

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

*Wednesday, March 25, 2020*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I have received communication from Mr. Ganga Singh, MP, Member for Chaguanas West and Ms. Marlene Mc Donald, MP, Member for Port of Spain South who have requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

**COVID-19****ADDITIONAL MEASURES ENFORCED IN PARLIAMENT**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, as we advance our efforts in the collective fight against COVID-19, I have today advised the Leader of the House and the Chief Whip that additional measures have been taken by the Parliament in relation to seating arrangements in this Chamber to satisfy the policy guidelines from the Ministry of Health. The additional measures have commenced today and will continue until further notice.

These measures require a limit on the number of persons in this Chamber at any one time, subject of course to the need to maintain a quorum during sittings. Adjustments have also been made to our food and beverage service, therefore, we have provided suitable accommodation for Members throughout the Parliamentary Complex including the Cabildo Complex. These areas include the offices assigned to certain Members, the Members' dining room, Opposition and Government caucus rooms, and the meeting rooms on level two of the Cabildo Complex. All of these spaces are outfitted with screens or computers for Members to monitor the

proceedings in the Chamber in real time. Outside of these spaces, Members are free to utilize the various lounge spaces throughout the building and are encouraged to use their personal devices to stream the proceedings. Spaces have also been provided for support staff of the Opposition and Government, including the staff of the Legislative Drafting Department.

In general, we have provided sufficient, safe, clean, comfortable and socially distanced spaces for Members and staff to avoid large numbers of persons congregating in this Chamber. Hon. Members, should a division be called, Members will be allowed a maximum of three minutes to return to the Chamber for the taking of the division. As is customary, even if the Clerk has already passed the Member in the usual voting sequence, once a Member is present in the Chamber before the division is announced, he or she will be called upon to vote.

I have also advised the Leader of the House and the Chief Whip that given the current unusual circumstances, the staff support will be of reduced capacity from 5.00 p.m. This therefore means that we should do all in our power to end the sitting within a reasonable time thereafter. I would strongly suggest by 6.00 p.m. I therefore thank all Members for their cooperation.

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, I just seek clarification based on your statement. I know we had an agreement on both sides eight/six of numbers. I notice on the Government side without being disrespectful or facetious, there are nine Members on their side at this point.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Madam Speaker, what I explained to my friend who drew this to my attention, is that the Minister of Works and Transport is here to answer a question. We are not going against what you told us. He is just here to answer a question. He is not a Member of this House. Madam Speaker, I explained that but,

Madam Speaker, if you would like Minister Sinanan to wait outside until the question is raised, I will ask him to do that. However, I just explained that to the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, so I find it quite disconcerting that he would raise it with you. Thank you very much. Minister, if you would just wait—

**Madam Speaker:** All right, just one minute. I recognize that Minister Sinanan is not a Member of this House, but the determination with respect to numbers really is based on the threat and a proper number capacity. So, Minister Sinanan, you will grace us with your presence later in the day. Thank you.

#### **PAPERS LAID**

1. Tobacco Control (Amdt.) Regulations, 2019. [*The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh)*]
2. Audited Financial Statements of the Tourism Trinidad Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
3. Audited Financial Statements of the Caribbean New Media Group Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Audited Financial Statements of the National Schools Dietary Services Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]  
*Papers 2 to 4 to be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.*
5. Annual Report and Audited Financial Statements of the Police Complaints Authority for the period October 01, 2018 to September 30, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]  
*To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*

6. Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to the Progress of the Proposals to Restructure CLICO, BAT and CIB for the quarter ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

## **JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS**

### **(Presentation)**

**Dr. Lackram Bodoë** (*Fyzabad*): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following reports:

#### **Public Administration and Appropriations**

##### **Trinidad and Tobago Police Service**

Twenty-Second Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an Examination of the Expenditure and Internal Controls of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for the fiscal year 2018/2019.

#### **Ministry of Communications**

Twenty-Third Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an Examination into the Expenditure and Internal Controls of the Ministry of Communications for the fiscal year 2018/2019.

**Mr. Esmond Forde** (*Tunapuna*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have the honour to lay the following reports today:

#### **Human Rights, Equality and Diversity**

##### **Special Education Programmes and Services**

Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on the Current Provisions for the Education of Children who require Special Education Programmes and Services in Public Primary and Secondary Schools.

#### **Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities**

##### **Municipal Corporations Financial Oversight**

Fourteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on the Inquiry into Financial Oversight and Financial Management Systems at Municipal Corporations.

**Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2019**

Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2019 in the Fifth Session, Eleventh Parliament.

**Cybercrime Bill, 2017**

**The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi):** Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present:

Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Cybercrime Bill, 2017 in the Fifth Session, Eleventh Parliament.

**National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, 2018**

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present:

Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, 2018 in the Fifth Session, Eleventh Parliament.

**URGENT QUESTIONS**

**Treatment for COVID-19 Patients**

**(Chloroquine and Hydrochloroquine Availability)**

**Dr. Lackram Bodoie (Fyzabad):** To the Minister of Health: In view of reports suggesting that the anti-malarial drugs, chloroquine and hydrochloroquine may be of value in the treatment of COVID-19 patients, can the Minister indicate whether

the Ministry is giving consideration to making this drug available to COVID-19 patients in Trinidad and Tobago?

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine are used to treat malaria, which is a parasite. COVID-19 is a virus, two entirely different beings altogether. The reports that chloroquine and hydrochloroquine may be effective are purely anecdotal in a small number of patients and carries no scientific or peer reviewed weight. It has been proven in China to be no better than regular supportive symptomatic care. As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, the rush to get onto the chloroquine/hydrochloroquine bandwagon has led to three people in Nigeria taking chloroquine, not under medical supervision and actually coming down with chloroquine poisoning. We have also had two cases of that in the United States. So the advice is, chloroquine or hydrochloroquine are absolutely useless, and possibly dangerous in the use of treating COVID-19 and we do not recommend it. Thank you very much.

**Madam Speaker:** Supplemental, Member for Fyzabad.

**Dr. Bodoë:** Thank you for your response, Minister. In light of that response and in light of reports from pharmacists that there is an increased demand for these two drugs, what advice, perhaps, you would want to give to the pharmacies and the population?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Health

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** Thank you again, Madam Speaker. The advice I would like to give to anyone engaged in hoarding, whether it is drugs, hand sanitizers, toilet paper or food, is that when you hoard drugs especially, you leave a gap in the health care system, so that people who really need chloroquine or

hydrochloroquine to treat malaria, now do not have it. What you do is create now, much more malaria cases.

So I would urge the public to return any chloroquine or hydrochloroquine into your pharmacies. It poses no real benefit to you. And if, as I said, in the case of Nigeria, United States, you use it inappropriately, you could end up with chloroquine poisoning. So, the advice is, do not use it, return it, and COVID-19 patients will be treated as per WHO protocol, that is, supportive symptomatic treatment. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

**1.45 p.m.**

**Pandemic Leave Entitlement  
(Approval of Cabinet)**

**Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh** (*Couva South*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development: Could the Minister state whether the pandemic leave entitlement which was publicly announced on Sunday last was officially considered and approved by the Cabinet?

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)**: Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, I would like to indicate that this matter is before the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the Cabinet. In addition to that, that committee met yesterday and requested some clarification on two issues and now that matter for clarification is going before the NTAC, and when we get the response from NTAC it will then be placed before the F&GP and then it would be sent to the Cabinet for final approval.

**Madam Speaker**: Supplemental, Member for Couva South.

**Mr. Indarsingh**: Minister, could you inform this House when the announcement was made by the Minister last Sunday, was she engaged in any collaboration with

the confederation's representative of the business community and the trade union federations such as NATUC, FITUN and JTUM?

**Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. At that time the Minister had been in consultation with the CPO, the members of—representatives from the Ministry of National Security, the Minister of Health, all heads of divisions and units of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, the CEO of NEDCO, the Executive Director of OSHA and his team, the Cipriani Labour College, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services; the Minister of Trade and Industry; the Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts; the Minister in the Office of the Attorney General, Minister Fitzgerald Hinds; the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, Ayanna Webster-Roy; and after that there was consultation with NTAC.

**Madam Speaker:** Supplemental, Member for Oropouche East.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. To the Minister: Minister, are you indicating to the House and the nation that a premature announcement a week ago was made on pandemic leave without the Government itself fully considering and approving such a policy recommendation?

**Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:** Did I indicate that what the Minister did was give the indication that these were the guidelines that would be considered by the Government to give notice that this is the mechanism that will be used, and the Minister at that time did indicate that it was part of the process. She also indicated that it would have to be approved by the Cabinet, and she was very clear in that indication that what she was doing was putting on the record that these were the guidelines, draft guidelines that would be approved by the Cabinet. And what she did was outline exactly what this wide-ranging committee had dealt with and these were the guidelines that were going forward to the Cabinet.



**Suspected COVID-19 Case in Tobago  
(Trinidad and Tobago Ferry Service)**

**Ms. Ramona Ramdial** (*Couva North*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Works and Transport: Does the Minister have any intention of stopping the ferry service between Trinidad and Tobago after a foreigner suspected of COVID-19 was allowed to travel?

**The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan)**: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there is no information to suggest that any passenger, foreign or local, suspected of having the COVID-19 virus was allowed to travel on the ferry service. I would like to inform this honourable House that the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago has implemented several measures specifically related to the ferry and cargo terminals and vessels operating on the sea bridge, one of which is restrictions to persons exhibiting flu-like symptoms to the terminal and vessel, and other measures as follows:

- engaging of a sanitization company to undertake steam cleaning of the vessels before and after sailing;
- the use of antiviral aerosol spray to sanitize during sailing and in the terminals at intervals;
- issue PPE to staff on board and in the terminals;
- COVID-19 training and awareness for terminal staff on the vessels;
- issue of additional disinfectant cleaning to the vessels;
- strict adherence to no loitering policy on the compound;
- waiver of penalty charges/administrative fees for passengers who no longer wish to travel at this time;
- restriction of shore leave to crew members on the ferry while vessels are in port;

- implementation of a two-shift operation at the Port of Port of Spain and Scarborough terminals to prevent cross-contamination of employees and cleaning of work space; and
- additional opening and closing time to facilitate sanitization of the work space.

I thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Supplemental, Member for Couva North.

**Ms. Ramdial:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, from your information, does the THA intend to implement testing and quarantining of passengers who enter via the sea bridge?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Madam Speaker, I cannot speak for the THA, however, I can say that screening is done at both terminals, both in Trinidad and Tobago and by the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. And we did indicate today that the Government did receive 15 thermal screeners and that would be positioned at both terminals and other places as required. Thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** Supplemental, Member for Couva North.

**Ms. Ramdial:** Thank you. Minister, would you recommend to the THA that they test and quarantine passengers coming into Tobago from Trinidad?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Madam Speaker, any advice on this pandemic is given by the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Works and Transport does not have the capability to advise the THA on matters of health. Thank you.

### **Imported Cases of COVID-19 (Screening of all CAL Passengers)**

**Ms. Ramona Ramdial (Couva North):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Health: Can the Minister advise whether all passengers on CAL flights which transported the “imported” cases have been contacted and screened and

quarantined?

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we are guided by international protocols. Under the Aircraft General Declaration, International Health Regulations, Annex 8, there is a special consideration for managing COVID-19 cases outbreak in aviation. That protocol says that you trace, contact trace persons within a one to two metre radius of any seat where a person sits. So it might normally be two rows to the front, two rows to the back and to the sides. But that is not fixed in stone, it could vary depending on the design of the aircraft because different aircraft with different designs would have different seat densities. So that is what is done and that is not only done on CAL flights, but on all the flights where you may have a suspected case or an imported case. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Supplemental, Member for Oropouche East.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Thank you very much, Minister, for the answer. Minister, in light of your statement on the matter today asking citizens not to be tested at private labs, could you indicate whether the Ministry has taken any steps to deal with the private labs that are offering tests now and whether or not that is indeed a threat to the health of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago?

**Madam Speaker:** I will not allow that as a supplemental question. Member for Couva North.

**Ms. Ramdial:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, at this time can you say how many passengers have been tracked and screened, tested?

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** It is a useful question but unfortunately I would not have those details as to the numbers at the tips of my fingers, but it is something I can get for you; that is not a problem. Thank you very much.

**Government's Intention for Nationwide Lockdown  
(Prevention and Spread of COVID-19)**

**Ms. Ramona Ramdial** (*Couva North*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of National Security: Does the Government intend to implement a nationwide lockdown with full force of the law in light of the increasing numbers of COVID-19 patients and to prevent further spread?

**The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young)**: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the response and how one deals with, responsibly, all issues related to COVID-19 is a very fluid process. As we have said repeatedly, the Government will continue to do what is responsible for Trinidad and Tobago. At this stage it is not on the front burner that we implement any nationwide lockdown, but we continue to monitor it, we continue to be guided, most importantly, by the medical expert advice of the Chief Medical Officer and his staff from the Ministry of Health.

**Madam Speaker**: Supplemental, Member for Couva North.

**Ms. Ramdial**: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, can you give an update with respect to marshalling those citizens who are not following the guidelines and the advisories being sent out by the Ministry of National Security? How are you coping with that at this point in time?

**Hon. S. Young**: Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, the number one front runner in handling and responding to COVID-19 is actually the Ministry of Health. As the Chief Medical Officer told the population this morning in his daily press briefings, he has the power of the Quarantine Act. The Ministry of Health has the full support of the Ministry of National Security. We have already implemented via the Inter-Ministerial Committee a list of those persons whom the Ministry of

Health would like to be monitored for quarantining, and the truth is, at the end of the day, it comes down to the self-discipline of every individual and this Government is not going to be using the law unnecessarily, but we will if we have to and the police are assisting the Chief Medical Officer and the Ministry of Health in whatever they need, including patrolling outside certain homes.

**Madam Speaker:** Supplemental, Member for Couva North.

**Ms. Ramdial:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, in light of the rapid increase in confirmed cases of persons with the COVID-19, do you think that it is very soon that you may rethink the SOE or the lockdown?

**Madam Speaker:** I would not allow that. That question has been asked and answered in a different form. Member for Oropouche East.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Thank you very much. Minister, in light of the statement that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has indeed established some special unit to assist with monitoring, are there steps that the Ministry will consider to take with relation to the line-up at the Ministry of Finance, BIR Division where this is now the first quarter and persons are lining up every day to pay their taxes, and so on? And with the amount of people populating shopping malls at this time which continue, are there any steps that we will take to reduce the amount of people entering shopping malls and protocols to follow for persons lining up at the BIR?

**Madam Speaker:** I would not allow that as a supplemental question. Hon. Members, the question time for Urgent Questions is now spent.

### ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Madam Speaker, there are two questions for oral answer, however, we are understanding that the Member who asked, the Member for Fyzabad is withdrawing both questions—both questions are being withdrawn but

we were ready to answer them. Madam Speaker, there are three questions for written response and we have the responses for these three questions. Thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Fyzabad, the questions are withdrawn?

**Dr. Bodoë:** Yeah, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay. So the questions have been withdrawn, 56 and 57.

## WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

### National Energy Corporation

#### (Details of Selection of Blue Ocean Marine)

**37. Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

With regard to the selection of Blue Ocean Marine by National Energy Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago for crewing and manning its vessels, could the Minister provide:

- a) the terms of reference of this contract; and
- b) the list of other tender applicants and their respective offers?

### TTPS Gender-Based Violence Unit

#### (Details of)

**54. Dr. Lackram Bodoë** (*Fyzabad*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

With regard to the recently established Gender-Based Violence Unit within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, could the Minister state:

- a) the organizational structure and staff complement;
- b) the reporting structure;
- c) the proposed training for staff members; and
- d) the budgetary allocation for this Unit?

### **Compensation to Fyzabad Flood Victims**

#### **(List of All Recipients)**

- 55. Dr. Lackram Bodoë** (*Fyzabad*) asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

Could the Minister provide a list of all recipients of compensation due to the flooding in Akbar Trace, St John Trace and St John Branch Trace, Avocat Fyzabad for each of the years 2017, 2018 and 2019?

*Vide end of sitting for written answers.*

### **ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

*The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad):*

#### **Proposed New Tobago Medical School**

##### **(Details of)**

- 56.** Could the hon. Prime Minister provide the details of the proposed new medical school in Tobago announced by the Secretary for the Division of Health, Wellness and Family Development, Tobago House of Assembly on February 16, 2020?

#### **Maracas Beach Lifeguards**

##### **(Extension of Hours)**

- 57.** Could the hon. Minister of National Security state whether he has considered extending the hours that lifeguards are stationed at the Maracas beach, in light of reports that a security guard rescued two bathers at that beach on February 16, 2020 due to the absence of lifeguards on duty?

*Questions, by leave, withdrawn.*

Miscellaneous Provisions (Heritage  
And Stabilisation Fund, Government  
Savings Bonds and Value Added Tax) Bill, 2020 (cont'd)

2020.03.25

**MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS (HERITAGE AND  
STABILISATION FUND, GOVERNMENT SAVINGS BONDS AND  
VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL, 2020**

Bill to amend the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, Chap. 70:09, the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41 and the Value Added Tax Act, Chap. 75:06 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Madam Speaker, in moving the motion for the second reading of the Bill, I am constrained to address issues relevant to Motion No. 1 made pursuant—

**Madam Speaker:** Procedurally, I think, if you could just consult procedurally you have to move for us to go on to the next stage. Okay?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I am sorry. I am terribly sorry, Madam Speaker.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES  
(Extension of Time)**

**Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2019**

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, having regard to the Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill 2019, I beg to move that the committee be allowed an extension of one month in order to complete its work and submit a final report by April 30, 2020, all things considered, Ma'am.

**UNREVISED**



*Question put and agreed to.*

### **Cybercrime Bill, 2017**

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, having regard to the Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Cybercrime Bill, 2017, I beg to move that the committee be allowed an extension of six months in order to complete its work and submit a final report by September 18, 2020.

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, 2018**

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, having regard to the Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, 2018, I beg to move that the committee be allowed an extension of three months in order to complete its work and submit a final report by June 30, 2020.

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **RELATED BILL AND MOTION**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in the context of extreme social distancing and the possibility that some among us may have come into contact with persons who have travelled aboard, in moving the motion for the second reading of the Bill, I am constrained to address issues relevant to Motion No. 1 made pursuant to the Development Loans Act, Chap. 71:04. These debates are inter-related. Madam Speaker, I would like to get on with the people's business and isolate from this Parliament as soon as

possible and therefore seeking leave to debate these matters together. Thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** Is this the wish of the House?

**Mr. Lee:** No.

**Hon. Member:** Division.

**Madam Speaker:** There is no vote on this and there is no consensus. Minister of Finance.

**MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS (HERITAGE AND  
STABILISATION FUND, GOVERNMENT SAVINGS BONDS AND  
VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL, 2020**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Madam Speaker, once again Members opposite do not take this coronavirus seriously, they think it is an opportunity to politic. [*Desk thumping*] It is reprehensible, Madam Speaker.

**Mr. Young:** Ask them if they were in contact with Ian Alleyne?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** They were. They were.

Before you this afternoon, Madam Speaker, is a package consisting of a Miscellaneous Provisions (Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, Government Savings Bonds and Value Added Tax) Bill, 2020. Unfortunately we cannot debate the resolution together. [*Interruption*] I am terribly sorry, Madam Speaker. I beg to move:

That a Bill to amend the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, Chap. 70:09, the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41 and the Value Added Tax Act, Chap. 75:06, be now read a second time.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As I indicated previously, before you we have a Bill, a Miscellaneous Provisions Bill designed to amend the Heritage and Stabilisation, Government Savings Bonds and Value Added Tax Acts. Madam Speaker, at the close of 2019 the world became aware of a virus that

we now know as the coronavirus. The World Health Organization on February 11, 2020, proposed an official name for the disease caused by the virus that is termed COVID-19. This is an acronym that stands for Coronavirus Disease, 2019, that is where COVID-2019 comes from. As you are no doubt aware the virus began an avalanche of events that has rocked the world to its core, not only from the point of our very physical life or death but also from the point of survival of the world's economy. Earlier this month Trinidad and Tobago woke up to news headlines like, "World Markets Plunge After Oil Nosedives Over Coronavirus" or "Oil price drops and coronavirus lead to cratering the stock market". Needless to say, Madam Speaker, these were very grim headlines for us in Trinidad and Tobago.

It is now common knowledge that the knock-on effect in the country from what has occurred in the rest of the world is that today's crude oil price is now 50 per cent below the fiscal 2020 budgeted price. In fact, Madam Speaker, the price of West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark crude that we use, was today \$24.67 which is in fact 60 per cent below the fiscal 2020 budget oil price of \$60. In addition, we have been hit by what is called colloquially a double whammy, because following the decline in the oil price or in tandem with the decline in the oil price is a collapse of the natural gas price which is now 50 per cent below the budget figure of \$3 per MMBtu. In 2019, Madam Speaker, the Henry Hub price for natural gas opened the year at \$3.25. It hit a high of \$4.25 per MMBtu and a low of \$1.75 as the year progressed. It averaged there at just below \$3, Madam Speaker. I just checked it, it is now \$1.64, so almost half of what the budget figure was. But what faces the whole world, Madam Speaker, is not just a negative crude and natural gas commodity price shock but a literal shutting down of businesses as

every country in the world tries to stem the spread of the COVID-19.

Country borders are being closed, many have already been closed; most have already been closed and word “globalization” is no longer relevant. Actually, the new conversation is social distancing and self-quarantine. Everyone is being encouraged and in a number of countries it is being legislated to stay at home. The result of all of this would be cataclysmic with citizens of this country, because we must look after ourselves, facing loss of businesses, jobs, homes and so much more. In light of all of this there is an urgent need for the Government to take action in order to alleviate hardships that will occur. In this regard, Madam Speaker, as I have said in another forum, some of the measures that would be implemented, including the Government putting businesses in funds to give them much-needed cash to keep people in jobs. Our primary objective at this point in time is to keep people in jobs, [*Desk thumping*] to keep people employed, to give them salaries, to give them assistance, to give them support, Madam Speaker.

**Mr. Hinds:** To keep them alive.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** To keep them alive. [*Desk thumping*]

We are approaching this challenge in many different ways. One of the things the Ministry of Finance has announced is that we will be accelerating the payment of a substantial proportion of outstanding value added tax refunds and income tax refunds. [*Desk thumping*] And now let me put into the parliamentary record some data that I put into the public domain in another place. The current total of VAT refunds owed to all VAT-registered business in Trinidad and Tobago at this time is \$6.2 billion. That involves 10,160 registered businesses. It is interesting to note, Madam Speaker, that 10,088 of that 10,160 businesses are owed less than \$10

Miscellaneous Provisions (Heritage and  
Stabilisation Fund Government Savings  
Bonds and Value Added Tax) Bill, 2020  
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

million in VAT refunds. It is interesting to note. So only 72 businesses out of 10,160 are owed more than \$10million. Let me repeat that, only 72 companies out of 10,160 VAT-registered companies are owed more than \$10million in VAT refunds. And I am sure you would be surprised to learn, Madam Speaker, that those 72 companies which do not even make up 1 per cent of the total companies that are registered and owed VAT refunds are owed \$5billion. Quite a shocking statistic.

So out of the \$6.2 billion, \$5 billion is owed to companies that are large companies that are owed VAT in excess of \$10 million, and this is why we made a decision that our first effort must be to help small and medium enterprises, because small and medium enterprises, Madam Speaker, can least help themselves in a time of crisis. Small and medium enterprises do not have the cash flow. They do not have the retained earnings, the savings that large enterprises have and therefore we took a decision that we would start with all companies that are owed VAT refunds of \$250,000 or less. And I am sure you will be surprised to learn, Madam Speaker, that out of the 10,160 companies that are owed VAT refunds, 9,364 or 92 per cent are owed less than \$250,000. I am sure you would be surprised to learn that, Madam Speaker. So the Government has taken a decision that by the end of next week we will pay all refunds to all VAT-registered businesses, [*Desk thumping*] all 9,364 of them that are owed \$250,000 or less, and that is going to cost the Government \$277 million.

Let me repeat the figures, by the end of next week it is our intention, and Ministry of Finance officials have already mobilized to do this, to pay out \$277million in VAT refunds which will take care of 92 per cent of the companies

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that are owed VAT refunds. [*Desk thumping*] It is also our intention to pay out income tax refunds to individuals who are mainly self-employed individuals and we are starting with paying refunds of less than \$20,000 by the end of next week [*Desk thumping*] to 9,397 individuals, and that will cost the Government \$110 million. Those 9,397 individuals who are owed income tax refunds make up 75 per cent of the persons who are owed income tax refunds.

**2.15 p.m.**

So let me repeat: 75 per cent of the persons who are owed income tax refunds are owed less than \$20,000, and to pay them off will cost us \$110 million and we intend to do that by the end of next week. So that will cost us \$387 million. Between the VAT \$277 million for VAT refunds for businesses owed 250 or less, \$250,000 or less, that is \$277 million, and \$110 million for income tax returns to persons who are owed \$20,000 or less.

In one instance we deal with 92 per cent of VAT refunds, in another instance we deal with 75 per cent of income tax refunds for individuals, and as more cash becomes available, and this is the point of this whole debate, Madam Speaker, because we need to put these businesses in funds, we need to give them cash. Under normal circumstances our cash flow will not allow us to pay out these sums, but we have made the decision because these people employ people, and the objective is to keep people in jobs [*Desk thumping*] and that is what we are about today.

Let me also say, Madam Speaker, let me now continue with my examination of the Bill. We are also going to be paying overdue payables to trade creditors. So HDC contractors, contractors involved in various government building

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construction of various types, contractors who would have worked for UDeCOTT, worked for NIDCO, across the entire state sector, whether it is infrastructure construction or building construction. We also intend to accelerate the payment of overdue payables to contractors whether small, medium or large.

We also intend to accelerate the payment of bills to persons who provide services to the Government whether in terms of janitorial services, whether in terms of security services, whether in terms of basic supplies to the Government, and government entities, the whole gamut of supplies to the Government, we intend to accelerate the payment of overdue payables to suppliers of goods and services to the Government. Again, recognizing that not everybody is a manufacturer, not everybody is a retailer, quite a large number of businesses in this country are service providers, that we need to spread the funding, the emergency funding across the entire economy. So we also intend to deal with overdue payables and for essential things like pharmaceuticals, very important at this point in time, medical supplies and so on. [*Desk thumping*]

We estimate that the cost of dealing with VAT refunds and the cost of dealing with overdue payables and the other social support measures that we have announced over the last couple weeks would be in the vicinity of \$2billion; and let me explain how this is built up.

On Monday the Government would have announced a salary relief grant programme for persons who have been temporarily displaced as a result of the closure of certain businesses as a result of health and safety precautions. We have done our research and we have been told that the persons who are employed and the sectors who will feel it initially, immediately, that is the food and beverage

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sector, the tourism sector, the hospitality sector, casinos, bars, restaurants, clubs, that sort of thing, recreational areas and so on, Madam Speaker, we have done our research and based on the statistics available to us, there are about 60,000 people employed across those sectors directly. We anticipate that there would be another 20,000-odd who would be in some way associated with those sectors, so we are looking at about 80,000 persons who might become temporary displaced or might be put on a reduced income over the next three to four months or so.

So we have decided to provide those persons a form of support. It is not intended to be a salary, it is not intended to replace their wage, it is intended to be relief, and we have decided that we will give those persons the sum of \$1,500 per month for the next three months. Assuming 80,000 persons, this would take the amount of money required per month to \$120 million, and over a three-month period that takes you to \$360 million. And then there would be persons who would also experience hardships, so we have added another 40 million to that to get a round total of \$400 million being the estimate of the salary relief grant that will be required for displaced persons over the next three to four months, because what this virus is doing is not just causing problems in the health sector. It is causing—it has had a devastating effect on the economy. So we have allocated in the first instance, because we do not know how long this thing will last, and we do not know how many people will come back from abroad and associate with people, so we have put \$400 million aside for the salary relief grant in the first instance for the first three or four months.

In addition to that, we expect that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and I must commend the Minister of Social Development and



Family Services, I listened to you on the radio this morning, [*Desk thumping*] well done. We have put in place some social assistance measures, increases in food cards, increases in the variety of support measures that are available at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, rent relief, public assistance, disability assistance, et cetera. We have allocated funding to that Ministry. Our initial pass through was that the amount required would have been of the order of \$100 million, but we now estimate that we will need to supplement the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services allocation by approximately \$300 million.

So if you take the \$400 million for the salary relief grant and \$300 million for enhanced social support and an increased social security net, and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will also deal with persons who are outside of the national insurance system, because in anything that you do, Madam Speaker, you have to have a structure, you must have a structure. So the salary relief grant is going to be administered through the National Insurance Board because they have a database of employed persons. They have information on employed persons, where they work, how long they have been working there for, their profile, their address, their ID card number, et cetera. So you must have a structure whenever you are doing something like this.

So in the first instance, the salary relief grant for displaced persons who have been temporarily displaced who were employed, but have lost their jobs because of what has happened, that will be managed through the National Insurance Board. The Government will give the National Insurance Board the money, and the National Insurance Board will distribute the grant. But as I indicated on Monday,

it will take us about a week to establish the criteria, the procedures and the guidelines in terms of advising persons as to how they should apply for this salary relief grant, where they should apply, what method they should use, and who would be eligible in the first instance to receive the grant. So we are quite confident that by Monday of next week, which is seven days from this Monday, this is the timeline that we gave, those guidelines would be published so that people would understand who is eligible for this grant in the first instance.

We know, of course, there are persons outside of the national insurance system for one reason or another. Some of them are not registered, some of them the employers have not be paying their contributions, whatever reasons, they are self-employed, they are outside of the national insurance system. So that is why we have added an additional \$200 million to the allocation to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to cater for those persons who are outside of the national insurance system.

And as the Minister of Social Development and Family Services said this morning, those persons who are not within the NIB system would be able to access support through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and guidelines will come out from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services with respect to that category of persons in due course; I expect sometime during next week.

So that when you take the \$400 million for the salary relief grant to be administered to persons within the NIB database, the \$300 million for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to deal with enhanced public assistance, food card, et cetera, you get \$700 million, but the problem is, Madam

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Speaker, we do not know how long this virus will last. Right now we are looking at a three-month horizon, but it could be six months, you hear all sorts of things from the world agencies. Some say six months, some say 18 months, some do not know. So that because it is indeterminate, and because it will take time for people to get back on their feet after this crisis has been averted, we believe that the appropriate amount for social security and support measures, would be of the order of \$1 billion in the first instance, and that \$1 billion is being set aside just to provide support to those most in need during this period of crisis. Another billion, we have estimated, will be required to deal with some of the arrears of money owed to contractors and suppliers to the Government. So that is \$2 billion, Madam Speaker.

I have just announced that we are paying out in cash, income tax refunds and value added tax refunds which will cost us in the region of about \$400 million if you round it off. So you are looking at about \$2.4 billion, and there are all sorts of unintended consequences. So what we are looking at in the first instance, if you round it off, it is somewhere in the vicinity of \$2.5 billion, but again, this is a moving target, Madam Speaker. So let me just repeat.

For the social support measures we are allocating \$1 billion in the first instance. For paying off overdue trade payables, we are allocating \$1 billion in the first instance, and for the VAT refunds and the income tax refunds, we are allocating \$400 million in the first instance. So I have rounded that all off to \$2.5 billion.

To that—these are unbudgeted sums, Madam Speaker, none of this was ever contemplated in October 2019 when the budget was read, and to all of that you

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must add the revenue loss. The revenue loss is going to be substantial, and it is very difficult to determine what the revenue loss will be, because whereas you can do an approximate calculation of the loss of revenue from the oil and gas companies in terms of the loss of revenue from royalties, because royalties is a function of price and volume, we have a fixed royalty of 12½ per cent across the board on all hydrocarbons in Trinidad and Tobago, oil and gas. So you know based on the production figures in volume of gas and oil and the price, you can estimate what your royalty revenue will be and what the loss will be. I can tell you right away, the loss of royalty is over 50 per cent because we budgeted at \$60 and the price of oil would be in the vicinity now of \$25.

In addition, Madam Speaker, supplemental petroleum tax is only paid when the price of oil is over \$50. And it is interesting that for the first four months of the fiscal year, from October 2019 to January 2020, the average price fetched for local crude was \$62. So for the first four months of this year we were on target in terms of our budget figures. We had budgeted \$60 and we got an average price of \$62.

And for those who do not know, our crude, our Heritage crude, formerly Petrotrin crude, fetches a price that is four to \$5 above the WTI price, and people need to know this because we have local experts who said nobody wanted to buy our crude but, in fact, it is more valuable than West Texas Intermediate; and there is a reason for that, it is not rocket science. The refineries in this part of the world are configured to process heavy crude and therefore, it is difficult for them to process light crude, and that is why our crude, which is a mixture of light and heavy, is more valuable than West Texas Intermediate.

So for the first four months of the year we were able to achieve an average

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oil price of \$62; so we were okay. The gas price suffered a dramatic fall. As I said, it reached a high of \$4.25 per MMBtu in 2019, but began to fall off rapidly in the last three months of the year. When we budgeted it was in the vicinity of \$3. It very rapidly went down to \$2 and then dropped below \$2, and it has remained at less than \$2 now for the last two months. So that because Trinidad and Tobago is more of a gas economy than an oil economy, about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of our petroleum revenues come from natural gas, and  $\frac{1}{3}$  from oil production. A decline in the price of natural gas has a profound negative effect on the national economy.

So when you take the decline of the price of natural gas from the budgeted \$3 to the current 1.60 or 1.70 as the case may be, and the decline in the price of crude from 60 to 25, this has a profound effect on petroleum revenues and the national budget. And many companies in this country depend of the petroleum sector. So the services sector is impacted by the decline in the oil price or gas price because the companies reduce their expenditure as soon as the commodity prices go down.

Petrochemical prices are also linked to oil and gas prices. So when oil and gas prices go down, the demand for petrochemicals go down, and the price of methanol urea and ammonia go down.

So that we have also had significant declines in the price of petroleum, and we get our revenue from different areas, but we get it primarily from oil and gas companies. Petrochemical companies, other businesses, your normal businesses in retail construction services as the case may be, that is where we get our revenue from. So when the oil sector is down, the energy sector is down, the rest of the economy suffers a blow as well.

Oil price fell as low as \$19 about a week ago. I have not seen—I personally have not seen an oil price of \$19 since the 1990s. I recall that price somewhere around 1995/1996. It has not dropped below 20 since the 1990s. So that to see oil hit \$19 was quite a shock, and when that happened, persons were not sure what was going to happen. There was a view it would continue to free fall. It has bottomed out, and it is bouncing now in the \$22 to \$26 range for the last couple days. But no one knows where it is going to go. And all of the advisory agencies such as the World Bank, the IMF, et cetera, who do projections on oil prices, they were projecting at the beginning of the year that oil would average \$62. They are now revising their projections down to \$30, \$25 some of them; we do not know.

We do not know what is going to go on with this economy, because China was one of the largest consumers of hydrocarbons of oil and natural gas. So China's problem has affected the entire world; and now yesterday I saw India has locked down. So 1.3 billion people, which is going to be quite a challenge for that government, are now locked down. So India was also a large economy or large body of people or a large body of consumers, China over a billion, large body of consumers, India over a billion, large body of consumers. So we have no idea, we are in uncharted territory, this is all brand new, this is a strange new world. In fact, some people say it is like a World War III in a different way. So we in Trinidad and Tobago we have to look after ourselves.

So the Bill before you is essential so that we can look after ourselves. If I go to the Bill now, the Act to amend the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, Chap.70:09, the Government Savings Bond Act, Chap. 71:41, and the Value Added Tax Act, Chap. 75:06. And, Madam Speaker, could you just tell me how

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much more time I have, please?

**Madam Speaker:** You end at 2.49:09.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** This is the first 30 or the whole thing?

**Madam Speaker:** Your full time, 45 minutes.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Well, I have 15 minutes. Okay. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. So the Bill before us is not a long Bill, just a few pages, and the first clause, of course, is self-explanatory, that is just the short title. When we look at the amendments that we are going to make to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act it starts at clause 2. This clause inserts a new section 15A, and let me explain why we need to do this.

The HSF Act was enacted so many years ago to provide for, among other things, but to provide primarily for the establishment and management of a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. At section 3 of the parent Act, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, the fund is established, and let me read.

“3 (1) There is hereby established the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to be denominated in the currency of the United States of America.

(2) The purpose of the fund is to save and invest surplus petroleum revenues derived from production business...”

And here is why I do not understand some of the commentary that I have seen in the public domain about the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. I just do not understand it, because it is here in black and white.

“The purpose of the fund is to save and invest surplus petroleum revenues derived from production business order to—

(a) cushion the impact on or sustain public expenditure capacity during

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periods of revenue downturn whether caused by a fall in prices of crude oil or natural gas;”

That is what the fund was set up for, “to cushion the impact on or sustain public expenditure...during periods of revenue downturn...caused by a fall in the prices of crude oil and natural gas”.

Now, Madam Speaker, let me break that down into simple English although it is in simple English. At the beginning of the year we come to this Parliament and we pass a budget, and the purpose of the budget is for the service of Trinidad and Tobago, and it will have a number of Heads, a number of line Items, and each Ministry and agency will be allocated funds and we get a total. That is our budget.

So our total expenditure for this year was budgeted at somewhere in the vicinity of \$53 billion, Madam Speaker. And that money is required to pay public servant salaries, to pay pensions to senior citizens, to pay pensions to government pensioners, to provide social grants such as disability assistance, public welfare and so on, Madam Speaker, conditional cash support, also known as the food card, to subsidize the Water and Sewerage Authority because the Water and Sewerage Authority requires \$2 billion a year to run. It is required to run the health sector, it is required to provide national security and the police with the money it needs to pay its men and women under arms, and also protect us. It is necessary to provide funds for the defence force, the prison service, the fire service. The budget is required to keep thousands of public servants in jobs. It is required to deal with the infrastructure needs of the country, the requirements of the local government system and all the facets of our country, Madam Speaker. So every year we come here, we pass a budget, and we agree and whatever. Sometimes we disagree on



what the money should be spent on, but we approve a budget.

When you have a calamitous, precipitous drop in the price oil and gas, you have two options available to you. You can reduce your expenditure, send thousands of people home, stop subsidizing WASA, cut out food card, cut out disability, stop fixing everything, stop paying your suppliers, you can do that, that is an option. You could devalue the dollar to 10 to one, that “doh” help, but you could do that, or, Madam Speaker, do what we plan to do, to keep people in jobs, to keep people alive, which is to access the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. [*Desk thumping*] The fund was never envisaged, was never envisaged for a situation like this; because why? When the fund was established, we had \$10billion in credit in the Government’s bank account at the Central Bank. We were not in overdraft, we were in credit. There was \$10 billion in credit, Madam Speaker. So the framers at the time, the Parliament, the politicians, the Government, the Opposition, never imagined a situation where the government account would not be in credit.

So they designed the fund that you withdraw it ex post facto after a year. So you wait for the whole year, oil prices could hit \$20, \$30 during that year, but you would have enough capacity in your bank account because your bank account would be in credit, and also you have the overdraft available to you so that you can deal with your expenses, and then when the year is over you look at the performance of petroleum prices and determine whether you need to withdraw from the fund to deal with the extraordinary expenditure that you incurred which you financed through your savings in the bank account and your overdraft; but all of that done.

Around 2012 under the former administration, the bank account went from

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positive to negative, and by the time we came in it was at maximum minus \$9billion. So we find ourselves in a situation now with a catastrophic situation facing us, and we now have to change the way we withdraw from this fund. We are changing the way, Madam Speaker, we propose that once one of three events occurs, and if you go to the Bill you will see how it is defined. Once one of three [*Interruption*] catastrophic events occur—Madam Speaker, I am hearing mumbling over there.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay. I just want to remind Members, you know, with the few of us in here there is a great capacity for sound to carry. So would Members please comply with Standing Order 53. Minister of Finance.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We are changing the fund to deal with the present situation. No longer—we cannot wait a year, the amount of people that will die during that year that we wait. We cannot wait until next year to withdraw from this fund, and anybody who says different is not a serious person. They are a joker if they say different. So we are changing it so that withdrawals may be made from the fund under three emergency situations. One, a disaster area is declared under the Disasters Measures Act. Two, a dangerous infectious disease is declared under the Public Health Ordinance or, three, there is or likely to be a precipitous decline in budgeted revenues which is based on the production or price of crude oil or natural gas. We have already met two of these conditions. We have a precipitous drop in the price of crude oil or natural gas by 50 per cent, and we have a global pandemic.

So in these circumstances we feel any government, if faced with this in the future and now, must have access to our savings account, because the HFS is really

just a savings account, it is for a rainy day, and we are in a thunder storm right now, in fact, we are in a hurricane, a deluge, a tsunami, that will drown us unless we deal with this, Madam Speaker.

So our intention is to change the method for withdrawals so that if any one of these three things occur, a withdrawal can be made up to a maximum of US \$1½ billion. And for transparency we are putting in a clause that when the emergency powers are triggered, the Minister shall cause a report to be laid in the House of Representatives within 60 days of that withdrawal.

**2.45 p.m.**

The rest of this Bill, Madam Speaker, is really some tidying up provisions. We are in a very litigious society, very litigious, very, very litigious. So when we announced the intention of the Government in the budget to issue interest-bearing bonds for persons who had arrears of VAT and we did not have the cash flow to pay for them, there were all sorts of people coming forward and saying, “I doh want dat. Dais not right. I want meh cash”, knowing fully well that the Government did not have \$6 billion available to it, but we recognized these people need to get their refunds so we announced that we would issue bonds. And what we have done, Madam Speaker, here in the next provisions, is tidy up some current legislation. We were going to use the Government Savings Bond Act, we in fact increased the limit in the Government Savings Bond Act to \$3 billion to cater for \$3 billion in bonds for VAT arrears but we have decided the best thing to do and cleanest thing to do, to plug any loophole and to avoid any challenge from any mischief-maker, is to amend that VAT Act. So that clause 4 of the Bill inserts a new section in the VAT Act, a new section 47A, which says:

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- “(1) For the purposes of meeting any liability to refund any tax”—and this would be Value Added Tax—“the Minister is authorised to—
- (a) sign agreements...
  - (b) make payments in any form...including the issuing of bonds.
- (2) Bonds issued under”— the— “subsection...may be—
- (a) interest or non-interest bearing...
  - (b) transferable or non-transferable.”

—and shall not exceed in the aggregate, the sum of \$6 billion, or such other sum as may be passed by resolution by both Houses of Parliament.

The payment of the money associated with the bonds shall be a charge on the Consolidated Fund. We are registering the bonds with the Securities Act. We have plugged in every possible loophole that some mischief-maker may want to use to undermine this rescue mission that this Government is all about to save the lives of the people of this country. And we have put in a section where we can designate the Central Bank or a financial institution as the fiscal agent for the bonds and as is already in existing law, in the Saving Bonds Act, we are putting it into the VAT Act that the Minister of Finance may make regulations dealing with the denomination of bonds, type, classes and series of bonds, transfer of bonds, form, issue and recording of bonds, method of holding bonds and so on.

Before this crisis, Madam Speaker, we had worked out that if we issue tax free bonds at an interest rate of 3 per cent over a period of three years, the banks would be able to convert those bonds at 100 cents on the dollar, and the banks have told us that. In fact, the banks are eagerly waiting to receive these bonds that they will cash in for businesses who need cash right away and it is our intention to raise

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\$3 billion in these VAT bonds. That will be in addition to the \$277 million in cash that we are paying into the businesses, \$250,000 and below. As I said, persons can keep the bonds or they can cash them in if they need cash, and the banks are standing by to pay 100 cents on the dollar. There has been some adjustments in the repo rate, it has gone down significantly from 5 per cent to 3.5; prime has dropped to 7.5 per cent. So we may, as we fine-tune going in to next week, have further discussions with the banks to see whether they would still convert at a rate a little below three but it is our intention right now, because that is the undertaking we have been given by the banks, that if we offer the bonds at 3 per cent tax free over three years, they would convert the next day at 100 cents on the dollar.

Let me just talk about the fund in the last minute available to me, Madam Speaker. The fund has lost some money in the last two weeks, as we would all understand. The HSF Fund, it has lost some money. I mean, the markets have gone crazy. It is like the depression of 1929 in the United States. But I am very happy to say that after losing approximately US \$500 million over the last three weeks because of the calamitous drop in the value of equities in the United States—

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance, your speaking time is now spent.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*] But we made US \$150 million yesterday in the HSF—

**Madam Speaker:** I beg to move.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** It went up US \$150 million.

*Question proposed.*

**Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie** (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Madam

Speaker. I empathize with the Minister of Finance in this particular situation in which we find ourselves as a country in a world crisis and I understand the need to intervene in what is essentially an emergency situation. This is an unprecedented crisis as the Minister has indicated. Nothing in anyone's plan prepares one for this. We have a health emergency and a crisis of unknown duration. We have an economic emergency which depends on the containment of the health crisis and we have a financial emergency because everyone needs cash to live, Madam Speaker. Citizens need cash to live, businesses need cash to survive, Government needs cash to be able to function and to govern, the economy needs cash, even if in these extreme circumstances we have to help the economy to limp along, and the society itself needs the cash simply to engage and to proceed with the business of living. Now a crisis requires short-term measures and it also requires emergency action, Madam Speaker, and in such a situation, long-term measures have to wait on the crisis recovery. So, in a fundamental way, the paradigm under which human beings, political systems, economic systems operate has shifted because everyone all over the world, including ourselves here in Trinidad and Tobago, are concerned with what are the short-term measures that are necessary in order to deal with the immediate interconnected crisis of health, economy, business and finance.

Now, I think all of us know by now that the only solution is indeed the containment of the COVID-19 virus, the reduction of the cases and a medical cure or a vaccine in the longer term. I think we also know that short-term measures would provide temporary support and temporary relief but they will not provide long-term solutions. The Minister himself in outlining some of the measures here talked about a three-month period with the understanding that we really do not

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know if that would be enough. Now, short-term measures would cost dearly and it will put a strain on the financial system controlled by the State. But I think we need to remember, and this is important for all of us, citizens, Government, Opposition, parliamentarians, everybody, business, the funds in the custodianship of the State really belongs to the people. Now, the Government has taken an approach in this particular crisis, which is not unreasonable, which is that we all have to share the burden and by sharing the burden, it would keep us going for a little while but sharing the burden alone would not progress us to a better position. Unless we can help the private sector to survive, economic activity will collapse and if economic activity collapses, the quality of life would deteriorate for every worker, for every citizen.

Now, the Minister outlined a number of measures which he announced previously that are in many ways positive measures, positive interventions. But I want to ask the Minister on behalf of the Government, that is to say asking him to, as he speaks on this Bill on behalf of the Government, has the Government considered or are they considering, in this horrible time, how to prepare for a stronger future, even though we take these emergency actions now, the situation of water and food security, for instance, food security on two counts, farmers on the one hand and homes and households on the other? Is the Government considering, for instance, that a lot of things are going to be changing because of this social distancing and now physical distancing? So, we already have an acceleration of e-banking, many units are being closed; e-business and e-commerce, e-education transformation, and to strengthen the work from home system.

What I am saying is that, I understand the crisis, I empathize with the

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Minister. We on this side support the approach by the Government to look after a population that is going to be in distress but we also want the Government to think as, we in the Opposition are thinking, about what do you do when we manage to survive, and in a transformed world because it will be transformed, we have to continue to progress. We want to be alerted and be assured that the expenditure that is being asked for here is going to be targeted to priorities and we also want to know that as we reduce our dependence globally, we are cutting off from the rest of the world that we will build up locally. And what are the things that we can do that can help us not to do harm to ourselves in the future as the foreign exchange depletes further, and as the HSF is reduced further, and what will ensure survival and help to build a platform for recovery and a more resilient economy? I take these things because we have to deal with the crisis, yes, because that is today. We must deal with it. But we have to deal with the prospect of tomorrow. Whatever happens, how many—regardless of how many people live, how many people get ill, people will die, we know that as a factor, hopefully not in Trinidad and Tobago, as they are dying elsewhere in the world, we still have to prepare for tomorrow.

Now, the legislation before us today, Madam Speaker, the Minister presented it in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, but I want to say the COVID-19 crisis has only made the legislation more urgent because the Government needs money more urgently. But all the measures before us in the Bill predate the COVID crisis. [*Desk thumping*] Now, the amendment to Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, for instance, I suspect that the Minister could have drawn down on the fund without the legislation. Perhaps he will tell me that he could not. But I think what the legislation does is to create a position that the Government will be



able to or the Minister of Finance in this case, will be able to draw down and come back to the Parliament within 60 days and tell us what he has done.

Now, the amendment to the Government Savings Bond Act is a consequence of a budget announcement in the 2020 budget and the amendment having to do with the Value Added Tax Act are based on measures that were announced in the budget of 2020 in October 2019. So, the measures that are brought here, while they take on a kind of emergency feeling in the context of the escalating COVID crisis both internationally and here, were not things that were contemplated post-COVID. They were all in the pipeline and announced months before the COVID crisis. [*Desk thumping*] Now, we need to protect jobs, we need to protect income and we are happy that there are measures by the Government to do this. It may be that they would have to extend this, it may be that they may have to support people more strongly, better but I am not sure, notwithstanding the assurances of the Minister, that it caters for all workers under this stress. And we cannot have, Madam Speaker, in this situation are conditions in which some can eat and others cannot, and I want to emphasize that point. It is a very important point. Whatever we do, however we try to be comprehensive, however by technicalities people are excluded, we have to make sure that it is a comprehensive, inclusive solution that allows all to have food at the table.

We are—for instance the Minister did not mention this here—retooling Tobago hotels, but we have no plan announced so far for food security. The Minister did not mention this, we are giving a \$100 million to the credit unions and that is good, it supports a very, very large sector of the country but there is no announced support package for small business that I can discern expect via the

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banking sector for those with loans. So, I need some clarity on some of those things. It supports business through the banking sector and it supports workers who are retrenched because of this crisis, but I need to get some clarity on two things: if businesses end up being closed either for the COVID crisis or because they cannot meet their economic and financial realities, what is going to be the sustenance offered to them? And secondly, if we have legislation which we have passed that makes it impossible for a business to open because the law is that they should be closed, what is the direct Government support to those businesses other than simply the employees from those businesses? [*Desk thumping*]

And I want to say, Madam Speaker, that the Government has a golden opportunity here to do two things: one is to pick up all the businesses that are not on the registry with the NIB and if they take a no penalty approach and simply use the opportunity to expand the list with the NIB, I think that that would be valuable in the long term, so we get all of these businesses who are unregistered, unconnected to be registered. And the second thing is that, we can also use this opportunity to widen the tax net with a no penalty approach in which a lot of the businesses that are now affected in this crisis and we are seeking to help, can be brought into the tax net because this will not last forever and eventually, we would have a better support system with the NIB, and we would have a larger base of revenue support from the private sector if we are able to do this. Okay?

So, we support the Bill, I want to say this, because citizens need relief and support, because businesses need relief and support, because COVID-19 has created a health emergency, an economic emergency and a financial emergency, and everybody looks to the Government for a solution because that is why

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governments exist. So, in this crisis situation and on this Bill, we will support the Government to find solutions. We will not stand in the way of solutions, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] Every day we in the Opposition try to put forward solutions in this country and we try to be part of the solution to the problems which emerge in this country. I want to remind the Members on the other side through you, Madam Speaker, that the hon. Leader of the Opposition asked for a meeting with the Prime Minister and in fact, five days later met with the hon. Prime Minister with a team from the Opposition, and she shared with the Prime Minister and his team a set of proposals from the Opposition, and the themes that she outlined, there were five of them, were protecting the vulnerable, so we could not but support what the Government is doing here for the vulnerable and the weak. [*Desk thumping*]

She proposed protecting the economy, and she had a number of issues under that, so we could not but support the measures by the Government for the economy. The hon. Leader of the Opposition included protection of our citizens' social net and the standard of living so, of course, in this Parliament we support these things. The Leader of the Opposition mentioned as well in her proposal, ensuring our medical response follows international best practice. Well, that has not arisen here but we support that, and we commend the health workers in the system for what they are doing for the entire country. [*Desk thumping*] And, of course, the fifth proposal was rebuilding our future as we ease out of the crisis. And that is why in my contribution here, I am telling the hon. Minister, yes, we support you in all your measures to deal with the crisis. We understand the measures, they are in line with our thinking but part of the requirements is also to

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prepare the ground for the future.

Now, I want to mention some things here that the hon. Leader of the Opposition mentioned. She said that it was especially important to cushion the effects of the crisis on small business, employment and the economy. I see that the proposals of the Government address some of those things. Government should consider making grants available to small business, in addition to those which already exist, as a way of ensuring cash to keep them running and workers paid. Now, I have seen no similar proposal from the Government. I do not know if they have a proposal of that kind or they have a position on this matter. They have used the route of the NIB, they have used the route of the banking sector, both of which I understand, appreciate and see the wisdom of, but I think this is a proposal that needs to be taken into account. Because when you look at the newspapers, even today, you see statements by the existing business sector speaking about the fact that not enough is being done for small and medium businesses. You sense from the manufacturing sector, worry about how long this would last and what the ultimate effect is going to be. The big businesses, of course, are worried too but they are better able to take care of themselves. The real worry there are the workers, and the businesses with 20 workers or so, and the businesses that have asked to close by law, those businesses have to eat too, and the workers from those businesses and establishments, whether they are registered with the BIR or whether they are registered with the NIB, they must be taken into account as well.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition also mentioned as well that Government may want to consider a tax holiday on business levy and Green Fund contributions, given that the profits of many businesses will be impacted. It is not just the profits,

Madam Speaker, it is the whole business itself. It is the survival of the businesses themselves. Government may want to consider a reduction or deferral on utility payments or micro and small businesses that have seen revenues severely depleted as a result of reduced operations. And the hon. Leader of the Opposition, of course, made recommendations on agriculture as well. She said we need an immediate and short-term agricultural policy measure to address the country's food security needs. We should use this time when our economy is relatively cut off to ramp up production, strengthen agro-processing linkages and build capacity. There would be an impact on food imports on the looming shortages and this country may lead to looting and banditry on citizens for food supplies. We need to incentivize farmers and prospective farmers to plant specific food crops now. Government may want to consider utilizing the Agricultural Development Bank, ADB, to provide support for farmers to ensure that food production could be ramped up to compensate for any food shortages that may occur. The announcement of tax free measures in the 2020 budget, and there was announced, Madam Speaker, a number of tax-free measures for agriculture in the 2020 budget.

**3.15 p.m.**

I can tell you that for the last three weeks I have been working with a farmer in my constituency and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Ministry of Finance in order to get a tax exempt machine that he has brought down for the production of feed food cleared because it is meant to be tax free. And for three weeks between those two Ministries I have not been able to make any progress. And the announcement of tax measures in the 2020 budget related to agriculture, tax-free measures, either the people in the governmental system do not

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know about them and how to execute those measures, or they are not working, Madam Speaker. And I want to say to the Minister of Finance that agriculture, following on the lead of the proposal made by the Leader of the Opposition to the hon. Prime Minister, that this is a very important thing that needs to be done in order to ensure food security.

Now, Madam Speaker, we are in a difficult time as the Minister himself said and a difficult time requires collaboration; it requires corporation; it requires a sense of shared purpose; it requires effective communication; it requires bringing people together; it requires getting every one behind an agreed plan. This is not the time that one would strive to be king of the mountain alone, by himself, nor to regard yourself as the fountain of all ideas. And that is why the collaboration is so important.

So the Government may have some ideas because they have a perspective; the business community, depending on the size of their business, may have some ideas, because they have their own perspective; the trade union may have their perspectives, so to the cooperatives and the credit unions, and so too the ordinary citizen, but the Opposition also has a view on these things and that is why we took the opportunity, the liberty, the hon. Leader of the Opposition, to engage the Government in this way even though without even trying the Leader of the Opposition had gotten an unnecessary “bouff”. But country comes first and on the basis of that she proceeded and she made those proposals.

And I want to say that we support the intent behind the legislation today. We are concerned about some of the targeting and the target groups and how particular measures will work and the reason we are concerned about this, Madam

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Speaker, is because governments and countries often fail on implementation and on execution and on delivering results. We do very well on announcements and promises but we are in a time here, Madam Speaker, where not a single citizen in this country wants our country to fail; not a single citizen in this country wants COVID-19 to spread; not a single citizen in this country wants to die. So everyone is behind the Government because in the hands of the Government stand success or failure for us as a country. And we in the Opposition we stand with the Government in this. And we expect to see therefore a certain amount of reciprocity in putting the nation first and in creating the collaborative climate that allows us to proceed in a certain way. But already dissatisfaction is brewing, Madam Speaker.

We had some little confusion over food cards; we had some little confusion—

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you, Member. Your original speaking is now spent, you are entitled to 15 more minutes to wind up your contribution. You may proceed.

**Dr. B. Tewarie:** Thank you very much. We had some little confusion over the NIB situation with unemployment relief, hopefully in a week that will be cleared. Small business as I said, I am not sure what is in for them; bigger businesses are concerned and people think that the Government is making the right announcement but they do not see the flesh, the meat of the proposals.

So when the Government comes here and says that they want to take money out of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and they want to pay VAT to businesses we do not have a problem with that. As I said, the VAT payment is late, it was promised in the last budget, people were asking for it before; there are terms and

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conditions in the value added tax legislation which have been violated and in this crisis time more than ever they need the money. But it is their money. It is money that the Government owes them. So the question arises: What are you going to do beyond that, Madam Speaker, if we are really to have the economy and businesses to survive?

Now, I have been hinting that perhaps there is some unevenness in the measures and if we are going to get this kind of money, \$1.6 billion out of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that we are going to deploy in addition to the \$6 billion in relation to VAT, which will come, I presume here, out of the banking sector; if we are going to have that kind of money and it is going to be deployed in expenditure it is important for us to know in a very targeted way where it is going to go and how it is going to impact.

You see when the HSF was established, it was established to save and to invest the money, and as the Minister said, it was to use the money in times like these when the revenue was short. But the Minister seemed to suggest that there is no heritage side to this legislation, but it is called the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act. So there is a heritage side to the legislation because the heritage side to the legislation says, that when the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund gets to a billion dollars there is nothing that you can do to touch it. And that is the heritage side.

So you have a stabilisation and you have a heritage side and I want to tell you something about this, Madam Speaker. In 2007 the assets of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was US \$1.76 billion. And that was money put in there from the year 2,000 to the year 2007. So it took us seven years to get \$1.76 billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. By the end of 2009 the value was \$3 billion.



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In September 2015 when we left office the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was US \$5.6 billion. [*Desk thumping*] In 2017 it was 5.8. In September 2019 it was 6.25.

Now the Minister admitted as we all know that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund got a hit in the equities market, in the stock market, and he said we made a gain yesterday of about 10 per cent, he said, and I would like the Minister to indicate what the amount is, because I do not know if the fund is above six billion or under six billion. And if we got an exact number I know that that will vary as the stock market fluctuates. But it would be good since we are talking about taking money out of the HSF that we know how much is in it today. [*Desk thumping*] We need to know how much it is today.

Now I want to emphasize two things, that the increase between 5.6 and 5.8 when it did, and to 6.25, was done on the basis of investment not by putting in any money by this Government in the last four and a half years, and that the losses have since reduced the amount that is available. Now we are talking here about a US \$1.6 billion withdrawal from the HSF. That is a lot of money, Madam Speaker. And when you add the 1.6 billion HSF, the six billion bonds, you are talking about a total expenditure here of about US 2.4 billion, nearly about \$16 billion. And I want to say that \$16 billion is about one-third of the projected revenue for this year, which is TT \$47.7 billion and which may be more than that depending on how much revenue we get because the Minister himself says that that may fluctuate.

Now in that situation and we are coming in addition—I do not want to anticipate, with another Bill which calls for more—TT 10 billion increase in the loan ceiling, but when you add all of this together there is a lot of expenditure here.

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And the Minister came today and he gave us some of the expenditure, one hundred thousand here, four hundred here, et cetera, and they add up I think he said to TT \$2.5 billion, if I am not mistaken. But I do not think that accounts for the entire amount that is being withdrawn from the HSF. [*Desk thumping*]

So while we understand where the Minister is going, we understand what he is trying to protect and support, we need to have an account of where all the money is likely to go, Madam Speaker. You see, because they have drawn down on two occasions from the HSF before and I do not think that we have an accounting of where the drawdowns on the two previous occasions were actually spent and where the moneys were allocated. [*Desk thumping*] So we support the Government, we want to work with the Government for the sake of Trinidad and Tobago and all its citizens. We support the measures that will bring relief but we want to hold the Government to account. You cannot use the crisis to simply take the money and not fully account for it. We must have a sense of where every cent is going. [*Desk thumping*]

And the Minister played down the heritage side, but I want to say that in 2014, Madam Speaker, we had drafted a Bill, I would not spend any time on this, and the main purpose of that Bill was to amend section 15 of the Act to increase the floor of the fund from \$1 billion which you cannot touch now under the existing law to \$3½ billion, US. So we would have created, if this Bill had been brought to Parliament and passed, I think the problem then was that we were caught up between whether you have one fund or you have two funds, one heritage, one stabilization, the minimum that would have been allocated for heritage under our administration would have been \$3.5 billion. And I wonder if in making

amendments to the HSF whether the Minister, who has been on record as saying that they would come to the Parliament to separate the heritage and stabilization functions, two distinctly different functions, whether the Minister would want to make an amendment that would in fact set a ceiling for the money that would be heritage, and could not be withdrawn under any circumstances even as we support here his right and his ability and the option he is now taking in the legislation for him to take out 1.6 billion and to be able to come to the Parliament 60 days later.

Sixty days is too long, Madam Speaker. There is no reason why the Minister could not account to the Parliament in a shorter time and it is very important. Now this Government has had a certain view of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, I want to say. In June of 2016 the Prime Minister said that there is nothing wrong with an HSF withdrawal. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March it was indicated that the Government wanted to amend the HSF legislation for emergency drawdown. The Prime Minister goes on record—in one of his press conferences he said that the HSF and the foreign reserves are our strength. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017, they, speaking at a party meeting—the Prime Minister—justified the withdrawals and said the fund was well managed in spite of the withdrawals. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 2017, in this House of Representatives the Minister of Finance defended two withdrawals saying that it was done according to procedure, TT \$2.5 million in one instance and TT \$1.7 billion in the second instance; May 16<sup>th</sup> and March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017. At that time it was supposed to be budget financing for development programme. And he then promised to split the HSF into two distinct funds, the bulk in heritage and the rest in stabilization for budget deficits.

So the issue I am raising here, Madam Speaker, is not whether these

measures are justified. They are justified. We have a crisis of humungous proportions and it is an emergency situation in health, in business, in economy, in finance; we must do something. There are two issues that I am raising here. The first is how properly targeted are likely to be the appropriation and the disbursement of funds to the various target groups that are stakeholders in the society. And I am making the case that if you do not allow small and medium businesses and the manufacturing sector to survive we are going to have a serious crisis. [*Desk thumping*]

The second issue that I am raising is the fact that it is a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and that we should also make provision to secure the heritage side of the fund notwithstanding the crisis at the present time which we must deal with. And the third thing that I am raising is that although the Minister is amending the legislation so that he can take the money out now rather than wait until the end of the year and that he will have flexibility to come back to Parliament, he should be able to do that in a shorter time than sixty days and we are asking for that consideration as well. What we are doing therefore, Madam Speaker, is supporting the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, supporting the Government and asking for accountability. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I welcome the contribution coming from my learned friend, the Member for Caroni Central that, in effect and in summary, that there is support for the legislation before us. The hon. Member I am sure would agree that urgency is what is required and efficiency is what is required. And permit me to address some of the issues raised by my learned colleague and to put them into context.

May I at the outset indicate, Madam Speaker, I am told by the Bench opposite, the Whip, that there are approximately six speakers in this debate on their end and if I dare say so, Madam Speaker, we are here today treating with this Bill in the circumstance set out by the Minister of Finance to treat with the emergency situation of finances for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago in today's sitting, without interrupting the rules of anticipation in today's sitting, by way of two pieces of work in the Parliament.

The first work that we are doing is this Bill which amends the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, the Government Saving Bonds Act and Value Added Tax Act. That is the first piece of work. The second piece of work is effectively to allow us to raise the ceiling limits for borrowings. In other words, Madam Speaker, we are seeking to use reserves that belong to the people of Trinidad and Tobago in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and also to cause payments and liquidity to people who are required to hold down in the situation. But under the Motion to come, effectively, we are looking to borrow money.

Now I say that because rooted in the VAT side of the equation and amendments there is a concept of borrowing as a bond in fact has certain elements of that nature. But let me just say this, Madam Speaker, most respectfully, everything that we require to address in the second work that we have to do has been said already in piloting this debate and therefore I find it inconceivable that we are not addressing these matters together. I just put that on the record. [*Desk thumping*] I say that because hon. Members opposite say that they want to support efficiency, yet the very decision that they have taken today is the opposite of that. [*Desk thumping*] Let me repeat that, Madam Speaker. The faster we assent to this

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legislation today is the faster the relief that we can bring to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, [*Desk thumping*] the same people that the hon. Member for Caroni Central just spoke about, the same people, the SMEs, the poorest of our lot, the same people who are waiting on our position, what are we going to wait on six speakers opposite to say, [*Desk thumping*] in another Motion with another six speakers, Madam Speaker? I mean, come on.

Madam Speaker, with the greatest of respect, it is either you are sincere about what you say and you so demonstrate by your action or just do not say it at all. [*Desk thumping*] And I really mean what I am saying here today, Madam Speaker, because if one puts into context what the Member for Caroni Central has told us today about planning for the future and about the Leader of the Opposition calling upon the Government to do certain things. The hon. Member mentioned the facility that we intend to use which is the NIB structure to pay things. And the hon. Member said something which I commend him for, because it is the first time it has been said.

In that NIB structure we will have that ability in processing the relief payments that we give to people, and in particular people who come to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services who are not in the NIB structure because people have been breaking the law, employers who do not register their employees, et cetera. In the Member for Caroni Central's contribution in commending the Government to have an opportunity to effectively close the circuit and widen the net, I want to ask the hon. Member now, if that is the position of the Opposition why on God's earth is there no support for the Revenue Authority which is exactly what that is supposed to do? [*Desk thumping*]

You see, Madam Speaker, today the Opposition comes to give us a contribution to this discussion and their actions in Trinidad and Tobago in resisting property tax, in resisting the Revenue Authority, all of these actions—

**Dr. Tewarie:** 48(1), Madam Speaker.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Madam Speaker, I am answering what the hon. Member put on the record. I cannot believe he is raising that, but I will let you rule.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so, Member for San Fernando West, I would really ask you to reign in what you are saying and please proceed with what is before us.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am properly responding, I took notes to what the hon. Member said, I will be guided by you. I noticed that the hon. Member gets a little hot under the collar when you raise the issues. I wrote down, courtesy the benefit of technology, everything the hon. Member had to say, and in his wide ranging discussion the hon. Member spoke to the Bill for exactly four minutes. Four minutes, he spoke to the clauses of the Bill, everything else was the underwriting of the long term policies and how the Government is going to go. So I cannot imagine that my learned friend does not want me to answer what he himself has put on the record. So I say that most respectfully because it is disingenuous to take that approach, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in looking at the inconsistency of the Opposition, and I say that insofar as the hon. Member said that the Leader of the Opposition's proposals would utilize the NIB and banking sector, the business sector, small, medium sector, not enough is being done, the SME needs to be done. He said that they too have to eat and it must be taken into account. The hon. Member proposed a tax holiday on Business Levy and Green Fund and utility payments, but I want to start

off by the understanding of what Trinidad and Tobago is not, and surely the country needs to be reminded what we are not.

We are not the United States of America. We are based upon reserve requirements for our currency. We cannot operate our system by printing money. The United States operates on a faith system. Their money is backed by faith in their currency. There is no backing to their currency and the manner in which their currency is addressed as a reserve currency in this world is by the question mark that is really related to their debt and their ability to service debt. We cannot print money in this country; we cannot issue a \$5 trillion package. This country has to survive on its income. Income is something which is generated by way of taxation or royalties if you want to consider royalties separate from taxation. [*Desk thumping*]

The hon. Member effectively made two points. One, the need for specificity of accounting, in what he called targeting and secondly, the only other point that the hon. Member made was the time frame for reporting. I will address those two but I will address it in the context of what the hon. Member said. I want to remind the hon. Member who is a well experienced person that no money in Trinidad and Tobago is without an account. This is pursuant to Chapter 8 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago starting off at section 112 of the Constitution. This is so because all moneys that come into Trinidad and Tobago go into the Consolidated Fund. In other words, the amendments to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that we are doing now have to go into the Consolidated Fund and we will have to close the accounts [*Desk thumping*] of Trinidad and Tobago.

The hon. Member has been a Member of this Parliament since the 1980s



when the hon. Member served in the NAR Government. I do not know if my learned colleague has forgotten all that has happened between 1989 to 2020, but we certainly did not amend the Constitution in Chapter 8 which requires the Consolidated Fund to be accounted for by the closing of accounts, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] And therefore the specificity of spending is going to be given in line Item, Ministry by Ministry, subject as well to the Auditor General's scrutiny in thousands of pages in this Parliament.

**3.45 p.m.**

So, Madam Speaker, what is the hon. Member telling us about the need for specificity now? Madam Speaker, I want to also remind that we, as a Parliament, had the benefit of the hon. Minister of Finance, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, putting forward a budget of estimates. At page 75 of the *Hansard* for the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 2019, the Minister of Finance set out the total revenue for Trinidad and Tobago for 2020 is expected to be \$47.749 billion; oil revenue, 11 billion odd; non-oil revenue, 35.7 billion odd; capital revenue, 0.95 billion odd. The Minister of Finance has come here today to say, "Listen, the oil price which we estimated dropped under \$20. Oscillating in the early 20s, we estimated it for the first quarter, proven to be correct, at \$60 odd per barrel and we are saying therefore, that \$11 billion in oil revenue is going to be almost wiped out by 50 per cent at least in this year."

The hon. Minister of Finance also pointed out to the petrochemical sector, and the manufacturing sector, and the services sectors being hit by an event that this world has never seen in the context that we are seeing it. Madam Speaker, it is a matter of history that the Spanish flu ran through in 1920 and that 40-odd million

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people died, but we did not have a derivatives market.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** 1918.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** 1918, forgive me. 1918 we did not have a derivatives market. We did not have stocks, and bonds, and positions of economies as we have now. We do not have the interrelated globalization factor and therefore, what we are treating with now is entirely unprecedented in the world and let me show you what I mean.

Madam Speaker, would you believe, everybody knows about Lloyd's of London. They have been around as an underwriting syndicate for hundreds of years. Lloyd's was opened through World War I, World War II. The pandemics, the crises that hit this world, Lloyd's of London stayed opened. Lloyd's of London was opened in the 2008 crash, global crash in the economy. I am reading here from "The Insurer—Global risk capital intelligence", their website, and it says here: "Coronavirus could halt Future at Lloyd's progress: Fitch", "Lloyd's seeks to dismiss..."—certain aspects, "Lloyd's closes underwriting room". Lloyd's of London, for the first time in its history that I am aware of, having stayed opened in its underwriting department through World War I and World War II, and 2008, has closed their underwriting room and gone to an online system because people in their department have contracted COVID.

So Lloyd's of London has closed its underwriting and gone online—and by the way the system crashed because of the sheer volume coming into it—and today the Opposition's recommendation to us is, come with certainty and we need specificity? And all of a sudden we forget about the consolidated accounting in the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and also, the obligation by

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law to close the accounts in Trinidad and Tobago with specifics, Madam Speaker? I mean really, I am disappointed. We are going to have six speakers opposite not talk to the next Motion at the same time so we could give relief to people by what? By delay? By raising up strawmen arguments about the need for specificity now?

Madam Speaker, in a global crisis where Lloyd's underwriting department closed for the first time in hundreds of years, we are supposed to come back to Parliament in under 60 days? Where are the people to do the accounting and the reporting going to come from to do it in under 60 days? I mean, there has to be a sense of pragmatism and reality that must descend upon the Members of the Opposition at some point most respectfully. It is not that we do not have the Auditor General, the closing of accounts, and the reporting in a positive obligation. You see, Madam Speaker, it is good enough to talk but for heaven's sake now is the time to talk sense, and I honestly and genuinely recommend that the voice that we ought to be hearing now in Trinidad and Tobago from all MPs, is a call to our respective constituents. I have not heard from the Members opposite a call to order in our constituencies in a resonating way. Where was the call to the beachgoers? Where was the call to the "liming" at Caura River? Where was the call to Ian Alleyne, a UNC candidate in an election, supposedly, I am told, attended the press conference held by the hon. Leader of the Opposition?

**Mr. Lee:** 48(1), Madam Speaker. I do not know why the Attorney General is pulling Mr. Alleyne into this—some press conference.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** What is that, 48(1)?

**Mr. Lee:** It had no relevance on the Bill. [*Crosstalk*]

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Yes, Madam Speaker. Where is the call for responsibility on

the part of the Opposition? Look, the country will not think less of any Member for just saying, “Ay, step in line. Follow the rules. Do your peer part.” [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, in the amendments before us to the VAT Act, to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, we are effectively saying we have to keep the lights on. We are not the United States of America. We need the money. The Member today calls for Green Fund and business levy moratorium. Madam Speaker, when your oil and gas revenue is decimated, when your other non-oil sector is decimated, where are we going to get the money to pay people? Caroni Central, [*Member snaps his fingers*] snap your fingers?

**Mr. Imbert:** Jumbie beads.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** [*Member snaps his fingers*] Jumbie beads? You see, Madam Speaker, the call for responsibility applies to the measures in the Bill itself. Look, Madam Speaker, the first option is to get cash. Cash in, which comes from the amendments to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and cash out, because the Minister of Finance has already addressed the multiple avenues to pay money to the private sector including the SMEs, including the unemployed, including the people who are decimated by the closure of businesses and services. So it is money into the Consolidated Fund and it is money out of the Consolidated Fund via the respective avenues. That is what we are doing.

So the SME management requires us to hold on but I want to repeat something that I found most powerful in the simplicity of what is required and this comes from the hon. Prime Minister. This equation is a four-part equation: the public sector must play its part, the private sector must play its part, the unions

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must play their part, and the individuals must play their part [*Desk thumping*] and, Madam Speaker, I really honestly wished that we could have immediately made a decision with respect to taxation. The job of the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago is to contemplate legislatively all options in situations. I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that the Bill before us today, there were five different versions drafted because the advice coming from the Attorney General to Government in all of this has to be in multiple options and then the Cabinet selects one.

Madam Speaker, we are legislatively prepared for all options—all—and I do mean all. And I want to take this opportunity to pause and thank, from the bottom of my heart, the entire team at the AG's Office as we have sat for days and nights calculating and prescribing legislative options for all options. And I also want to add into that my colleagues at the LRC, Minister Hinds, Minister Deyalsingh, Minister Mitchell and Minister Clarence Rambharat because we have been working to past midnight, every single night, together with the Deputy Chief Parliamentary Counsel, the assistants and the Chief Parliamentary Counsel, all of them on frontline activity.

So today when we came, Madam Speaker, I heard a very curious submission coming from Caroni Central that the Government is in breach of the laws in the VAT Act. What is the hon. Member referring to? Madam Speaker, as we treat with the amendments to the VAT Act in the Bill before us—and let us look at that. In this Bill, we are proposing an amendment into the VAT Act and hon. Member is correct in saying—Caroni Central—that clause 3 of the Bill which is an amendment to the Government Savings Bonds, and clause 4 which is an amendment to the Value Added Tax Act, are matters which we were dealing prior

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to COVID—that is true—but, Madam Speaker, thank the Lord for the fact that we were doing that. You see, the hon. Minister of Finance announced in the budget, the VAT bonds; announced in the budget, the utilization of Government bonds, and we were fully intended to take these courses of action. All of the underwriting, if I can use that expression, meaning the preparatory work to get this thing done at the Ministry of Finance and other divisions, has been done. So what we are doing today is we are crystalizing work done already. It is exactly like the mammoth event which happened at the Attorney General's Office.

We, at the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, we went online with whole of Government Ministry payments for the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, allowing us to implement 5,000 people per day being redirected online. You can get your birth certificate, your death certificate, et cetera, by payments online. That did not happen because of COVID. We have been working on that for years and therefore, clauses 3 and 4 are work products that we have had into gear but let me address the allegation, the unspecified allegation coming from Caroni Central that somehow the Government is in breach of the VAT Act, and let me look at that in the context of the VAT Act itself and I want to quote what the hon. Member said that the terms and conditions of the VAT Act are being violated.

Madam Speaker, the VAT Act is a specific piece of law. It is Chap. 75:06. It was born as Act No. 37 of 1989. It has been amended some 37-odd times plus and the obligation that we are treating with legislatively today, we are putting in a new Part 5A into the VAT Act after Part 5. We are inserting special provisions for refunds of tax and we are allowing specifically for the purposes of meeting any

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liability to refund any tax—meaning a VAT tax, right—the Minister is authorized to sign agreements on behalf of the Government, make payments in any form whatsoever including the issuing of bonds. Now I say that because section 35 of the VAT Act is the springboard that allows for a refund to be paid. Section 35(2) says:

“Where, in a return furnished to the Board in accordance with section 31, a refund of any amount is specified as being due, the Board shall satisfy the amount—

(a) by paying the amount, or any of it, to the person whom the refund is due...”

It is arguable that section 35(2)(a), which simply says you can pay the amount, it is arguable that the Government can pay that amount in any manner possible. One thing you are sure of is that the UNC likes to threaten to go to court for everything and as a responsible Attorney General, I will not rely upon their good graces to get law right. And therefore, notwithstanding the fact that section 35(2)(a) arguably permits payments of the sums due as specified by the hon. Minister of Finance—I just do not trust the Opposition—I have recommended and the hon. Minister has agreed, that we amend the law to specifically provide for payment by way of bonds.

Now, Madam Speaker, there is a large elephant in the room and I want to address that. That large elephant in the room is the concept of interest. The VAT Act does provide that where you are beyond a certain period that there is an interest due after six months of a certification, interest is due at 1 per cent per month. I want to remind that that is entirely subject to the certification

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methodologies by the value added tax calculators and assessors who certify those positions. Secondly is, I want to remind that the priority of payments and the ability to set off refunds also exist in law. So I do not know if that was what the hon. Member was referring to but the fact is, it is open to any Government under the Value Added Tax Act to in fact apply refunds to taxes which are owing. And therefore, Madam Speaker, I want to compliment—

**Madam Speaker:** Member for San Fernando West, your original half an hour speaking time is now spent. You are entitled to 15 more minutes to wrap up your contribution.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Should it please you.

**Madam Speaker:** Please proceed.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Thank you. And therefore, I want to compliment the hon. Minister of Finance, instead of hiding behind a technicality of saying, “Yeah, you have a refund but we will not pay you the refund, we will apply it towards another tax”, I want to compliment the Minister of Finance for particularizing the number of people who will receive cash by way of refund [*Desk thumping*] and I want to remind what the hon. Minister of Finance told us here today.

The hon. Minister of Finance told the country that we are looking not only at value added tax refunds but we are looking at value added tax refunds for 9,364 individuals comprising 92 per cent of the category of persons to whom the value added tax payment refunds are due, and that that sum is \$277 million. I want to go further that the Minister of Finance has done the work to also identify income tax refunds—that is not value added tax—to some 9,397 individuals, to an accumulated a sum of \$110 million, and when you add those two together, \$387



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million is to be pumped into Trinidad and Tobago's economic system, the veins and the lifeblood of our system by next week. [*Desk thumping*] And, Madam Speaker, I want to remind this, could not have been done just so because of COVID. This work was in gear, it was being calculated, the Minister of Finance who receives a lot of criticism and a lot of fight from certain people as we all wrestle to try and do it, he has the obligation to take the blows and takes it like a man. Because it is not easy to be the person to say, "I cannot afford this" or "I cannot afford that" and therefore, Madam Speaker, this relief of \$387 million in taxes alone, VAT and other taxes, is welcome because that is where we make the call to the SMEs and to the businesses in the four-part equation to hold strain.

The messenger is in targeting, please keep people employed. Hold on! It cannot be that you only do it in good times. Yes, the hon. Member across me is saying, "Where will they get the money?" The money is coming by way of some of the refunds, the money is coming by way of some of the payments. The hon. Minister of Finance has also said that trade receivables will be paid. So, Madam Speaker, as the hon. Members know, the call to the banks to drop prime, to skip mortgage payments, to reduce the benefit down, all of these things, whether by way of write-off or not, there are limits to Government action. I honestly hope that the hon. Members of the Opposition will join in the chorus.

I know the Member for Tabaquite is very often on record in Parliament in calling on banks to do their fair share and as the Minister of Finance has addressed the banking sector, not only by Central Bank adjustment of the repo rate, not only by a 3 per cent reduction in prime, not only by the movement of credit card interest down from 24 per cent to 10 per cent—and that is for interest that is under a

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\$25,000 limit or from 24 per cent to 14 per cent in respect of limits above 25 per cent—not only are all of those things done, but we are asking the Opposition, instead of the rhetoric of “All hail Siparia”, join us in the push to ask all sectors to hold their own.

Madam Speaker, I want to tell you this. As Attorney General, I have called for every bar licence that has been issued by the licensing committee, I have called for that information so that we can target every bar owner in Trinidad and Tobago—because they must be licensed—so we will know them and can therefore apply a targeting mechanism to those most vulnerable via the NIB. We are all busy at the same time doing our respective jobs. [*Desk thumping*] We all fall in line. My colleagues, the Minister of National Security and the Minister of Health, those two frontline spokesmen together with the Minister of Communications and the hon. Prime Minister, the rest of us are in the background doing our jobs and that is what is required.

Madam Speaker, when we look to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and the exhortation coming from Caroni Central that we must look to the heritage side of it, the hon. Member asked how much was in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund at present, and I am able to say that that is \$5.75 billion. Yesterday alone, we earned US \$150 million because in the face of adversity is opportunity. The disaggregation of investments by the fund manager includes debt and equity. What do I mean by that? Bonds, treasury notes, other structures are investments, and fortunately because the Federal Reserves of the United States of America was quick-footed and opened the Fed window in respect of certain instruments. In other words then, holding the value of instruments by buying them back, buying

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back US treasury notes, buying back that kind of arrangement, we preserved value

But the stock market is right now in its state of flux, one of the most aggressive money earners as we speak for people who are experienced in that area and therefore, we are confident that Trinidad and Tobago's fund manager, who has been doing a brilliant job for the many years whilst that fund manager has been in place, is acting in the best interest of our country. What do we want the \$1.5 billion for? We want that for budgetary support. Where will that accounting go? It will go into the closing of the year end. That is a mandatory requirement under the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. We just did one in January 2020 as we closed off the last financial year. All of the specifics will be provided.

Madam Speaker, when we look to the provisions of clause 3, I just want to add that even though we made an amendment recently to the Government Savings Bond Act, we wanted to preserve the transferability of bonds and specifically, we wanted to, in the VAT refund positions, maintain the prescriptions by way of regulations so that we can avoid primary legislation holding back the process and we are using the regulatory regime requirements. Madam Speaker, I genuinely believe that we are in difficult circumstances, yes, but that we have opportunities for innovation. We have opportunities, thank the Lord for our Internet penetration; thank the Lord for our users by smartphones, et cetera, as we have a two to one supply in Trinidad and Tobago to every individual. We are one of the largest penetrative markets, online purchasing, *Tootoolbay.com* as they deliver, delivery services that you are seeing coming from food vendors, supermarkets as you saw Tru Valu. We are seeing innovation jump into the equation.

I ask Trinidadians and Tobagonians to innovate our way out of difficulty.

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We can do that.

**Dr. Tewarie:** I agree.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** I am able to say, Madam Speaker, we will open in a matter of weeks the remand centres for videoconferencing at Golden Grove and Remand Yard. Why? We jumped into the dance, built out the centres, got it done. At the AG's Office, our property and business real estate solution and our solution for the Companies Act, they will allow us to go full online filing for everything.

**Mr. Lee:** 48(1), Madam Speaker. I am trying to understand where the Attorney General is going with his Ministry.

**Madam Speaker:** Attorney General, I will allow you based on the point about innovating out of the difficulty. Please continue.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Unfortunately, Pointe-a-Pierre is resolute on demonstrating the Opposition's stance. The Opposition's stance [*Desk thumping*] when a Government Member stands up and tells the country that we can innovate our way out of difficulty and have faith, Pointe-a-Pierre finds that to be irrelevant. Madam Speaker, what possesses my friends opposite? Genuinely, I ask that question. Is it that Pointe-a-Pierre does not want the Government to give comfort to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we can do this?

**Mr. Forde:** Sit down and let him answer, sit down and let him answer.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Let me ask you that question. I will give way. [*Minister sits*] Let the record show that when asked the question as to why stamp out positivity, that Pointe-a-Pierre sat in his seat and stayed quiet.

**Dr. Rambachan:** Why are you getting angry?

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** I am getting angry because of the—

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**Madam Speaker:** Attorney General.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Yes, Madam Speaker, I will continue. Madam Speaker, the anger for the people of Trinidad and Tobago is where we cannot agree upon common sense. Look, Madam Speaker, the amendments before us will not be the last amendments. There are more amendments to come. The Parliament will no doubt continue to sit. I have drafted three other Bills that are of equally severe importance to the business and continuity in this situation. Any recommendations that comes from my learned friends opposite as to what may be something in need of attention, we welcome. My colleagues opposite, Madam Speaker, as you know, we have a good relationship. It is just on the floor that something possesses a few to behave a particular way but the Government is saying, bring constructive ideas forward. Let us be targeted in approach. We do have more amendments to be made. This is very simple law before us right now but very powerful.

I genuinely regret the inability to support the Opposition's position in not supporting the Motion which we have next because I would like to get done with this business, and I thank you for this opportunity, Madam Speaker, to contribute to this. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it really gives me no pleasure in joining this debate here this afternoon to talk about an Act to amend the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, the Government Savings Bond Act, and the Value Added Tax Act because we are here in a crisis and the Opposition understands the crisis, and before we break for tea, I just want to raise some of the concerns that the Attorney General raised in his contribution. He

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started off by being— urgency and efficiency, and chastising the Opposition of not bringing the two Bills together—the Motion and the Bill—and that is our prerogative, Madam Speaker, because the Motion that we will debate later on [*Desk thumping*] was placed on the Order Paper on January 31<sup>st</sup> and it had nothing to do COVID. The Act that we are doing right now with the HSF, and the VAT, and the Savings Bond is about COVID measures that the Minister of Finance spoke about.

So I listened to the Attorney General and I think I bore some of the brunt of his debate, and I think the Attorney General is suffering from a lack of media attention because every day for the last few days, I am only seeing some good colleagues of his, Arouca/Maloney, even the Minister of Finance, the Minister of National Security, and the Minister of Health, every day on the—

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I rise on Standing Order 48(1). I will repay my colleague with 48(1).

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, please continue. I will just remind you about personal infections. Okay?

**Mr. D. Lee:** Thank you. I am guided, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, and the Attorney General used the words, “he does not trust the Opposition”.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Nope!

**4.15 p.m.**

I want to tell him and his bench, we on the Opposition do not trust this Government. [*Desk thumping*] Because we are here to debate a Bill, changing how we take out money from the HSF and we just do not trust this Government in giving us the true story behind the removal of the money. We are talking about

removing TT \$10.2 billion from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, Madam Speaker, TT \$10.2 billion. If you take US \$1.5 billion by 6.80, you get TT \$10.2 billion. That is not small money, that is not small money and the Attorney General comes here and tries to say that we do not know, the Opposition does not know and we should not account to the Opposition. It is not about accounting to the Opposition, it is about accounting to the taxpayers of this country. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I listened to the Attorney General, talking about closing of accounts. I wonder which year he is talking about closing of accounts. Is it the 2020 accounts he is talking about? We are six months into a financial year. The financial year started in October, we are in March. Six months into a financial year and we are seeing \$10.2 billion that the Minister of Finance is asking for to be removed from the HSF and we can only account for 2.5 this afternoon and the rest goes into a black hole called the Consolidated Fund. That is what this Government is asking us to take on board. And, Madam Speaker, it is not the Opposition's money, it is not the Government's money, it is the taxpayers' money.

Madam Speaker, I want to compliment the foresight of the Opposition Leader, then Prime Minister of this country to build up the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund between 2010 to 2015, and that is the same fund that they are now dipping into and it is required to assist the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So I have to compliment the Opposition Leader, then Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

You know, they talked about the NGC funds and the abuse and the use of—well, the number changes, Madam Speaker, from 14, 16, 12, 10, and you

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know, I listened to the Minister of Finance over the last four and a half years here in this Chamber and every time you ask him about accounting for money, he says “Well, it is ah big pool, it is ah big pool”, and we cannot give specificity but “it is ah big pool”. [*Crosstalk*] Now, Madam Speaker, they always like to talk about the NGC funds. I want to say to the population—and they always talk about the removal of the NGC funds. Those NGC funds could be placed in that Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, that is why it is built up today.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1), please.  
[*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, I rule on Standing Order 48(1) on that it is irrelevant. Please continue on another point that relates to either what has been said or what is in the Bill.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Sure, Madam Speaker, I am guided. The point is about the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and the Minister of Finance and even the Attorney General accounted to the funding and the amount that is in this Heritage and Stabilisation Fund over \$5 billion-plus, US dollars. When my colleague the Member for Caroni Central was talking, he showed how that fund grew under the PP Government led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar and that is the same fund that we are dipping in today and that is the point I was trying to say, on how those funds could have been accumulated under the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, so I want to thank her for that, for allowing this country. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I want to spend a little time on the Attorney General. He talked about SMEs and so forth. You know, listening to the passion of the Attorney General here this afternoon in his debate, one would have thought—and I



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get the impression that he is saying to us “we are all in this together”. Not so, Attorney General? And you are asking the Opposition to come on board, Madam Speaker, and we are on board. [*Desk thumping*] But I want to say to the Attorney General and to the listening public and the viewers out there that the Attorney General is a landlord of this country to the Government and I was hoping—

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1), please, 48(1). [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I am going to give you a little leeway to tie that in. If not, you have to move on to another point.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Madam Speaker, “yuh giving me some leeway”. Right? There are revenues and expenditures and we are in trying times and the Attorney General is asking everyone—public, Government, individuals and unions—to get on board to save this country and it is about saving where we can save. The Attorney General is asking SMEs, business sector, try and keep your employees employed for the good of the country, for the good of their families. I agree with that, we agree with that. But, Madam Speaker, in saving expenditure, I was hoping the Attorney General would have said he was giving six months’ free Government rent for this country.

**Madam Speaker:** All right. So in terms of measures, I am not going to allow you to continue with that. Please move on to another point.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Would you give way?

**Mr. D. Lee:** No, no, no.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** “Yuh afraid I will answer.”

**Mr. D. Lee:** No, you want to—okay, I will give way.

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**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Perhaps the hon. Member does not know that the company that I have an interest in that does in fact rent a property to the Government has already given three months' rent free. Perhaps you just do not know that in your attempt to malign people, so I do not know what the Opposition is trying to do but he is too late and that has already been the effect.

**Madam Speaker:** Please move on to another point.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Madam Speaker, if the Attorney General just said that he is giving three months' rent free to the Government and the people, I want to thank him.

**Madam Speaker:** I just ruled to move on to another point please, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. [*Crosstalk*] Attorney General. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, are you completed or are you continuing with your contribution?

**Mr. D. Lee:** Yeah, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Right.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I want to turn to the Minister of Finance in his presentation and we agree on this side, it is about saving jobs, keeping everybody alive, saving the economy. When I looked at the measures that the Minister of Finance talked about, VAT refunds for a number of individuals or companies, income tax refunds also for individuals and companies, it talks about SMEs, the small and medium businesses in this country and presently the small and medium businesses are suffering, literally closing down as we speak, Madam Speaker, on a daily basis, and those who are opened, their doors are opened, are basically about trying to earn whatever little revenue they can get to keep their employees employed so that they can feed their families.

Before this pandemic hit this country, the economy of Trinidad and Tobago was

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already flat and I would use the words “in the doldrums”, and businesses, especially that small and medium sector that employs thousands of individuals in this country—thousands, some would say over 80,000 workers—they were already suffering, those businesses, and they were just breaking even or barely making ends meet and then we had this pandemic. And really and truly, I would have thought that some of the initiatives to help that sector of this country that this Minister of Finance talked about, and I just want to go back to some statements that the Minister of Finance—and I agree, it is an important sector but I just need to reinforce some of his meaning for the small and medium business sector.

In his Budget Statement of 2018, on October 02, 2017, in the section in the budget under the “Business Development Incentive Programme”, the Minister of Finance—and I want to quote from page 14, and I quote:

“Madam Speaker, another area of focus for the Government is the stimulation of the small to medium sized businesses.”

Another quote:

“Thus, we see the encouragement of small and medium businesses as crucial to our future development. As they succeed, many successful small businesses will grow and expand and even become big businesses.”

So the Minister of Finance is in agreement that this is a critical sector in the society. I go on because I need it for the records, Madam Speaker:

“However, small businesses face a different range of problems than their larger counterparts, due to their inability to enjoy some of the same advantages in the marketplace”—as the bigger businesses. “Most of these problems are due to revenue and cash-on-hand availability when the bills

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become due.”

So even back in October 02, 2017, the Minister of Finance recognized the problems with the SMEs and I want to really compliment him for recognizing that back in 2017 and even the Minister of Trade, the hon.—

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, could you quickly tie what you are talking about in 2017 and so on, to what the measures are before us? Because I do not think we are dealing with the past, you have admitted a pandemic has changed everything, please tie it into what is before us.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Madam Speaker, the point that I am trying to say is that the SMEs that the Minister of Finance made in his presentation are critical to this society and even over the last few years—

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I have heard you say that. I do not need you to reinforce it. I am asking you to tie it to what we are doing here.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Sure, Madam Speaker. What I am trying to say is that there are not enough incentives announced by the Minister of Finance to help that sector of the economy.

**Mr. Imbert:** What that has to do with this?

**Mr. D. Lee:** How do you mean “What that has to do with it”? You are withdrawing US \$1.5 billion.

Madam Speaker, as I move on, I would have thought that—when I researched and I looked at the some of the measures of rescue packages on the international—in some countries, and you look at the UK, for example, Madam Speaker—you see, we must show and see where we can help in this time. You cannot just come and take the money and not try to understand. I am not blaming

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anybody, Madam Speaker, I am saying that we need to have bold incentives and initiatives to help this economy survive.

So, for example, in the UK, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced salary relief for workers. That is just like us. We are doing something for the workers with salary relief, as mentioned by the Minister of Finance. In the UK, there were a lot of incentives for the small businesses, like cash grants for the small businesses and I just want to put that on the table because it is necessary that this sector has to survive.

So, Madam Speaker, for example, in the UK, in their rescue packages under COVID, there is something like the Government will increase—businesses in retail, hospitality and leisure market, you know, they would give incentives to those businesses up to grants of £25,000 and above. He talked about incentives, the UK model about retail in the leisure and hospitality companies that would be exempt from business rates for a whole year. In the Australian model, they also mentioned a lot of incentives for the SMEs to be able to survive.

So, Madam Speaker, I am asking the Minister of Finance, through the Opposition, through you, Madam Speaker, to look at that whole sector to see if he could be creative in allowing that business to grow and survive. For example, landlords, Madam Speaker, for example, small and medium businesses, you have rent to pay, you have salaries to pay for workers and you might have accounts payables. Since over the last week or so, those businesses—

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, it is now 4.30, we shall take the suspension now. We shall resume at 5.00 p.m. This House is now suspended.

**4.30 p.m.:** *Sitting suspended.*

**5.00 p.m.:** *Sitting resumed.*

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Kindly proceed.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Just before we broke for tea, I was talking about the SMEs and I will get back to that but I just want to go back to the Bill that is in front of us, clause 2, and as I have the Minister of Finance here. Clause 2 with respect to:

“The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act is amended by inserting after section 15, the following section:

15A (1) Notwithstanding section 15 and any other written law and subject to subsection (2), withdrawals may be made from the Fund where—

(a) a disaster area is declared under the Disaster Measures Act;”

When the Minister of Finance was piloting the Bill and he read out that clause, he sort of skirted over that subclause (a), not giving any sort of explanation to us, the Opposition, you know, as to why there was a need to put in 15A(1)(a), Mr. Deputy Speaker, which reads:

“a disaster area is declared under the Disaster Measures Act;”

And I am trying to understand why there is a need to put in that subclause given that the HSF fund is such an important fund for this country and I do not know if it is hypothetically—I asked the Minister of Finance if, let us say, within the Princes Town area you have the mud volcanoes who I think last year were very active and a couple of the homes in that area got damaged and the families were calling for

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relocation. So I do not know and I would give way to the Minister of Finance, if he can add some clarity to 15A(1)(a), under what circumstances that would be. Minister?

**Mr. Imbert:** All I would say is that all that money spent on GATE was wasted. A disaster is a hurricane or earthquake. So if an eight on the Richter scale earthquake levels Trinidad and Tobago, it is just as bad as COVID-19. Come on. It is a calamity. If you look in the actual Act itself, it refers to the event of a calamity. Okay? Hurricane, earthquake, not mud volcano. Mud volcano? “Waz that?”

**Mr. D. Lee:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for that clarity. When you look at 15A(3), where it states—and this is the Bill that I am reading:

“Where a withdrawal has been made from the Fund under this section, the Minister shall cause a report to be laid in the House of Representatives, within sixty days of that withdrawal.”

My colleague from Caroni Central had mentioned that that is a bit too long but I am also asking if that report is laid, is it going to be laid to go to the PAC, the Public Accounts Committee? I do not know, I ask.

**Mr. Imbert:** Every document that is laid in the Parliament goes somewhere, okay, and certainly that would go to an appropriate committee. We have so many committees now. That report would certainly go to the committee on expenditure. There is a committee on public expenditure.

**Mr. D. Lee:** All right, thank you again, Minister of Finance, and that leads into the whole aspect of accountability and transparency which is such a critical fund, that we feel that the taxpayers need to get some accountability with the change of the use in how you can withdraw funding from this Fund. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I

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just want to put on the table, we are not happy how this clause is worded and we would like at the committee stage if some consideration could be done with the extent of the report from 60 days be reduced to maybe 30 days so that we can have a quick oversight of what the fund was used for, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to just say when I listened to the Prime Minister over the last few days and he talks about “we are all in this together”, I really believe that we have to be in this together. As the Attorney General in his debate talked about all sectors—the individuals, the public, companies, unions, Government—we are all in this together and I agree with that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because for us to get out of this situation we are in, it takes a concerted effort, whether we all isolate ourselves to protect our families and loved ones, it has to be altogether. But be that as it may, there are some sectors of this economy that need some help, I use the word maybe “guidance” from the Government in assisting them to stay afloat and again, that is the small and medium enterprises, those businesses that employ over 80,000 individuals in this country. And in crosstalk with the Minister of Finance, he said in his winding up, he will teach me about the small and medium enterprises.

**Mr. Imbert:** I did not.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Okay, sorry, sorry.

**Mr. Imbert:** Stop saying these things.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Sorry. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I draw the attention to yourself and I ask the Minister of Finance to—and he might have done it—look at some of the measures that the UK Prime Minister is putting in place to assist the country and also the Australian. Even our Jamaican country has put some good measures in



place, not that the measures that the Minister of Finance has announced here this afternoon are not good but as I said, it needs a lot more in my view and it has to be bold.

I want to also ask the Minister of Finance, the \$1,500 that he mentioned to the workers, especially in the small and medium sector, the 80,000-plus individuals that he talked about at \$1,500 in his calculation of about \$120 million for three months. That is 360, so he rounded it off to \$400 million. The concern that I have of that \$1,500 and I know the Minister of Finance said by Monday we would have some clarity how it is going to operate. Given that individuals that are a part of the NIB, NIS plan, at some point in time, they will get a pension at age 60, I am asking if this is—because there is a talk out there, I am not saying it is malicious or anything but there is a trend of thought that whatever funding comes—the \$1,500 that individuals get that is distributed by the NIB paid by the Government, one is saying that it could be as a deferral or an upfront payment on their potential pension when they reach age 60. So I just want to put that on the table and maybe the Minister in his wind up could add some clarity to that. [*Crosstalk*]

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

**Mr. D. Lee:** Because that is the information that a lot of workers are asking.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I said, we require some bold initiatives. Look at the rescue packages from the international countries and I must want to say that one has to remember that when we were in a crisis—and we are in a crisis right now—back in 2009 with Clico, the Government stepped up to the plate and put measures in place to bail out Clico for the good of the country. Now we are in a crisis and I really would ask the Minister of Finance to really add more to the measures that he

is putting in place right now and it could go a lot more in our view.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to ask the Minister of Finance to look at ADB, Agricultural Development Bank and see how they can assist in respect to our small and medium farmers in either the loan deferrals or even some capital funding to assist them in food security in growing that aspect. Because if you are in this particular crisis that we are in right now as a country and you are in one type of business and that business is generating zero revenue, maybe you have to turn to another source of business to generate some sort of income for sustenance and so forth. So food security, the agriculture economy is something that would help this country as far as scarce foreign exchange.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, I ask the Minister of Finance to either use moral suasion with the landlords of this country, the people who own malls, et cetera, to see how they can work with their tenants in either deferring rental payment because I understand that the banks have stepped up to the plate. In a particular bank, FCB, and they have now deferred loan payments for three months in the first instance and I am hoping that landlords who might have loans with commercial banks and as they get deferral payments, that they can also work with their tenants to assist them in keeping their businesses alive. Because as the Member for Caroni Central said, we would get over this and what happens after we get over this. We would not like to see that when we do get over this crisis that we are in, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we have a set of small and medium businesses to have closed up shop and you have a lot of foreclosures, et cetera.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was an article in today's newspaper, I think it is the *Express*, written by Dr. Terrence Farrell and he talked about "A perfect storm",

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and in that article, he really talked about that HSF issue and if we do not manage that properly, we could be in a worse position than we are in today, so I refer that article to the Minister of Finance. I have not heard anything for maxi-taxi drivers or even small businesses who own maxi-taxis. Transport movement of people is down, they have payments to be made, they have their families to feed and so on. So I really hope that the Minister of Finance—

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is something that I am asking the Minister of Finance to look at. In the World Bank, I know under the World Bank, the IMF, a lot of these international funding agencies, for example, the World Bank has put out a \$16 million funding under the COVID crisis that the world is under and I am asking if the Minister of Finance has tapped into those international funding agencies to see as a first resort that—they have set it up for the COVID crisis that the country can tap into that. The IMF has a fund, the World Bank has a fund.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, your original speaking time has elapsed. You have an additional 15. Care to avail?

**Mr. D. Lee:** Yes.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Kindly proceed.

**Mr. D. Lee:** So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I put that on the table because it is there for the Minister of Finance to tell the country that he is able to access that funding at maybe low or non-existent rates and with a long-term repayment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I close and I did not think that I would have taken so long, I want to agree with the TTMA, the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association, and the Opposition also agrees with the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association where we recognize that this is a difficult time for all

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and the issue of survivability is systemic.

**5.15 p.m.**

The challenges we face demand a responsible and intelligent response from those of us charged with governance and those of us who contribute to a viable and stable economy. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as the release says and we agree, the situation can become very protracted. It will put a strain on all our resources in this country, and will have serious implications, not for the Government and businesses, but more importantly for our families and our family lives, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This country would not be the same, given what we are going through. And we hope, and we will get through this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to say thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and with the grace of God, we will get through this. Thank you.

**Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh** (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I join this debate on this very important piece of legislation which has been brought by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, as it relates to a Bill to amend the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, the Government Savings Bonds Act and the Value Added Tax Act, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And immediately, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to join my colleagues on both sides of the House in underscoring the importance of what we are confronting in Trinidad and Tobago at this point in time, the realities that we have to deal with, and the sense of duties and responsibilities we must fulfil inside of this Parliament and outside of this Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is important that I place on record, from an Opposition point of view, that we all recognize the importance of all categories of workers serving on the frontline at

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this point in time, in combating or attempting to combat COVID-19 and to mitigate its impact upon Trinidad and Tobago; whether it is health care workers, law enforcement, plant quarantine, doctors, nurses, whatever support staff that is keeping our public health system, our public institutions going, and at the end of the day keeping Trinidad and Tobago going as a society, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important to respond to a couple of things that have been raised in this debate, especially from the point of view of the Member for San Fernando West, the Attorney General, when he responded to some of the concerns of the Opposition and attempted to, I would not say belittled, but in his own style, really attempted to, in his own way really, to minimize the importance of what we were trying to achieve here this evening. And we on this side know for a fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we are in crisis and this is extraordinary times and extraordinary circumstances. And if this is considered on the part of the Government to present a Bill in the House, which they have termed to be extraordinary in response to the COVID-19 crisis, extraordinary initiatives, from a legislative point of view, demands extraordinary responses, based on the queries and concerns of the Opposition.

And I say this against the fact that we all know for a fact that when there is a drawdown from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, it will go into the Consolidated Fund and the Consolidated Fund, the accounts are closed and there is what we would call, at the end of the financial year, accountability from a line item point of view, and so on. But it is important that if we are withdrawing 10-plus billion dollars under extraordinary circumstances, at least the Government display some kind of responsibility here this evening in this House and indicate, whilst we

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have gotten some indicators of how sums of moneys will be spent, I think that we on this side have a responsibility in asking those questions. And we hope that in the winding up of the Minister of Finance, that we will get additional information as it relates to the spending of this 10-plus billion dollars within the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also heard from the Attorney General, the Member for San Fernando West when he made his intervention. He attempted to call out the Opposition and the Opposition Members, as it relates to what the Opposition has been doing and what has been our sense of responsibility in this whole COVID-19 crisis. And it is important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to put the Opposition's response on the record of this House. Because it must not go undone or it must not go unheard as if the Opposition has been irresponsible in its conduct since this COVID-19 virus has come to the attention of the global community and more so now it has hit home.

I want to say that the Leader of the Opposition displayed that sense of responsibility when she dispatched a letter to the hon. Prime Minister, calling for bipartisan talks to discuss the crisis. And whilst I will not go into the merits of what was brought before this House, from the point of view of urgent public importance, and so on, the Opposition was first to raise the issue of COVID-19 in this very said House.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I rise on Standing Order 55(1)(b). This is the second speaker to go into length on this.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Overruled. Please proceed. I will give you some leeway, Member.

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**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I continue my response, as I said we displayed our sense of responsibility and where—in the bipartisan talks that were held between the Opposition and the Government, the Leader of the Opposition sent—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 55(1)(b). Both speakers previously referred to those talks and letters. This is now the third speaker referring to the same bipartisan talks and the same letter, 55(1)(b), tedious repetition.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, overruled. But Member, I would like you to tie it in quickly. Tie in your point. Tie in your point.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am simply responding because my colleague, Pointe-a-Pierre, did not address this issue in responding to the Attorney General, as it relates to our responsibility as an Opposition.

And besides the bipartisan talks, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from an Opposition's point of view, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, the Opposition, through our party, officially released COVID-19 guidelines and also, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I rise on Standing Order, two Standing Orders, 48(1) and 55(1)(b). This is genuinely the third time that the same point has been read in relation to the Leader of the Opposition's letter, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, Member, this evening, as we have clearly identified, we have another Bill in order to deal with, and the House have taken the decision that we would like to do it separate. So, again Member, tie it in quickly and move on. All right? Tie it in quickly, please.

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**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In addition to our official position, we have demonstrated a sense of responsibility through an initiative, an online initiative, on the part of assisting students preparing for the Secondary Entrance Assessment examination as—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(1) and 55(1)(b). Please.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Okay, Member, again, the relevance on that particular aspect, I really do not see it fitting into the Bill that we have before us. So could you move to a next point, please?

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the piloting of this particular piece of legislation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance indicated that the focus of this Government was to give citizens jobs to keep them alive and to preserve jobs. And he indicated that they would have set aside, based on the notes that I took, initially approximately \$360 million for a salary relief grant. And he indicated that they would have done their research and, based on their research that the food and beverage, the tourism, the hospitality sectors, and so on, would have been impacted upon and the salary relief grant would be in the sum of one thousand, five—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 55(1)(b). This has been traversed by every single Opposition Member today.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, hon. Member, please. Tie in the point quickly, otherwise you will have to move on.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am simply—I have just gotten into my first line of dealing with the salary relief grant, and this is something that was—



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**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** And I have given you permission to tie it in as we go along. Proceed.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** I understand that there is some kind of haste on the part of Government to truncate this debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and at the end of the day we have our responsibility to ask the Minister of Finance the importance of how this \$360 million plus an additional \$40million, how it will be operationalized for the benefit of the over 80,000 persons, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 55(1)(b). That has been said over and over and over and over.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, move on to your next point, please.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the National Insurance Board has been asked to administrate the disbursement of this \$400million. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, yesterday, outside of many offices of the National Insurance Board, there were long lines.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

There were persons who were confused based on the announcement that was made in the press conference of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, to the point that in one of today's newspaper headlines, it read:

“Confusion, tears outside NIB, Social Development offices as jobless citizens seek relief”

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I stand on the point of relevance. Where is this going, in terms of the measures in the Bill?

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Madam Speaker, I am simply asking, in terms of the operationalization and the disbursement of the \$400million.

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**Madam Speaker:** Okay. Now, that you have clarified, this has been discussed by the two Members who preceded you in a different manner. So that I ask you to go on to another point.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, another issue that has been of concern to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago in relation to this COVID-19 crisis—and probably in his wind up, based on the fact that 10.5-plus million dollars will be spent by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and in this very said place the issue of pandemic leave has encountered, not only the—  
*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1) and 55(1)(b). Madam Speaker: The objection is sustained. Please move on to another point. And just—I remind Members, with respect to the announcements, and I think it has come up in this debate about efficiency. I remind Members of that. The Standing Orders are going to be strictly applied. So Member for Couva South, please deal with a point that has not been ventilated here already.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Madam Speaker, from the point of view of the expenditure that is being sought here this evening, it is 10-plus billion dollars. COVID-19 is important for a hygienic point of view. Madam Speaker, in the very budget presentation of the Minister of Finance, as it relates to 2020, the Minister of Finance spoke about a deficit shortfall of approximately \$3.5billion, based on the—

**Madam Speaker:** Again, I stand on Standing Order 48(1). I am going to give you one more opportunity to bring this presentation with respect to what is before us, if not I will have to invoke other powers that I have.

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**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Madam Speaker, I will not want to detain this House, but what is happening here, Madam Speaker, is a travesty of our democracy in the context of what is supposed to be discussed on behalf of the people Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. Hinds:** You are challenging the Speaker?

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Couva South, that is a reflection on the Chair. Okay? Next. Member for Tabaquite.

**Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan** (*Tabaquite*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I assure you that I am not going to be long, but there are a couple of points I want to make. Madam Speaker, you know, throughout the last couple of days, we have been hearing the statement “We are in this all together” and I agree we are in this all together. And I want to say that together we can also weather this. But we will weather it, if we put the value of national unity above everything else. I think that my colleagues on the Government side were surprised to see and hear the Opposition as speaking in support of the generality of the measures. We are being very sincere, in terms of how we are supporting these measures. And I think it surprised our colleagues on the other side because, perhaps, they did not get the opportunity to exploit the narrative that they have tried to create of being unpatriotic, and what have you. But, Madam Speaker, this Opposition will not stand in the way of measures that are intended to ensure that children are fed in this country, they are nourished, that families can withstand the economic challenges and financial challenges that now face them.

We are not going to stand in the way of measures to ensure that people are

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not put on the pavements by their landlords. But Madam Speaker, having said that, we also know that these resources that are being asked for here today from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund are for the short term. And in a sense, the Minister indicated that, that it is about a three- to four-month planning scenario, in which, in the short term 277 million will be given in VAT refunds, 110 million in tax relief, 400 million in salary support, and so on, relief grant, and 300 million to the Social Development Ministry, which gives you one—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, it pains me, Standing Order 55(1)(b). Every speaker has said that.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Tabaquite, Member for Tabaquite, I will give you a “lil” leeway to see where this discussion is going. Please continue.

**Dr. S. Rambachan:** Ma'am, I am saying that this is going to be a short term. But in the view of the world, this matter is not going to end overnight, and with so many businesses closing down, it is going to take a longer time to get back on the road. And I am just asking the hon. Minister to consider in his wrap-up or consider somewhere along the line, whether there is a medium-term plan and a long-term plan to continue to take the people over this hump that is growing.

Madam Speaker, you know we are all in this together, and I want to make a very bold suggestion here today, that what we require is not just the drawdown on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. The Minister clearly indicated the conditions under which drawdowns can take place, but we need to go more than that. We need to go more than that. We need to have an economic stabilization and recovery plan. And I want to suggest, that if we are really interested in bipartisan politics at a time when this country is in need of unity and national unity that the

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Government consider setting up a bipartisan committee of the House and incorporating into its stakeholders, so that we can come up with such a plan. And I go even further to say that that committee be co-chaired by the Leader of the Opposition, and that we really get to the point—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1), please.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Tabaquite, I uphold the objection.

**Dr. S. Rambachan:** Ma'am, what I am saying is that we need to think outside of the box and that we need—[*Interruption*]

**Madam Speaker:** I uphold the objection.

**Dr. S. Rambachan:** Sure.

**Madam Speaker:** So please move on something—

**Dr. S. Rambachan:** Sorry, sorry.

**Madam Speaker:**—that relates to the Bill as it stands.

**Dr. S. Rambachan:** Sorry, Madam. Sorry, Ma'am.

Madam, the other point I want to ask is that the Minister raised it, about some of the relief that is being brought by, for example, the banking sector. Where they say they are giving deferrals of the loans. I would like the Minister to clarify whether in his negotiations with the banks, that the deferral really refers to a true deferral or that people at the end of this three months, would not, at the end of the loan, be recapitalized and have to also pay the interest that was accumulating in these three months. That is a very important point I want to make. And also, just to remind the Minister, that for the \$2.6 billion that is made available because of the repo rate, that people must borrow and they to pay it back.

So that, Madam Speaker, these are the points I wanted clarification from the

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Minister, because I think it is important in the context of people understanding what kind of relief is really being brought and what they are responsible for. Those are the points I wanted to make.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, some of the points made by Members opposite simply “doh” make any sense. And the sad part about it all is that Members opposite have been Members of this House for a very long time. They know how our system works; the Member for Caroni East, the Member for Tabaquite, the Member for Caroni Central, in particular. They understand how our governmental system works.

Let me deal first with a comment made by the Member for Couva South, who does know better. The Government can only spend according to the law, according to the Exchequer and Audit Act what has been appropriated by Parliament. That is trite, Madam Speaker. The Government cannot spend more than what has been appropriated by Parliament. We have no authority to do that. If we were to spend more, not only would we be breaking the law, we would have to come to Parliament and do another budget, do a supplementation of appropriation. So this theory that has been thrown out here, that the Government is going to spend an additional \$10 billion is nonsense, Madam Speaker. We can only spend what has been appropriated for fiscal 2020.

I need to debunk this nonsense coming from the other side; that we are just going to dip into the Heritage Fund and spend \$10 billion "lablash", I think is the colloquial word; just wild. We cannot do that. This is a country that is ruled by law. There is a Constitution. There are a number of laws that would prevent a

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government from just spending money wild. And we, this side, will abide by the law. So this Government is only empowered to spend what has been appropriated in the budget of fiscal 2020, passed in this honourable House in October of 2019. So all of that nonsense, please stop it.

Secondly, Madam Speaker, secondly, the Members opposite very well know what they are saying is incorrect. I made the point that in terms of support measures, support, we have an additional two and a half billion dollars at this time, estimated, assuming that we would be of this crisis within three months. We estimate that we have to spend an additional two and a half billion dollars, helping people of this country to live, to stay alive.

But, Madam Speaker, every one of them knows that when you have a precipitous fall in the price of oil and gas, when you have a slow down or a shutdown, as we have now, the effect on revenue is catastrophic. Ten days ago I made the point that our first estimate, based at that time, on an oil price of \$40, at that time. The world is changing so fast every single day. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, I had a press conference and I made the point that our calculations at that time were that oil would be at \$40, and that the loss of revenue from oil and gas, at that time, was three and a half billion dollars.

Since then, when you take into account business levy and Green Fund lost, because we get a lot of Green Fund money and business levy revenue from the oil companies. So when you add in the business levy that would be lost, the Green Fund that would be lost, you go to \$4.5 billion. That is two weeks ago, 10 days ago. Today oil is 24, gas is 1.60. So you have another \$2 billion to add in. That takes you to six and a half lost, lost from the original appropriation.

And then you have the fallout that must come from the decline in business activity, from the health and safety measures that we as a Government have to take to save lives. We are in a situation here where we have to take measures to save people's lives; and the consequence of ordering the closure of certain establishments where people congregate. I know the Members opposite are intelligent and educated. We had to deal with the places where people congregate. Because if this virus starts to spread in the community, then all the estimates we are making here is joke, the estimates of three and a half billion or four and a half billion lost in revenue, all that is joke. From the time the virus spreads in the community, our health services would be overwhelmed, our health service workers would be overwhelmed, our economy will be overwhelmed. Look around in the world, Madam Speaker. Look around in the world. Look at what is going on in Italy. I saw a fantastic statistic yesterday. Thousands of—*[Interruption]* no, Italy in particular—people dying, thousands. Germany has 40,000 cases of this virus, 2,000 deaths. And you are seeing people. This thing is no respecter of age, you know. Twenty-five year old, 35 year old dying of this thing. Healthy people dying of this thing.

So we at the Government level have had to close down certain establishments. You know what the consequence of that is? You all are all educated, intelligent people. You know, once we close business establishments down, we get less revenue, less tax revenue, less value added tax, less PAYE, and so on. So, at this point in time, Madam Speaker, we estimate that we could lose as much as \$7 billion in revenue in fiscal 2020.

But what our plan is, because we are planning for the future. We are not



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planning only for the present. The two and a half billion dollars in support, salary relief, social services, trade payables, accelerated VAT and refund payments, that two and a half billion dollars, and that is outside of the \$3 billion in VAT bonds, by the way, that is outside of that. That two and a half billion dollars is in cash. That two and a half billion dollars is in addition to the loss of \$7 billion in revenue. It takes you to nine and a half billion dollars, Madam Speaker, just to maintain our original budget. We are planning for the future. We have to keep this country alive, not just the people, the country alive. So we have decided as a Government we are going to maintain our original expenditure plan.

**5.45 p.m.**

And let me tell you something else, every month the Government has to find \$4 billion for mandatory payments, just to pay public servants' salaries, salaries of workers in the state enterprises like the RHAs. People do not understand these things you know. The Government pays for all the health sector, billions of dollars every single month. When you add up public servants' salaries and you add up RHA workers it comes to \$1.8 billion, Madam Speaker. Add to that pension \$400 million a month, add to that government pension, add to that debt servicing, because if you do not pay your debt and your creditors, all the international and local bankers calling all your loans, economy crash.

So we have to service our debt, make sure we do not default on loans. We have to pay salaries and wages to public servants and state enterprise workers. We have to pay disability grant, public assistance, all the social welfare payment. We have to give WASA \$200 million a month otherwise WASA will collapse. All of these things add up to \$4 billion a month. We have spent \$48 billion a year to just

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barely survive in this country; \$48 billion a year. And then on top of that you have the Development Programme, you have to continue with your construction programme, construction is an employer of thousands of people in this country.

So what we have decided as a Government, we are planning for the future. We have decided in this crisis we must keep the economy going, so we are going to attempt to manage, to meet our original expenditure target. We do not have any lavish conspicuous expenditure or conspicuous consumption in this Government. We are dealing with basics, with necessities. So that when someone asks “What the money go be used for?” I just do not understand the question. The money is used to make up the shortfall in revenue caused by this global crisis; that is what it is for. So if we appropriate for \$53 billion and we already had a deficit of five, so we had to borrow five to make up that and that was primarily the capital programme, which is \$5billion, and we lose seven and you want to maintain people in jobs, you want to make sure everybody gets their salary at the end of the month, at least in the public sector, you have to find the money.

So that is why we have changed this Heritage and Stabilisation Act withdrawal system so that in a crisis like this, at least we can keep our head above water. And all the money goes into the Consolidated Fund and everybody in this Parliament can see how it is spent.

**Hon. Member:** And it is not a black hole.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** It is not a hole. It is going into the Consolidated Fund to pay old age pension. What you think the money is for? The money is not to play the fool with. And I do not understand this consistent ridiculous position of the Members opposite, what the money “go be” used for? The money is going to be used for the

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service of Trinidad and Tobago, for mandatory payments, for salaries and wages, for pension. What you think the money will be used for? [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Member:** For medicine.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** For pharmaceuticals, for hospitals, to pay nurses, to pay doctors. That is what it is for, to buy ventilators and respirators. These questions coming from Members [*Desk thumping*] opposite are absurd. So having said all of that, Madam Speaker—[*Laughter*]

**Mr. Forde:** Say it again.

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—having said all of that, I want to repeat that the Government can only spend what has been appropriated and all of us come here and we sit down here for five days, and every one of them asking you every question about every single line Item—“Wat is that for what? Wat is that for? Goods and Services, Personnel Expenditure, Vacancies. Wat is that for?” And we sit down here for five days, eight hours a day and answer every single question they ask. Thousands and thousands of line Items in the budgetary estimates. That is what the money is for. So stop asking what it is for. It is to keep the country alive and to keep the people of Trinidad and Tobago alive. I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

*Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.*

*House in committee.*

**Madam Chairman:** Minister of Finance, can we take these four clauses; 1 to 4?

**Mr. Imbert:** I would deeply appreciate that, Madam.

**Mr. Lee:** I just want to ask a question to the Minister of Finance, on clause 2.

**Madam Chairman:** On clause 2 only? Member for Caroni East, you wish to ask on which clause?

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Yeah, same clause 2. I do not know if my colleague would be asking the same question.

**Madam Chairman:** That is fine. We will give an opportunity, because none of us are clairvoyant. So we will go for 1, then we will do 2 and then we will do 3 and 4 together.

*Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 2.*

*Question proposed:* That clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister of Finance, clause 2(3), the 60-day period of reporting to the House, if some consideration would be given to shorten that? We would be grateful. That is the only point.

**Mr. Imbert:** We did it for a reason, we discussed this at length and we considered the fact that in the event of a crisis such as we have now sittings of Parliament might be limited. So it does not make practical common sense to put a short period. And the people may not be here and the people to prepare the report, the public servants. Right now I have a whole set of public servants working from home. They are not coming to work because they are scared. So that we thought we would put 60 days in it, it is a reasonable period and it takes account of—If you had an earthquake, for example, which this thing contemplates, where are you going to find the people to hustle to do a report in 30 days? So we thought that 60 days makes eminent sense and we would like to leave it so. And it is in the context of a disaster, okay?

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** My colleague asked the—

**Madam Chairman:** Okay.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 2 ordered to stand part of Bill.*

*Clauses 3 and 4.*

*Question proposed:* That clauses 3 and 4 stand part of Bill.

*Question put.*

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Another thing. Part 5A, becomes a part of clause 4?

**Mr. Imbert:** Yes.

**Madam Chairman:** Yes. But I have already put the question.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** No, I was a little confused whether that formed part of question 4.

**Madam Chairman:** Yes, that is clause 4.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Could the Minister just give a little elucidation on 47A, “sign agreements”. Minister, this is a little vague.

**Madam Chairman:** But just, just one moment. I have already put the question that is now stands part of the Bill. So that, you know, I cannot see at this stage how I am going back to allow discussion on the clause. Okay.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** I thought that was Part 5A.

**Madam Chairman:** I am so sorry, Member. I am so sorry, Member for Caroni East.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** No. Sorry.

**Madam Chairman:** Okay. I am so sorry. These are unusual times and we have to behave in accordance with the time.

*Question agreed to.*

*Clauses 3 and 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Question put and agreed to:* That the Bill be reported to the House.

*House resumed.*

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Madam Speaker, now having kept my procedure to myself and not allowing others to take it, I think I have the correct procedure. [*Laughter*] I wish to report the Miscellaneous—

**Madam Speaker:** May I say, I am now beginning to worry. [*Laughter*]

*Bill reported, without amendment, read the third time and passed.*

**DEVELOPMENT LOANS ACT**  
**(AUTHORIZATION TO BORROW)**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

*Whereas* it is provided by section 3(1) of the Development Loans Act that the Government is authorized, for the purpose of —

- (a) financing general development in Trinidad and Tobago;
- (b) repayment of borrowings effected for such general development; or
- (c) repayment of borrowings effected for general development-
  - i. by a statutory authority within the meaning of the Statutory Authorities Act;
  - ii. by an enterprise that is controlled by or on behalf of the State; or
  - iii. by the University of the West Indies

to borrow from time to time money externally or internally in a sum or sums not exceeding in the aggregate forty five thousand million dollars in the currency of Trinidad and Tobago;

*And whereas* it is also provided in the said section 3(1), that thereafter such sum in such currency may from time to time be specified by Resolution passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives;

*And whereas* it is necessary for the Government to borrow further

sums of money for the purposes stated in the said section;

*Be it resolved* that for the purposes stated in the said section, the Government is hereby authorized to borrow money externally or internally in a further sum or in further sums not exceeding in the aggregate ten thousand million dollars in the currency of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, this Motion has been on the Order Paper for quite a while. We did not avail ourselves of the Motion because we were monitoring the fiscal out turn for the first, three to four months of the year, and as I said oil prices had kept pace with budgeted figures, and therefore, we were on target. Commodity prices began to deteriorate in January and in fact it is a little known fact that the price of oil was \$63 in January, 63 and dropped now to 23. So the price of oil has dropped 65 per cent in the last two months. The only way to deal with a precipitous drop in revenue which is the obvious result from a drop in commodity prices is to borrow.

At this point in time the Government must consider all sources of funding available to it to keep this country afloat. So we have a range of funding sources. We have the possibility to borrow from international financial institutions and that comes under a different Act, that is, the External Loans Act and the ceiling there is quite significant at this point in time. The ceiling under the External Loans Act based on previous debates is at this time \$10.4 billion.

We can also borrow guarantee of loans companies. In other words, we can authorize state enterprises to borrow for development and the headroom on external loans, which is foreign loans, is 10.4 billion and the headroom on guarantee of loans companies is \$21 billion. So we do not need to adjust those limits at all. So let us say we were borrowing for a state enterprise, MTS, for

example, as we are doing to complete schools. We have available to us \$21 billion in headroom, \$21 billion in headroom which is based on previous Motions and debates in this House.

So we can borrow up to a further \$21 billion for state enterprise development without coming back to this House. We can borrow \$10.4 billion externally from IDB, World Bank, Andean Development Bank, foreign institutions, like Bank of America, Credit Suisse, JP Morgan, et cetera, to the amount of 10.4 million. So we have substantial headroom already approved by this Parliament, external loans and companies.

Where we do not have headroom is in the Development Loans Act and that is general borrowing by the Government and the headroom now is just \$400 million. That is where we have reached in terms of the Development Loans Act, the headroom, the availability. We can only borrow \$400 million at this time if we are borrowing for general development under the Development Loans Act, direct government borrowing. This is quite different to borrowing overseas or borrowing—allowing state enterprises to borrow with a Government guarantee.

In the situation we find yourselves in that is too close for comfort, much too close for comfort, because while Members opposite may want to throw stones at us about taking out all this money from the Heritage Fund, we must have options as a country and a Government. We must have a range of options available to us to deal with this crisis. Some funding is available from the Andean Bank, the World Bank has offered some funding as well. The IMF funding is really not for us. That is for poor countries and it comes with conditionalities. And IDB has decided that they would redirect resources to the health sector so that is confined within the health sector. But whatever is there we will avail ourselves of it. If we can get



money from the World Bank, from the IDB and from the Andean Bank, we will avail ourselves of it.

But really, you want to mobilize resources in the domestic sector. You want to mobilize as much borrowing as you can in TT dollars, because once you borrow in foreign in dollars you face exchange rate risk. So that it does not make sense for this Government, for any government, to have only \$400 million left available in terms of general borrowing. So this is why we have come today and we are seeking to raise the limit by a further \$10billion; and this will be for the foreseeable future. And in plugging the deficit that I spoke about earlier, which is now about 10billion when you add everything together, we will avail ourselves of different avenues. We not going to go and take 10billion out of the Heritage Fund, we are not going to go on the foreign market and borrow 10 billion, we are not going to go local and borrow 10 billion. We will avail ourselves of all available sources of funds in the best interest of the country at the best rate and all that sort of thing.

So all we are doing here is we are now putting this together as part of a package of measures to help to keep this country afloat and to keep people alive. I beg to move.

*Question proposed.*

**Dr. Tim Gopeesingh** (*Caroni East*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam Speaker. I know in the interest of us not being delayed too long in this House and us standing the risk of getting the infection, God forbid. We are very happy with the way that we were placed out today. So we know that the Minister came here, with the one that preceded this on the HFS, but he has come now on this Motion. This Motion really seeks to move the borrowing limit under the Development

Loans Act from 45 to 55. So that is 10 billion. Minister, you had come here earlier on, I think it was 2015 just after the election and you had asked us to move the ceiling from 30 to 45 billion. I think it might be incumbent upon you to give—well you said you only have 400 million headroom on this.

**Mr. Imbert:** Yes.

**Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** So you have come close to maximizing your 45 billion. So perhaps it might be appropriate at some time for you to, in the interest of what people are asking for in the country, you have \$45 billion under the Development Loans because you move it from 30 to 45, 15 billion during your term, what have you done with it. Give us an appreciation of what development you have achieved with that \$15 billion. So I think from that perspective you will comfort the population as Minister of Finance to say well look I ask for 15 billion more in December 2015, I have maxed it out, but I can tell you this is how we were able to spend that money on development plans. But now you are asking for another 10. I know you wanted to cut short your presentation on this and I will do so myself. You should just give, just as you did on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, you gave a breakdown on how you are going to spend your \$2.5 billion, at some time when we are not this type of situation you will say what you really want to do with the other 10 billion.

In essence now, based on the HSF and this you really asking to borrow \$20.5 billion because 1.5 from the HSF, US, that is TT 10 billion and 10 billion from this. So people are asking, hon. Minister, well what are you doing with this \$20 billion that you want to borrow and you said it is going to be a mix, you are not going to utilize all from the HFS and you are going to have some—and you still have some headway under the External Loans At as you mentioned, I think

you have 30 billion ceiling now because that was passed, I think the Central Bank has an economic bulletin in March 2016 and under the External Loans Act, Chap. 71:05, it had been moved from 15 billion to 30 billion so, I think you probably know with your headroom—how much you said you have?—about 10 billion somewhere there and the Guarantee of Loans (Companies) Act, you said you also have a headroom, but that was increased from 25 billion to 45 billion.

So during this time you had had the External Loans Act moving from 15 to 30 that is 15 billion there and from 25 to 45 with the Guarantee of Loans (Companies) Act that is another 20 plus 35. So from that hon. Minister of Finance it would be, I think, important for you to give an account to the country, because people are asking well why is it that the Government is borrowing so much money all the time and we are not seeing any developmental processes for these. So I think I have completed my point on that.

The one for statutory authorities and state enterprises you want to borrow for repayment of some of these. I think it says here, repayment of borrowings effected for such general development or repayment of borrowings effected for general development by a statutory authorities and state enterprise and for the University of the West Indies. So from my understanding we have 49 state enterprises and we all know what they are. And we have, I think, 49 state enterprises and now is not the time to read out all of these 49 state enterprises, and 62 statutory authorities.

So I think the country needs to know where we are with borrowing for these statutory authorities and state enterprises. When we had the yellow books at the beginning of the fiscal year when we do the assessment and ask the questions and so on, we get a little inkling of where we are with loans and how much we have made with capital repayment but I think as a responsible Government, if you

consider yourself to be a responsible Minister of Finance, and it would be good for us to have a breakdown of the various statutory authorities and the state enterprises in terms of where we are with the loans.

There is just one little area, again, that I want to speak about. Minister, you have borrowed already—well I think everybody knows that the borrowing is \$122 billion at the moment and you have moved the debt to GDP from 49 per cent to about, I do not know whether it is 63 per cent or 65 per cent and the IMF is saying that 70 per cent is a critical level. Now, I have with me a detailed breakdown of what you have borrowed for your four and a half years of total loans of \$26.52 billion. I would not go into the details. You know what are the details of that. And if we add the HFS from what was there previously we come to \$30 billion, hon. Minister.

So \$30 billion already borrowed for the four and a half years and I think from a responsible Opposition perspective we need for you to tell us, well people are saying where did you spend this money and if you look at your total budgetary expenditure for the four and a half and projected to five years, you would be spending something close to \$277 billion whereas in our five years we spent \$297 billion. So we spent \$20 billion more if you take five year to five year, 297 versus 277, but here you have borrowed already \$30 billion and you want to borrow another \$20 billion. So that is \$50 billion plus your 277, where is that taking us and people are asking what really have you done.

Now, one last year area, the public debt issue. I have a little comparison of 2018, '19 and '20 on interest and principals and the grand total for 2018 for total repayment of loans for interest and principal and Sinking Fund was \$9.2 billion, 2019 the revised estimate was 8.0billion and in 2020 estimate, 8.6billion.

**6.00 p.m.**

So, hon. Minister, we are finding ourselves borrowing more, and more, and the amount of money we are having to pay from the total revenue, if you said you are getting \$47 billion for revenue for the year, and that is going to be forestalled—I mean shortened, and we have to pay \$8.6 billion, which works out to about close to one-fifth of that which is about 20 per cent, and if we have to pay towards principles and interests, 20 per cent of our revenue. I am sure you are finding it extremely difficult as a Minister of Finance to have to deal with that.

So, from our perspective as the Opposition, a responsible Opposition, we are asking you to look critically, and we expect that you as Minister of Finance will use your intelligence, and your networking, and what you have gained over the last four years as Minister of Finance, to look critically at where we are in terms of our borrowings, and be very passionate of a decision not to continue excessive borrowing, unless it is absolutely necessary.

As my colleagues earlier on said, we support you wholeheartedly, from our side, from the general population. The Opposition supports you wholeheartedly in your thrust to spend the money to pay the people, the unemployed, for the pharmaceuticals, for the ventilators, and to help the indigent, and from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to help the people who are without jobs, and who need funding. So, we support you with that fully, and therefore, it is our hope that when you come now for approval and of course our concurrence, to support this Development Loans Act, and where I have pointed out that you in effect would be borrowing close to \$20 billion, when you have already borrowed \$30 billion. I think it is important for you to tell the country what you are going to do with it, and where are we going. You have explained one part of it, which is

over \$2.5 billion there, and then you come with the VAT for \$6 billion and so on, but that is a separate issue which you have discussed earlier on.

So, hon. Minister of Finance, I think I am dealing with this from a perspective of time, and from a perspective of asking questions which the general public has been asking, and you need to demonstrate to the country how you have really spent this money, so that people will not be questioning you as they are questioning now. Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] I thank the Member for his contribution. Just let me clarify some issues. A withdrawal from the Heritage Fund is not borrowing, not borrowing. If you withdraw from—I mean you added up, the hon. Member, Madam Speaker, was adding up everything, you know. Ten billion from the Heritage Fund that is borrowing 10, 10 billion extra on the Development Loans is a next 10, and he got 20. I just want to—there are people listening who might believe you. Madam Speaker, through you, they might believe him. A withdrawal from the fund is not borrowing. Just let me make that clear, okay.

Secondly, we cannot spend \$20 billion, we cannot take 10 billion from the Heritage Fund and borrow 10 billion and spend it, it goes back to my earlier point. The Government can only spend what has been appropriated. I do not have the ability under law to spend \$20 billion extra, in terms of this year's budget. It is impossible. It is illegal. It is unlawful.

**Hon. Young:** It is not impossible, they did it, but it is illegal.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** So, Madam Speaker, there are people listening. They must understand what these honourable gentlemen opposite are saying. It is just not

correct. I am not coming to the Parliament today to ask for permission to spend \$20 billion, in addition to what has already been approved by this Parliament for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for fiscal 2020. That is impossible.

What we are doing today is increasing the limit, because you do not want to come back into Parliament every month, every week, to increase the limit by 500 million, another 500 million, another—that does not make common sense. And the whole point is, Madam Speaker—*[Interruption]*—would you all stop it? The whole point is, Madam Speaker, when we came to the Parliament some time ago to increase the borrowing limits, we increased the External Loans limit, the Guarantee of Loans for companies limit, and the general development limit. As it turns out, it is more economical, it is more cost effective, to borrow using the Development Loans Act, you get a better rate. For example, if the Government goes to market to borrow \$1 billion over three years, the rate the Government will get is 3 per cent, but if alternatively, we said, all right let a state enterprises, let NIDCO borrow \$1 billion with a government guarantee the rate immediately goes to 4 per cent. The interest rate charged—you want to ask a question? *[Member shakes head suggesting yes]* Sure.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you, Minister. We have seen here on the financial statements of a number of state enterprises, that some borrowings have been an interest of 9.5 per cent and 7.5 per cent, and that will come under the development loan, but I am a little puzzled for you to say that the interest rate on that would be less than the other—like the World Bank and so on, which is about a little one or two per cent in addition to LIBOR. So, could you explain that?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Those rates of 9 per cent and so on were borrowed by you.

Under this Government, Madam Speaker, we borrow at 3 per cent, 4 per cent, 5 per cent, but we are carrying a lot of old loans on our books from prior periods, prior governments, where the interest rates were much higher. I am talking about over the last four years. Over the last four years, that is not this under this Act. Over the last four years, and that makes my point, that when the Government does direct borrowing, because the limits we are seeking to increase the limit for direct borrowing. When the Government does direct borrowing, we get a far better interest rate for a sovereign loan, than a loan taken out by a state enterprise. And I am talking about a loan taken out by a state enterprise with a government guarantee.

And let me go back to the point I was making. If the Government borrows money over three years, the interest rate is in the vicinity of 3 per cent. If however, we were to guarantee a loan for a state enterprise, over the same period, the interest rate will automatically rise to 4 per cent. If it is not guaranteed, the interest rate could be any amount, so that, under the Development Loans Act, we get the best interest rate, the most cost effective interest rate, and the best value for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

When we did it before, we increased all of the limits, external, guarantee of loans, and development loans, and what the public servants have done over the last four years, my debt management unit, they have chosen to go for the least cost loans, which is the loans taken out through the Development Loans Act. That is why we have a large threshold in the guarantee of loans of \$21 billion, and a large threshold in the external loans of \$10 billion. We could still borrow 10 billion more externally, and \$21 billion more for companies, but it is at a higher rate. So, this all about value for money and efficiency. This is the best form of borrowing.



[*Interruption*] Yeah, I am about to end. So, this is all about borrowing at the best rate, and this is why we see the need.

What we perhaps should have done the last time we spoke, and on hindsight is, the last time we debated this, hindsight is 2020 vision. Perhaps, we did not need to increase the ceiling on the guarantee of loans for companies by the amount that we did, or even external and perhaps we needed at that time, to raise the development loans ceiling more.

I will end with that, Member, and having said everything I said, let me thank hon. Members opposite for supporting both of the matters before the House today. [*Desk thumping*] Notwithstanding all the old talk, thank you very much for supporting both of the matters before the House today. The threshold—sorry, the headroom left on the development loans is 400 million, the threshold left on—is 10 billion, [*Interruption*] yes, so, and on the guarantee of loans is 21, okay, yes.

So that, Madam Speaker, this is the best value for the country, and I therefore beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That for the purposes stated in the said section, the Government is hereby authorized to borrow money externally or internally in a further sum or in further sums not exceeding in the aggregate ten thousand million dollars in the currency of Trinidad and Tobago.

### **ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS**

**Madam Speaker:** So, leader of the House, do we have an agreement to entertain one more matter on the understanding of the time for the adjournment?

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille**

**Robinson-Regis):** Yes, Ma'am, we will be ending at 6.30 come what may. One minute—

**MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS (AGE OF RETIREMENT OF JUDGES,  
 INTERPRETATION AND CHIEF JUDICIAL OFFICERS) BILL, 2019**

**Senate Amendments**

**The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi):** Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

*Be it resolved* that Senate amendments to the Miscellaneous Provisions (Age of Retirement of Judges, Interpretation and Chief Judicial Officers) Bill, 2019 listed in Appendix II be now considered.

*Question proposed.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 4.*

*Senate amendment read as follows:*

4 In paragraph (a), delete the words “the Registrar and Marshal of the High Court” and substitute the words “Registrar and Marshal”.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Madam Speaker, I thank you, and hon. Members, this is really just to correct the nomenclature in line with the public service nomenclature. It is a very simple amendment, it is intended that we can proclaim this law immediately, and therefore ensure the continuity of sitting judges. I beg to move.

**Madam Speaker:** Attorney General, if you could just move in accordance with the procedure please.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House agree with the Senate in amendments to clause 4 of the Miscellaneous Provisions (Age of Retirement of Judges, Interpretation and Chief Judicial Officers) Bill, 2019.

Miscellaneous Provisions (Age  
of Retirement of Judges Interpretation  
and Chief Judicial Officers) Bill, 2019  
Hon. F. Al-Rawi (cont'd)

Madam Speaker, this is to correct the nomenclature. It is a simple amendment. Passing this today would allow us to preserve the existing capacity of the Judiciary, and I beg to move.

*Question proposed.*

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I beg to move that the House of Representatives doth agree with the Senate in the said amendment.

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **ADJOURNMENT**

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 6.29 p.m.*