I know that for a fact because I was there, and we never have enough money, because the people want more. So, the collection of this residential tax will help each municipal corporation to ensure whatever the people want in their community they will have a say at all times.

Executive authority: Local government bodies in the 14 municipal corporations will be given a level of autonomy similar to that of the THA, that is

the Tobago House of Assembly. New responsibilities: Local government bodies will be responsible for school maintenance, social welfare services, sporting programmes and agriculture and local tourism. Local contractors: Local government bodies will be responsible for developing the competence, expertise and facilities that will create opportunities for local work to be done by local suppliers and goods and services. So that means, the contractors will come from within the community and they will be responsible for doing the work in the community, the work chosen by the people who live in the community. More effective municipal policing: Broader responsibilities and staff will be given to municipal police, closing the gap between community and officers of the law. Development control: The ability to fully participate in planning and development of communities would be expanded beyond approval of plans and construction of dwelling houses and simple buildings.

Madam President, if fiscal year 2019 to 2020, under the project Support for Automation of Construction Permit Printing Process, the Ministry received an allocation of \$2 million. This project is in collaboration with the Ministry of Planning and Development and involves the upgrade of the application and approval process relevant to building construction of sub-division land. Madam President, I am confident that with the implementation of the automated system, many of the challenges encountered by applications seeking approval by building plans will be eliminated, since there will be greater transparency, accountability and efficiency.

Madam President, in December 2019 Phase I of the Train the Trainer Programme was executed involving the Port of Spain City Corporation, the Diego Martin Regional Corporation and the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation.

Phase 2 of this programme occurred virtually in June 2020 involving Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, Chaguanas Borough Corporation and Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. These training sessions were accessible to all corporations. Madam President, under the registration of persons responsible for reviewing and processing plans from a new pilot region is ongoing, infrastructure works, implementation of local infrastructure projects will be completed. This would require reengineering of process and periodic monitoring evaluation and the review of plans.

Disaster management: Local government bodies will be able to reform and facilitate direct collaboration with central government. Involving civil society: The public and civil society will become more involved. Regional Development plans: Detailed regional development plans have been done for 14 corporations. This will support the implementation and monitoring of transformation of municipal corporations.

Madam President, this will also assist the Ministry in transition into this half of its portfolio which will soon be the Ministry of Rural Development. Madam President, I spent a lot of time on the local government reform process, because a lot of people keep saying nothing is happening with local government reform, and that is the furthest from the truth. Under this Government, under this Prime Minister and under my watch, and I am qualified, because in this House and in the other place I am the only person with this experience in local government reform. That is 40 years of experience. [*Desk thumping*] Development projects, head office and the 14 municipal corporations. Madam President, this PNM-led Government stands by the mantra of putting people first through good governance, accountability and transparency. We do not just talk. We talk but we deliver.

During my tenure, Madam President, we have accomplished over 2,800 projects under drainage and irrigation; over 1,300 projects under local roads and bridges; over 210 recreation grounds and an average of 13 crucial landslips, both through the Ministry and the 14 municipal corporations. And if anyone wants to dispute this, I have all the information on my desk there [*Point at desks*] and I could have it available to anyone who wants to know if this was really done. These development projects, Madam President, have benefited over 10,000 households across the length and breadth of our beloved country, and in turn improve productivity through quality infrastructure and transportation. Major programmes and projects. Madam President, more effective municipal policing remains one of the major priorities of this Government, because the safety and security of our beloved citizens will not be compromised. We at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government will continue on the path of progress as we consistently increase the complement of municipal police across the 14 municipal corporations.

Before the Government's mandate to increase municipal police officers across the 14 corporations, with 100 each in 13 corporations and 200 in Port of Spain, we had before only 216 officers in the entire 14 corporations. In December 2018, batch one of 2018, we had graduated 199 officers; in April 2019, batch one of 2019, we had a further graduation of 200 officers; in May 2020, batch two of 2019, we had also a graduation of 115 officers who have been deployed across Port of Spain, San Fernando, Arima and Point Fortin. Madam President, I am pleased to inform this honourable House, to date, we are nearing 800 municipal police officers who have been trained and assigned across the 14 municipal corporations. In Port of Spain, 177; in Arima, 92; in San Fernando, 96; in Point Fortin, 96; in

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Chaguanas, 32; in Diego Martin, 27; in San Juan/Laventille, 29; in Tunapuna, 27; Sangre Grande corporation, 28; Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, 29; Mayaro Corporation, 26; the Siparia Corporation, 26; the Penal/Debe Corporation, 24; the Princes Town Corporation, 28 and that brings the total of 737.

Madam President, greater strides have also been made to standardize operational issues existing between the Statutory Service Commission and the Public Service Commission which would pave the way for a recruitment for a further 378 recruits in the near future. And when I say the near future, I mean right now they are shortlisting and they will be going through the process of evaluation and all the requirement required. So you see, Madam President, even though the COVID-19 pandemic may have disrupted and extended the timeframe for training due to restrictions, we remain committed and focused on Government's unwavering promise to make our community safe and secure for all citizens. And the municipal police, they have a mandate now to do a softer approach to policing, which will be interacting with the schools, and the churches, and the elderly in the community, because they work closely with the TTPS, but the job of the TTPS is different. So I am encouraging the municipal police to have a softer approach, whether it would be visiting, they must be more visible on the ground and interacting, especially with the elderly in the community, the young and the school children, et cetera.

National Local Roads Street Signage Programme: We had an allocation of 7 million. Madam President, we can all agree that the inadequacy of signage, especially in the rural communities in Trinidad, has posed immense challenges to the commuting public, to essential services and to local and foreign tourists. Madam President, in fiscal 2019, the National Local Roads Street Signage

Programme was successfully implemented through a collaborative effort with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and the Ministry of Works and Transport and the 14 municipal corporations. And I want to thank the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Minister of Works and Transport, and the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Works and Transport and the administrative arm for working closely with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to ensure that these street signs are built and are up. These ongoing projects which conform to the international best practices are already yielding tremendous benefits to road users nationwide.

Thus far, Madam President, street signage has been manufactured for 11 municipal corporations. The three remaining corporations are expected to be completed by this year 2020, and we have a standard sign for that. Madam President, this project is improving accessibility as well as the safety of the commuting public in Trinidad. It has been facilitating a quicker response by emergency services through the installation of prominent signage. Ultimately, this initiative will stimulate the efficiency in service delivery by municipal corporations and other government agencies, that is, like the postal service, WASA, T&TEC, et cetera. Furthermore, this street signage programme will promote a sense of community spirit, the geo-spatial identity amongst citizens and enhance the marketability of rural communities. By the end of 2021, Madam President, we would be able to proudly say that we did it, as the first phase of this programme will be successfully completed with an average of 250 signs being installed per municipality. And when I say “we did it”, I mean the citizens of this country, because we are not doing anybody a favour, this is taxpayers’ money and the taxpayers will see the benefit of the money that they are spending.

Madam President, I am pleased to say that while the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government purchased the based materials, these signs were actually being manufactured by the Ministry of Works and Transport. This partnership between the two Ministries has been a tremendous success story, and I wish to congratulate everyone who played a part this initiative.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, through this whole of government approach, we have also saved this country thousands of dollars. We anxiously await the commencement of the second phase of this initiative that will focus on the installation of directional signs, informational signs, tourist and heritage signs and road safety signs.

Madam President, I have a lot to talk—we just did the development of the West Park savannah, which is in Diego Martin, where we have just completed a jogging track, sewage drain, car park, grass cutting, planting works and fencing around the historic building, which is almost 100 per cent completed. Madam President, we have two administration complexes; the Diego Martin Administrative Complex, which is part of a holistic plan, and this is going on right now, which should be completed—a loan facility was arranged for this and it should be completed by next year. We went into a lease agreement with the First Citizens Bank. There is also the other Penal/Debe Administrative Complex. This construction and outfitting of this Penal/Debe Administrative Complex is presently being addressed by UDeCOTT. We revised requests for proposals, documents. We had an open tender process for modify/design, et cetera.

Madam President, I have a lot of information about projects, because the Ministry that I work at we touched small people, which is CEPEP and rural

development areas. We did a lot of work. You could imagine CEPEP not working for one week in this country what would happen, place will be overgrown.

Madam President, with your permission, I would ask, I feel obligated to ask you for permission to acknowledge—we paid respect to some people here this morning, and I want to ask your permission to pay respect to one person, please? And that person who is a simple person, just like myself, very humble, comes from a humble background, we went to one of the best schools in this country. That is Naparima College, the school that I went to. And that person is Mr. Dennis “Sprangalang” Hall. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Dennis Hall was born on the 30th of September, 1949, in Trinidad and Tobago, and passed away on the 2nd of October, 2020, at the age of 71, just two days after his birthday. He is a national figure known by his stage persona “Sprangalang.” He made a significant contribution in the area of arts and the culture, and in numerous live shows, television and productions. He impacted the lives of many Trinidad and Tobago citizens and persons across the world as a comedian, historian, actor, master, storyteller, producer, talk show host, singer and composer. Dennis Hall came from a very humble home. His father was the vice-principal of Naparima College, my alma mater. Mr. Hall was a student of Naparima College where he had originally wanted to be a school teacher. At this college he participated in the Shakespeare festival, behind the scenes handling of lighting and sound equipment, and later became technical director for several arts council. Mr. Hall held several lifetime membership like the TUCO, et cetera, the National Action Cultural Committee. Dennis was best known for his portrayal as “Drax”, a character in the “cultural Sprangalang” segment of *Gayelle*, the immensely popular series of the television.

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Madam President, in closing, he will always be remembered for his simplicity, his stage character, wearing a baggy jeans, oversized clothes, slipper and a towel draped over his shoulder. This witty manner in which he made complex situations and Trinidad matters easy and comical. He once said, “it is just a normal citizen trying to put back something in the country for the air that I does breathe.”

Madam President: Minister, your time has passed.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: “I finish.” [*Desk thumping*]

6.00 p.m.

Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing: Thank you very much, Madam President, for the opportunity to make this intervention on this Appropriation Bill for fiscal year 2021. Madam President, I want to begin, first of all, by thanking the vast majority of the population of this twin island Republic that we love and that we know as Trinidad and Tobago for entrusting the PNM for another five years following the August 10th general election. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I wish to extend my own personal gratitude to the Prime Minister, the Hon Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, for the opportunity to serve our country in this capacity. I wish to extend as well my congratulations to the Minister of Finance and his team, including the Minister of Planning and Development, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance and all of the other Members of the team who worked together so hard to put together fiscal package 2021.

Madam President, before I go on, permit me, please, just to respond to a few things that would have been brought up earlier in the debate. I heard from Sen. Wade Mark that the PNM crushed the economy, that the PNM means “promises never materialized”, that there was no consultation and that the PNM is the wrong

choice. But, Madam President, the sad thing is I heard this speech 22 times in the past three weeks, then I heard it again a little while after [*Desk thumping*] and I anticipate I am going to hear it four more times in the coming days. But the fact of the matter is that all the Opposition has offered, all the Members on the other side have offered is bacchanal, “lacuray”, and wailing and moaning and gnashing of teeth which really is their response to the mammoth defeat at the polls on August the 10th. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, there is one thing I must respond to on behalf of this side. Sen. Wade Mark proceeded to say, and I quote from the *Hansard*:

“Madam President, you and I have been reading about something called “Drug Sou Sou”. Right? And the question that people are asking is, why has the Government taken so long to take action on this matter?”—and something about—“...three PNM politicians involved in this “Drug Sou Sou.”

Madam President, Sen. Mark has almost scandalized this debate before it really took flight and took its wings. Sen. Mark knows better than everybody else that if he has this alleged intelligence he needs to take it to the appropriate place and not shelter under the cloak of parliamentary privilege. This, Madam President, is yet another UNC red herring to distract from their poor performance at the polls and the total rejection by the population. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, Sen. Lutchmedial entertained me to say the very, very least. She talked about political gas lighting, and achievements, pie in the sky and all of the UNC’s achievements under both Basdeo Panday and under the People’s Partnership—whatever the People’s Partnership really and truly is, because I am still very unclear what really is the People’s Partnership or what was the People’s

Partnership.

Madam President, Sen. Lutchmedial talked about regressive taxes, such as the property tax. But I continue to be appalled and it pains me that some people are here ranting to “axe the tax” across the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago, but they “rell” willing and up-to-date with paying their taxes in foreign jurisdictions to which they have no national loyalty. Madam President, I heard Sen. Lutchmedial talk about the red book of fairy tales. I am an avid reader, Madam President, so I walk with my books too. I have a book here which really and truly is Trinidad and Tobago’s yellow book of nightmares and it documents from 2010 to 2015 things that have scandalized the governance in Trinidad and Tobago; things that could have crippled our nation; things that have embarrassed people who purport to be leaders in this society, and I want to say to her that perhaps she took a better read and if she wants I will lend her this copybook so she could understand what real governance is versus what tomfoolery is. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, Sen. Mark also referred to—saying that it was an exclusive budget and that there was no consultation and stakeholders were not invited to participate. But, Madam President, I have with me here the editorial from the *Express* of September 08, 2020 titled:

“COVID-19 budgeting”

And, Madam President, permit me just to please read the first sentence, that is all, just the first sentence. It says:

“With three weeks to go before he presents his proposed national budget, Finance Minister Colm Imbert on Monday issued an open invitation to the national community to submit recommendations on the fiscal measures and

initiatives they would like to see in the 2020-2021 budget, given ‘current restricted financial circumstances.’”

Madam President, everybody in Trinidad and Tobago was aware that an invitation was extended well in advance of the budget—of the presentation of the budget, and shortly after he was sworn in, he took his oath as the Minister of Finance, to encourage members of the public to participate and to have a say. This is what we call participatory representation and participatory politics. So to say that there was no consultation is simple untruth. This, Madam President, certainly is one of the most inclusive budgets; this is one that has had perhaps the most national participation. And, Madam President, our Prime Minister has repeatedly said to us time and time again that we are all in this together. And so I wish to thank all of those people, the organizations, civil society, different industries and all the different organizations in Trinidad and Tobago who took the time to contribute to our national development by submitting their suggestions for budget/fiscal package 2021.

Madam President, please permit me as well to put on the record and to read into the *Hansard* some of the professional commentary that have come from captains of industry in the finance and taxation sectors. From Aegis, in a document titled,

“TT Budget 2020/2021, in a Snapshot, Diversity & Digitization Pillars of Reconstruction”. And I quote one of the messages:

“Given the numerous challenges the government is faced with, it was encouraging to hear of the diverse plans and intended pillars of reconstruction. This is just the beginning. There is much strategic work ahead for us to steer our country...”—and to—“get us back on track and

online. We must ensure we get results as we P.U.S.H. (Persist Until Something Happens).”

And then from PWC in their document, entitled, “Trinidad and Tobago 2021 national budget: Recover and Reset 2020 and beyond.”

“Fiscal prudence and economic stability have been consistently articulated themes of the PNM Administration. Whilst bold action to rebalance our economy is undoubtedly required, we wholeheartedly agree that fiscal discipline and sacrifice, by all, are required. It is our sincere hope that COVID-19 will continue to provide real and sustainable impetus to implement many of these measures.”

And again, Madam President, KPMG—it is necessary for me to read this because out of the 24 commentaries, the 24 repetition of the script we keep hearing that there are no new ideas and there was no creativity to the budget, et cetera. From KPMG,

“2021 Budget Commentary”:

“Each one of us can play an integral role in reviving our economy and it is necessary that we envision it. This is no easy task, and our actions today require compassion, composure, solidarity, decisiveness, innovation, unshakeable resolve and most of all faith - that this too shall pass, and we as a nation will emerge from this battle victorious.”

And the last one I will read—I will skip Deloitte—the last one I will read is an article from the *Business Guardian*, two sentences from the *Business Guardian* published on the 15th of October, 2020, and written by Curtis Williams:

“The 2021 budget has been read, debate on it continues, but in the main it has received good reviews from the private sector and many members of the

national community.”

And then he goes on to say:

“The voters have spoken and yes both the property tax and the revenue authority were campaign issues. So often the leader of the Opposition Kamla Persad-Bissessar told us Vox Populi, Vox Dei, she must accept that the voice of the people has been heard and with suitable amendments the Revenue Authority Bill must be passed.”

And he closes by saying:

“The road ahead is difficult and we must all be vigilant, less we fall by the wayside.”

So, Madam President, imagine my horror when I opened up my email yesterday, late yesterday evening and I received a press release from the Office of the Leader of the Opposition entitled, “Opposition abstains from voting for an oppressive budget.”

Madam President, I have to say, I used to be in this place in another era some time ago and I find it fairly incredible that the language of oppressive, vindictive and dictatorial continues to be the only words really coming out from that Opposition Bench. And it really makes me wonder what purpose is being served. In the press release, Madam President, it states:

“...we cannot in good conscious vote for a budget...”—and it is—“such oppressive, backward policies.”

But, Madam President, the common message from all of the other experts that I just read before basically went along the lines of, this was an excellent budget which really and truly requires all hands on deck. And so I wish to ask all of the participants in this debate here today, whose interest do you really serve?

Who are you here to represent? Whose voice are you speaking for? And for whom will you take that decision when it comes to matters of the national economy?

Madam President, the budget pays heavy attention to major issues such as digitization, agriculture, food security and caring for the vulnerable in society. I heard Sen. Vieira state that a budget really is the allocation of resources for the highest good of all, and I certainly believe that this budget, given current and prevailing circumstances indeed reflects the allocation of resources available to the Government for the highest good of all in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, Sen. Mark kept saying whatever he believes the PNM to mean, I swore I was in my primary school class with the letters of the alphabet, what fun we can have. But I want to just quote from our PNM manifesto, just very quickly. We spoke to—in the 2020 manifesto we spoke to a fund for domestic violence shelters, transitional facilities and strategies to end gender based violence. The PNM's Manifesto also spoke to an online portal or hotline through which the private sector can register various forms of assistance for children in need. It speaks to tax concession for those who support children's homes and families in need. It speaks to incentives for the private sector to engage in philanthropy to develop children and the youth.

So, Madam President, I am very pleased now to go forward into what was listed in the *Social Sector Investment Programme* as things that this country can expect coming out of a two-month old manifesto quickly. That, Madam President, is PNM performance, because PNM brings good governance to Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, who will benefit the most from this? In my opinion it is

the children of Trinidad and Tobago, I absolutely believe that everything that we do—Sen. Vieira spoke about imagining what our future will be like and I stand with him fully on that. I had a priest in Arima who always used to talk about—Father Leo O’Donovan. He always used to talk about, and he had a strong Irish accent, imagine Arima, a place where everybody is living in love and harmony. And I want to say to you that really motivated the community of Santa Rosa in Arima to work together and to make Arima the best it could be. And so I commend what Sen. Vieira was speaking about when he talked about we have to imagine what is the best and the best way for vision is to imagine it and do it along those line. I am paraphrasing you, Sen. Vieira.

So coming out of the SSIP in fiscal 2021 things that this country can expect. In the Child Affairs Division the establishment of two drug rehabilitation community residences in Tobago. And the objective of this is to create residential spaces in Tobago suitable for use as rehabilitation centres for boys and girls sentenced by the Children Court to a substance abuse programme. The reality is that there are children in Trinidad and Tobago who unfortunately have been exposed to many ills in society and the State is accepting a measure of responsibility in ensuring that suitable facilities are in place to help children who are inflicted by substance abuse and addiction.

Madam President, a feasibility study will be done to create a community in Aripo Wallerfield. And the purpose of this community is for the incorporation of the St. Jude’s School for Girls, which houses girls who are wards of the State and girls—vulnerable community—who are in need of care and protection. In this coming year Trinidad and Tobago can expect the establishment of a national children’s registry. This registry is a Government database to effectively monitor

the development of children, to provide a more efficient and effective method of monitoring children's development, specifically to reduce child abuse, neglect and exclusion. It is to help service providers to quickly identify a child with whom they have contact and who they determine is not receiving the essential services, which include, education and primary health care, et cetera. And it is to enable early identification of an effective action to address needs by providing a tool to identify who is involved or who has a concern with a child. And, of course, the overarching view is to protect and monitor the growth, care and developing the children throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, in fiscal 2021 we can also expect the renovation of community residences to accommodate children in need of supervision and it will create a renovated facility suitable for the execution of a programme aimed at rehabilitating boys categorized as children in need of supervision. There is also the intention to reconstruct and outfit the Josephine Shaw Transition Home for Girls; refurbishment works at the St. Jude's School for Girl. As pertains to the Children's Authority, supply and implement a new call centre for the registry. And this project will involve the improvement, modernization and strengthened coordination of the IT framework for the Authority. In the Gender Affairs Division, the establishment and renovation of safe houses and shelters so as to create additional residential safe houses for victims of domestic violence, two in south Trinidad and one in north Trinidad. Madam President, these are just some of the things that we can expect.

And so I just want to add a couple more things; some of the things that were hinted in the budget. So we want to incentivize the private sector with respect to support for women and children. The Office of the Prime Minister will mobilize

all partners, public and private sectors, because we are all in this together. The Office of the Prime Minister recognizes that gender equality stymies development and there is a need for human centered development. The National Gender Policy will be revisited and ramped-up. The Government is committed to include gender perspectives or to have gender perspectives in all activities of government and civil society. The Government is encouraging civil society organizations to promote gender equality and strong families. The Government is actively working to change the culture of violence. There are limited safe spaces that are opened. There are two Domestic Violence Centres that were opened in June 2020 and I want to compliment the Government for that accomplishment. The victims of domestic violence absolutely needs safe spaces at—where they can retreat. There will be an inter-ministerial support to promote capacity building. There are already 103 gender focal points in Ministries and State agencies. The 800-SAVE hotline for domestic violence is fully activated. But, Madam President, this requires people to make a conscious decision on a personal level.

Madam President, we also thought about how we socialize our boys and girls. There is an ongoing initiative called the Barbershop Initiative which encourages conversation with boys and men. Madam President, this Government is fully aware of the challenges of human trafficking and the Government is resolute in its efforts to stop all forms of human trafficking. The Government wants the national population to join us and rethink masculinity. You know, we keep hearing the phrase “toxic masculinity” and we really, really have to rethink this notion of masculinity both from a male perspective as well as from a female perspective.

Madam President, there are community caravans, there is the radio

programme called Speak. The Government is committed to making 2021 a serious year for gender development. The Government has a draft national strategic plan for gender-based violence. There are three additional domestic violence shelters in north Trinidad. The Government is committed to partnering with existing organizations to help victims and perpetrators. In March of 2021 as the world celebrates International Women's Day there will be two female projects undertaken. One, women in politics, to raise women's representation and participation and the second project is, leadership for gender justice for all women who are aspiring to enter public life. And so this is our clarion call to women who are either interested in becoming active politicians representatives or women who aspire to enter leadership roles in different organizations. This will be your opportunity to come together.

Madam President, there are three major policies that have to come together and we need the synergies of these three to bring about behaviour change; the national child policy, the national parenting policy and the national family policy. And so we anticipate that these three policies will be worked on and we will see the fruits of these three policies in the coming months and years. Madam President, we noticed that there have been more than 4,000 cases at the Children's Authority and the Government continues to lend great support to the Children's Authority because this Government genuinely cares about the children, the future of this nation. The Children's Authority is expected to expand its HR in order to meet the needs of the children who require these services. Four regional assessment centres are already in existence or will come, three in Trinidad and one in Tobago. There are 20 approved children's homes and the Government is working with others to ensure compliance. Madam President, foster care. We

continue to look at foster care to encourage children to remain in a family setting and safe spaces. The national children's registry which would be set up to eliminate child abuse, neglect, exclusion, to help identify vulnerable children, to ensure and facilitate access to education and primary health care, to ensure that care givers are well trained and to provide support for reentering society. Those are the priorities of this Government.

Madam President, a short while ago as I was scrolling through social media—outside the Chamber of course, [*Laughter*] the representatives of the United States Embassy met with the Minister of Education, Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly to discuss helping at-risk youth to ensure that no youth, no child, is left behind. And, Madam President, please allow me to take this minute to compliment the Minister and the Ministry of Education for the fantastic work that they have been doing thus far. [*Desk thumping*] And further, Madam President, it would be remiss of me if I did not thank the teachers who have found themselves in a really trying situation and who continue to try their best to educate the children of Trinidad and Tobago. So thank you to the teachers and just a word of encouragement to the parents and guardians who are struggling to keep up with the online learning and the online teaching.

Madam President, in the PSIP, the Government speaks to and intends to develop a child labour policy and the Ministry of Labour in conjunction with the National Steering Committee for the Prevention and Elimination of Child Labour and other stakeholders will seek to develop a national child labour policy aimed at preventing and eliminating child labour in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, I think that is something fantastic to talk about. Also a package of legislation had come before the last Parliament to look after gender and children's

affairs, the most recent being the Domestic Violence (Amdt.) Act of 2020 which allows the Commissioner of Police to establish and maintain an electronic national domestic violence register. This is very necessary. We find recently that there have been many crimes of passion committed, in the most against women, but we have seen incidences of it happening against men. And so I want to compliment the Government and I know that there are several other pieces of legislation that will be coming forward in this term to continue to protect the children and to look after a gender issue, women issues.

Madam President, in the last term, from what I have counted, approximately 94 pieces of legislation were assented to between 2015 and 2020; 17 in 2015, 10 in 2016, 19 in 2017, 25 in 2019 and 23 in 2020. And that speaks to the commitment of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to do what it can to make this place a lawful civilized society.

Madam President, it will be remiss of me if I did not mention something that is very dear to my heart. I belong to—I am from Arima. I belong to a community called the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community and I take my first peoples lineage very, very seriously. It is not a joke to me. So imagine my horror, on International Day of Indigenous People last week when I saw a press release coming from the UNC with the political leader leaving a UNC meeting October 2019 with masqueraders from either Kalicharan or Tribe purporting to be First Peoples. And I have to register my displeasure, personally and on behalf of my community, the Santa Rosa First Peoples, for what is really a pappy show, a costume party, a masquerade and lip service. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, this Government is committed to the development of the First Peoples. The Government is committed to supporting the development of the First Peoples by promoting their

food, music, dance and spirituality in order to preserve the culture and to ensure its continuity in Trinidad and Tobago.

6.30 p.m.

Madam President, we know that the Cabinet had agreed to 25 acres of land for the specific purpose of the establishment of the model Amerindian village. This village will comprise of farming, cassava processing, craft production, communal spaces, facilities, recreational spaces and visitors' centre and exhibit space, spaces for spiritual and traditional ceremonies and performances, workshops, reserved forested areas for conservation of traditional plant and animal life.

Madam President, a feasibility study will be undertaken in 2021 and post the completion of the study, some of the projects—some of the projected works in phase one would include: the construction of a parameter fence, the pyramidal square along the traditional village square, a spiritual centre, an art and craft pavilion, and food preparation sheds. All sustainable services for connection of utilities, finishes, drainage and lights will be established and the construction of traditional earthen ovens, and the drilling of water wells to provide the compound with an adequate water supply. This project will have a positive impact on the environment being ecofriendly. I know Sen. Vieira was speaking to making sure that we are ecologically aware.

This project also has the potential for earning and saving foreign exchange, generating employment, contributing to the development of skills, and it has the potential to be financially profitable for the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community. And please let me place on record, on behalf of the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community as well, our gratitude to our Prime Minister, hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, who continues to lead by example with his commitment to

the First Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago. We must thank our area representative, the hon. Penelope Beckles-Robinson, who has been a friend of the Community and she is committed to the Community. We must thank the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, somebody who totally understands the need for preeminence of the First Peoples across the world and particularly here in Trinidad and Tobago.

And we want to thank all of the people who understand the importance of the First Peoples. Bishop Harvey always used to say that you do not know who you are unless you know where you came from. And if we continue to attempt to etch out our Trinbagonian identity, there is no way we can know who we are or we can really develop as a people if we do not treat the first inhabitants of this land, if we do not treat them with respect and if we do not take time to understand and pay attention to the fact that they were here first and whatever happened throughout the course history which led to their displacement, the fact remains that they were here first and Kairi is their land. Madam President, I think I have a few more minutes? Yes? Five more minutes, seven more minutes?

Sen. Mark: You have the whole night.

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: The whole night? Thank you. I know you want to hear me, Sen. Mark.

Madam President: You have seven more minutes.

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Seven minutes. Thank you. Madam President, I just want to take a few minutes now please, to just go through some of the accomplishments that would have happened over 2015—2020 and to show that PNM promises actually materialize all the time. Always materialize, Sen. Mark. Madam President, there has been dialogue and consultation in decision-making

which we promised. The local government reform has been embarked upon: the completion of the cycling velodrome, completion of the aquatic centre, completion of the tennis center, inflation subdued, outfitting and occupancy of Government buildings to reduce rental, VAT reduction decreased, personal allowance increased in that term and will now be increased again, phased reduction, OJT stipends increased, legislative agenda prepared and published, simplified process for selecting of a police commissioner, firm action to reduce violence in schools and this is evident because there is a clear decline in school violence, the national statistical institute is being established, there was a state visit to Jamaica to avert potential foreign relations crisis.

Madam President, I know for a fact that our international reputation was severely challenged during 2010—2015, and the 2015—2020 administration had a hard task in trying to build back the reputation and the brand “Trinidad and Tobago” because there was reckless and irresponsible national frontage and leadership.

Madam President, we commenced the housing programme under the HDC; the Caroni workers have been paid outstanding money; the brand new ferries have been purchased; we anticipate two more ferries, the *Buccoo* and the *APT James* and I look forward to travelling to Tobago very soon in due course when those ferries arrive. The PNM Government has also improved the air bridge and the sea bridge despite challenges and despite sabotage—

Madam President: Sen. Lezama-Lee Singh, you have five more minutes.

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Thank you—despite attempts at sabotage. The 2015—2020 Government increased the OJT intake by 2,000; back pay was paid to public servants; the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund grew; the planting seed programme

was launched; 200 new motorcycles for the TTPS; Heritage Petroleum registered a \$500 million profit; increase in the number of courts; we had the online courts; we had increased social welfare grants and pension thresholds; 115 new buses; increased minimum wage to 17.50; we saved 400 million on the Red House restoration. I think we are all very delighted to have the opportunity to sit and debate the laws of the land in this wonderfully restored space, Sen. Mark, who at one point served as Minister of Public Administration in the '90s and upon whom we had trusted that this would have happened, but great is the PNM.

Thank you very much, Madam President. The Laventille pool was built; the Morvant pool is under construction; Skinner Park upgrade is ongoing; walkovers constructed at Sea Lots, Wrightson Road and Four Roads; the night court facility at Remand Yard is almost completed; and, of course, the changing of the hundred-dollar bills from the old one to the new polymer bill. Madam President, so those are some of the things that have happened under the PNM and, again, I have this yellow book of nightmares. If anybody wants to borrow it, it is right here I can lend it to you, and things that must never ever happen again in Trinidad and Tobago.

And so, Madam President, as I close, I commend this budget to each and every Member in this House, and I commend it to the population of Trinidad and Tobago. I congratulate again the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development and their teams. I thank the national community for its widespread participation in the development of the budget and I thank the national community and the captains of industry for understanding where we are. Madam President, I ask again, whose interest do we really serve? It is self-service or are we looking after the greater good? Who stands to benefit from this budget, Madam

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President? And as Sen. Vieira said, “Budget is the allocation of resources for the highest good of all” and I totally believe that this is what has happened with this fiscal package.

And so, Madam President, today, we stand on the cusp of truly building that new, diversified, environmentally conscious, caring, productive, disciplined and tolerant new society that this PNM has been speaking of, and we thank the people of Trinidad and Tobago for partnering with us as we walk towards *Vision 2030*, as we work towards building a new society, and as we work towards the betterment of each and every citizen of this nation. I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, I beg to move that the Senate do now adjourn to Monday, October 26, 2020, at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.39 p.m.