

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, October 09, 2020*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**PAPERS LAID**

1. Report of Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Environmental Management Authority–Environmental Trust Fund for the year ended September 30, 2019. [*The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
2. Annual Report of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board for the period October 1, 2017 to September 30, 2018. [*The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young)*]
3. Administrative Report of the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts for the fiscal year October 2018 to September 2019. [*The Minister of Sport and Community Development (Hon. Shamfa Cudjoe)*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2020

[Second Day]

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition has the equivalent time to the Minister of Finance which is three hours.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, as I thank you for this opportunity to contribute in the debate on the Appropriation Bill, 2020, for fiscal '21, I want to thank my colleagues on this side of the House for their overwhelming support and

confidence reposed in me to lead what I now think is one of the most powerful Opposition benches in the Caribbean. [*Desk thumping*] Whilst some Opposition parties have been wiped out during national elections under COVID measures, here in Trinidad and Tobago we increased our parliamentary seats and we received the popular vote in Trinidad; no easy achievement. [*Desk thumping*] Thanks to all. The democratic disaster being what it is, we soldier on to hold the Government accountable as the loyal Opposition of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Today, the Government has a wafer-thin majority, resting nervously on the edge of a precipice. They are as stable as Jello. [*Desk thumping*]

We are confident that the weight of incompetence and corruption may well nudge them off that metaphorical cliff. We will triumph regardless of how long and hard the road may be. Ours is a sacred duty to compel, by lawful means, the Government to be accountable and transparent. As I survey the horizon on this day—I reflect that we are in 2020—a former PNM administration which carries several of the front bench Members we see here today, including the Prime Minister, did promise us that in 2020 our nation would be a developed country. Well, if this is a developed country, we do not want to see an underdeveloped state. [*Desk thumping*]

In preparing for my contribution today, I reflected on my own journey and mission. When I had the honour to lead the Government in 2010, I indicated that I was driven to take steps to immediately protect our children via the Children's Life Fund. Indeed, Cabinet Note No. 1 of 2010 was to establish that Children's Life Fund. Later, I was moved to introduce a milk grant when we saw a mother resorting to stealing milk at the grocery to nourish her baby. Today I am more committed to protecting the poor when I saw a recent headline entitled, "Bandit apologises for robbery, says he was trying to feed his family". While citizens must

be one punished for transgressions, one cannot help but feel empathy for those who are driven to lawbreaking to find food.

A woman who was forced to stand outside a gas station with a placard this very week, and that placard read, “Good day, please help us, help a child to eat”. When we contrast this with the obscene headline on yesterday’s newspaper, “Gas Brains”, where we learned that a few Government Ministers ate up about \$7 million in exemptions, luxury cars, we must conclude the suffering is real, the pain is real, and the rage is real. [*Desk thumping*] Today I want to indicate that the Members of the Opposition benches are willing to work with Government for us to revisit the exemptions on motor vehicles with respect to putting a cap and/or otherwise with respect to the number of times that such exemptions can be given. [*Desk thumping*]

In 2020, the year of developed country status, communities are crying out for water in their taps or complain of too much water when it floods. It seems to flood when the clouds just set up, when it just gets dark. We find protests in the villages for better roads and infrastructure; children marching, demanding Government to complete construction of their schools. Is this the long sought after goal of developed country status? Today the Minister talks glibly about the digital economy while 65,000 students are without IT devices after that Government shamelessly rejected the policy of laptops for our children. Belatedly and sheepishly, they come now to offer IT devices, but that after a means test which can take years or months, at least a year to implement. So give us some targets, give us some benchmarks as to when it is that you hope to achieve this promise that you are making. [*Desk thumping*]

On Monday last, the Minister of Finance rhapsodized about his e-governance ecosystem, this two months after a taxi driver purchased a \$500

typewriter for the Licensing Division so he could get his taxi badge quickly. He did get the badge after donating a typewriter uncannily called Smith Corona. [*Desk thumping*] They talk digital but they behave analog and mechanical. They have returned to the tired tactic of “blame Kamla, blame the UNC”. I warned the Government that this strategy had a sell-by date and that date has completely expired now. [*Desk thumping*] As we meet today, there is no sector that has been a standout area for performance by this Government and in its incarnation as the previous Government. In fact, they have normed incompetence and inefficiency. Correspondently, no Minister has ever emerged as a high performing administrator.

In several Ministries, they changed the Ministers between Friday and Sunday, delivery has been their Achilles heel; there is a deficit of implementation and a deficit of delivery. [*Desk thumping*] But they are not short on talk, but they are very short on the walk. After five years, they are still constructing a walkover and we still expect foolishly for them to build highways and waterfronts and ferries and ports, and so on. The Minister last Monday began his three-hour long tirade at about 2.34 p.m. Remarkably, it just took him 90 minutes about to arrive at the very crucial issue of crime and security, little comfort for many citizens plagued by crime in all its most heinous forms. Just yesterday, senior police officers were urging the population to take preventive measures following an increase in home invasions over the past few months. Within 48 hours this very week, three home invasions have been reported in south Trinidad.

In one case, an 87-year-old retired medical doctor was confronted by armed bandits at 3.00 a.m. in the morning at this home. However, the Minister, like Rip Van Winkle, has not yet awoken to this grim reality which citizens face on a daily basis. There is neither empathy nor urgency from Government, but then for the

Prime Minister, hell hath no fury like a peacock stolen. [*Desk thumping*] They commandeered the elite hierarchy of the police service to hunt down those miscreants responsible for stealing the Prime Minister's peacock, dead or alive. Later I would go into a little more detail to expose incompetence and hypocrisy as it relates to security.

When I speak about empathy and sacrifice, I do so with moral authority. When I led my partnership team into a new government and established, as I said, the historic Children's Life Fund, we led by example. I gave 10 per cent of my monthly pay as Prime Minister to put in that fund. My Ministers followed by contributing 5 per cent of their salary to this fund for all of five years; that is what leadership by example is about. [*Desk thumping*] It was in solidarity with the poor and the response to suffering. And so I think in these pandemic times another great moment of moral leadership has arrived, and so I call on this Government to consider a 5 per cent pay cut in solidarity with suffering citizens. [*Desk thumping*] Follow the growing examples of countries like New Zealand, India, Singapore where top politicians have taken pay cuts in solidarity with the poor.

While such a move will not necessarily shift the overall fiscal position, it is about leadership by example. We can call it a policy of coronavirus solidarity. We can show that we are riding out these difficult times with the people. While I expect a collective moan and groan from colleagues opposite, they may even consider it as a short-term initiative in the short term for about 12 months as the worst of the pandemic's harshest circumstances are being experienced by our population. These funds can go towards a special cooked-food supply programme for citizens deemed to be in extreme need, as the lady with the placard I described earlier. From our side, we did it already to save lives of children in the period 2010—2015. We stand prepared to participate in a collective effort if Government

can find the heart and the will to do so, but with or without them, I have instructed my Members of Parliament to take steps to increase our assistance to the poor and suffering at this very difficult time.

I turn now to the actual budget presentation of the hon. Minister of Finance. Incredible as it seems, the Minister has managed once more to deceive the vast majority of Trinidadians. “The budget ain’t so bad”, people have been saying, unmindful as it appears, of the spectacular rise in the cost of living of unprecedented retrenchment and bankruptcies of declining company profits. The fact is the budget lacks the wit, sagacity and hope one would expect in these desperate times and it is a little more than a shopkeeper’s list of impending price increases.

10.15 a.m.

Madam Speaker, these words aptly describe our current situation in this year’s budget, but they are not my words, they are the words of the late well-respected journalist, Owen Baptiste, in a newspaper column published on Sunday, January 25, 1985. But the words could have easily been written after Monday’s presentation. This is where this Government has taken our nation. We are an economy in retreat.

There was once *Vision 2020*, but under the Member for Diego Martin West and the Member for Diego Martin North/East, we now have *Vision 1985*. [*Desk thumping*] We have gone backwards. The column from 35 years ago paints a picture of life back then under a different PNM regime which is strikingly similar to what we see today under yet another PNM regime. Trinidad and Tobago seems to be living in a perpetual time loop, where one generation of Trinbagonians must pay for the incompetence of a PNM administration.

Our task as the Opposition is to hold the Government accountable to the

great people of our nation. In this budget debate we will show how this administration continues to fail the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Minister of Finance named this budget, “Resetting the Economy”, but it should be called what it is, “Business as Usual”, as seen over the last five years. It is shocking how much of this budget is simply a rehash of old policies and old idea, “same ol’ same ol’”. There is nothing new, nothing innovative. There is no vision to take us into the economy of the 21st Century. [*Desk thumping*]

The budget was outdated before the ink had dried after it was printed and of course, it has all been covered with a cloak of deception. They came with misinformation, conflicting figures, a convoluted narrative intended to hide the true reality of our situation. As expected, the Minister’s almost three-hour presentation focused heavily on COVID-19. They did not account to the people for the five years of economic mismanagement, instead now changing their mantra to blame COVID-19.

They are so utterly clueless that they complain and bemoan the pandemic and its effects rather than seeing that there is opportunity in this crisis. Now is the time for refocusing priorities and developing policies and programmes to help people. There was not a single initiative to do this. In fact, I think this budget was very anti-people. [*Desk thumping*] You did nothing for five years, spent close to 300 billion, with very little to show for it.

Let us look at COVID. I urged the Government over and over to test more, to tell the nation the truth of what we were dealing with. The truth is now being revealed. Before elections low testing, low numbers, a story of handling COVID well. After elections, increased testing, increased numbers, and in true PNM gas lighting form, they still want to say they handled COVID well. There are three doctors on my Bench and they will go into more depth and details about the

handling of the COVID and their own suggestions as we go forward. But it is ridiculous and unacceptable that an administration which refused to test more than 5 per cent of the population before the elections could continue to say they acted on the data. [*Desk thumping*]

What data was that? What data did they act on? It is shameful that countless persons have had their surgeries and treatment postponed, yet this administration still boasts of a functioning parallel health care system; and some have even died whilst awaiting treatment. It is unconscionable that any of them can get up and boast of a health care system that we all know has failed our citizens, and this was long before COVID. They passed the buck continually to our first responders and medical professionals. When something fails, it is always someone else who must take the blame, but if it goes right then you see them lining up all to take credit. But history would show this Government dealt with COVID in a manner to fit their own narrow agenda, and not in the best interest of the people of T&T.

They have tried to use the cover of COVID as their own antidote against any criticism and responsibility. And how did we get here? There is only one role which every government must perform, and that role is to serve their employers, and their employers are the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Right now, outside these walls, outside the bubble that this Government lives in, thousands of our fellow countrymen and women are facing a bleak future. Many have lost their jobs, are struggling to find work. On Monday I said Trinidad and Tobago is facing a “twindemic”, one is COVID-19 and the other virus is far more dangerous and has been with us for five years now.

It started with shortsightedness and incompetence that led to the closure of the Petrotrin refinery, the destruction of our oil-producing sector, the placing of

close to 10,000 people and their families on the breadline. It started with the failure to implement proper policies to secure our borders, allowing for the influx of drugs and guns and so escalating our crime rate. It started with the arrogance that made a politician with no experience in the energy sector think that he could personally negotiate gas deals, causing the collapse of the entire Point Lisas Industrial Estate, and the loss of thousands of jobs. [*Desk thumping*] It started with the hubris of an engineer, who after five years has crafted zero policies to drive economic growth, attract foreign direct investment and address the forex issue crisis or deal with rising poverty. It started with the blatant corruption that wrecked the interisland sea bridge, destroying the Tobago economy, and then trying to blame everything under the sun other than themselves.

Today Trinidad and Tobago has failed and is falling in almost every index measuring process. And one way we can look at the state of our economy, the health of our economy, and be able to see that before COVID this Government put the economy in intensive care. They crashed the economy before COVID. [*Desk thumping*] So, an examination of our macroeconomic environment reveals that our Government has put our economy in intensive care before COVID.

Let us look at some of these indices, the macro indicators. I will start with labour because this has to do with jobs, and that is where we are, in a job crisis. COVID did not crash the labour market. This PNM Government crashed the labour market, long before COVID. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, when the virus arrived on our shores, as I said, the economy was already in intensive care. With the PNM in office in March 2020 when the virus arrived it was sadly a disaster meeting a disaster. [*Desk thumping*]

So let us look at employment. This Government has consistently been hiding the statistics relating to employment. Some comes out, some does not

come. So let us look at what we have. We have the annual reports of the NIBTT, and that report tells us that the June 2015, which would have been just before—these reports are done with data up to June in any calendar year—that up to June 2015 there were 516,926 persons on the list of insured contributors, that is to say, meaning that they are employed and they are paying NIB dues. That number, when we come to June 2018, fell to 452,234. What this means is that in that period from June 2015 to June 2018, 64,692 persons were no longer employed. In other words, before COVID 64,692 people had lost their jobs, and these are only for registered contributors to the scheme. There would be those who would be outside of the formal NIB insurance scheme, so the number would be much greater. All of this, all these people lost their jobs under this Government before anyone got a COVID fever in the country. This number does not include all the job losses for the rest of 2018, all of 2019, and up to March 2020, which is up to just before COVID, the COVID lockdowns in March.

The Government has not provided any statistics for this period, and even though the NIB on its website quite a while now has been saying they have completed the 2019 NIB Report, they said they will not post it on their website until it is laid in Parliament, as the Government has to do. So they have sent it to the Minister but the Minister has failed to lay it in Parliament and I say this is another attempt to hide the true statistics of unemployment. [*Desk thumping*]

Anecdotal evidence however, as carried in newspapers, in the media, whether print or electronic, suggests that an additional number of persons have lost their jobs. So you would get, for example, up to June 2018 that we have the numbers for, thereafter they shut down Petrotrin, with thousands of more workers going home. You had many other companies shutting down with workers going home, and it is all there carried anecdotally in the media. So it suggests that by the

end of 2019 about 100,000 persons had lost their jobs under this Government, over 100,000 persons. And to this debacle we now face the possible retrenchment, job losses at WASA, at T&TEC, used-car industry, National Petroleum and the Port and many others. So the numbers are expected to increase. Interestingly, just yesterday as reported from the Morning Edition programme on CNC3, Dr. Patrick Antoine of the hospitality industry said that over 100,000 persons in that hospitality industry are now unemployed.

So we are looking at, pre-COVID, thousands of persons losing their jobs, nothing to do with COVID, and then we come within the COVID times, we are seeing thousands again, and then we are seeing the projections for more to lose their jobs. Imagine over 100,000 persons left without a source of income. Imagine their family members, how saddening and how heartbreaking. It unfortunately does not stop with this industry only. We have to consider the tens of thousands sent home before COVID-19. Unemployment was a pre-COVID issue and now it is exacerbated by COVID. The Government could not deal with that unemployment issue before COVID, so I do not expect and believe that they can deal with that unemployment situation now as we go into 2021. [*Desk thumping*]

We see no clear skies on the horizon. Any light at the end of the tunnel is really a train coming towards us in our direction. What was the bright plan of this Minister of Finance? Guess what? He astonishingly gave a tax break to persons who are unemployed. The tens of thousands who are not earning a salary got the good news that if they had 7,000 a month, that would be tax free. The savage attack on labour was predicted as I see the privatization of the Port and NP and others, more job losses.

Then we get all the grants being given. Again, my colleagues who are shadowing the Social Development Ministry portfolio will give more details. But

each day you read the horror stories of people who are saying they have not got any of the grants. They have applied for salary grants, rental grants, they have not got them, but yet billions are being spent and persons are saying they have not got it. We hear the horror stories of the pressure that they go through in order to put in the application, and then to be told they lost the application. So something has to be done, Minister. Maybe we can suggest because you may have good intentions and want to help people. It is often said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Maybe you may want to consider empowering the local government authorities to assist in the distribution of the assistance, of the help for citizens of the country, because clearly centralizing it up in the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Finance is not reaching the people who are most in need. [*Desk thumping*] It is not helping.

103.0 a.m.

The Minister in the meantime whilst sitting upright at the wheel of his Mustang and luxury Benz, may not be aware that ordinary low-income workers in elementary occupations, particularly single mothers, they buy low-cost used cars to take their children to school and to drive to and from work. They cannot afford the million-dollar-plus Porsche Cayenne, if that is the proper thing, and the Mercedes-Maybach favoured by some Ministers. The Prime Minister can declare cars are not critical because he has a fleet of vehicles at his command, so cars are not critical, but for the ordinary person a car is vital to them functionally especially now in the COVID time, especially now.

The cost of a used car is expected to increase by 40 per cent. Those low-income workers who depend on a Toyota Aqua or a Nissan AD Wagon will feel the pinch as the Porsche boys continue to ride high. Low-income persons earning \$5,500 can get a loan today and afford a car valued at \$65,000. When the

Minister's measure kicks in, that same worker will not be able to afford the cheapest car. [*Desk thumping*]

There are thousands of persons in addition employed in the sector; think of people like mechanics, workers in body and detailing shops, drivers, office staff, many of them will be out of a job courtesy the Minister of Finance with this measure. Imagine small operators with a yearly quota of 15 cars will now have that quota reduced by 30 per cent. Economies of scale will wipe out many of these small firms. The big players with the 400 quota, they will survive, the big ones always do, not so the small and medium-sized firms.

The Minister boasts about helping small and medium-sized enterprises while presiding over their demise in this used car sector. This is the deceit we speak about today, this is what you say, "it is not so bad, not so bad" but the devil is in the details and the impact it will have on the poor, the vulnerable, the working poor, the middle classes of this country, and therefore, we ask the Minister to reconsider this measure. If it is that you want to impose this, you said because of traffic but I ask you to think of the low-income persons and even the middle-income persons who use this for their children, for themselves, for their families, that you may want to consider the quota that you set. So instead of going at a 30 per cent, the quota that you may want to consider something smaller than that, and give these people, again in a very harsh time with jobs being so scarce, an opportunity to survive and feed their families. And this will happen, the price at the same time of fuel will go up, the cost of the car goes up and we will expect high productivity and low cost for transportation, construction and services. This budget, in my respectful view, spells pressure, pressure and more pressure on the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

I want to speak a little on the new domain of work and family life. It is an

area that we need to take account of. We cannot continue business as usual, business as usual with the same kind of models. It is a whole different world, I am speaking in a plexi box here. Who would have thought that in the Parliament, the seat of our democracy, that MPs would be distancing, only limited numbers will be coming out and speaking in a plexi box. Well, I am glad for it because at least we can remove the mask, so thank you, Madam Speaker, for this provision because it is very difficult to speak, you already hyperventilate when you are speaking, and with the mask it was really uncomfortable, so thanks to the Parliament and to Madam Speaker for allowing us this opportunity to address the Parliament and, of course, the public; so, new domain of work and family life.

In a matter of months the landscape of work and family has been altered fundamentally. How we see work and where we do it have become a key focus of policy makers across the globe. Remote working has now become the order of the day. The renewed growth of this phenomena now presents significant policy challenges which this Government, true to form, will take another five years if they have so much to understand. This process appears to be irreversible as traditional workplaces are portrayed as dysfunctional and unhealthy, so that is why we have to hide of our faces, we have to speak in a plexi box, we have to social distance and all the other health protocols because workplaces are now seen as dysfunctional and unhealthy.

So as we are bunkered down in our homes therefore, many people are working remote from home, as we work from confined spaces, we find that work space and leisure space is one and the same; this is the new norm. As employers look for greater efficiency and productivity gains, there is a greater potential to exploit workers and deny well-established benefits and statutorily protected entitlements. A new form of labour inspection machinery is needed to supervise

the advent of working from home. I repeat, Government should give some attention to providing a new form of labour inspection machinery whether through legislation or otherwise to properly supervise the advent of working from home. Another factor is the isolation and loneliness that has been flagged as psychological variables demanding greater employee assistance strategies and counselling service. Has Government given any attention to this?

Female employees who stay at home find that they must weave their days as remote workers for their employer, but they must also tutor for online education, their children, and still undertake everyday household work. They balance full-time child care with part-time teaching, lesson planning, online learning. Single mothers are today bearing this burden in the pandemic, many must work through the chaos while keeping a balance.

Today I salute the mothers who now work on an average 15 hours more per week to ensure that their children reap the benefits of stay-home education whilst undertaking their own careers and professional tasks. Let us salute the mothers who are doing this extra work. [*Desk thumping*]

In a May 2020 survey of parents in the US, UK, France, Germany and Italy by the Boston Consulting Group, families reported an additional 27 hours, 27 hours spent each week on household work, child care and education; that is nearly like a second job, equivalent to a second job. Such is the stress and strain for parents and particularly single mothers.

I suggest and recommend that Government must have dialogue with employers to ensure that parents receive reasonable time off once per week, at least, to collect assignments with the children from the school. A single mother working reported she was threatened with being fired because she took time to go to a primary school to receive her child's hard copy of assignments; this in the

context where children have no IT devices and online learning is not available.

There are policy challenges we face, homeschooling will be here for the foreseeable future. There will be no stampede to get children back in schools even when the doors reopen. We took note that Government has not paid attention to these issues. Facts are stubborn things and whatever may be our wishes or the inclinations or the dictates of our passions, “they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence”, as John Adams once said. It is clear that the facts and evidence show an incapable, apathetic and indifferent administration with regard to the humanity of the citizenry of our country. It is like déjà vu every year and nothing new. Unemployment and layoffs have become the norm under this Government, and even when the present Prime Minister was Minister of Agriculture, disaster at Caroni that led to its untimely demise in 2003, was under his purview; 17 years later, the same khaki pants. And he was the Prime Minister that closed Petrotrin, destroying a century-old legacy.

Today, less than two months into his second term as Prime Minister, hundreds of thousands more are marked to lose jobs in the manufacturing, beverage, entertainment, foreign-used vehicle industries and others.

Whilst that is happening what is most disheartening is the Government’s continued lip service to the poor and vulnerable in society. I want to remind you that it was this same PNM which boasted that they had slashed the social safety net and they had saved millions by reducing the number of meals for poor children in schools, and the number of people who got food cards. Tell us what is the actual number of individuals who have received the support, because every day, every day people come to my office, people text, people send emails and so on saying that they are in desperate need of support. Many have become impoverished and some are in absolute poverty.

Have you ever heard of a man boasting of his incompetence? The same Ministry, the same system, the same time and effort that would have collated the information and processed these individuals to collect the 1,500 food support grant, should have processed their pending applications. The system that was being audited and made more efficient as the Minister reported in the 2017 budget speech, has failed our most vulnerable.

I challenge the Minister to tell us how many individual children have benefited under this programme and for what period. Do these grants cover all 79,000 students for the almost 200 days they have been without access to school feeding? If not, what has happened to all of the rest? The Minister has declared he has spent over 4 billion already of the 6 billion that he determined would be needed through the pandemic. This was spent under social safety net exclusively, and was in addition to expenditure previously budgeted.

I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the vulnerable are protected. I recall a Minister stating that persons receiving funds from the Government to assist in providing support will be accountable to God. I would like to remind Members opposite that they are accountable to the people of this nation. [*Desk thumping*] As such, I call for a complete and forensic investigation into the expenditure of this \$6 billion. [*Desk thumping*] I am not convinced that the provision of these grants is being done equitably and with transparency. [*Desk thumping*]

And whilst COVID has taken centre stage, the Government's *Social Sector Investment Programme 2021* is characterized by the multiplicity of projects abandoned or underfunded by this Government. Several programmes they have abandoned, the development centre for persons with challenges; they have abandoned the plan to refurbish and reconfigure DRETCHI and other homes for older persons. They underfunded the establishment of social displacement centres,

refurbishment of the community education training information and resource centre and much more. As I say, the shadow social development MP will talk more of that.

So I talked of macro-indicators which showed that before COVID this Government had put the economy into intensive care. I want to speak now about GDP numbers which tell us about the state of the health of the economy.

The Minister of Finance in his Spotlight presentation introduced a graph to show real growth rate of the GDP in Trinidad and Tobago. As a reference however, that very graph also shows that when my government inherited the economy, that economy had tanked, contracting by almost 5 per cent in fiscal 2009, and had struggled with the lagged effects of the global financial crisis in the previous year. So we did not come, we did not come to the population with doom and gloom and blame game. We did what we do best, we set about putting the country back to work and we succeeded, we succeeded. [*Desk thumping*] We were able to grow the economy from \$141.2 billion at current market prices in fiscal 2010, we grew that to when we left in 2015, to \$159.2 billion. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, according to Central Bank stats, in fiscal 2015, even with Brent falling to as low as US \$36.11 per barrel, we were able to grow the economy by 1.5 per cent in our last year. [*Desk thumping*]

At a per capita level our gross national income was at its highest level in our history. Our GNI was at the highest level in our history at US 191.30 per person, \$19 per person according to World Bank figures.

10.45 a.m.

Under the PNM, well before COVID, income per person dropped to US \$16.8 in 2019, per person, which means each man, woman and child on average lost TT \$20,000 in income under the PNM before COVID. The Minister has been

making the rounds preaching that the economy was on growth path, the economy had stabilised, that the economy had turned around, that he was seeing clearly and the rain is gone, all the song and dance, and each budget they were not a true reflection about what was happening with the economy. [*Desk thumping*] With each year the economy—the GDP continued to fall and it was simply not true; that the optimistic outlook that the Minister was feeding the population was totally erroneous. During the first year of this Minister, the economy dived. It contracted by minus 5.6 per cent marking the start of the recession under this PNM Government. Despite boasting for years about stability, turnaround, growth, the evidence is clear that the economy of T&T contracted in 2016, contracted in 2017, had virtually no growth in 2018, contracted in 2019, and there was no COVID in Trinidad and Tobago. None! [*Desk thumping*]

If that is what is happening before COVID then we have no hope that they can restore this nation, revive this nation during COVID or after. [*Desk thumping*] Falling credit ratings. Standard and Poor's continues to downgrade T&T. From a grade A in December 2015 to BBB+ with stable outlook 2017, to BBB+ negative outlook 2018, to BBB in July 2019, and BBB- in March 2020. All before COVID. All before COVID. Moody's Investors Services has consistently downgraded the country under this Government. After five years of mishandling the economy and misleading the population, the incompetence of this Minister of Finance is finally evident in his very flippant confession for the first time, and I quote:

Generally, we have not been too well economically speaking for the last several years.

The Minister's own words:

Generally, we have not been doing too well economically speaking for the last several years.

This is at the Spotlight held recently, at the Spotlight, first time admitting.

Every time coming to this Parliament in budget statement after budget statement, speaking about stability and growth, and turnaround, all totally untruths to the population. [*Desk thumping*] Having used the blame Kamla rhetoric for five years, Government has now adopted blame COVID as a mask for their incompetence. I say again, COVID did not destroy the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, the PNM destroyed the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] When we look at Government revenue, the picture is the same. The Minister of Finance came to tell the country government revenue has fallen, hard times are upon us. No surprise. That has been the same song and dance in every budget statement. So while he was standing there wringing his hands in a fake despair, I say he must take full responsibility for the collapse in government revenue during his tenure. Take responsibility. [*Desk thumping*]

Let us put it in perspective. I told you what we had inherited when we came in office in 2010. But during the period 2010 to 2015, we grew government revenue from 43.9 billion in fiscal 2010 to 58.4 billion in 2014. We fell slightly in 2015 because of the drop in prices to 57.3 billion in that fiscal year. More than that, we were able to increase revenues from VAT, from 6 billion to 7.2 billion, and we did that in spite of the fact that we took off VAT on over 7,000 items. [*Desk thumping*] We were able to grow that revenue from six—I have told you before. We grew total non-tax revenue from 6.5 billion in '10 to 9.96 billion in 2015, a growth of 53 per cent. Overall, we were able to grow our revenue base by 39 per cent in our five years because I say we did what we did best, we put the country back to work. [*Desk thumping*]

Central government revenues from taxes dropped by a whopping 20 per cent over the period fiscal 2015 to fiscal 2019, with most of that drop coming from a

loss of central government tax stay on incomes. And you know, all this falling revenue, despite an unexpected windfall in 2.4 billion that they got from a tax amnesty. Over the same period central government revenue from taxes and goods and services dropped. In spite of all these new taxes that the Minister was piling on, their revenue from taxes and goods and services dropped from 9.3 billion to 7.8 billion, 15 per cent, even with the new online tax and putting VAT on items which were before zero rated when we were there.

So when you compare fiscal 2015, our last year in office, to fiscal 2019, no COVID, we see that the revenue has fallen. Reported by the Central Bank, revenue has fallen. Even as they broaden the tax base, as I said, they were not able to collect that revenue from taxes. There is no mystery or mischief query here. This is simply mismanagement and incompetence on the part of that Government. [*Desk thumping*] One of the most important indicators of economic illness is debt. Well, this Government has incurred more debt than any previous administration in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And that debt was accrued before COVID. Do not let them fool you. Before COVID. They were intent on borrowing and borrowing and borrowing in order to satisfy their vanity projects and so on. When we left office, net public sector debt to GDP was at 47.1 per cent. They came into office with their runaway borrowing and we see net public sector debt to GDP ratio whopping 62.2 per cent at the end of fiscal '18; '19 again, all before COVID. All before COVID. They crashed the economy before COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

When we talk about levels of debt, I want to just raise a point because every budget debate somebody on the other side raises this. Every debate comes with things that are totally untrue. They said we were running on fumes with respect to the overdraft. Running on fumes with respect to the overdraft. And that we had

maxed out the overdraft. Well, let us look at the figures. The only Minister and Government which maxed the overdraft over the legal limit is this Minister of Finance. This Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*] We left the overdraft on the Exchequer Account to 33 billion in 2015. When we demitted office it was 41 billion. That was September 2019, pre-COVID-19. Each consecutive year they maxed out the overdraft. And what the Minister always does, he comes to this Parliament, and those books that brings the estimates, the books tell us about interest payment on the overdraft. But what the Minister does, is ever year he estimates that it will be \$250,000. The interest payment on the overdraft would be 200-and—I do not know, like they have some magic figure, because each year, 2019 he estimated interest on the overdraft at 250 million. In other years the same things. And in 2021 he is doing it again, interest on the overdraft, 250 million. But then when we get the actual numbers, what is happening? The interest is over a billion dollars. Over a billion dollars. [*Desk thumping*] So, he underestimates or misestimates, and one would think that he is doing that deliberately, doing it deliberately, thinking nobody will go back to check. So, what is the magic in 250 million, which ends up that the interest being paid is over a billion dollars. In 2019 the estimate of the interest on the overdraft was 250 million. The actual expenditure is 1.2 billion. That is the pattern. [*Desk thumping*]

So let us talk about maxing out this overdraft. Minister, there is a formula, you know. There is a formula. It was 15 per cent of revenue in any fiscal year. You are allowed to take that as an overdraft, month-to-month, as the case may be. But this Minister has done two things. The Minister came to the Parliament and increased the limit on the overdraft to, from 15 per cent to 20 per cent, so he could now, now overdraft more. Let us look at the figures: In 2016 the limit on the overdraft, the legal limit estimated by using the percentage of 15 per cent out of the

revenue numbers, the legal limit was \$7 billion, just over. Do you know what the Minister did in that year, 2016/'17, fiscal '17? The Minister took from the overdraft \$10.5 billion. I am not making these numbers—if you do not believe me ask the Auditor General. These come out of the Auditor General's reports. Each year the annual reports. [*Desk thumping*] Ask the Auditor General, 2017, 2018 fiscal, the maximum for that overdraft was \$8.9 billion, using the legal formula. Do you know what that Minister did? He maxed out the overdraft above that legal limit, taking 13.6 billion from 8.9 billion. Maxed the overdraft above the legal limit. Do not ask me, as I say if you do not believe me, check the Auditor General. Check the Auditor General report. [*Desk thumping*]

And if you want the page number I will give it to you. For the '17 to '18—for the '16/'17 you could go to look at page 149 of the Auditor General's report for that year. For the '17/'18 you could go to the Auditor General's report, page 109 for that year. Come now, fast forward 2018/2019 fiscal, the maximum, legally you would see the formula set in the law, was 9.3 billion, just about that. Do you know what the Minister did? The Minister maxed it above that legal limit to \$13.3 billion; \$13.3 billion. [*Desk thumping*] Go to page 133 of the Auditor General's report for that fiscal year. We do not yet have the numbers for 2019/2020, the fiscal year that has just ended, because we only get these—we do not get it from the Government. We only get it when the Auditor General publishes that report, and that report would not come until next year April. But I have no doubt that the Minister maxed it out over the legal limit. [*Desk thumping*]

Let us look at the deficit. The Minister of Finance over the past five years, starting from his first budget speech, has repeatedly chided my Government for running budget deficits. He continued this in his most recent Spotlight, ignoring the facts facing him in the very graph that he had presented. So in this five-year

term, this Government ran a whopping \$48 billion deficits over the five-year period, an average of 9.6 billion per year. Even removed the effect of COVID on the deficit, removed 2020 altogether go back to pre-COVID, the average deficit for the four-year period before was 7.3 billion per year. Higher than any and every deficit during my tenure. The new deadline has also passed, and given the budgeted deficit of over five billion in 2020, it is safe to say that the Minister never expected to balance any budget this year COVID or no COVID. The fallacy of balanced budget is laid bare. It was never intended.

And I want to remind you, Mr. Minister, in your graph, whilst you say that in the last year we were in office that we had a deficit of over 7 billion, the true figure is 2.7 billion, but in your very next year it was minus 7.9 billion. That is what the seven billion is. That is what you did in your first fiscal year, first budget. And it continued to increase, 2017, 13.5 billion. This year I think it was 16 billion was the deficit, if I am not mistaken. Yes, you had extraordinary COVID, but the point is that you have been running budget deficit in almost every fiscal year before COVID. Remember before COVID you put the economy in intensive care.
[Desk thumping]

11.00 a.m.

Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. I think today the country should be very grateful that we had the fiscal space in this pandemic time because of the Government I led which put all that money in this Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.
[Desk thumping] It is a sovereign wealth fund but a sovereign wealth fund established first by the Panday Government; it was then known as the Interim Revenue Stabilisation Fund. Thereafter, the legislation was passed. It took the PNM Government coming into office several years before they actually brought the legislation, so we would have lost all those years of moneys that could have

gone into the fund.

I met, when I came into office, a net asset value of a little over US \$3 billion, to be exact, in the HSF. Over my tenure, we grew the fund to over US \$ 5.7 billion. [*Desk thumping*] We always put deposits into the fund and not once did we withdraw or make any withdrawal out of that HFS, [*Desk thumping*] not once, not once. What that meant, we increased what is known as the net asset value, the NAV, of over US \$ 2.7 billion. That was almost a 100-fold increase. In other words, we doubled the savings in the fund under my tenure. [*Desk thumping*]

So when you talk about— you come and talk about “we raided Treasury and running on fumes”, nothing is further from this truth. Statistics—these do not lie. You have an HFS report that comes out, being put out all the time, there is a committee, a Chairman of the Board putting out these reports and so on, and the numbers are there. I have the pages if you want me to tell you what they are. But we never withdrew. And with credit to Mr. Patrick Manning, even when there was a—former Prime Minister, the late Patrick Manning—even when there was a problem in the 2008/2009 period, that Prime Minister did not withdraw from the HFS, did not. [*Desk thumping*] It took this Government, even before COVID-19, even before COVID to withdraw from the HFS, even before COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

So, they have withdrawn about US \$ 1.6 billion, \$1.6 billion, that is TT \$10.9 billion. Where that money gone? Can we see schools?

Hon. Member: No.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Can we see any development, roads, schools, and so on? Where has that \$10.9 billion gone? The Minister of Finance continues to “ratch” everything, even “ratching” our foreign reserves leverage. This is dangerous and unsustainable. They have borrowed, I think in this fiscal alone,

COVID times, they have borrowed I think three times to the tune of about US \$900,000. And before that, before COVID, they borrowed twice—not borrow. They drew down, they raided, they took out of the HFS.

The Minister stated when they came into office they met the HFS with \$5.5 billion. It was really \$5.6 billion and to date, it has \$5.8 billion. So the statements he made is that, you know, they are ridiculous and unfounded. They are very disingenuous statements to say, well, look we pulled out all that money, you know, but it is the same. Minister, if you did not pulled it out, it would have been more in the HSF fund, [*Desk thumping*] it would have been more, it would have been more. But that is how it is, it is like a—anyhow. You just need more and more, a very voracious appetite.

So that is with the HFS and there is a dangerous thing happening with the HFS with these withdrawals because it seems as though the Government is using HFS, the foreign exchange to prop up the forex situation in the country. They give the false impression that we have forex but when you have killed all the forex revenue earners, all those plants in Point Lisas, Petrotrin and so, where are you going to get foreign exchange? And in this budget 2021, I have not seen one measure that will earn us foreign exchange, not one, [*Desk thumping*] not one, not one. Because what you have to do is—those products, those items that can be sold abroad.

In your budget, tell me what it is you are going to sell abroad? What is it that you have put in the budget that you say that we are here—what is it? We setting the economy for growth and stability or stability and growth—what? I do not see any new revenue streams there that are sustainable. The only is revenue streams that are there is tax, tax, tax, tax, borrow, borrow, borrow, [*Desk thumping*] engage in fire sale, sell out NP, privatize the port, sell out other assets. In your COVID

roadmap you have about selling shares, Clico, whether it is Trincity Mall or wherever, fire sales, and this is a buyer's market, it is not a seller's market. [*Desk thumping*] So that you are going to have sell out, you are going to get sell out. And is it then, again, a case of friends, family and financiers that these are going to? And I urge that the Government must fully proclaim and implement the procurement law before any sales take place, [*Desk thumping*] before any of these sales take place. We must preserve the patrimony of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Go down to Australia, no tendering process, buying Austal boats— I will come to that in a moment.

So foreign exchange, Forex, we have a hunger. So we do not need cars, we need medicine and even that we are not getting, as one of the doctors will tell you what is happening with the CDAP. You talk about expanding CDAP. People cannot get medicines out there. So who are we fooling? People do not need cars, we need medicine, yet you have the gas brains with the millions in revenue foregone for these luxury vehicles.

Foreign reserves, two very topical issues continue to plague the economy. The continuous decline in our level of foreign reserves with our level of import cover and secondly, the availability of foreign exchange, most frequently US dollars for consumers and businesses. In 2010, when we came into office, we met reserves to the tune of a little over US \$9 billion or 12.9 months of import cover. Well done again by the late former Prime Minister Manning. Under my tenure, we were able to grow those foreign reserves to a high of almost US \$1.5 billion, US, \$1.5 billion, okay. I am sorry, US \$11.5 billion. From US \$9 billion to US \$11.5 billion in 2014. The prices declined, oil in 2014, mid '14, yet we still left over US \$10.4 billion; we left in foreign reserves US \$10.4 billion when we demitted office. In December 2019, before COVID, before COVID, before COVID, this

incompetent Government allowed our reserves to fall below US \$7 billion, representing a decline of almost \$3.5 billion; a 33 per cent decline in our foreign reserves.

The Minister of Finance has now resorted to external borrowings and of course, the drawdowns from the HFS to boost foreign reserves. So they are not real foreign reserves. It is a kind of sleight of hand, a bookkeeping kind of exercise with no real foreign exchange being earned. It must also be noted persons and businesses have severe challenges to get foreign reserves, to get US dollars which is severely impacting on businesses. So Minister, in resetting the economy for stability and growth, I would appreciate in your reply or from any of the others that you tell us where in your budget 2021 you are resetting the economy to generate revenue, foreign exchange as revenue. [*Desk thumping*] And whilst we do that, I just want to spend a moment on what has been happening with local government. There is a tremendous disparity in the financial allocations to the local government bodies.

Madam Speaker: Member—Member for Siparia, I just want to advise all Members to please comply with Standing Order 53. We know we have certain constraints and therefore your compliance will assist us in smoothly proceeding. Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I was on the issue of discrimination, a local government discrimination. We have 14 of these local government corporations in Trinidad. When we look at the figures, it is clear that those corporations that are not controlled by the PNM are given much less resources even though they have far more burgesses there. [*Desk thumping*] For Arima— for example, Arima, their population, their electorate is 33,606, they got an allocation of \$82,437,758. This means that every single individual, if you

divide it up, will get \$2,453 for the year.

Let us compare Chaguanas, a population of 83,000 and a bit more—Chaguanas, comparing 33 and now we are talking about 83,000. They get an allocation of 69,000 just above, which works to \$830 per year. In the Chaguanas Borough Corporation, the population is 49,910 more than the Arima Borough Corporation yet they receive over \$30 million less. Do you think that is fair? Do you think that is equality of treatment in this day in Trinidad and Tobago? It also means that individual corporations throughout, in the case of the regional corporations that are controlled by the UNC, Mayaro, Siparia, Princes Town, all received considerably less than those controlled by the PNM. It shows that this is not a Government for all, it is a Government for a few. [*Desk thumping*] Chaguanas lives matter, Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo lives matter, Diego Martin lives matter, Port of Spain lives matter, but where is the equity of treatment, where is the equality of treatment from a Government body? This is a classic case of discrimination and I have our lawyers looking at it and we will be challenging this allocation [*Desk thumping*] on the basis of inequality of treatment via public authority.

I turn now to property tax. Madam, would you be kind enough to give me an idea of time, please?

Madam Speaker: Your time will expire at 1.03 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sorry?

Madam Speaker: At 1.03 p.m., your time will expire. [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What time will it— I am not hearing. [*Crosstalk*]
What time will I finish?

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima, no one is to remove their mask to speak unless they are inside of—please. Member for Siparia, at 1.00 p.m., three minutes

after 1.00 p.m., your time will expire.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Madam.

Madam Speaker: And the time now is 11.12 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you.

Madam Speaker: You are welcome.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I apologize. It is bit difficult to hear with the mask and the booth, so I thank you for repeating. I turn now to property tax, property tax. Again, bankrupt of ideas to recalibrate the economy to take us through COVID and thereafter. The Government has placed on its list of revenue raising measures, the dreaded property tax. I have called on the Government repeatedly to hold their hands on the property tax. [*Desk thumping*] We are currently facing a pandemic. Thousands have lost jobs as I have explained, incomes and livelihoods. By law, this property tax is to be calculated on the annual rental assessment of your property. This tax will vary on the use of the property, residential, agricultural, commercial and so on.

Every owner, an occupier of land will be liable to pay property tax. So whether you own the land by deed or you are squatting on that land, you are the occupier and you will still have to pay the taxes. Those persons who are currently renting, take note, the landlord will be required to pay property tax as the owner of the property, but whom do you think that extra cost will be passed on to? Whom do you think? So as a tenant, you are also in jeopardy. You think a landlord would say, "Okay do not worry," when the landlords themselves are under pressure just as John public. At the moment, no valuator has the power to go into someone's home without their permission unless you are given notice in advance and so on. The Government has said they will be moving to use, I think it is section 29 of the law, to allow for in effect mandatory registration for the rolls. So the law is that

you must have at least 50 per cent of these properties on the rolls. I want to ask, why is the first line of attack against the residential properties, why? When these might be the most vulnerable persons, the most vulnerable— I believe it might be the small household that lost his job, family lost their job, why, why?

11.15 a.m.

Why do we not go at the industrial and the big commercial ones? [*Desk thumping*] Why? Why go at the small man again? You may have a public servant who built a house over time, over years, now retired and so on. You really want to advantage these poor old people with this tax at this time? I am told that right now there is an ongoing method, a short cut method, for the valuation exercise. So even if you did not fill out your form Government is engaging in curbside valuations, stand up outside by the road and assessing your house from out on the road. Then there are those who say if you send these assessors now in the COVID—and given the home invasions and the robberies, and so on, people are afraid, they are at risk, and they are already at a disadvantage from having lost jobs, loss of incomes and so on.

So curbside—“macco” if you want to call it—estimate what your house has, how many bedrooms, how many windows, washrooms and so on, that could never be right. This is a “macco” valuation. They are also using deeds submitted by stamp duty in the past five years to determine the valuation of your property. Now there are some people I know—I will not name them, they know who they are—who have found ways to get around putting the correct number—of amount of stamp duty on a deed. So if you are using that you are also using that as an escape route. This law, as it stands, gives the Government the power to retroactively tax because it speaks about property tax from 01 October, 2007. So we may be collecting the three years in taxes, or will they wave that as we had done for five

years basically.

I want to repeat some comments here today as I hear somebody call it Oh Lord. Yes, God is great and I agree with you. Hear these words:

“Presently, in my constituency, there is anxiety at both ends of the spectrum. There is anger at both sides of spectrum; and there is resentment on both sides, and I would tell you why. People are seeing this as a situation that ought not to have been. If you accept my argument or my understanding that it is really a revenue raising measure, and anything else is disingenuous, then people are saying had we handle our largesse differently, we probably would not have had to resort to this measure.”

These are the words of the then Member for Diego Martin West, present Member for Diego Martin West, the present Prime Minister, in 2009 on the property tax during that debate in 2009.

Now, property tax is not going to come directly in the form of collection by the corporations. It is going into the consolidated fund, and again that is something that the present Prime Minister in his previous incarnations was fighting against. I quote again from the *Hansard* of 18 December, 2009, then Member for Diego Martin West, present Member.

“I was hoping that—in the context of the local government reform and in the context of this attempt to do what this Bill says in the Preamble, that it is a paradigm shift—we would have taken the opportunity to really make that paradigm shift based on the Tobago House of Assembly model, let people pay in their district, spend in their district and hold the people in the district accountable.”

So two points, one, look everybody vex. Even 100 is plenty money; \$100 is plenty money. This is what the Member then said, it is plenty money. And in these

COVID times it is even worse. If it was bad then it is 1,000 times worse now in COVID. [*Desk thumping*] It is 1,000 times worse. Again, I call on Government in these pandemic times to hold your hands on the property tax at this time. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, you will hear some on the other side saying that the Government I led wanted persons to pay property tax. I want to set the record straight today. We came in and we put a moratorium in it until 2015. On 22nd August, 2005, then Finance Minister Larry Howai as reported in the Trinidad *Guardian*, August 28, 2015, headline: “Minister: Property Tax not a priority”. Larry Howai said this:

“Government has no intention of implementing the Property Tax and will seek to extend the amnesty if it is returned to power next month.

This is according to Finance and Economy Minister Larry Howai who told yesterday’s post-Cabinet...conference that the matter was ‘not a priority’ for the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government.” [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Howai had made an announcement that we will be considering the tax, but he had also said that there will be consultations. Minister Howai then said.

After—“consultations...to implement the tax in the proposed matter ‘could potentially impact on investments and after we evaluated the feedback we decided we are not proceeding with it in the way that I had originally indicated’.” [*Desk thumping*]

He said further:

Cabinet has not considered this matter nor has the matter been brought to Cabinet for consideration at any time in the last two years—2014 or 2015.

Statement of debate sometime in 2014. *Newsday*, Howai. No property tax. No property tax, Dr. Rowley, Monday, August 24th, 2015.

On Friday, 20th February, 2015, in this Parliament, I was asked as a question

to Prime Minister, *Hansard*, February 20, 2015, this was with the question:

“Can the Prime Minister indicate whether the Government will be taking any steps to introduce or reintroduce any system for the collection of Land and Building Taxes or any form of Property Tax during the current session of Parliament?”

Then Prime Minister, myself.

“Hon. Member, the answer is no.”

The answer is no. [*Desk thumping*] So there is a confusion saying that we were going to put it. I wanted to clear that record, and they are saying what has changed.

Well today I could ask the Member for Diego Martin West, when we are in a worse situation, what has changed from your feelings back then in 2009? [*Desk thumping*] Or was it then that you were on a rampage against the then Prime Minister who had brought the Bill to Parliament, the hon. late Patrick Manning and this is why you fought the tax? But you were not genuinely caring about the people. Because how could you fight it then when now we are in a time when the situation is much worse, and the suffering is much worse, but you are promoting the tax. [*Desk thumping*] And I want to raise a matter which is very sensitive. So whilst we are talking about property tax for citizens and so on, we are seeing exemptions for multi-dwelling properties—exemptions. Government continues to want to put taxes on people, but their self-serving Ministers changing the rules.

In 2016 the Minister of Finance amended the Income Tax Act to allow for income exemptions for something called multi-family dwelling properties. That was never a concept in the law before, multi-family dwelling properties. I understand they still cannot figure out how to define that multi-family dwelling; and why? I invite you to take a drive down Picton Street you will see the highest most posh building going up, one of the biggest multi-family dwellings you will

see in the country. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, I do not know of any other. That is the only one I see people on the social media posting up. And who wants it? Who owns it?

When this exemption was brought to Parliament in 2016 the Minister knew or ought to have known that Belgrave properties, in which he was a director, had submitted to Town and Country Planning an application for the construction of luxury multi-family dwelling. That application building permit was granted in May 2016. Look we have the documents in May 2016. The construction of these units would have started after 2016 which would place, the Allora, within the exemptions for the Income Tax Act brought in 2016. In other words, self-serving, is it? Was it in breach of the Integrity in Public Life Act that you are giving to yourself a benefit? Did the Minister do like his other colleagues, the Minister recusing himself 57 times when family business were being discussed in the Parliament? Did the Minister recuse himself like the hon. Attorney General when matters relating to family business? Did Minister recuse himself? Taxing vehicles, taxing tyres, taxing apples and grapes, but exemptions to others. And it does not stop there. Let us fast forward, 2020/2021 is this budget.

Corporation tax exemption for multi-dwelling properties. Again, it does not end there. Fast forward 2020/2021, the budget statement at page 116 says:

“We propose to amend the Corporation Tax Act, to allow approved property development companies to claim as a deduction 20 percent from the present 15 percent of capital expenditure incurred in the construction of commercial, industrial or multi-family residential buildings...completed on or before December 31, 2024”—in this budget.

Minister knows the current section 16 of the Corporation Tax Act allows for the exemptions only with respect to commercial industrial buildings. We brought this

new concept in again now, and we will see what happens when we come to amend the Corporation Tax Act to include this new exemption now proposing with this amendment to increase the tax exemption from 15 to 20 per cent. Is this to include the multi-family resident buildings, the Allora? Does it include that? Minister will tell us. And when we come to do the corporation tax amendment to put in this increased deduction there we will devil it more. We will go into the details. It will not be surprising; this has happened with the Income Tax Act.

Madam Speaker, I always advocate for lower taxes across the board for every citizen. You cannot tax yourself into prosperity—you cannot. As I said before when we were talking about revenues from tax and so on, in spite of all those taxes the Minister has been bringing on, the tax revenue has fallen all the time. We are not against tax breaks which benefit all of the citizens, even the Minister of Finance. After all, he is a citizen of the country. But his self-serving actions concerning tax breaks, and possibly his properties, again shows how they govern. They will never do something for the good of the people unless they are first assured that they themselves will benefit. That is the historical hallmark of PNM policy and politics. [*Desk thumping*]

By this income tax amendment and by this new corporation tax exemptions, again are we in breach of the Integrity in Public Life Act? Was there a conflict of interest when they took this before the Cabinet? Did the Minister recuse himself from the meeting when the budget documents—because I know they come to the Cabinet for approval when the fiscal measures and others they come together. Did Minister recuse himself saying, “Hey listen guys, you know I have a property in north-east storey multi residential family and so on? Listen, I cannot stay in this meeting. I cannot participate.” Did that happen? Did that happen? I ask you Members on the other side. So there are several questions. We look forward to

responses.

I turn now to some of the sectors. Energy sector. Again, this sector is in shambles because of the incompetence of that Government. And it is in shambles before COVID. I want to make the point again, before COVID. [*Desk thumping*] After five years of mismanagement and incompetence the energy sector is now facing a full-blown crisis and is in complete shambles. Whilst the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have us believe that stability and growth was returning to the energy sector pre-COVID-19, his own Review of the Economy shows us that under this administration the sector has experienced consecutive periods of decline and this clearly is a case of a sector running on fumes. [*Desk thumping*]

11.30 a.m.

Today, anyone who drives through Pointe-a-Pierre at night, you will notice the darkness that has befallen the once bright lights of that Petrotrin refinery. Those lights were extinguished by this Government. Those lights were put out. Never forget those lights were extinguished by this Government. Many of us in the south land and those who are from the north who come south, you would know where you were when you saw the flame flaring whatever it was there in the refinery flared, when you see that, you know you nearly reach home or you would know if you were further down south, how far away you were; it is gone. That once proud piece of history of Trinidad and Tobago, lights were extinguished by that incompetent Government.

Under our Government, the national oil and gas belt has turned into a national scrap iron belt, [*Desk thumping*] scrap iron. I want you to remember that we left behind a Petrotrin refinery in 2015 that paid 3.1 billion by way of taxes and royalties to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] We left a refinery with throughput reaching 138,688 barrels of oil per day. In fact, the refinery throughput in 2015 was 20 per cent higher than even in 2014. We left

behind thousands of jobs with persons benefiting directly and indirectly because of the operations of that refinery. That is because we were a responsible, capable and competent Government. [*Desk thumping*]

We did not have a Minister of Energy who only found out Paria Fuel was being put up for sale when he read about it in the newspaper. “You all remember dat?” After thousands of job losses, a major forex earner to our nation, \$3 billion of debt placed on taxpayers. The closure of the refinery will go down in the annals of our history as one of the biggest tragedies perpetrated against the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Point Lisas is another national crisis looming. Today, our nation is facing another PNM-made crisis with the collapse of the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. Madam Speaker, for the first time in our nation’s history, so many petrochemical plants have halted their operations. Six plants which brought in billions in revenue and employed hundreds of workers have shut down their operations. We must not for one minute let Government continue with their narrative that these plants were closed due to COVID because before this virus even hit our shores, massive plants such Yara, ArcelorMittal, Methanol Holdings, they were shut down. This was before COVID. [*Desk thumping*] Remember that, remember that, before COVID. No matter what they tell us, the collapse of Point Lisas lies to the feet of this Government’s botched Houston negotiations, [*Desk thumping*] botched Houston negotiations. The millions lost in revenue, the hundreds of job losses at Point Lisas are a direct result of the Rowley-led regime’s poor negotiations with upstreamers which resulted in an uncompetitive natural gas price, a problem which downstreamers have been complaining about in recent years. So the Government went from blame Kamla, blame COVID, even though Point Lisas estate began collapsing well before COVID.

There was a news report in the Trinidad *Guardian*, January 25, 2020, when there was no COVID shutdown, that news report was, headline:

“Manufacturers: Brace for job cuts if NGC hikes gas price”

Report written before the COVID pandemic which assures—says that and I quote:

The NGC—“...is already demanding that the manufacturing sector pay 13 per cent more for natural gas this year, moving to as high as a 100 per cent increase by 2023.

The NGC has been embroiled in difficult negotiations with all its customers as it tries to significantly increase prices because of its new deal with the oil and gas majors that have...”—made—“...significant price increases for the aggregator.

The deal which was brokered by Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley means that the NGC has to pass on price hikes to its customers, many of whom say they cannot pay the new prices.

This has already led to the loss of scores of high-paying jobs and tens of millions of dollars to the Treasury, the closure of an ammonia plant, and the planned shutdown of a methanol plant in a week.”

This, I am quoting from the article, January 2020, so pre-COVID, pre-COVID, the gas negotiation, price negotiation, whatever—we do not even know what they negotiated—brokered by the Prime Minister, the best salesman of the country and by his young Minister, Minister Stuart Young in Houston, brokered. And there is more evidence from the *Hansard* record from what they said when they came back that they were the ones who were responsible for those unsustainable and non-competitive prices.

This news report, of course, has become our unfortunate reality with multiple plant closures occurring on the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. The Prime

Minister with arrogance has destroyed Point Lisas and the thousands of jobs because he was a gas negotiator. Both Point Lisas and Petrotrin were destroyed by the same Government in just five years before COVID, [*Desk thumping*] before COVID.

Still on the energy sector, still on the energy sector. Lowest oil production for over half a century. Lowest oil production for over half a century under this Government. The Rowley administration has not only brought chaos and crisis as well as underdevelopment to Point Lisas and Petrotrin but also to our oil sector. February 2020—again, before COVID—was a historic month for us in Trinidad and Tobago but not for good reasons, not for good reasons at all. According to a report in *OilNOW* magazine this month, February 2020, oil production in T&T reached 55,685 barrels per day. That is the lowest production since the 1950s. The lowest production since the 1950s. Forget the 1980s, Government has taken our energy sector back to the 1950s.

In June this year, this year 2020, Heritage Petroleum, one of the replacements for Petrotrin, said that they had earned 5.4 billion in its first 10 months of operation, so you know that sounds good until you factor in that Heritage is currently producing 40,000 barrels a day which is even less than we did in February. So the oil production is going down and then the Minister comes wringing his hand and crying crocodile tears, “oh, is the prices, the prices, the oil prices”. Listen, goodness me, yes price is a factor but you must have product to sell and if the product keeps decreasing, then you are going to get less and less and less money. That is what has been happening, that the production has been falling and falling. Tell us why. You have created all these new companies, whatever, why is production continuing to fall? What went wrong? And it was not COVID. Again, it was happening before COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

So the Government wants to blame the failures in this sector of oil and gas on the price. You know, as I said, there is nothing innovative or creative in generating new revenue streams in the budget. It is just like a pie in the sky waiting for a miracle to happen that one day, the price will go up again. But in the meantime, what is your production level which continues to fall? Had you been serious, you would have taken steps to increase production.

Speaking of low production, let us look at the natural gas sector, the real backbone of our economy. When the government I led demitted office in 2015, natural gas production was 3.8 billion standard cubic feet per day. I repeat, 3.8 billion standard cubic feet per day and that is in spite of temporary platform closures by multinationals between 2011 and 2014 because they had to do maintenance work. According to a news report by *OilNOW* magazine, September 02, 2020:

“...natural gas production...in...”—T&T has fallen—“...to its lowest level since 2016 averaging a mere 3.110 billion standard cubic feet per day...”

So that too is falling. The report goes on to say:

“...that natural gas production declined...or...”—fell, had—“...a fall of...”—over—“...400 million standard cubic feet per day...”

And I quote from the article what that means. The numbers are just numbers, what does it mean.

“To put it into perspective the 400 mmscf/d is equivalent to all the gas used to power the entire country.”

So you have a fall of that but it:

“...is equivalent to all the gas used to power the entire country. It is enough gas to power Atlantic LNG’s Train 1...”—before—“...its debottlenecking. It is also enough gas to run four methanol plants and an ammonia plant...”

OilNOW magazine, September 2020, talking about the decline in our natural gas production. I am proud to stand today and say that it was the achievements of the government that I led, especially in relation to success of projects like BP Juniper and Angelin, amongst others, that have saved our economy during these past five difficult years. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, the growth of 1.9 per cent, TT experienced in 2018—which the Minister loves to point out—is entirely due to natural gas projects of the government I led; they have done nothing. [*Desk thumping*]

I hear again now in this budget about the Loran-Manatee. We have been hearing about this Loran-Manatee field for decades and now, the Government comes to tell us, on top of their poor decisions on Petrotrin and Point Lisas which has led to their destruction, Government is now embarking on an even more dangerous scenario. They have opted to go it alone and develop our side of the Loran-Manatee gas field. Most of the gas field holding, 70 per cent is claimed by Venezuela. The development in this field is a vastly complex issue. Discussions for the development of this field have been ongoing across successful administrations because of its very intricate nature. Now, with the Maduro regime and Venezuelan companies such as their national oil company, PDVSA, they are under US sanctions and the issue is even more complex. It is highly unusual and ill-advised for one party to proceed to tap into this field under the best of circumstances, far less in the highly volatile atmosphere currently surrounding the Maduro regime. Will we be opening ourselves up if we have dealings with the Maduro regime in terms of the sanctions that they are under? Some are even suggesting, I am not saying it but some are even suggesting that this is the way for the Maduro regime to work through Trinidad to market their oil because they cannot do it themselves because of the sanctions from the US.

So I strongly urge the Government that any development of the Loran-Manatee field needs to be done with very transparent and legal guidelines and frameworks agreed upon by all parties, otherwise we could potentially expose our nation to substantial risk. [*Desk thumping*]

I turn now to the proposal to sell the NP gas stations. On the selling, privatizing of all NP gas stations, contrary to what the Prime Minister and Minister of Finance may have stated, NP's business model is not in the distribution field anymore or fuel anymore. What makes NP profitable in today's market economy is the franchise agreements with petroleum dealers and/or retailers. NP obtains its profits under the current business model plan of the management and rental operations of gas stations and the networks and this includes convenience stores—

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, I am being disturbed, I cannot hear the Opposition Leader.

Madam Speaker: So I want to warn both sides because also the hon. Member who has stood and raised the objections, I have also been hearing you, so I want to urge both sides to comply with Standing Order 53.

Dr. Moonilal: That is fair.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

11.45 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So NP is really getting their profits under the current business model by management and rental operations of the gas station network and this includes convenience stores operated by the dealers. However, the dealer-owned stations and dealer-operated stations are the less profitable ones to NP. The management of service stations amounts to 70 per cent of NP businesses and most of NP's profits. The official records at the NP show in Trinidad and Tobago there are about 130 NP gas stations and 75 of them

are owned by the company and the other 38 of them are owned by dealers. These 75 stations, they bring in the majority of profits for NP.

So with the Government now proposing to sell these stations, they will have removed the profits of NP as organization and that would lead to NP making a further loss. The question now is: Is the Government signaling that in the same way that they closed down Petrotrin they are now closing down NP, another energy company? Are they going to come and put more than 500 permanent employees and their families on the breadline, as well as the thousands of citizens who are dependent on NP contractors? The Government's track record has shown the callus approach to labour relations. They have shown little remorse in taking the food off the kitchen tables of these employees.

With respect to the sale of the 75 stations, their estimated value of the stations owned by NP is approximately TT \$1 billion. Let me repeat that. The 75 stations estimated value TT \$1 billion, and that will have an approximate value of TT \$50 million each for one of these. We will be looking very closely at this process because we are very concerned whether this is a scheme, as I have said before, to raise money by selling out lifeline to friends, family and financiers. We are saying there must be no fire sale of these assets before the procurement legislation is operational. [*Desk thumping*]

It has come to our attention that many, if not all of these 75 stations, recently before elections, signed a new ten-year lease on the franchise agreement with NP. What this means is that should the current dealer not be able to purchase the station, does it mean that NP will now have to pay off these dealers for their ten-year contracts? What does it mean? Because they are holding ten-year contracts. Is this, as some are asking, part two of the gas station racket PNM style? Are we to see another Jean Miles gas station racket one? People are asking these

questions.

We are also looking at the possible formation of cartels. And I took no comfort from the words of the Prime Minister that the Government will make sure that there is no price gouging and no cartel formations, and so on, or words to that effect. I take no comfort from that, because we really do not even have legislation to prevent cartel formation in order to affix prices. Right now, there is a company in Europe, Siemens, I think they are, they are a lighting company, and they have been caught because there is law. There is legislation where they got together, basically as a cartel to fix prices. So they would agree to fix the prices. But they went further in establishing that. Fix the price, so we would agree to sell at a price. Whether that is the price we bought it for or not.

And the second aspect, they farmed off where. So they would say: okay you, you will sell in the east, you will sell in the north, you will sell in the south. So they worked it in a way, of course, for maximum benefit. Listen, businessmen want to make money, and they will do what is necessary. So I take no comfort that Government will prevent it. The only way you may be able to prevent it or try is to bring legislation.

The other aspect of it, we cannot even prevent price gouging in the supermarket. And we are talking about, I mean big business people who would buy these million dollar gas stations. So there is a concern that we have, that these privatization and deregulation of the retail fuel prices means that it opens up the definite possibility of cartel retail business in this very vital sector. This will affect every person in this country. The cost of living, the transport, everything will go up because of fuel prices if this is not managed properly.

When the Government announces its selling price of fuel to retailers at the beginning of every month, one would expect that the Petroleum Dealers

Association will suggest a retail selling price of the fuel. Okay, so you buy at a price, but then you get together and decide what to sell it for. No retailer is mandated to use the suggested price and they can, as I say, form a cartel with other retailers to set a much higher price. This will mean that maxis and taxis may be forced to raise their fares/prices. We will pay more at the pumps. This is a higher cost of living for everyone. We must ensure a price cap at the pump to protect citizens from price gouging. So if you want to do this you will have to put a price cap at the pump.

Most of NP gas stations are located in the very best and prime real estate locations, “eh”, remember that. Would this be a case of big business buying up prime properties throughout Trinidad and Tobago? Would it be that if they buy it as a gas station they must continue to operate as a gas station? Would there be a commission? Or would it be we get prime property throughout the country and then we set up whatever business we want? Close down the gas station and put up some other kind of business that we think will bring in more money. So we have prime lands, prime property, millions of dollars.

Another point on this matter is the potential for the closure of stations in certain areas. There is only, at this time, one supplier of fuel and that is located at Pointe-a-Pierre; that is Paria Trading. This is the only important wholesaler point of sale in Trinidad. The price offered by Paria would be same to all gas station retailers at any given time. We do not know. We have not been told. So Paria is the sole seller, important seller of the fuel. We have the gas stations.

Listen, the main but not sole factor to retaining the retail cost would be the cost of trucking the fuel to the various gas stations around the country. So gas stations that are closer to the Pointe-a-Pierre bond, to buy the fuel, they will have a lower trucking cost, and maybe they may be able to offer lower prices at the pump

than a gas station that is situated further away.

So the issue we can then look at is that persons on the east coast, deep south, north, west of the island further away from the bond where the fuel is, will incur higher pump prices than persons situated in areas on the west coast and San Fernando area. Will this then mean that motorists from these more distant locales may choose to refuel in transit to, or passing by Pointe-a-Pierre in close proximity out of stations that are close to Paria? So MP for Mayaro, a person commuting from their Mayaro or Point Fortin residence to San Fernando may want to refill in San Fernando because you may get a cheaper price because of this trucking matter of which I have spoken. Eventually gas stations in areas further away from the supply point will suffer poor sales and could possibly face closures, leading to fuel deserts in various parts of the country. So let us look out. When the fridge door closes again National Petroleum doors are shut permanently like Caroni (1975) Limited and Petrotrin and all the employees would be marching left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot outside the door of NP house. [*Desk thumping*]

So just a few questions to Government on this sale, NP sales: what are the long-term benefits for Government's revenue streams when all valuable assets are sold to private entities? That is the NP assets. What happens at the pumps when the cartels are formed? What is the plan? Will dealers be able to buy directly from Paria Fuel or directly on the open market? What happens if not controlled and a cap is not placed on the price per litre at the pump? What happens to the billion dollar gantry at Caroni that now sits like a white elephant? It has never been operationalized. I am told it is being staffed every month by taxpaying citizens. Will this also be sold at a peppercorn price to friends, family and financiers? What will become of that massive gantry at Caroni?

I turn now—I have spoken about the loss of jobs, and so on and this

privatization of the patrimony of the things that belong to the taxpayers of this country. You know we want to remember, you know, how it is that we took the benefits from Petrotrin with respect to the oil and gas, and so on, and we try to pass it on to the ordinary citizens. It was a brilliant plan by the late Dr. Eric Williams that the wealth of the nation belongs to all the citizens of the nation, and that is how with Texaco that he bought it over and made it into a Government asset to benefit the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is where the issue of the subsidy and so on arose; that the wealth of the country must be shared, the collective wealth of the country from the oil and gas under the earth. That should be shared with the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Are we now saying that we are going to give this away to the big businesses? Are we going to give it, as I say, to friends, financiers and family, and so on?

It is a total shift. And maybe the Minister might come and tell me why it is necessary for this total shift in the paradigm, in the business model that we had. Why is it necessary to do this, especially at this time of COVID? Why; when so many are already suffering, when so many others could lose their jobs; when so many others, when the subsidies are removed; when the prices go up at the pump will have to face that hardship? Minister, please explain for us.

Let us turn now to privatization of the port. Now there are two models. We have those funding to conduct business or there are more than two but I can mention two. You can private/public partnerships or you can outright privatization. The Government has chosen the model of privatization of the Port of Port of Spain. The other model is where the Government still retains some equity. So we have what is called the 3P model. The Government instead is going with, look, sell it out, give it away, privatize it. Some may tell us why that is the best model. Was there a report done on this? What does that report say? Please share it with us.

What tells us this is a good model to follow for the port? And who says that private business is the best way to go? What is the feasibility? Many private businesses shut down you know. There is no magic because it is a private business. Again, the question will arise: What is the disposal of property? What is the process for tendering this out? We would be very curious. Again, we say do not do it until you have fully implemented procurement legislation.

So on the 9th January, 2019, the *Express* reported that from two weeks at that date the port authority will make a presentation to the Ministry on the future of the port. Nine months later Minister of Finance announced that by the end of fiscal 2021 a private sector operator will handle the operations of the port. Then I say Government needs to act in a transparent manner and let us see the documents. Maybe you have a good reason for this. Let us see the documents. Yes, there are inefficiencies in the port. But that does not mean you pick it up and give it away. Tell us why that is the preferred model instead of dealing with the issues at the port. I call on Government again to hold their hands until, as I said, full implementation of procurement.

Now, that port issue too could see loss of jobs. That port issue could see another scandal with the way in which this property is disposed of. So it is an area we will be watching very closely.

12.00 noon

I turn now to national security. National security, my colleagues will develop more on national security but there is an aspect of national security. One, is the Ministry of National Security and there is the TTPS. So I will just talk a little on Ministry of National Security. Following the September 2015 General Election we left plans, policies, projects, research, institutions, infrastructure, a strong relationship with global partners, that really helped us to have a great measure of

success in the fight against crime. We never kept these plans secret and they were underscoring that crime is not a partisan matter. We shared our ideas and strategies.

Since September 2015 we met twice with Government to share ideas on the fight against crime. Regrettably our efforts came to nothing since Government reneged on some agreements and abandoned the collaborative approach by reverting to personal insults, and baseless allegations against some. So I will leave this area for our shadow national security persons because I want to get to something I think that is even more vital at this time, and that is, what Government has done in this 2021 Budget is really to foreshadow a police shutdown, a shutdown of the TTPS in Trinidad and Tobago, and I will share with you why.

At a time when home invasions and robberies have increased drastically, we see a very concerning cut in finances to the TTPS in these estimates. Reduction in allocations for the TTPS at a time when we see home invasions, robberies, everywhere—thank you. There has been an overall reduction for the TTPS in the item known as Goods and Services, from \$515 million, just about over, in fiscal 2020, to \$334 million about fiscal 2021. So what is that in these estimates, a reduction of \$181,157,278 to the TTPS, just in the item Goods and Services eh, understand that. The Goods and Services budget allocation for 2020 as I said, \$515,847,200, but you know what, the TTPS only received releases of around \$400,000. So there was a shortfall of sorry—\$400 million so there was a shortfall of \$100 million in the 2020 allocation, and now a reduction. What this means is that the TTPS was unable to pay contractors and other agencies who have done work for the TTPS. Many of these contractors are still owed by the TTPS and they have indicated that they will soon no longer service the TTPS. These include the repairs of vehicles, supplies of materials and so on.

Further, where are the funds in these estimates for the much spoken about drones that the TTPS were to acquire to help in patrolling of the coastline and intelligence gathering? Where is the allocation, with the 2021 allocation being \$181 million as well as a \$100 million shortfall in releases in last fiscal? It means the TTPS is starting in 2021 fiscal year in a \$282 million hole. We will say this is not a lot of money but are talking about security, we are talking about crime prevention. We are talking about a very sensitive area in our lives and in our nations—in the society.

Vehicles, the TTPS was allocated \$40 million fiscal 2020. You know how much was allocated in this fiscal year 2021? Can you imagine, for vehicles? Zero. Zero for vehicles. As citizens keep saying they “doh” see a police vehicle, they do not see patrols, nothing is happening, zero, zero.

International best practices dictate:

The police forces worldwide annually change out 20 per cent of their vehicles, thereby ensuring the police force has vehicles that can stand up to the rigours of patrolling and police work.

Zero dollars for vehicles to the TTPS.

This also reduces the maintenance required by the fleet, resulting in fewer breakdowns, fewer vehicles in the shop, more vehicles on the road.

By that turnover as I said of 20 per cent which you would take the vehicles in and that you change them out so it will allow you to do repairs, fewer breakdowns and fewer vehicles in the shop, more vehicles on the road which we need. I do not know if you understand what is happening in some parts of Trinidad and Tobago. The home invasions, the ordinary homes, these are not mansions. In fact, the bandits probably not even going to mansions because so much security may be there. Just ordinary people, old people, home invasions.

A young lady was telling me her husband lost his job and she had to go out to work. She got a job in a small what we used to call long time a “shop”, not a supermarket, a “shop”. And she got this job there on a very secondary road not any major place, and she said since she got that they have been robbed three times, three times, robberies. And she said she is so scared but she has no choice, she has to go to work, she has to feed her children, husband having lost his job. So the home invasions, the robberies, yes, there may be a decrease with the murders related to the lockdown with the COVID and less people out, but these other crimes are happening against, you know, ordinary citizens and here we are, we will be giving for vehicles zero to the police and then you want to bad talk the police, how “dey lazy and dey dis and dey dat”.

Today I salute the police officers of Trinidad and Tobago for the job they are doing. [*Desk thumping*]. They are working under very trying circumstances, they are being under-resourced by this Government, under-resourced. So that when you come to say police not doing their job but they do not have the resources. If this happens now with the zero for the vehicles, what is going to happen? When you call police to come out, where “dey” coming, how “dey” coming? Bicycle? I saw a guy saying now maybe motorcycles might get more sales because people cannot buy cars as before so, how will they go out? You need the patrols because the lawlessness is increasing. So, zero allocation means that for fiscal 2021 they cannot buy any new vehicles, they cannot replace any ageing vehicles, they cannot replace any vehicles that have been damaged on operations. And so, less working vehicles for the police.

The Minister also mentioned a mobile command centre for the TTPS. But how can the TTPS acquire needed equipment if they were allocated no funds for the purchase of vehicles? This is a mobile command centre, we have no funds to

buy vehicles, how are you going to do this? In fiscal 2020 the TTPS was allocated \$39 million for vehicle maintenance. So first they are getting nothing for vehicles. For vehicle maintenance, this figure has been reduced to \$19 million so it is a cost of about—a drop of about \$20 million for maintenance. So, no new vehicles, zero, and then you are cutting for maintenance with a zero allocation for purchase of vehicles. Government has reduced the allocation for repairing vehicles.

It is also understood that there are bills outstanding from fiscal 2020 in the tune of over \$12 million. So this money TTPS is getting now in this fiscal they will only have some \$7 million to repair and keep on the road vehicles currently in the fleet. What does that mean? They are owing, so the money allocated will go to pay back bills. We can expect more breakdowns, again, less car patrols.

The TTPS announced the formation of the Marine Unit, Government has only allocated \$500,000. Established the coastal and riverine—if that is the word. I think the Minister spoke about that this coastal and riverine, boasting about it—patrol unit. When the purchase of vessels for this unit will average close to \$1 million per vessel. So what is this \$500,000? Are you serious that you want this coastal and riverine patrol unit? Everyday people send you pictures of Venezuelans coming up by the north coast, you are seeing boats coming in. Well do not talk about Cedros, Cedros has been overrun by illegal migrants coming in. So you need this. You need this for border security, border safety, this is totally inadequate to get that unit. That \$500,000 might just sit there as an administrative because if you do not get the units then you cannot do anything else.

Government has purchased you know, on the other hand starving the TTPS. They went down Australia, down under, talked about it before, two brand new 50 metre Cape Class vessels from Australia for the coast guard, no procurement processes, no proper procurement processes. And they bought this for the coast

guard when the coast guard have already in their fleet six fully operational 50-metre Damen vessels which we had engaged and had bought for Trinidad and Tobago. But they are parked up in Staubles Bay, I am told. Why? Because they either have lack of manpower or lack of fuel. Can you imagine that? But you run down Australia to buy this big boat. Two, not one, two. I hope you could get money for manpower and fuel for this one, or it will end up parked or rusting in Staubles Bay as the Damen vessels.

I come now to the allocation for medical expenses for the TTPS, \$1.5 million. I am told this is a drop in the bucket, considering some treatment for a single officer can cost in excess of \$500,000 just for one. So this \$1.5 million is going nowhere, a drop in the bucket. Whilst I raise this, whatever happened, whatever happened to the grant that we had proposed for the families of officers who died in the line of duty? They came with a song and dance in this Parliament when they formed the Government and up to today, five years later they have not put into legislation the framework for the officers. You will ask me—Minister Young, you can look at me. [*Crosstalk*] You can look at me and look surprised.

Madam Speaker: Members, no crosstalk please. Member for Siparia, Member for Siparia. Member for Siparia, please direct your remarks to the Chair. And Members again, please refrain from crosstalk.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Through the plexi I saw a very malevolent stare so I will withdraw for my colleague. I am saying, Attorney General. Madam Speaker, I am guided, I am guided by your comments.

Madam Speaker: Please direct your comments to the Chair please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am in a very good mood today. I will take your guidance, thank you very much.

So, the Attorney General has said he would bring the legislation well five

years later. Maybe in the second term they will bring it. It was never done. You will tell me well I did not do it. No, we put it in place coming to the end of our term and the legislation had to be brought to give legal validity to it. Since then even without the legislation, how many police officers who have died in the line of duty, how many of the families have benefited? How many of them? Any at all? Do you have another mechanism for doing it? And that should not be right because then it is on a discretionary basis that if you feel to give him or if you do not want to give him or give her, it should not be by discretion. It should be according to law, [*Desk thumping*] that when the criteria is met, the police officer will automatically be entitled and will not have to go and beg a Minister to say, “You know, I applied you know, please make it happen”. It should be according to law, they deserve that, they put their lives at stake on a daily basis and therefore should such accident befall them, not that we wish it, their families should be properly taken care of.

So back to medical expenses, I am saying a drop in the bucket in terms of allocation. Now, that \$1.5 million for medical would be manageable if the TTPS had medical insurance to help cover excessive cost but Government has allocated zero for medical insurance for them. It means that an officer requiring an urgent operation they will have to pay out of their own pocket, you know, large sums to cover expenses out of their pockets.

With the number of crimes against women I turn to another matter, and I think the hon. Minister mentioned it, these special units that the TTPS has launched. Crimes against women, TTPS has launched a Gender-Based Violence Unit. They have also launched a Sexual Victims Unit.

12.15 p.m.

Unfortunately, the Government did not see it fit to place any allocations in these units, no allocation and gender-based violence, we have seen what has been happening. People say you do not choose—what? You do not choose—what it is Prime Minister told us? Choose wisely or something like that. No, no, no, you have to—that is what you are there for. Put some money into these units, too many women are being abused. So the Gender-Based Violence Unit and the Sexual Victims Unit, no money, zero, zero, zero into these units.

So while the TTPS must develop these special victims' locations where rape/abused victims will be able to be interviewed, swabs taken, timely basis, to be counselled in a specially designed facility, these victims now will have to remain unattended in a main office, in full view of everyone. I think Government you may want to really seriously reconsider, Minister of Finance, funding for the Special Victims Unit, funding the Gender-Based Violence Unit.

The TTPS uses technology platforms and software that have to be renewed on an ongoing basis. With many of the investigative systems utilizing foreign-based platforms, the annual and monthly fees required far exceed the fiscal 2021 allocation for fees of 13.9 million. There are outstanding bills from the previous fiscal year due to lack of releases that will now have to come out of the present '21 allocation. So the TTPS runs a great risk of not paying for licences for systems such as AFIS which is the Automated Fingerprinting Identification System, and the system will not be available to the TTPS if we do not pay. It means all the databases and intelligence gathering software will cease to operate. It also means that all the GPS installed on the TTPS vehicles and the onboard cameras will not be transmitted to the command centres. This is a serious matter. Again, Minister, please reconsider.

We have heard the Minister of National Security speak of increasing the number of recruits for the TTPS to allow the TTPS to be at full strength within a period of four to five years. However, again, in this budget, Government has cut the allocation under Item 02, 001 for fiscal 2020 from 18 million to 11 million, a reduction of \$6.5 million. This shortfall will not be able to allow the TTPS to recruit the numbers required to serve or even to fill the present vacancies.

Still on the TTPS, and why am I spending so much time on this? Because I think safety and security is of paramount importance at this time. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister spoke about TTPS getting body cameras, pepper sprays, Tasers, non-lethal equipment, other equipment required urgently by the TTPS to equip officers, again with the reduction in the allocation of Purchase of Minor Equipment, fiscal 73.6 million down to \$8 million.

So you see, people say the budget is not bad but the devil is in the details, the devil is in the details. [*Desk thumping*] You have come here and the Minister is rhapsodizing, you know, his usual cheery self, we have to give him credit for that. He was not very cheery on Monday, I must say however, it might be the plexi—the plexi box, and at the end of the day seems to have convinced some people that “de budget eh bad”. But we need to take time to go down into the details and see what is happening here. We have to see where the allocations have gone, where they have not gone and what is the impact it would have. And I see TTPS allocations, there is going to be a shutdown in the TTPS if something is not done about allocations for all these items. [*Desk thumping*] And I am not saying that they will go on strike, it is just that they will not be able to perform their functions as they would want to and as they should.

I turn to one sector again, which is agriculture and this sector has to be the most unbelievable portion of the whole budget speech. It is preposterous, it is

unbelievable, it is incredible, that this Minister of Finance will come to talk here about agriculture. Imagine the Minister is telling this country, with a straight face, how it is going to improve and support the agricultural sector. How can anyone take them seriously on this? The Minister laments decades old malaise, structural impediments inherent in the agricultural sector. He states that decades ago, this malaise cracked the willpower of farmers and farming families. Minister, who is responsible for that? Who is responsible for the decades of malaise? There has only been one Government there for decades. No other Government has ever been there for decades. Decades of malaise, structural impediments, the malaise cracked the willpower of farmers and farming families. Just last year let us remember, PNM Ministers sitting right in this Parliament were laughing in this very House at our honest and hard-working bhaji and pumpkin farmers, you do not remember that? Giggling and laughing at these farmers. The Prime Minister, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries publicly wrote-off the local sector saying, “We do not have enough land. We could never be globally competitive.” We have been talking about agriculture for a while now. The Prime Minister said “Doh bother with Kamla, doh bother with that lady. We do not have land.” Now they are coming to talk about vertical agriculture and talk about aquaponics. Look, you see that and God’s face, we are not going to see under this incompetent Government, [*Desk thumping*] not going to see. That is an attitude ingrained in them. They simply do not have the will or desire to improve agriculture. The fact is quite the opposite, quite the opposite.

The whole history has been to undermine farming. Remember the closing of the Caroni complex, the whole agricultural, manufacturing and drainage complex surrounding it, an example. Shutting down the railway which faithfully serviced rural, agricultural communities, is another. Since Independence, the PNM turned

its back on agriculture, turned the country into a dependent petro-economy. That is what happened, let us face it, starved the agricultural sector of investment, access roads, marketing, support and even human dignity. The budgets of the PNM have been so full of broken promises and pitiful allocations, no wonder agriculture contributes less than 1 per cent of our GDP. That has been the plan ever since.

And you know, even that 500 million the Minister talked about as a stimulus package for agriculture, if that ever gets implemented, is miserly. This is far less than the regular allocations we used to give to the sector in our administration. And I want to point out something Minister, I will be very happy if you or anyone of your colleagues will tell us where is this allocation of 500 million? Because when you pick up the Appropriation Bill, which is a document that the Parliament will approve, there is no mention anywhere of any \$500 million in the draft—in the Bill. And it is the numbers in a Bill that the Parliament will approve. So tell us where is it? Where is it? Or is it that you will come in the midterm or you will come next year and say, “Okay, you are ready 500 million”? And then the question to ask is, why all the incentives that were put in a year back or two years, why are they not working? You have to get to that problem. Why is it that those are not working? You are coming to throw another 500 million. It is not just about the money I saw the farmers were saying, it is a whole issue of land tenure, the whole issue of ownership of land that they—the problems that they face, because when they go for incentives, they cannot produce a deed, they cannot produce legal ownership and therefore, they cannot access the incentives. Those things have to be fixed as well.

So these budget pledges, perhaps more than any other, this will clearly be a case of “PNM promises never materialize”. [*Desk thumping*] And how do we know? We will know when we see the broken promises by this Government in

agriculture budget, after budget, after budget. I will leave it to my colleague who is shadowing the agriculture portfolio. I have it here but I will leave it for them in the interest of time. None of those promises have materialized. They talk big. Budget after budget, these promises are broken. We do not have any reason to believe if you broke those promises, did not happen, never materialized before COVID. I cannot see it happening. I really refuse to believe they will happen during COVID or after COVID under your watch.

So, agriculture, as I say, is an area that yes, we should develop, it is good, we need food security but there must be implementation. I mentioned before that part of the problem of the PNM— this Government, is they have an implementation deficit, they have a delivery deficit. So talk is talk to talk but in terms of getting the work done, it does not happen.

I turn now to the sector relating to education and again, I will just touch on this. My colleague shadowing this will speak more on it. Let me congratulate all the students who wrote the SEA. [*Desk Thumping*]. In very troubling times, I congratulate them, I congratulate their parents and their teachers, that they were able to complete the exercise. And let me say I am proud to see it is three girls who topped the SEA exam this year. [*Desk thumping*]

Education and training perhaps got the biggest budget— biggest allocation in this budget but it is also the biggest “mamaguy”. It is hedged on the moving into a digital era and I do not think we can take them seriously on that. In 2020, the Government for decades— let us talk about how important it is to shift into digital transformation and now, more a reactionary measure to COVID. When I started the laptop programme in 2010, they ridiculed it, they vilified it, they belittled it, they lacked the vision and the foresight to see the importance of such a very

important move. Five years later, they wish they had that programme in place.

[*Desk thumping*]

In April, they had the gall to announce that 65,000 did not have devices for students to access the education learning platforms. We must ask what data drove Government to scrap the laptop programme in the first place? Over 100,000 laptops were distributed. It is unquestionable that even if half that amount was distributed between '15 to '20, we will be more prepared for the kinds of times we are in. This same administration has spent close to 30 billion on education between '16 and '20 and what do we have to show for it?

So many schools remain incomplete, overgrown with bush and vine. So many schools for the past five years have not been serviced. And so, more money again is not better ideas; 2020 we are still getting promises from 2015. Remember, in 2015 they promised Wi-Fi you know. Five years later, where are we to? Back to Wi-Fi, back to Wi-Fi. In the October 2015 budget, the Minister talked about broadband all over, comes back again in this budget to talk about broadband everywhere, you believe them? It is very difficult to believe anything this Minister tells us, very difficult. [*Desk thumping*]

They left schools at almost 90 per cent complete for five years. If you go back to try to fix those schools, you are going to have go back almost to scratch. The cost will be far more than if you had just completed them. Leaving the UWI South Campus closed. The famous one Oropouche always speaks of, Ramai Trace Hindu. I would talk about the Shiva Boys, the Parvati Girls, two abandoned half or three-quarter complete schools. And you know, now they are not even in the estimates for—they are still not there all these years later. There are many, many more and our shadow education person will name some of them for you. I speak of those because they are in my constituency so I am familiar with them.

12.30 p.m.

I want to turn to digitalization of the economy. The Minister's excited proclamation of plans for a digital economy, reminds me of an animated child with a brand new toy, an animated child with what he thinks is a brand new toy. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister almost breathlessly detailed some modern tech language, expecting it to resonate with a demoralized population. His persistent challenge, however, to pronounce the term "digitalization"—and I am also having difficulty, "digitalization"—showed a lack of familiarity with the word, far less the concept. For a Government, I think, this is just a slogan. It is not an all pervasive process.

In the era of remote learning, online work processes, Government distributes reams of photocopying paper, and you know what? To schools that do not even have a photocopier. So much for this digital economy in Trinidad and Tobago. This is the same Government that has not been able to introduce a modern national statistical institute, which was a PNM 2015 general election promise.

This is an administration that has seen the country become the least competitive business society in the Caribbean, according to the repeated ease of doing business metrics. And you think—the Minister made a confession here on Monday when he read the budget. He confessed that the ease of doing business is intolerable. Who has been there for the past five years? Who was the Minister of Finance for the past five years who has brought us to where we are at 105 on the ease of doing business? [*Desk thumping*] All of that happened before COVID. How are you going to take us out of that now? You announced it, you are going to deal with it, you are going to improve the ease of doing business. How? How are you going to do it? What are the specifics? What are the benchmarks? What are the targets? So it is all talk because we have been talking that for years about improving the ease of doing business, and it is still where it is dropping, down now

at rank 105. This is an administration that—see us now at this low level with the ease of doing business when under my watch we had increased, improved, the ease of doing business. You have brought us to this past.

We saw the digital process as a cornerstone of human development and talent management. Our administration of 10 to 15 made considerable strides in creating sustainable development through an innovation-led and knowledge-driven economy. We established a single electronic window years ago. We knew, a decade ago, that a technologically-driven economy was necessary. We were moving to deal with the retraining of officers, modernizing certain legislation and regulatory framework and for standardization of equipment.

You know at the Couva Hospital, the children's hospital, we were on the way to creating the first digital hospital in the Caribbean for medical tourism. [*Desk thumping*] Out of spite and bad mind, this Government never open the hospital. It took a pandemic to open that hospital for use. [*Desk thumping*] All the records of a patient's medication, health conditions, supervision stored on a barcoded wristband to be shared with all health providers and institutions on an electronically secured platform. That is what was to be started there to encourage medical tourism. So do not tell me we did not try to diversify the economy.

We worked with respect to medical tourism, we worked with respect to sport tourism when we built all those sport centres everywhere, and education tourism when we built that campus down in south so that more people could come from the Caribbean. These were some of the areas for diversification. So do not come and tell me—you did nothing for diversification. You probably do not understand what it means. [*Desk thumping*] You do not understand what it means.

So, here we are. The Minister did not acknowledge the critical need to partner with the private sector with this digital economy. Like a heady child with

the toy, he could not be bothered with relevant details. Well, you know what the truth is? This Government, in this previous term, they put together some digital projects, most of which have failed. There were 24 associated projects worth a total of about 273 million to improve IT infrastructure in the police service. These projects were due to begin in '16/'17 fiscal. They collapsed, PNM style. Then 8 million was allocated to telecom companies for the provision of broadband, Wi-Fi services along Brian Lara Promenade and elsewhere. In 2017, a total of 15 million for strengthening the single electronic window. As for the previous undertakings, that too failed.

Madam Speaker, 2019, Government again put another 30 million to the single electronic window. An IDB loan was then sourced for a 26 million project for institutional strengthening in the Registrar General's Department. That venture was meant to simplify the process of property registration and improve conditions for investments in the country. You could guess what became of that project also. You could guess because two years later, a further 13 million was allocated to the very same project. And then in 2019 a further 30 million was assigned for procurement of consultancies and equipment for the exact same project at the Registrar General's Department. So what is happening? You talk the talk but you do not walk the walk. You have an implementation deficit, you have a delivery deficit. So you have been talking about these things, but it is not happening, it is not happening. My colleague, MP for Mayaro, will deal a little more with these projects in the digitalization aspects of the economy.

So, it is a new buzz word. It sounds as though something is going to happen, when for five years you pump money into these things to grow a digital economy and it just never happened. New buzz word. That is the new buzz word. Here we will see again, a lot of these things before COVID, tell me what will help you to

make it happen during COVID now, in this 2021 budget that you have delivered and the policy prescriptions that you have made.

Again, it is very difficult to believe that these things will happen. Again, I agree that is the way to go for the digital economy. I have been talking about that for years. When I talk about the fourth industrial revolution, I have been talking about this for years. We began on that journey when we gave out the laptops and we dealt with certain other things in ICT. That same Registrar General's project, when I was legal affairs Minister years ago, we had started that, putting the records—the Companies Registry, Land Registry and so on, Civil Registry—onto computerized databases and so on. Some of these things that he is talking about now started back then. I do not know what has happened to them. Maybe the Attorney General will tell us about it.

Finally, before I go into my closing remarks, I had said and I repeat that this budget is a budget of recycled broken promises, recycled broken promises. [*Desk thumping*] I would just give a few recycled broken promises. That is why I say, there are promises made before COVID, they have been broken and, therefore, I have no reason to believe that it is going to be any different with the same PNM Government at the helm. You have failed miserably for five years. The Government still has the gall and temerity to stand here and claim achievements—achievements, you know, in that red book budget statement—which have not materialized. Can you be so boldfaced to claim achievements that have not been achieved? Whom are we fooling? Whom are we fooling? If someone really does not take the time to read it, you will go out there and say the budget “eh so bad yuh know”. But when you get into the details, we see that they are giving a false narrative to the population, a false sense of feel good, because their delivery, broken promises, PNM: promises never materialize, up to today.

The reconstruction of the Central Block of the Port of Spain General Hospital to date remains incomplete, but we are told that is an achievement. The Valencia/Toco Highway is still in the planning and design phase, yet you put that as an achievement. It is an achievement. And, you know, the ferry port in Toco, you put that as an achievement. There is no ferry and there is no port, how can it be an achievement? [*Desk thumping*] And, by the way, you tell us you want to privatize the Port of Port of Spain. Why are you telling us now you are promising to build a port in Toco? Why? The same one port you cannot run it, let us privatize it, but you are going to build one in Toco. Is that making sense? It does not seem to be making any sense at all. So a ferry port in Toco as an achievement, no ferry, no port.

You talked about 1,700 units that were supposed to be built, you did not build them. The Minister, a former Minister of Housing will talk more about that. You did not build them, but you put that as an achievement, furthest from the truth. You talked about the highway extension to Point Fortin. We started that highway, five years now you are claiming this as an achievement and it is still not complete. And I am talking, these are also repeated promises. Each budget these projects have been repeated.

The San Fernando Waterfront Project, achievement. You know what is happening right now? They are digging the dirt by the cemetery, but that is an achievement. That is the achievement. Dry-dock and Shipbuilding Facility at La Brea, achievement. Can you believe? Dry-dock and shipbuilding at La Brea. We signed this agreement in 2014, up to now they say they are conceptualizing this facility. Achievement. They are conceptualizing. The Tobago Airport, achievement. Well, as far as I read, it is only recently some money was approved to pay for land. So these are not achievements, these are not achievements. [*Desk*

thumping]

It is clear that the Government has failed miserably to accomplish anything meaningful after five years in Government. They are reduced to claiming broken promises, pie in the sky plans still in just starting phase or not started at all—they claimed them as achievements. We know that the PNM really means, promises never materialize. [*Desk thumping*] We know that you have an unsavoury history of broken promises on key issues. For example, when the Government sole selected inter-island vessels to the value of more than 1 billion, it has been vainly promised since the 2016 budget to introduce a fair, transparent procurement system. Five years later, we are still waiting. Every budget we are told it is coming, it is coming, it is coming. Procurement: in the meantime, dished out taxpayers' money in contracts worth billions of dollars.

The National Statistical Institute, another promise, repeat, repeat, repeat. In the meantime Government uses stale-dated figures from the CSO and none at all to suit their agenda. Whilst hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their jobs, the Minister says with a straight face, unemployment rate is 4 per cent. You hear that untruth? Thousands, and they are telling us it is 4 per cent. Nobody is fooled, because anybody who is outside of the bubble that you are in will see the job losses, will see it everywhere throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. That is an untruth. But you put out no statistics, you just make up this figure from out of a hat. If you can get the statistics from a very reputable source that we can give credibility to, bring it, then we will believe you, but do not just come and pull that out of a hat, 4 per cent unemployment. When and where? Not in Trinidad and Tobago. You are living in a different world.

Again, I talk about agriculture, repeats, repeats. Last Monday's assurances to double output, raise contribution of the sector, we have heard all of that before,

broken. At the end, there are promises with respect to manufacturing which have also played out in each budget, you know, like a popular Road March, playing out in every budget.

Since 2017 you have been pledging to boost the non-energy sector to establish special economic zones. All these things are not new, so what in heaven's name in this budget is there to—what was the word?—reset the economy? To reset what? All these things you have promised and you have not implemented. What is there to reset the economy for growth?

You speak of a menu of infrastructural projects, of plans to incentivize the sector. The traffic woes have only worsened again. My colleagues will go into more details about that. Public Utilities, you have been promising for years about WASA and T&TEC would become more efficient, lo and behold, back again, repeat, repeat, repeat, to be broken again.

12.45 p.m.

The last thing you said, “We are working assiduously to improve the distribution of water to all segments”. The reality is that the people of T&T have in recent months gone through some of the worst water shortages in recent memory. We talked about the illegal migrants that are already stepping ashore. The Minister said that work is far advanced on establishing a joint border patrol agency. My God, that was a promise from the manifesto 2015 and every single year thereafter, and now you are talking about that again, joint border patrol agency? I mean, how can you? You know, it is insanity—insanity to do the same things over and over and over again and expect a different result. It is the same broken promises. For years promising renewable projects, promising negotiations with the oil and gas companies, promising plans to upstream production, repeated promises on Tobago, provision of ICT connectivity, police service, and so much

more.

Promises, it is said, is gold to a fool—gold to a fool. With multiple failed promises over the years, this Government has not critically examined and repaired their poor record of implementation. It could only mean that they think very little of the community nationally and they continue to shoot off these “fool-gold” promises. Today as I close I say, the UNC is committed, the UNC is the only party that produced a comprehensive economic plan. [*Desk thumping*] Our economic master transformation plan is detailed and I want to encourage you to go to our website, www.uncplan2020.com and take a look. The prescriptions that I have given you here, I have given you some suggestions, but the actual master plan can be seen and can be read; it is there for anyone who wishes to see.

So do not come and tell me I did not give you any suggestions. I have an entire plan which I shared with the nation which we have in it, we have the seven boosters, COVID boosters. We have the 12 prosperity engine drivers and all the other elements of that master plan. The UNC believes in equality; we believe in investing in children [*Desk thumping*]; we believe education is a passport out of poverty; we believe that small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our economy [*Desk thumping*] and they need help to grow; we believe that our nation needs a clear and comprehensive national security policy; [*Desk thumping*] we believe in secure borders, [*Desk thumping*] and we say the UNC is still here and remains the only hope for Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Our economy and democracy continue to be under threat by this regime. People are looking to the UNC to defend our Constitution and freedoms. The UNC is the only party which represents the needs of the middle class and the working poor. [*Desk thumping*] We continue to advocate policies to promote social mobility and aspirations. Our nation’s future is on the peril. We know that

it is only set to get worse, even as the Prime Minister himself admitted on election night, to get worse. The budget appears designed to punish the vast majority of our citizens whom he chastised at the start that will affect every man, woman and child. The Opposition has its own duty, will continue to push for greater transparency and accountability from Government. We will continue to put forward plans and suggestions designed to develop and uplift all citizens of our nation.

I say on a personal note, I will not stop fighting. [*Desk thumping*] I have stood many times in this Parliament to defend the rights, liberties, as well as welfare of our citizens, not only because of my elected duty but because of my love and dedication for our beautiful country. [*Desk thumping*] Many years ago when I entered these hallowed halls my aim was to ensure equality, justice and equitable development. My goal has always been the development of a nation where the children of janitors or of taxi drivers have the same opportunity as those of lawyers and doctors. Indeed, one of my MPs is the son of a taxi driver and he has educated himself, he sits now in this Chamber.

My passion has always been, “No child must be left behind”. My passion has always been the creation of a society where one is not judged based on appearance, race, religion, economic background, gender or even political support. We must be all able to achieve our true potential and be given the opportunities to do so. [*Desk thumping*] Today I stand at a time when our greatest asset, our citizens are under attack from a misguided, incompetent, uncaring and incompetent intellectually bankrupt administration. There has never been a more uncertain time in our nation’s history with the suffering, burdens and hardship of so many increasing by the day. That is why I stand more determined as ever to battle for the betterment of people. I repeat, COVID did not crash the economy, that

Government crashed the economy. [*Desk thumping*]

Our troubles started long before COVID. There was no bold COVID stimulus package to jolt the sluggish and stalled economy into gear from this budget. There was no bold announcement of foreign direct investment to create wealth and prosperity. There was no investment strategy to get T&T working again. The wisdom ends with raising the price of apples, grapes, cars and gas. If they could not do it before 2020, I am saying they cannot do it after. [*Desk thumping*] If they could not do it before COVID, to grow this economy, to stabilize this economy, they cannot do it during COVID and after. What we saw in Monday's budget was a Government that has given up on the people of our nation. In the Opposition we say we will never give up and we have not given up on them. We will not and never stop believing in the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

We believe in the talent, the skills and dynamic ability of every citizen. That is why we put this Government on notice, we will not allow you to burden our citizens, crippling their true ability. We will not allow you to neglect citizens, depriving them the opportunity to achieve their dreams as you have done for five years. We will not allow you to endanger the future of our children who face very grim days. We will not allow you to derail our democracy as you have done. I tell all citizens, we will not—in the Opposition we will not stop fighting for you. [*Desk thumping*] As we enter the new normal we will ensure that our citizens are placed before politics. Government has failed citizens with this budget. It is clear that their botched policies mean more hardship, but the Opposition I lead will utilize these hallowed halls to ensure that our country develops into a nation which serves, protects and enriches all who call these islands home.

We will do our part to ensure that our citizens can live, thrive and be given

equal opportunities. As a nation it is now that we must rediscover our purpose, we must return to those qualities of nationhood. We will be resilient, courageous, vigilant and keep faith that a better day will come. This is still our time to shine as an Opposition, as a people and as a nation. This is also still the time for a government to shine. We will bring hope where there is despair. I want to say, may God continue to bless our great nation, and I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. [*Desk thumping*]

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, as I rise to enter this debate to respond and also to tell the nation what it is that has happened and what will happen in a number of areas, I would like to start—it would be remiss of me not to start by thanking the people of Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West for the opportunity to represent them and to serve them once again, for the overwhelming re-election numbers in a general election even though it was held in a pandemic. I also would like to thank the hon. Prime Minister for the privilege to serve as the Minister of National Security and as a Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, and to thank the people of Trinidad and Tobago for their mandate to the PNM for another five years of governance, [*Desk thumping*] and to remind the population almost two months ago, and especially those on the other side in Opposition, to remind them that a population two months ago rejected lies and the destructive ways of the UNC and returned the PNM to governance for the next five years. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, respectfully, what we have heard for the past three hours is a script prepared by handlers who led the Member for Siparia to a record 11th loss

at the polls on August 10, 2020, but the danger is that the information thrown at the population which is untrue and designed to mislead must be corrected. This is an Opposition that is clearly in denial that our country's problems are not singular, an Opposition that continues to ignore what is taking place globally and its effects on Trinidad and Tobago. So I would spend a little bit of time, not much, correcting some of the misinformation put out in the last three hours. The first disturbing thing to me as a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago is the continued narrative by a UNC Opposition that they won a popular vote in Trinidad, completely ignoring the fact that there is a country called, and a state, Trinidad and Tobago, [*Desk thumping*] and as a citizen I take umbrage to this continued attack on Tobago, the sister isle of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Very early o'clock in the Leader of the Opposition's contribution this very disturbing statement was made as she stated, Member for Siparia, and I quote, this country has:

"...a sell-by date and that date has...expired..."

Madam Speaker, I noted this and for a person who aspires to lead this country I find it very distasteful and of serious concern to me as a citizen, and I reject this proposition. As a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago I reject this outright, because this is my country, this is my Trinidad and Tobago and it has no sell-by date. [*Desk thumping*] I found this to be offensive. A lot of time was spent on COVID. We are still in a global pandemic that is COVID; we are still seeing what is taking place internationally, and I am certain that my colleague, the Member for St. Joseph, will spend some time on the health side of what this Government did successfully in protecting the population when COVID appeared on our shores on the 12th of March of this year and what we have continued to do. But I remind the Opposition that on the 10th of August, 2020, the population did decide and decided very clearly

who it is that should continue to govern this country and take us through the difficulties of COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

The misinformation that continues with respect to gas and gas prices and Point Lisas, all that we have heard in the last three hours in this area is a confirmation that the Leader of the Opposition has no handle, no understanding on the energy sector of Trinidad and Tobago. And I would like to put it to rest immediately, all that screaming and shouting and continued narrative about the Prime Minister negotiating gas deals and the collapse and the gas price in Houston. Fortunately we have a leader; fortunately we have a leader who knows what is going on in our energy sector. And when it was in 2015 and prior, there was no gas price decided between National Gas Company and any up-streamer taking us forward and taking the country forward with no gas price. I heard the screams of, “Oh, we are ones responsible for Angelin and Jupiter”, but what the country again is not being told that with respect to all of those deals they had not negotiated a gas price. And what this country was facing in March 2017, was a failure of any continuation of gas price to take us forward in the future.

NGC and BP, the largest up-streamer producer of gas had reached a brick wall and they had downed their tools. There was no conversation taking place. So what happened in Houston is a leader using the relationship that he had as the Prime Minister of the country asking to see the highest levels of BP, going to Houston and getting NGC and BP back to the table to negotiate, and that was successfully done. This false narrative about the gas price—if I may just spend a few minutes on it, Madam Speaker, what the population needs to understand is the prices that were negotiated, because that is what was taking place at the time. It is a gas price formula based on some parts on commodity pricing. So, as the prices of ammonia and methanol rose or dropped, so was the gas price being paid for the

upstream gas.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

What I find ironic and hypocritical though is the two gas contracts, the only two gas contracts negotiated by the UNC prior to 2015 are the two worst gas contracts for the country of Trinidad and Tobago, [*Desk thumping*] and the two gas contracts that are saddling NGC today. And the population needs to know that, because the only two contracts that they negotiated prior to 2015 are the PL&L and the CGCL contracts, and those two contracts now are yokes around the shoulders and necks of NGC and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. So add to that the fact that they did not negotiate downstream contracts for the rest of the Point Lisas Estate, and when we came in we met billions of US dollars of claims that had to be dealt with because there was a gas shortage and curtailment. So to stand up here once again and mislead the population and say that at the time they left 3.8 million scuffs of gas being produced a day is completely untrue.

We met billions of dollars of claims at the time. Before 2015, a Minister of Energy, every time he was asked about what is going on with curtailment of gas and gas shortages at plants at Point Lisas, the response was maintenance. We all now know that is untrue. We all now know that not a single gas contract, apart from CGCL was negotiated, and that is the singular worst, in addition to the P&L contract for gas around NGC's throats. Every loss-making contract for gas supply was due to the United National Congress, all of the claims. The collapse of global commodity prices is what is affecting Point Lisas today. So this continued false narrative that the difficulties at Point Lisas are based on the Houston pricing, I tell the country today that we have renegotiated the prices in Houston with EOG, with BP. We have renegotiated with Shell. We have renegotiated with BHP for better gas prices from our up-streamers today, even beyond what happened in Houston in

2017. But what the country needs to understand, and I am sure they do despite the continued false narratives, is that the global commodity market has collapsed, including an oversupply of LNG in the world.

The plants that have shut down at Point Lisas—because, yes, plants have shut down—are due to their age and inefficiency. Again, what we are hearing here today is an ignorance of the truth and of the reality, truth and the reality of what our energy sector is about. The YARA plant that was referred to is one of the oldest plants built over 30 years ago, it is inefficient. Are we to subsidize with taxpayers' money inefficiency and inefficient plants? The answer is no, and that is how we have dealt with it. There has been an empowered negotiation team. We have built up the relationships with the up-streamers and the down-streamers, and that work continues. Up to today that work continues.

This week Minister Khan and myself were having virtual meetings with the boardrooms of the large multinational plants at Point Lisas, the “Nutriens”, the “Methanexes”, and all of this work is being undertaken. And you know what is being undertaken for the first time properly? A protection of the future of Trinidad and Tobago, sophisticated negotiations taking place by the Government with experts on its teams as we look at the gas value chain and doing what needs to be done to continue to protect the industry of Trinidad and Tobago and not have it decimated in the way that it was prior to 2015. It pains me as a citizen to come here and to listen to these falsities and this misleading information, because the truth is by 2015 all of the good work that had been done or may have been done prior to 2010 had been decimated in the energy industry. It was found in shambles.

I am listening here today about the sector now running on fumes again, that is not true, anyone can go and look at what is happening globally. Methanol and ammonia prices have crashed. COVID brought about a complete lack of demand

for these products. There was oversupply in the global markets and that is what Trinidad and Tobago is facing the consequences of here today. Nothing more than that. Yes, prices have gone up for gas as they should, because Trinidad and Tobago gas is an asset, it is a resource that is replenishing. And what we are facing here today, for example with ammonia, is for the first time in decades the price of gas in Europe is cheaper than even Henry Hub in the United States. That was unheard of years ago, but if the UNC had spent some time trying to protect Trinidad and Tobago and the gas prices, prior to leaving office in 2015, maybe the country would have been in a better place. But this Government and this administration without fear of contradiction has done a remarkable job in standing up to the multinationals upstream, downstream, working with them as well, but making sure that we extract a fair return for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, [*Desk thumping*] and protecting for the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

There is no Houston blotched negotiations or uncompetitive gas price. That shows the ignorance; you are dealing with jurisdictions that have larger gas reserves than Trinidad and Tobago. There was a point in time in the United States not too long ago, in fact in 2017 when negotiations were taking place, that the United States oil producers were paying people to take gas because gas is a by-product of oil production. How do you compete with that?—and we have effectively, because even in this day and age's global competitive environment Trinidad and Tobago continues to attract the spend of the global dollars from these multinationals. BP has not stopped, BHP has not stopped, in fact BHP is doing record deep-water exploration with an eye towards production.

Shell has not stopped, EOG has not stopped, and we still have persons coming, looking for opportunities. What is going on at Point Lisas is unfortunate, but it is not relegated to Trinidad and Tobago alone. It is as a result of global

commodity prices crashing, plants that were inefficient have to come out of the system. This Government will not bow over to sell the patrimony of Trinidad and Tobago and subsidize gas for inefficient plants, because as the inefficient plants leave, the efficient plants will come and that is how a patriotic government deals with the business of Trinidad and Tobago.

Loran-Manatee, again my stomach shifted as I heard the assault and the attack and the dog whistling on Loran-Manatee. What we are dealing with, with Loran- Manatee, is a gas field that straddles an international border, and on the Venezuelan side there are sanctions being applied. Let us not forget that. The same Opposition who a few months ago as we sat in Parliament, we went through weeks of them calling for the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Security, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister to be personally sanctioned by the United States, calling for sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago by the United States, and what did this Government do, needing gas and gas production for the future? We negotiated to be able to access the gas on the Trinidadian side. So to listen to the suggestion that there is anything untoward with that and being told we should not go it alone and it is unusual and ill-advised to tap into this, it is with the greatest of respect, complete rubbish.

As usual it is a UNC dog whistle. The Manatee field is on the Trinidad and Tobago border and we will go it alone, and this week we began the negotiations and discussions with Shell for the future production of that gas, because you see this Government does not do things for today for today, we are looking at what has to take place down the road. But once again, and I put the country on notice—and thank God the country did what it did on the 10th of August having listened to the ignorance and the lack of knowledge of the energy sector for the last three hours, it shows a complete lack of understanding.

Cars, the whole conversation and narrative on cars, again I must correct it; the decisions taken in this budget are based on a policy, a policy where we are spending, and we earn foreign exchange, US dollars through the energy sector, as we know the revenue has fallen. The country needs to know that US \$450 million are spent on motor vehicles a year. I heard the suggestion that by the imposition of taxes on vehicles and us doing a policy to protect our limited foreign exchange, it is going to affect the small garages and body shops, it is quite the opposite. And I am putting on record here today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are currently—I just got the statistics from the Minister of Works and Transport, there are over 1.1 million registered vehicles on Trinidad and Tobago's roads, 1.1 million. And you know how many driver's permits are current, issued, and it does not mean that they are driving: 600,000.

So for every driver's permit issued we already have almost two vehicles per driver's permit in Trinidad and Tobago. The body shops and the paint shops and the mechanics will get work as we must continue to maintain the vehicles that are here. We did not stop all vehicles coming but we must protect our foreign exchange, and it is being applauded. So the continued dog whistling is again rejected. "Grew the economy", this talk about "grew the economy", the UNC did not grow the economy, what they grew was expenditure. [*Desk thumping*] When the UNC came into power our annual budget was about \$41 billion. The UNC grew it from \$41 billion to 63 billion; 20 billion, and they must answer to the people where that went. So they did not grow the economy, they grew the expenditure.

Talk about overdraft conversation, overdraft and debt conversation, and reading from a script without understanding it, otherwise the Leader of the Opposition would not have said it.

1.15 p.m.

First of all, they accept that there has been a drop in revenue. So I always wonder, if a person accepts that there has been a drop in revenue where do they expect to maintain the existing expenditure, or where do they expect to grow revenue from? The hypocrisy of this statement and this conversation on the overdraft is—I must remind the country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that in 2010 there was \$6 billion in cash in the Treasury, no overdraft. In 2010 they came in and they met \$6 billion in the account. That was completely spent. They left in 2015 a \$9 billion overdraft, so that is \$15 billion there spent of cash. And let us not forget what they did when they plundered the NGC and took \$14 billion from there as well. So \$30 billion in cash at a time when energy prices were much better, and then come now to tell the country that there must not be an overdraft facility and a debt to equity ratio? We are dealing with different times. Let us deal with the reality.

Another point to be made, deficit budgeting. Again, I do not know if they understand, but since 2008 every budget in Trinidad and Tobago for the last 12 years, including five between 2010 and 2015, has been a deficit budget; every single one since 2008. The CLF liquidation, and another dog whistle about the sale of malls. There is no truth to that whatsoever. The Government is not permitting nor is the liquidator of the CLF group looking to sell any mall at this point in time. There is no fire sale of malls going on. But what I again remind the population about is that this Government's astute leadership took on the CLF problem frontally. The Government took it on.

Taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago were saddled with a \$30 billion unsecured loan to the CLF shareholders, a private few people—\$30 billion. Between 2010 and 2015, nothing done to secure that debt. We went in, put it into

liquidation when the shareholders were pushing back—and exposing the taxpayer, no interest being charged either, but interest and all the expenses come up to \$30 billion and it is by that which we did as an administration, having the astuteness but also the fortitude to take on the fight, put CLF into liquidation and fixed that problem and created things like the NIF to protect. So again fiction. There is no sale or fire sale of any assets, not under this Government.

Service station concerns—I will leave the service stations for the Minister of Finance to respond to as well as the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, but it would be remiss of me not to put down a marker here. As I heard the cry about service stations, I cast my mind back, and I am putting it on the *Hansard*, and I want the population to understand what a previous administration in 2010 to 2015 did with the taxpayers' service stations. One of their sitting Senators got a service station. One of their Members who has gone up for the last two general elections got another service station. A family member of a UNC Member of Cabinet got a service station on Wrightson Road, and the UNC financiers got service stations. That is how they wanted to dispose of it and disposed of service stations. *[Interruption]* I will leave now, the Member—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. Again, hello, Member for Siparia. Again please I would like to hear the discourse of the hon. Member. And again as I am on my legs remember the procedure is clear: Once speaking you still have to keep your mask on your face, please, Members. Let us abide by the rules. Proceed.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I expect the noise, because the course of action in here shows that anytime you touch a sensitive nerve that is the reaction you get from the other side. So to listen to them talk about conflict, and to listen to the hypocrisy needed to be dealt with.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because there was very little else to respond to

from the last three hours of discourse, I will now deal with matters of national security. I heard the laughs and cries and again the misinformation about what existed in 2015. First of all, this Government is committed to the fight against crime and criminality, and we have been working with the assets that we have. We have not been going out and spending billions of dollars on toys and technology, the way that happened, without proper procurement. I remind the country of the going and purchasing of helicopters that never even made it to Trinidad and Tobago that we are now tied up in litigation for, half a billion dollars spent on certain assets without anything being done to implement and to put it into use.

This Government has used the multiagency approach. Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, our Defence Force, our intelligence services, even prisons and Immigration all sit around a table now and work together using the assets that they each have to make Trinidad and Tobago a safer and more secure place. We have introduced and implemented, and it is working, a national Operation Fusion Centre and introduced for the first time a National Intelligence Fusion Centre. Just to briefly, without giving away the confidentiality and the national security issues there, explain how these operate. A National Operation Fusion Centre that is being worked as we speak, and providing results, is a gathering under the same roof of representatives who are vetted, not hand-picked by politicians, but vetted and they sit in the same area. They do the analysis. They have the technology. The information comes in as to how they should move forward. So the National Operation Fusion Centre is working.

We have introduced for the first time a National Intelligence Fusion Centre, a body where analysts sit and intelligence from all arms of national security: the police service, the prisons, the Defence Force, the SSA and other areas, feed up into this body and analyzes it and then puts the appropriate reports for action to the

bodies that need to.

As I sat and reflected on the last year, I want to remind the country, respectfully through you Mr. Deputy Speaker, of one of the most successful exercises that again Trinidad and Tobago led the charge on and is now the case study, the number one case study in the world for how to do it successfully, the demonetization exercise in 2019. Let us not forget the success of that exercise. It was a national security venture. There were only three persons in the country who knew and who implemented this successful demonetization, and we have shown the world how it should be done.

Just to explain briefly to the population, because we were here in December of last year, what that meant is removing the largest bank note that exists in Trinidad and Tobago, the \$100 cotton note. We did it against all naysayers, against all of the pushbacks, in the shortest period of time it has ever been done in the world—in the world. [*Desk thumping*] When we were preparing for it we looked at India, we looked at what happened in Mauritius an island similar in size to Trinidad and Tobago. They could not get it done in the period of time that we got it done.

The success of that demonetization exercise and where it struck at the heart of corruption was borne out at the end, brought it \$8 billion worth of new polymer bank notes, \$100 bills. At the end of the exercise, \$500 million of old cotton notes have not returned to the Central Bank. So it is a safe assumption that \$500 million of corrupt money was not allowed to return. [*Interruption*] And as I hear the Members, because you could always tell you know, you could always tell when it touches a nerve, and the population will know.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, please. I do not want to have to identify Members who are not conforming to the wearing of the mask. I do not want it to

reach that stage, but if you all permit me to I will have to. Proceed.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We all heard the rumours around election time, the resurfacing of some cotton notes and on which side of the isle it was resurfacing. Maybe that is the noise. But the demonetization exercise was a successful one in the last fiscal. It took two years of planning. Implementation was done in top secret. All of the other countries we studied with the experts, no other country did it in the short time frame that we did and as successfully as we did. I want to use this opportunity to thank all of the protective services that were involved, the banking system that was involved, they all worked with us to make it happen safely, resulting in \$500 million of corrupt money not coming back into the economy.

The scourge of domestic violence—The scourge of domestic violence does attract National Security's attention. It is something that you would recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just before the budget, in our last run-up to the election, we as a Parliament took certain decisions. My colleagues will expand on it, in particular the Member for Tobago East. The Attorney General worked with the Member for Tobago East, they brought a suite of legislation designed to protect the victims of domestic violence. So we listened to what is being said out there, and remind the country that we took legislation to Parliament. We made the amendments.

For example, from a national security point of view, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service brought into being a special unit with special training, the Gender-Based Violence Unit. The legislation was amended to allow persons to make a report now at any police station. Before it had to be at the district station. We have also implemented the Electronic Monitoring Unit at National Security, and the unit is operational. The legislation was proclaimed for the electronic monitoring on 18th of September, and that unit is now operational. The next step is

for the Judiciary to begin utilizing these electronic monitoring bracelets, as I know they will, and we will expand it. This Government is committed to doing what needs to be done there.

COVID—National Security played an extremely important role in the response to this global pandemic. And again, through you Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity as the Minister to thank all of the frontline workers: the police service, the Defence Force, Immigration, prisons, fire, for doing what needed to be done in responding to COVID. Right now in the prison system last week we opened a facility in Claxton Bay for those few prisoners who have tested positive, to make sure they are kept separate from the general population, but have available to them hospital facilities. We are doing the same thing right now as we speak for Tobago, and they have the commitment of National Security to continue doing all that we have done from day one being an integral pillar in this country's response to COVID.

Borders—Borders is always a constant conversation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and rightly so. I would like to take a few minutes to just talk about borders from a national security point of view. We have already implemented a multiagency approach. So in the winding up I heard the Leader of the Opposition talking about we say it every year. It is working and it is there. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is working along with the Defence Force and Immigration along with intelligence and the NOFC. But this ridiculous narrative of the Opposition, always about porous borders.

Look at what is going on at every developed island in the world. I look at what goes on in Europe. I do not know what goes on in the United Kingdom as an island, in Europe and coastal countries, even in the United States. Once you have those types of borders there are going to be attempts. We do not bury our head in

the sand and pretend it is not happening, but to continuously try to convince the population that there is not border security taking place is wrong. I would like again, through you Mr. Deputy Speaker, to thank the men and women of the Defence Force, in particular the coast guard and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and Immigration for their tireless work in this area.

The coastal radar system is working. The coastal radar system has been and is being further upgraded. All of our assets are being used. I heard again the attempt to mislead the population about the Damen vessels being at Staubles, showing again the complete ignorance of those on the other side as to how these things operate. The vessels have to come in for supply and change of crew. Every single working Damen vessel is being utilized, but there are occasions when they are in a dock to refurbish, to also change crew and to resupply. We did a refurbishment of our interceptors. Every interceptor that we could have gotten refurbished was refurbished and is out there working.

The combined use of the Defence Force and the police service as land operations on our borders has been working. There are challenges. In fact, one of the challenges we face right now is the onslaught of lawyers, and I will not call their names. All of a sudden they have knowledge of when illegal Venezuelans are coming across, and before they even land they rush into the court to try and get orders. I stand here without fear of contradiction. As a government we will continue to implement, and to implement successfully, the domestic laws of Trinidad and Tobago, because part of border protection—part of border protection—is using the laws to deal with illegal immigration, and we will continue so to do in a humanitarian manner.

The migrant registration was successful, 16,523 Venezuelans registered. Cabinet took a decision and extended that to the 31st of December, 2020. We will

not allow UNHCR registration process to be abused. By coming and registering with the UNHCR does not give anyone a right to break the domestic laws of Trinidad and Tobago and to act in an illegal manner. It is not a get-out-of-jail card.

Human trafficking is real. There are locals involved. There is a local demand unfortunately for this human flesh, and this is what we are fighting at National Security and will continue to fight. We have a counter trafficking unit at the Ministry of National Security. I thank them for their tireless work and their effort, often calling me at midnight and other wee hours of the morning, as they are dealing with the victims of human trafficking. I want to thank them for their hard work as they make the most of their limited resources.

What we will be doing to increase border security, the same two Cape Class vessels—and I noted it, and I want the population, through you Mr. Deputy Speaker, to note it, an assault on us getting two Cape Class vessels. It reminded me of the cancellation of the OPVs. What is the UNC's problem with vessels of this nature patrolling our maritime space and protecting our borders? Why is it that they are so determined to attack OPVs and now attack the two Cape Class vessels? Is it that they are protecting certain interests? The population will answer that.

We are also going to be utilizing drones. We are purchasing new interceptors. The Air Unit is getting an upgrade with our C-26 fixed wing. I would like to thank the United States Government for giving us additional surveillance equipment. We will continue to deport and repatriate illegal immigrants as this is an integral part of border security.

There is a Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Marine and Riverine Branch that is currently operating, and more officers being trained. The Carenage Police Station that is being built will become the headquarters for this Trinidad and Tobago Marine and Riverine Branch. There is going to be implemented in this

fiscal a special vetted unit for multiagency border unit. We have already begun getting the training for air corp and sea corp, it is ongoing, and this be to tackle illegal ports of entry, because we know that illegal ports of entry are facilitating unfortunately illegal firearms, contraband and narcotics. A unit that will comprise Customs as part of it, vetted officers, the police service, the Defence Force and intelligence services is going to be put into place to tackle this scourge at our legal ports of entry.

The anti-gang fight—Anti-gang legislation has been applied and utilized. Unfortunately I do not have the time to give the statistics, but I am sure we will get there. However, I am putting the country on notice that there is a sunset clause that expires soon, and we will be approaching the Parliament to continue it because it is being used. It takes time to build the evidence. There have been a number of substantial charges of persons as gang leaders and those assisting them. It has also assisted the police service and the specialized units in being able to get warrants and also to detain persons suspected of gang activity for longer than the 72-hour period via legislation. I assure the country it is being utilized and it needs to continue.

Illegal firearms: Illegal firearms are a serious problem in national security. We re-established SERU, the Special Evidence Recovery Unit. It was as the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, along with the Prime Minister in a meeting with the US authorities, we were told not too long after in the 2016 period, this unit that has received specialized training by the ATF in the United States and other law enforcement bodies in the United States, was trained and under the UNC it was disbanded and the officers sent everywhere. Again, the question: Why would you disband a unit that must analyze ballistics and do special evidence recovery. We put it back together. I also arranged training through the British High

Commission on ballistics. We had for the first time a forensics ballistics evidence analysis training to train police officers, over 20 of them, to ease that ballistic backlog. This is what is taking place and I tell the population, through you Mr. Deputy Speaker.

But I also remind the population that as we fight the scourge of illegal firearms, the Opposition was opposed to us amending the Bail Act and the Firearms Act, and I ask this question: How could the Opposition justify bail for a person held with an automatic firearm or a grenade? Our neighbour next door with a small population, Barbados, passed legislation that there should be no bail for illegal firearms for 24 months. We were seeking no bail for automatic firearms for 90 days, and it was opposed by the Opposition.

The CCTV—the National CCTV is being upgraded. We fought a hard fight. Again, the population needs to know that we fought a fight, against corruption I suspect, in the CCTV arena. Immediately, through finally having a competitive tender process, reducing the bill to the taxpayers by over \$300 million a year. COVID has unfortunately pushed us back in the implementation, but we are waiting for the technicians and they are going to come in to set it up. That will happen this fiscal.

Our prisons: We are in the process of upgrading the remand facilities at Golden Grove. We have upgraded and are upgrading the security systems at Maximum Security and Golden Grove, the CCTV, the alarm—I cannot get into the details—even the fence. It upsets me as a citizen that \$80 million was spent to build a fence that surrounds nothing at the prison, and then now in a time of little we are trying to build a similar fence around the prisons at Golden Grove, and we will get it done. We have renewed the fight against contraband being taken into the prison. We are even using in in the prisons a multiagency assistance approach. We

amended the Interception of Communications Act.

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

Hon. S. Young: Thank you. I would like to take the opportunity to thank two persons who have been doing phenomenal work in our prison system over the past decade, Debbie Jacob and Sister Kay Narinesingh, for working with our prisoners and giving them hope. [*Desk thumping*]

The fire services, Immigration we have fixed, knock on wood. I am actually getting a lot of messages. The whole passport renewal system, people are saying that they are able to get their appointments to go in and to get a passport, to do the whole thing, within a space of days. TTPost is now working along with us for the delivery of the system.

I just want to close by saying, I did not get to touch on it in the detail I had hoped, this cry about the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and National Security getting a reduction in the budget, we understand that we are in difficult financial times. I give the commitment as the Minister that we will work with what we get, and we will stretch it and make it work. [*Desk thumping*]

To the police officers and the police service, continue doing the great job that you are doing, because the police service actually got almost the same amount that we got to run the whole rest of the Ministry: Defence Force, Fire, prisons, Immigration, the SSA and general administration. But we will work together and we will get it done, and it will not affect our delivery. It is going to be a difficult period.

I can stand here assured as the Minister of National Security charged with the responsibility for those services, that in my interaction with the men and women in National Security, I tell the population they remain committed in the fight against crime and criminality. We will do what we need to do with the limited

resources that we are thankful for as we resolve and continue to do what we can to make Trinidad and Tobago a safer and more secure Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Naparima, and just a reminder it is 45 minutes, no additional time. Proceed.

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As I stand to contribute to this debate, I must congratulate the hon. Member for Siparia for her forthright analysis of the disaster which has befallen Trinidad and Tobago under this PNM Administration. The Member for Siparia has articulated a people-centred alternative.

The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, in his response could not answer her challenge to cut our salaries by 5 per cent to share the burden. No response whatsoever. [*Desk thumping*] The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West refused to respond to the offer by the Member for Siparia to work together to reduce exemptions on the purchase of vehicles. But I know why. I know why the hon. Member would not do that, because as the beneficiary of a Mercedes Benz valued at 1.7 million with tax exemptions worth \$1 million, he would not do so. I could say that. I am the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I understand that you can say it, but I want you to understand clearly what you are bringing into the debate. Proceed.

Mr. R. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am hearing the concerns of the population of Trinidad and Tobago which speaks to a sharing of the burden of the COVID pandemic, and that the purpose of us as representatives is not to hide and not to dance, but to show our population by demonstration that we are willing to work with them.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of National Security spoke about on our

side, and said he wants to know why we on this side have a problem with OPVs and whatnot. But I want to tell him—he also spoke about gas stations and who got gas stations. I want to tell him that nobody on this side will have to recuse ourselves from a Cabinet because of \$2.5 million raised for a company such as NCB Global Finance.

The difficulties which we face in Trinidad and Tobago started with the Prime Minister's misguided involvement in the gas negotiations in Houston. That is a fact which they cannot run from. I quote from *Kaitour News*, June 08, 2019, and it quotes the *Trinidad Guardian* and it says and I quote:

Prime Minister Keith Rowley has walked away from his two-week long trip to the United States, Netherlands and the UK with favourable terms for the country's energy sector. This according to a release from his office.

You cannot want to take the claim for successful negotiations, and when they turn out to be a disaster you want to walk away from it and say that you did not do what in the past you indicated was a successful negotiation in Houston.

1.45 p.m.

The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West misquoted the Member for Siparia when she said, and I quote:

“They have returned to the tired tactic of ‘blame Kamla, blame the UNC’.”

And she continued:

“I warned the Government that this strategy had a sell-by date and...has completely expired now.”

I wish to tell the Minister, the hon. Member, she did not say “the country” had a sell date. She said “the strategy” had a sell date. If you would only listen when you are being taught, when you are being given information [*Desk thumping*] instead of jumping to rebut. I repeat, she said the strategy had a sell date, not the country had

a sell date as you so erroneously pointed out.

The question about Loran-Manatee, anything concerning Venezuela, the Government should run from, they should not talk about anything concerning Venezuela. They have created a disastrous foreign policy with respect to that country. They should not talk about the failed meetings with the Vice President Delcy Rodriguez on whom sanctions had been placed by the US Government for being involved in drugs. They cannot speak. They cannot speak about Venezuela when they have been in cahoots with senior officials of the Venezuelan Government, when there is a UN report about human rights abuses in which the person who they met might have been involved.

Minister Stuart Young said we met 6 billion in the Exchequer; totally false. We inherited 20 billion overdraft in 2010, and I quote from the Auditor General's report of 2011. And he would not tell us that today the overdraft at September last year was 40 billion; 40 billion. You see why Trinidad is going nowhere fast, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they said that we never negotiated good gas prices. But if we did not, how could the profits of NGC—the profits of NGC in 2010 in 2011 was 4.6 billion; in 2012, 3.93 billion; 2013, 6.5 billion; [*Desk thumping*] 2014, 4.48 billion. [*Desk thumping*] They came into office, 2016 720 million. They could negotiate, they are the best negotiators, but NGC in 2015, 560 million; 2016, 720 million; 2017, 989 million; and 2018, 2.3 billion and in 2019 guess how much?—393 million. They ran NGC to the ground. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could go on and on. What I will tell you is that his speech today, I have heard it for the past four, five years—four years or versions of it since I have been in this House.

Let me get to my contribution today, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is my sixth

contribution to the budget debate, and as I speak I do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under a plaque. It is covered, this plaque is covered. Inscribed with an address by the father of the nation Dr. Eric Williams. That inscription was to the 21st annual convention of the PNM on the 29th of September, 1979. It is written here. I have no problems with a statement by the father of the nation, not at all, but at a PNM convention as I talk to this House in this budget, is it fitting that this debate be regaled in this Parliament with a PNM party statement however erudite? In this supposedly co-equal branch of government, should we not also have a fitting comment from a former Prime Minister from the UNC or People's Partnership Government? [*Desk thumping*] Or are we to be forever reminded that this Parliament is an extension of the PNM and it is they who run things here. May I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in this budget speech respectfully suggest that Dr. Williams' enlightened and relevant statement given on Independence Day when he called for respect and recognition of the role of the Opposition, that that should regale us.

As I address this honourable House I recall the thousands of useful ideas on this side which we have provided and not one has been accepted. This is a government that we face weekly. If we do not support them, we are unpatriotic. They do not listen to us. We are, pejorative terms I use, yet in this budget they call for the support of the Opposition for very important pieces of legislation such as the Revenue Authority, the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control and procurement legislation. We are willing to work with them provided there is the mutual respect that the father of the nation called for at Independence Day.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have in vain in past budgets lamented that we should have smart budgets, smart goals for our budgets. They listen half-heartedly, and when they set targets, they do not make sense. In this budget we are told in the PSIP that the TTPS has set a target conviction rate of 2 per cent, a target conviction

rate of 2 per cent in 2020 in the PSIP, Public Sector Investment Programme. And they have set a target to reduce police emergency response time to eight minutes; on which roads? Do these targets make sense, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

We have said in the past that there is an arithmetical approach to the budget by the Minister of Finance, that it provides no architecture, no discernible road map for the future, no plan to take us forward. So we are back to balancing a deficit of 8.2 billion and doing the arithmetic to make it happen.

We have said that budgets prioritize the interest of the 1 per cent and not the suffering masses. I have said in the past and I say it today, when we finish, if this budget is implemented, “Massa day not done”. We are back to the days of Massa.

We have said that it is based on poor statistical data by yet to be developed national statistical institute. Now the World Bank and the IDB have lamented the poor state of data. You cannot make a plan, you cannot budget if your data is inaccurate.

So even the Government confesses in the *Review of the Economy 2020* that there was no CSO employment data for 2019 or 2020. We are still using 2011 census data for information notwithstanding the fact that we may have up to 50 to 100,000 Venezuelans for whom we do not plan or we do not incorporate in our strategies. We have said that it is a cut and paste repeat of past budgets signifying a performance deficit of immense proportions by this incompetent administration.

We have spoken in the past about the need to respect the views of the Opposition. At every turn they blame us. They said we left no money and they operated on fumes and yet mysteriously found US \$1.6 billion from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund which we left and which they inherited. What is today’s reality as we face this budget? This is the first budget presented by this recently-elected Government. We warned the population about PNM’s policies that were

not people centred. Clearly the population did not listen. In fact we heard comments, some said, they rather eat grass and suffer under the PNM than prosper under the United National Congress. And today we are all paying the price for that disaster.

So when we hear Mr. Michael Annisette, and I am not saying that he is a PNM or UNC or whatever, but when we hear him predicting 1,300 job losses at the port because of the Minister of Finance's penchant for privatization, we say is that PNM policy for which you voted. You cannot vote for grass and expect manna from heaven.

Today when I see job losses, possible job losses of over 500 employees at NPMC where I worked for 18 years and introduced the convenience store concept and the service station upgrade, when we see them hurt by a PNM Government, we say, that is PNM policies for which you voted.

On the question of National Petroleum, we say, and I support the political leader of the United National Congress when she said that there must be no sale of NP service stations without the procurement legislation being fully operational. [*Desk thumping*] I will go further and say that we must implement a computation policy and legislate to support that policy so that we do not have cartels setting prices for consumers.

We see entire industries on the brink of collapse. The foreign used car dealerships, six industrial plants have closed their doors at Point Lisas, Petrotrin, the entertainment industry, food and beverage sector, tourism, bar owners with 20,000 jobs, total anarchy under this incompetent PNM administration.

On one hand the Minister of Finance is saying, "we are leaving no one behind" and they are committed to improving the lives of the youth in unserved communities. Yet, on the other hand, no novel initiatives to turn lives around,

dress up old activities and placing them under a new Ministry of Youth Development and National Service under a 64-year-old not so young Minister will just not cut it.

The Minister gave a long-winded speech. He rambled on for three hours. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the United States President Clinton in 2000 delivered the longest budget speech by a US President, State of the Union address. He spoke for only one hour and 25 minutes. Our GDP is \$23.8 billion. The US GDP is \$20.54 trillion and they speak for one hour and we speak for three hours. What has been the record of this finance Minister over the past five years? According to the World Bank we witnessed four successive years of negative growth. 2016, minus 6.3 per cent, 2017, minus 2.3 per cent, 2018, minus 2.5 per cent, 2019—World Bank, eh—minus .002 per cent. Failure, failure, failure. Compare that with the Minister of Finance of Guyana. 2016—this is Guyana's record, Minister of Finance—3.3 per cent, growth; 2017, 2.1 per cent growth, 2018, 4.1 per cent growth, 2019, 4.7 per cent growth, and Trinidad and Tobago, minus .002 per cent decline.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they tell me I speak about Singapore but let us talk about the Caribbean countries, compare that with the growth rate delivered by Finance Ministers in Caricom. According to the World Bank, in 2019, Grenada's economy grew by 3 per cent; Grenada 3 per cent. Dominica 5.7 per cent, St. Lucia, 4.7 per cent, Guyana, I said it before, 4.7 per cent, Antigua and Bermuda 4.7 per cent. What is wrong with Trinidad and Tobago?

The *Bible* says, "on to whom much is given much is expected". We have oil, we have gas, we have an educated population, we have creative people. They inherited US 9.9 billion in reserves in 2015, they inherited US 5.8 billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is "worse" Minister of Finance in the history of Trinidad and Tobago and the "worse" performing finance

Minister in Caricom [*Desk thumping*] and the facts are there. “Doh” argue me when you come to respond, argue the facts that I have presented. Under our illustrious Minister it is decline upon decline upon decline due to his dismal performance since he became finance Minister.

And he has the temerity to say, “I can see clearly now the rain has gone”; he boasted. And the national economy, he said, was not turning around, it had turned around. With performance figures like that, I would be ashamed. I would be ashamed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if this were Singapore, which rewards Ministers based on performance, he would have no “wuk” put simply. [*Desk thumping*] I am not here to win friends and influence people, I am here to talk it as I see it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance would not be able, if he was in Singapore, to claim nine—a \$1 million on tax exemption on a Porsche Macan—I “cyar” even pronounce the word—in 2015, a Mustang in 2017 and a Mercedes Benz in 2019.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, I mentioned earlier in your discourse the personalizing of the particular debate. Again, I am not going to allow it. I am not going to allow it. [*Crosstalk*] Listen, Member for St. Augustine, you will have your turn, please. You will have your turn. Okay, Member for Naparima.

Mr. R. Charles: I go on to Naparima. I move on. For years this Government has operated as if Naparima does not exist. I want to tell this Government that the constituents of Naparima are people too, they are citizens [*Desk thumping*] of Trinidad and Tobago. They are under-serving the children of Naparima. Nothing for the completion of the Reform Hindu School. Nothing for the new Barrackpore ASJA Primary School promised by a former Minister of Education in 2016. Nothing for the completion of Ben Lomond early childhood centre or the Reform

early childhood centre. Only 500 temporary food cards for 2,500 needy children. We have a deficit of laptops exceeding 5,000. We have pupils today going to school with no meals under this caring PNM administration. Do not talk about roads. The shoddy work done on parts of Garth Road have already deteriorate. Coryal Road, Reform Factory Road, GP Road, Kanhai Road, Kanhai Road north. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could speak about many more: Jaipaulsingh Trace, Sahi Trace, et cetera. They gave Princes Town Regional Corporation a measly 250,000 for the purchase of materials to maintain 7,000 secondary roads and agricultural traces, \$250,000 for 7,000 roads and traces. That is insulting. Tobago received 35 million for the maintenance of roads. I have no problem with Tobago people but we are people too. We are simply asking for an equal cut of the pie.

Praedial larceny on the rise in Barrackpore and surrounding areas. *Express*, October 05, 2020, page 16, "Farmers in misery". One farmer stated:

"The Praedial...Squad is there...

...does not have the resources to fulfil their duty."

Nothing for them. Farmers are still waiting for deeds for their two acre plots of land which they were promised upon the closure of Caroni (1975) Limited. And they come here talking about agriculture and their concern for food security.

Flooding: Well, I would not talk about that. Every year if it drizzles we get flood. Water problems, no water throughout the constituency. And I want them to listen, because they tell me, what am I doing to represent them? But I am talking to people with deaf ears today.

Youth unemployment is rampant in Naparima. Among the under 30 age group, 40 per cent unemployed or underemployed based on anecdotal data. I have young, bright, intelligent constituents with Master degrees with no jobs, no opportunities, and rising hopelessness.

Forex does not exist for the businesses in my constituency. I challenge the finance Minister to name one thing that he has done for Naparima in the past five years to make our lives easier or better. I challenge him. One thing. Cannot, cannot. I am hearing talk about internal self-government, I do not agree with it, but I am hearing talk if the Government continues to ignore, I am not saying that that should be supported, but the people are growing desperate and they are coming up with desperate ideas. Crime is on the rise in Naparima.

Just last week one of my employees and her husband and her son were pistol whipped and brutally assaulted and robbed in their house in Iere Village. Last week a Cuban shot by police in Princes Town. A sense of safety is declining, and yet the Minister says—the Government tells us that they have implemented several initiatives in crime that are bearing fruit. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister boasted on the effectiveness in the budget, the effectiveness of these initiatives. He talked about the operationalization of the National Operation Fusion Centre. Have we not heard that before? He talks about facilitating closer working relationships among the arms of divisions of national security that has led to better results. And we ask the question: What results?

He talked about using greater technology like GPS tracking, emergency response patrol vehicles, body cameras and drones. And we have said in July, the Commissioner of Police told us that they would acquire a thousand body cameras. Have they been acquired? He talked about the improvement of border security. They have no shame? Upgrades of costal radar system. We hear that 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 on and on and on. What did they tell us? In 2018, at a post-Cab, the Minister of National Security said 7.5 million to upgrade the coastal radar system. 2019 in the budget Government is in the process of upgrading the coast guard radar system. 2019, 23 million budgeted for a number of items including upgrade of the

coastal radar system. 2020 budget, you know what this budget tells us? Upgrades of the coastal radar system contemplated. They do not even change the words, cut and paste, they do not even change the words.

We have told them in terms of the crime that they have spoken about improve the security system in prisons; that is in this budget. Tell that to the family of prison officer Richardson who was shot outside Third Company Baptist Church in Indian Walk. Opening of brand new fire stations and refurbishing of other—they talk like they believe that when they talk somehow it happens.

The Fire Service Association tells us that:

There is a severe deficiency of fire trucks.

According to the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* the budget allocation for national security decreased by a 182 million. I think the political leader spoke about that.

Among the few items with increases is the SSA, essentially a spy agency, a “macco” agency. The SSA allocation is 215 million in 2021, this is 54 million greater than last year. Over 1 billion spent in five years, and how many criminals have been caught to date, and the SSA cannot even tell us who are the TT fishermen facilitating human trafficking and the flow of arms, ammunition, drugs into our south-west border. A self-respecting spy agency would have infiltrated and could have told us who are the fishermen, because fishermen have families on our side and their side, and we understand that there is a taxi service operating under the eyes of the under-resourced coast guard, good officers, hard-working but poorly, poorly resourced by an uncaring Ministry of National Security.

Twenty million to the TTPS for essential equipment. The PSIP 2021, page 161, states that:

“...\$20 million would be provided” to the police service “for essential

equipment...”

Part of this would be used to purchase, hear what, spy equipment, surveillance systems to monitor and annualize social media. Hmm. It would also use mobile devices tracking systems; more spying. The Minister comes and tells us with a straight face, borders are not—the borders are locked down, they are doing their best. The Minister of National Security said our borders are closed due to the COVID.

Yet, reported in *Loop* news TT July 15, 2020, there was a search for an estimated 150 Venezuelan nationals who have been seen entering Trinidad and Tobago through an illegal port, and countless other reports. Who they fooling? Because of the laziness, because of the sloth of our border control capability, some estimate that there is—one in 12 persons in Trinidad could be Venezuelan. If that is the case, we are looking at 100,000 illegal immigrants in our country, and as far this ostrich-like Government is concerned, there are only 16,000 residents here. Anytime you talk to them, 16,000. Anytime you tell them, it is 100,000, they ask you, how you get that data but they cannot supply you with the correct figure of Venezuelan resident in our country, and I challenge them so to do.

So when they talk about improving coast guard capabilities, there was a 5 million decrease for fuel and lubricants for the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard from 2019. And they tell us the boats lock up. We know that is because of shortage of fuel and lubricants; the Minister could deny that, they have reports in the media. And yet they cut it by 5 million and they talk about caring about border security. Border security, my eye.

They talk about they keep our citizens stranded. Our citizens stranded, born and bred citizens stranded while Venezuelans come in through the backdoor without being tested for COVID. Our citizens born here have to beg this PNM

Government on bended knees, genuflecting, I want to come back to my country of birth, and they have to resort—there are stories of them resorting to soup kitchens and lining up in the United States begging for food. This is an uncaring PNM administration. [*Desk thumping*] And they will attack me. I am just the messenger. Do “yuh wuk”. Deal with the citizens who are stranded.

They have failed to protect our prison officers and revamp the prison service. *Express* October 07, 2020, the president of Prison Officers Association Ceron Richards said every year—hear what the prison officer is saying. Hear what he said:

Every year we hear the same thing. We hear about upgrades and alarms We hear about refurbishments and improvements. But when the year closes nothing is done, it is disheartening.

And as my political leader says, PNM promises never materialize. [*Desk thumping*] For years our prison officers have been under attack and nothing is being. One prison officer said.

“It’s almost as if signing up to be a prison officer is like signing your own death warrant.”

That is *Newsday* 05 October, 2020. This cannot be the state of our national security apparatus.

They are piggybacking off COVID to claim success in reducing crime. The Government cannot boast about passing with flying colours when talking about solving crime. Other cities the world over have recorded drastic reductions in criminal activities due to the COVID global pandemic.

Chicago, one of America’s most violent cities, drug arrests have declined by 42 per cent since the lock down of the city in mid-March when compared to the same period last year.

In Jamaica, the parish of St. James, which has been on and off a state of emergency for last three years, is experiencing its lowest murder rate in 17 years. In 2011, we had a 15-day state of emergency and recorded 131 less murders. Today, with six months of partial and full lock down, the murder rate is down by 100. What we achieved in 15 days they cannot match that in six months.

2.15 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in praedial larceny, praedial larceny, it is on the rise in Barrackpore and it is said that they have a squad but it does not have resources. And what is the additional resources that have been given to the Praedial Larceny Squad in Craignish this year?

In terms of Foreign Affairs, no mention of a migrant policy or the reopening of the registration process. The UNC has called in vain for a comprehensive and well-thought-out refugee migrant policy that is humane, consensually developed. Take into consideration our absorptive capacity and our international treaty obligations. We understand that there could be upwards of 100,000 Venezuelans in Trinidad. They have given birth to many children who are citizens of our country. Their children are not being educated into our schools. Our teachers are not being trained to teach children whose first language is Spanish. Our hospitals have no protocols for teaching non-emergency situations involving Venezuelans. We are floundering as to whether to keep or deport, notwithstanding the UN Convention which we signed, which bans the repatriation of refugees.

In other words, our Venezuelan situation is in chaos. We are not taking advantage of opportunities available in Guyana. In 2019, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs indicated during a budget discussion that work progressed on the re-establishment of a High Commission in Guyana as several potential properties were visited; 2019. What has become of this? While the world is beating a path to

Guyana to benefit from the energy boom, we are twiddling our thumbs. Could I get my time please?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Eight more minutes.

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you. Thank you. Their priority is to refurbish the Ministry building in TT instead of advancing our interest on the global scale.

So you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, societies succeed on the basis of hard work and vision. They do not succeed on the basis of promises that never materialize. We learn in Proverbs 14, verse 23: In all toil there is profit but mere talk tends only to poverty. That is what the scripture tells us. Why are we so poor today? Why is everybody despondent and facing hopelessness under this PNM administration? Because the scripture tells us that you will not survive by talk, you will survive by your labour. This Government talks a nice talk while unemployment, poverty, hopelessness, income inequality increase as we speak. Young people are telling themselves they are giving up hope in Trinidad and they are going to Guyana. I am daily in—when I was coming in the car today a gentleman with a Master's degree in Engineering was telling me, talk to some Minister over there, some Minister to help him. And I am saying, the Government, do they not care? Do they not understand that they are destroying the hopes and aspirations of an entire generation of citizens? Do they not understand that when they stopped the laptop policy for five years that a generation of citizens that could have been computer literate, to take advantage of their digital economy, that they have been set back. For heaven's sake, if you cannot do the job, resign. [*Desk thumping*]

There is a pervasive sense that under this PNM administration, and the Prime Minister and this Minister of Finance in particular, that we are on a fast track to being in the back waters globally and even regionally, and to being a Fourth World. I gave you the statistics, Grenada has no deaths from COVID. They

had 40 times the number of tests per capita than we did prior to the general elections. Little Grenada. We pay more for CARPHA. CARPHA is located here, and before the elections Grenada had 40 to 50 times more tests per capita than great Trinidad, under this slothful, lazy PNM administration. Nothing makes sense anymore. They talk about a digital economy and working from home. Head offices around the world are becoming obsolete, yet this Government finds it necessary to spend, and you will stop me, 1.6 million per month on the rental of One Alexandra Place. I have family working in BP, a company which said—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister, when you said “you will stop me”, who you are referring to?

Mr. R. Charles: I was talking to them over there. I know they would get up on a Standing Order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please! Please! As the Speaker in the Chair, you said “you will stop me”. The only person who has the prerogative to stop anyone in this Chamber is the Speaker in the Chair, so I would like you to retract it please.

Mr. R. Charles: I retract it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member!

Mr. R. Charles: I retract it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not with no action. Just retract it please!

Mr. R. Charles: I retract it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you. Proceed.

Mr. R. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, BP reportedly plans to sell its headquarters in London as it cuts jobs and adopts flexible working hours, while in Trinidad we have had no cuts to rental properties consistent with best practices throughout the world.

We have heard nothing about the reopening of the refinery. Nothing about

making the Point Lisas Industrial Estate a viable project. We have heard nothing about water for all. We have heard nothing about reducing the murder rate for consecutive future years by 10 per cent annually. We have heard nothing about increasing scholarships. We have heard nothing about a diaspora policy. We have 400,000 citizens living outside.

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

Mr. R. Charles: Nothing! India has a diaspora policy that taps into the diaspora. Sooner or later Jamaica will have a vice-president, possibly, in the United States, of Jamaican descent, and possibly a president down the line.

Jamaica has had Colin Powell, of Jamaican descent. Why can we not understand that we have citizens abroad with talent? When they go abroad as in Guyana to leverage their knowledge, their energy, they were fired from Petrotrin, et cetera, and they go to Guyana, and we had the COVID, we leave them stranded there for months, and they called me and told me they had their friends who work in cubicles next to them—the Canadian Government came, flew out their citizens; Americans, flew out; the UK, flew out their citizens. Trinidad, we told them essentially, you are surviving on your own. We heard nothing about hope for our young, bright generation of future leaders. Nothing, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Unlike the Minister, I cannot see clearly now. The sky is falling, the centre cannot hold, and unless this PNM administration does the honourable thing and demits office and stop fooling their supporters, Trinidad and Tobago is doomed to being a Fourth World society. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the hon. Minister, Senator, of Social Development and Family Services. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Allow me to begin my contribution

to the Appropriation Bill, 2020, with a quotation from the former President of United States of America, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who said:

“The test of...progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much”—but rather—“is whether we provide enough for those who have”—too—“little.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that quotation sums up quite appropriately, not just the gist of my own contribution today, but the undergirding philosophy of the budget statement enunciated on Monday by my colleague, the hon. Minister of Finance, [*Desk thumping*] which I offer congratulations to him. Throughout my contribution today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will recognize the erstwhile efforts of a government who in the midst of very strained economic circumstances, deliberately implemented policies and projects to ensure that no citizen who needed was left without, that no citizen because of COVID-19 pandemic was left behind. As I account to the nation through this honourable House on the programmes and initiatives undertaken by this Government, the one thread you will see being woven through this narrative, is the thread of compassion and care for the citizenry of our loved nation, especially those who are susceptible to the prevailing socioeconomic and other life challenges which they may be experiencing.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker, it is now obvious that increases in unemployment, underemployment, hunger and poverty, homelessness and mental health issues have all emerged worldwide with the arrival of COVID-19. In the midst of it all, the efforts of this Government have ensured that those affected the most have, for the most part, still been able to put food on their tables, to care for their loved ones, and to continue to make an effort to be productive. And that could only happen,

Madam Speaker, because of the astute leadership of our hon. Prime Minister, and the contributions of the teams around him. [*Desk thumping*] In that light, I wish to place on public record my own appreciation for the sterling contributions made by the two strong women who preceded me in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and on whose shoulders I am now able to stand. The foundation which they built has provided me with the assurance that the rock on which I now stand is solid, firm and secure.

Madam Speaker, as I listened to the predictions of doom and gloom from the many political pundits in the days prior to the delivery of the budget, I often had to wonder whether I am living in the same Trinidad and Tobago as they are. You see, Madam Speaker, while I know this Government is led by a Prime Minister who is unafraid to take necessary decisions in the interest of our country, I also know that we are led by a gentleman who understands poverty. Who understands what it means to be in need, and who genuinely wants to offer the generations to come, the chances that were unavailable to him in his generation and mine. Madam Speaker, I read in the newspapers that the Opposition Leader's dear friend, and soon to be challenger, stated that this budget does nothing for youth and elderly. Well, I had to respond to that, because I know this is definitely not true. But this Government created an entire Ministry dedicated to youth and youth development [*Desk thumping*] and that Ministry is funded in this budget.

We are ensuring that none of our young people fall through the cracks where the provision of learning devices and training is concerned, and even the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is rolling out plans to increase youth input in agriculture, and the relevant Ministers will speak to this. But, Madam Speaker, as I speak about the media, I saw in the media a gentleman from an automotive dealers association, who said that the Minister of Finance's removal of concessions on the

importation of motor vehicles is callous and will lead to the shutdown of the used car industry. Well I must admit, Madam Speaker, that I know this gentleman because I bought a car from that same gentleman, and first of all I got that vehicle with one key. When I raised the issue with him he callously stated that that is how it came. Secondly, after three months a serious problem occurred with the engine. When I called and I spoke to him about it he callously said that the vehicle's warranty was just three months. So I had to spend thousands of dollars to fix a vehicle and purchase new keys from England.

So, Madam Speaker, I know if you buy a fan today you get a three-month warranty. But the vehicle, I was told, just after three months that it was three months' warranty. So therefore I want to say that it is poor service and poor quality products from dealers that will shut down the industry. [*Desk thumping*] And when we talk about callous behaviour, I can say that that behaviour towards me was callous.

Madam Speaker, I will move on from here. The very philosophy behind the Minister of Finance plan to examine the need to extend the retirement age to 65, is a recognition that our health system is causing people to live longer, healthier, and more productive lives. It is to recognize that the vast majority of our 60 year olds still have valuable contributions to make to the development of this country. This Government respects, honours and cherishes the contributions of all citizens, but we will continue to pay special attention to the youth and the elderly, as no other Government has done before. Later in my contribution I will outline the many provisions the Government has put in place for elderly, and this has nothing to do with COVID-19.

Madam Speaker, I for one was not in the least bit surprised by the title of our budget presentation: *Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation*. If only

because it represents a balancing of our priorities with our expectations, our suit style with the amount of cloth that is available. And I am confident that the Government will continue to work with every citizen of our beloved country, to propel our economy towards full recovery, as the burden of adjustment is shared by all, with a clear understanding that things are only going to get better when we all work together. It is indeed an open secret that it will take endurance and resilience, creativity and innovation, strength and determination to chart a course to full recovery, to secure and advance every son and daughter of this beloved country. But I remain confident that we have the will, we have the wisdom, and through this budget we will find a way.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has a simple yet intensely significant mandate, and that is to help empower and transform the lives of the most vulnerable of our country, ensuring that no one is left behind. And that is it. And we have identified the most vulnerable segments of the population amongst us as our senior citizens, at-risk youth, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, street dwellers, single fathers, single mothers, and single-income households, and most certainly the family as the cornerstone of our society. Our task is to ensure that there is a social safety net available for those vulnerable population segments, and that they know about it, they know how to access it, and they do in fact benefit from it. I am extremely pleased to inform this House, that notwithstanding our challenging economic circumstances, this Government has not shirked its responsibilities, and duties, and commitment to the vulnerable population segments, to which I alluded earlier. Moreover, in spite of the doomsday predictions of many, and consistent with the quote from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, that we measure progress by our ability to provide for those who have little, there has been no reduction in any of

the benefits presently being offered to persons in need. More importantly, there has not been a single month when any of these payments were late. [*Desk thumping*] Like clockwork, the Government ensured that our pensioners received their pensions on time, that our disability grants recipients received theirs on time, that our public assistance recipients received theirs on time. [*Desk thumping*]

This Government, Madam Speaker, understands the importance of the grants and allowances to the vulnerable, and more so, our responsibility to provide for them. Indeed, our task at the Ministry going forward is to ensure that all of those who might have fallen through the cracks for one reason or another are captured once and for all. I can report to this honourable House that as at September 2020, the Ministry provided support to 174,798 individuals and households through the various core social programmes. [*Desk thumping*] And I want to make this clear, because this has nothing to do with COVID-19. This is part of the core programmes that the Government assists the vulnerable in the society.

Outside of this, Madam Speaker, the Ministry provided assistance in the form of income, food or rental support to over 173,000 individuals and families who were impacted [*Desk thumping*] by the measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Madam Speaker, this is indeed a phenomenal achievement. The Ministry and certainly this Minister is quite cognizant of the fact that we cannot accomplish all that we set out to do by ourselves. There are several hard-working well-intentioned individuals and organizations on the national landscape who are doing fantastic work in ensuring that our vulnerable population are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, it is a well-established fact that incorporating civil society as part of the business model in the social services delivery system, is crucial to sustainable development, especially in these times when reaching the

vulnerable is threatened by restrictions in our movements and the new normal of limited contact. As core partners, NGOs, CBOs, FBOs and other civil society organizations, are also facing harsh economic realities of compressed, financial and human resource required for their efficiency and effectiveness. It therefore calls for greater collaboration, closer engagement and navigation in these relationships as we continue to protect and empower the most vulnerable in our society. In fiscal 2020, the Ministry disbursed the sum of \$47,278,912 in subventions to 22 NGOs, inclusive of three statutory boards, to support their work and facilitate the delivery of specialized services for persons with disabilities in their care.

Madam Speaker, in fiscal 2020, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services touched the lives of more than 700,000 citizens of this country. The provision of these grants and services, which include senior citizens' pension, public assistance, disability grants, food cards, et cetera, cost the taxpayer approximately \$5.113 billion. [*Desk thumping*] And that is why we could give the assurance to all of our pensioners, and to all of our grant recipients, that this Government will continue to pay special attention to your needs, and fulfil our promises to ensure that you are not left behind.

Madam Speaker, I will now provide some further insights on the human capital investment made by this Government through the Ministry in 2020. Our elderly are our most valued assets, and this Government views their care and protection as high priority. It is for this reason that the lion's share of the Ministry's allocation goes towards the care and well-being of older persons. Over the last five years Government introduced measures aimed at providing greater protection to our elderly population. These measures resulted in an increase in the number of older persons accessing the senior citizens' pension, from 86,280 by the

end of fiscal 2015 to 104,007 persons by the end of fiscal 2020. Between October 2015 and September 2020 more than 41,000 new persons were added to the system, inclusive of 9,417 in fiscal 2020. Older persons are now in a better position to overcome the many challenges they encounter. More than 71 per cent are receiving the maximum senior citizens' pension of \$3,500 per month. In a 2017 report, titled Caribbean synthesis report on the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the San José Charter on the Rights of Older Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC cited that Trinidad and Tobago has the most comprehensive contributory and non-contributory pension scheme in the Caricom. The report also sighted that the pension scheme has evolved to become the highest per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean region.

So, Madam Speaker, as at September 2020, the Ministry expended \$4,012,344,121 on our senior citizens' pension. [*Desk thumping*] The senior activity centres programme was designed to provide the necessary physical, social and mental stimulation and support mechanism to enable older persons aged 55 years and over to remain active and healthy. The centres served as multi-service facilities, which are the focal points where older persons come together for services, educational and recreational activities that enhance their dignity, support their independence, and encourage their involvement in the community. Seniors are participants in five regions: Maloney, Barataria, Rio Claro, Princes Town and Pointe-a-Pierre. Total membership across the region thus far is 985. In 2020, \$703,000 was spent on this programme. Ninety-one residents are currently housed in 18 homes under the community care programme. This programme offers accommodation and care for older persons who do not have such support available to them. In fiscal 2020, \$3,874,021 was paid to these homes. The Ministry continues to support eight homes for the aged in collaboration with management

committees comprised of volunteers from within communities. These homes are located in Toco, Sangre Grande, Couva, Chaguanas, Point Fortin, La Brea, San Fernando and Siparia. Approximately 150 older persons are provided with residential accommodation at these homes. In 2020 the total amount of \$1,144,384 was disbursed by the Ministry to the eight homes.

The Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme is an intensive short-term inter-generational training programme aimed at empowering young persons between the ages of 17 to 35 to respond to the growing and complex needs of an ageing population. Graduates of the programme are placed with older persons to provide a range of care for a specified period. In fiscal 2020, 988 older persons were provided with care by trained caregivers of GAPP. The investment associated with this measure was \$19,852,000.

Families: Madam Speaker, one way to ensure that no one is left behind is to ensure that no family is left behind. The family remains one of the most important institutions in our society, and can be the heartbeat of a productive and crime-free nation. As the bedrock of our society, the family must therefore be provided with all the support that is required, particularly at this time when we are in the face of unprecedented challenges to our socioeconomic and human capital. To this end, the Ministry's National Family Services Division increased its output of services to families. Up to August 2020, the family division managed a total of 2,885 cases of which 1,485 were new, and 1,400 were ongoing assessments. Services included individual and group counselling, co-parenting counselling, referral, advocacy and advisory services. As part of its annual public education series, the division also initiated new radio and television programmes, bringing together executive and staff of the Ministry as well as subject matter experts to discuss the delicate nature of family dynamics within the stay-at-home period of restrictions.

In July and August of 2020, the National Family Services Division launched its first cycle of blended parenting workshops via remote technology for interested parents and individuals. Through this approach, the Ministry was able to facilitate a wider cross section of participants, thereby creating a more inclusive approach to parenting education.

Two of the sessions were opened for general participation while the third was exclusively for adult males who were parents, grandparents, uncles or mentors within their communities. Men who were not yet parents were also encouraged to register.

2.45 p.m.

Fiscal 2020, the Ministry partnered with several NGOs in the provision of family life and counselling services of a specialized nature. The Ministry views these services as crucial in the preservation of family life. The investment in this area was \$2,113,393. At September 2020, 27,741 households are in receipt of permanent food support. In fiscal 2020, 5,728 new households were added to the system. Investment in this area is \$193,300,710.

In fiscal 2020 the Ministry supported 18,942 economically disadvantaged families through the public assistance grant. Over 2,700 new families were introduced to the grant in fiscal 2020. The investment associated with this measure was \$339,409,457. A further 1,004 families also benefitted from a number of other grants like, household furnishing, medical equipment, funeral grant, house repairs, along with others at a cost of \$5,994,392 in fiscal 2020.

Madam Speaker, over the years we have witnessed an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. The devastating effects of these acts of nature on family life are well known to all of us in this Chamber. Despite the challenges in determining the veracity of the many claims the Ministry paid 1,554

affected persons. The expenditure associated with this is \$11,652,000.

I now wish to highlight the difficult and thorny issue that has been plaguing our society for some time, domestic violence. This scourge of our day has been increasing at an alarming rate. Madam Speaker, in some cases it has resulted in the ultimate murder and/or suicide, creating lasting traumas on family members and the wider community. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, through the National Family Service Division, understands the importance of having relevant interventions that neutralizes conflict, support victims and perpetrators alike and save lives. The Ministry's domestic violence counselling services are readily available to assist those in need of support. Over the years the Division has done intensive intervention in cases of domestic abuse, such as conflict and anger management, mediation, problem solving techniques and family group therapy among others. It engages in regular collaboration with other Ministries, faith-based and non-government organizations to host workshops, seminars and community outreaches of various types. Today, we encourage our citizens to reach out if you or someone you know are in need of support. Let us work together to prevent domestic violence. We are here to serve you.

Madam Speaker, I am certain that every one of us here knows someone who is affected by a disability. Mindful of our commitment to persons with disabilities, the Government amended the Public Assistance Act, Chap. 33:03 to allow children with a disability to access the Disability Assistance Grant. As at September 2020, 25,149 are in receipt of the Disability Assistance Grant and this includes 2,134 children with a disability. The investment made on this is \$567,003,594.

Madam Speaker, 101 persons receive assistance with assistive devices, such as wheelchairs and prosthesis at a value of \$1,090,700. The Ministry has a long standing relationship with several NGOs inclusive of three statutory boards who

act for and on behalf of persons with a disability. In fiscal 2020 the Ministry provided \$41,269,419 to these NGOs to allow them to provide services in various areas relative to persons with a disability. We have gone a step further and approved the national policy on persons with disabilities as a White Paper and have made significant steps towards the operationalization of the National Enrichment Centre.

Cabinet has also approved the establishment of an interagency committee to promote, monitor and devaluate the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities for a period of two years. The Government has also moved to ensure that the community of persons with a disability is not left disadvantage by the digital divide. Two important steps were taken to ensure that the members of this community are able to participate as fully as possible in their own development.

The first was through the installation of the job access with speech software called the JAWS at The National Enrichment Centre. This screen reading software allows visually impaired persons to interface more easily with computers. It also allows organizations working with persons who are visually impaired to conduct computer literacy training and other training courses for their clients. These training programmes allow persons who are visually impaired to gain additional skills, become more marketable, pursue employment and educational opportunities and increase their access to information available online. The cost of outfitting these computers was \$52,000.

The second initiative was an amendment to the Copyright Act which was successfully passed through both Houses of Parliament and gave effects to the Marrakesh Treaty, thereby facilitating access to publish works for persons who are

blind, visually impaired, or otherwise print disabled. This Bill brought print equity to persons who are members of the visually impaired community and provided for greater inclusion and access to reading literature for these groups of persons. The Bill also empowered NALIS to make previously inaccessible material printed in format such as Braille and digital audio files more readily accessible to this community.

I move to the social support interventions for COVID-19. Madam Speaker, COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event in the current global social landscape. Governments the world over are adopting as best as they can mitigation measures designed to curb the spread of the virus and flatten the curve. However, those measures carry with them socio-economic and psychosocial consequences for citizens that may undoubtedly have long term and far-reaching effects. It is clear however that in anticipation of the impact on what has unfolded so far during the crisis the Government has led the private sector and civil society organizations in implementing various strategies to alleviate the severity of these effects.

There can be no doubt that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services played a significant role in the implementation of these measures. At this time I just want to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their hard work in this regard. While most of the support was financial, the National Family Services Division has, through collaboration with its key stakeholders, also provided much need counselling and psychosocial support to affected persons and their families. As at September 2020 the Ministry provided assistance to 173,020 individuals and families at a cost of \$329,600,240.

Contrary to the comments of the Leader of the Opposition that persons have not gotten support with respect to COVID-19, here is the list of the number of persons who received support. Top up to existing food support beneficiaries,

25,101 persons; [*Desk thumping*] food support to families where a member was retrenched, terminated or experienced reduced income, 49,486 families; [*Desk thumping*] food support to persons who applied for senior citizens pension or disability assistance but whose applications were pending, 3,306 persons; [*Desk thumping*] food support to households that receive meals from the School Feeding Programme, 20,497 families; [*Desk thumping*] food support, market boxes, provided to families in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, 24,999 families; [*Desk thumping*] emergency food hampers, 1,400; income support to existing beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grants, 42,451 persons; [*Desk thumping*] income support to families where a member was retrenched, terminated, or experienced reduced income, 47,774 persons; [*Desk thumping*] rental assistance, 3,770 persons. [*Desk thumping*]

As it relates to Tobago, Madam Speaker, persons received both food and income support and the total expenditure associated with these measures was \$12,028,308 [*Desk thumping*] up to September 2020. So we are continuing. Top up to existing food card beneficiaries in Tobago, 1,864 persons; food support for families where a member was retrenched or experienced reduced income, 1,841 persons; [*Desk thumping*] top up to existing public assistance and disability grant recipients, 731 persons; and food support for parents with children on the School Feeding Programme, 1,099. [*Desk thumping*]

I continue with Tobago. The Tobago Service Desk was established on October 1st and this will serve to resolve all matters which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services inclusive of matters related to COVID-19. And this decision was made during my visit to Tobago when I met with the secretary of the Division of Health, Wellness and Family Development as well as the Members of Parliament for Tobago East and West. At

this desk all issues related to the COVID-19 support measures will be promptly, fairly and professionally dealt with ensuring that no one is left behind. Equal access and feedback relative to COVID-19 social support grants will continue to be provided to clients of Tobago as is being done in Trinidad. Since the establishment of the desk we have fielded over 400 queries including calls, emails and WhatsApp messages.

Madam Speaker, none of us gathered in this Chamber could predict with any degree of certainty when the world will return to some semblance of normalcy. We have moved from trying to keep the virus out, to learning how to live with it and there is no doubt that there are thousands of families who remain traumatized and affected by this virus. I give the assurance today, as the hon. Minister of Finance did in his presentation, that this Government will not abandon its citizens in their hour of darkness but will continue to engage all stakeholders to ensure that no citizen is left behind and that no citizen in need of help is neglected.

Madam Speaker, it is my belief that the Ministry has been delivering on this mandate with great success. But can we do more? Can we do better? Can we be more efficient? The answer to all three questions is solidly in the affirmative. The Ministry will redouble its efforts in the new fiscal year to fulfil its call to service to reach the persons in need. As we look ahead, the National Social Mitigation Programme emerges directly from the national Roadmap to Recovery Plan and represents one part of Government's response to the present and future impacts of the challenging economic risk now being faced across the globe. The implementation of key recommendations contained in this plan is one of the key steps in transforming the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; appropriately themed: Building Resilience to Secure our Nation.

This mitigation plan seeks to equip affected persons with resources and tools

to cope firstly with the short term consequences of the down turn and ultimately help them to overcome these circumstances in the medium to long term. The plan therefore targets persons who are in vulnerable, socio-economic positions, such as recently retrenched workers, unemployed persons, low income earners, at-risk youth, persons with disabilities and individuals and families currently living below the established poverty line. The social mitigation plan is focused on three main objectives: strengthening the social protection system; promoting community and civil society action and enhancing productivity and innovation. The new system will be the liaison point with other Ministries, Departments and agencies to implement a one stop more integrated and holistic programme of assistance for the vulnerable and families.

Madam Speaker, I remain confident that the process will result ultimately in the transformation of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services into a modern, client-centered and high performing organization. Not only have we recognized that we cannot do it alone we also recognized that there is a need, even within the Ministry, to become more agile, more responsive, more service driven, more customer centric and more outcome oriented. And if we are to deliver on our mandate to be our brothers and sisters' keeper, to this end the Ministry has done its own introspection and undertaken a number of initiatives which we believe will both strengthen and improve our operations. And these include a new model for the delivery of social services that best suits the multi-faceted and complex needs of our families. Specifically, the trend is suggesting that an increase in number of families experienced interrelated barriers in life. The Ministry will accelerate the establishment of the social support and empowerment unit which is an integrated one-stop shop designed to enable citizens to access all of our services with a single visit to one of our offices, whether it is for urgent temporary assistance,

counselling or others.

Madam Speaker, as you read the newspapers, as you go about life in your own communities, on a daily basis you see families in distressing situations. Some of these situations have a paralyzing effect with unnecessary loss of life or broken families—and I spoke about domestic violence as one of them earlier on. Many, at times, are either unaware or simply unable to seek support services; in their state there is a need for an immediate response.

The Ministry will accelerate the development of a critical incidence protocol. The design will involve a collaboration with key stakeholders which include other Ministries. Resilient communities are the bed-rock of a nation. A key component of a strong resilient community is tabled relationships among people that will endure over time. Members of such communities invest of their time and love to protect and support each other so that the community thrives. It is with this understanding that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will lead the thrust towards establishing the community first responders system.

In times of crisis due to natural disasters or threats to the well-being of individuals or families in the communities, the capacity to deal with this must emerge from within communities at the local level as far as possible so that a network of first responders is there to facilitate a quick proactive response to those in need. The Ministry recognizes that our traditional first responders, police, fire services, the defence force, and others, will always be important to us. However, our aim is to build even greater protection into communities by establishing an integrated support system that would also offer psychosocial and other support to families when they face different crises, such as, bereavement, critical illness or family disputes. The integrated first responder system will be an important factor in building resilience and more positive relations within communities. When fully

implemented it is expected to usher in a new era of national peace and stability.

The Ministry has already identified the broad framework for such collaboration and has begun to reach out to Members of Parliament, partner Ministries and other individuals and groups. We will continue to do so over the coming months. Some of you all would have received a letter from me, most Members of Parliament. If the Ministry of Social Development and Family Service is to live out its brand promise of “Good Governance and Service Excellence”, a comprehensive information system to administer the Ministry’s various programmes, grants and services cannot be over emphasized. It is in fact the way forward and there is no better time for its implementation than now.

I am pleased to inform this House that in 2020 fiscal we expect to see the digitization of all our grants that are not currently in our electronic database through the Integrated Social Enterprise Management System. This will enable greater efficiency and effectiveness in the processing of grants. The introduction of this technology will facilitate an integrated, more dynamic and responsive system and by extension a more effective solution. The service standards and outreach unit will work in conjunction with the Tobago desk and will also resolve matters which fall under the purview of the Ministry. This initiative will enhance the performance of the Ministry in the delivery of services to citizens, identifying their needs and responding positively to their concerns.

In so doing we are saying to the public we care about your issues, we care about what you encounter on a daily basis and we are here to support and help you. This unit will maximize opportunities for citizen engagement beyond those that already exist, build a more substantial rapport between the Ministry and the citizens, identify and troubleshoot problems and effect solutions in the most direct, caring and efficient manner. Through our outreach efforts we will expand

communication by utilizing an integrated mix of mechanisms including, traditional and social media, person to person meetings and community walkabout to meet with communities, learn of their issues and respond accordingly. And we have already started by reaching out to key stakeholders including our partner Ministries, Member of Parliament, the private sector and other community organizations. We will continuously measure on what we do to ensure that we are meeting our goals and regularly provide feedback on our performance to the national community.

The Ministry intends to establish a fully functional toll-free call centre to assist the general population in accessing information about social services across the social sector. [*Desk thumping*] The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, in collaboration with the University of the West Indies, has produced a handbook on social services for this purpose. Additionally, the Ministry signed an MOU with iGovTT, TTConnect to utilize its call centre and chat robot to assist with any gaps which may arise and also provide real time responses to online queries via the Ministry's website. The Ministry will examine and revise a means test. The prevailing socio-economic conditions will certainly inform the revised test. We are presently seeking an MOU with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development to assist with the provision of transitional and low income housing to meet the needs of our clients. How much more time? Two minutes? Wow.

I will go to the—speak about supporting— It is important that we highlight excellent and important supportive role being undertaken by grandparents because this is something that we are now going to be looking at in support of their grandchildren. There are times when the grandparents' role is very critical such as in a full time care situation, due to death, illness, migration, incarceration and other family circumstances. And we recognize that there is a need for greater recognition

of the vulnerability of grandparents when they perform these roles , even more so if they are caring for children who are ill or those with disabilities. In these circumstances grandparents can suffer from a number of issues, including: financial hardship, physical, emotional and psychological stress, isolation and poverty. So the Ministry is now, you know, now will be looking at catering to the need of grandparents.

The Ministry welcomes placements of additional disposable income in the hands of families and this will apply to situation where an individual earns \$7,000 or less per month. That person will not be required to pay tax. In keeping with the intention to create a digital society via Mi-Fi, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services endorses the initiatives of the Government to expand existing Wi-Fi hotspots and establish more Internet cafes in all areas of Trinidad and Tobago.

And as I close, Madam Speaker, I wish to thank you and this House for the opportunity to make these remarks in support of the remarkable budget presentation for fiscal 2020/2021. The budget ensures that the most vulnerable in our society have access to a multi-faceted safety net especially at this time of a pandemic. It is my firm belief that this Government is poised to take our country forward—

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—as it continues to place in focus the strengthening of the safety net—

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—for the most vulnerable in our midst. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rai Ragbir (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Madam Speaker, I am honoured to stand

before you in this august Chamber to speak on behalf of the poor, the destitute, the differently-abled, the senior citizens, the homeless, the single mothers and the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla in particular as their health, both their physical and mental, is important to me. I want to thank the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC for placing faith in me in becoming the Member of Parliament for Cumuto/Manzanilla. To the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla I say to you, thank you, thank you for your love and your support and for putting me here and I promise you to give you my utmost representation. Also I would like to have the opportunity to—heartfelt thanks and congratulations to the 19,201 students that wrote this year's SEA examination. Kudos to the first six girls, [*Desk thumping*] especially during this perilous COVID-19 time.

I take this opportunity to recognize the number of families whose children have been affected with cerebral palsy as we recognize World Cerebral Palsy Day which took place on Tuesday 6th of October, 2020. I remember that it was the People's Partnership that ensured that these children were taken care of and there was a building that was built in Carlsen Field called the National Enrichment Centre under the wisdom of the political leader then, Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC. [*Desk thumping*] Unfortunately the stipend that was given to them was taken away, because it is a tiresome job for these mothers to look after these children as they grow into adulthood 24/7.

Madam Speaker, I am getting straight into the meat of things where everyone is concerned about COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has brought untold pain and suffering to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and moreso the entire world. The health sector, like the economy, crashed before the COVID-19. Madam Speaker, if you would permit me, being a professional health care worker myself, I will give some details of the conditions that existed and exist in the health

care system.

Madam Speaker, before I continue it would be remiss of me not to applaud the frontline health care workers and first responders. [*Desk thumping*] That being said, one of my wishful thinking is that these persons should receive a three month tax relief as they are the persons who have put their lives in a line and continue to do at the expense of their families and their lives. Being a health care professional I am familiar and know personally health care workers who, upon completion of their duties, Madam Speaker, they have to take off their clothes at home by the door, they take off their shoes and then they get inside, have their shower, and sometimes they are even scared to interact with the families, especially those that are vulnerable. I make my commitment today, I say I will not chastise any of the health care workers but I will be your champion for a better health care system for Trinidad and Tobago and I will walk side by side with you because so far you have done yeoman service.

3.15 p.m.

I say this from the budget that the Minister alluded to the CDAP programme, the Chronic Disease Assistance Programme, in providing the existing network of pharmacies of over 1,200 medical items which was said in the budget, which met the needs of 200,000 persons. However, I have here in my possession a CDAP form. There is an error there. It is actually 51 prescription items, not 1,200 medical items.

Madam Speaker, in looking at the Ministry of Health's Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non Communicable Diseases: Trinidad and Tobago between the areas of 2017—2021, the non-communicable diseases which we term NCDs, are notably: heart disease, diabetes, asthma, stroke and cancer. It is a good plan, but it must be rolled out in its entirety: primary care, secondary care and

tertiary care. Primary care is at health centre level, secondary care is at the hospital, and tertiary is heart surgeries, joint replacements, et cetera, and renal transplants.

Madam Speaker, diabetes is a leading core factor of heart disease as heart disease has significantly impacted the land of Trinidad and Tobago like the rest of the world. The CDAP programme provides citizens a wonderful array of drugs. But here is the thing. It is time, as a physician, we increase that to extend, because if everyone has heart disease, to cardiac drugs, even arthritis medication and skin conditions, and even for the women even birth control pills if he wants to add further.

What I think is important in this area here is to understand about chronic disease, that with the diabetes instance the complications, Madam Speaker, such as blindness, heart attack, kidney failure, limb amputations are quite prevalent. Madam Speaker, I have an article here dated Tuesday 22 November, 2017, from the Trinidad *Guardian* where the Minister of Health from St. Joseph was quoted as saying:

Trinidad and Tobago is damming high with approximately 500 limb amputations every year.

That is a huge cost to the State. Madam Speaker, it starts with a toe, then a second toe, even a third toe, then a foot and then a leg, and they may even die. This causes a great economic hardship on families and patient themselves, and this is where people like the Minister Donna Cox was saying about disability grants, et cetera. But it is a huge cost to the State.

Madam Speaker, poverty is closely linked to non-communicable disease, and with this budget of 2021 I can see there will be more poverty, more heart attacks, more strokes and more people losing their limbs. With this 2021 budget it is clear that it holds no hope for the vulnerable and socially disadvantaged persons.

[*Desk thumping*] This budget would surely get persons sicker and die sooner than persons of higher social positions where they can access private health care. Almost every diabetic and cardiac disease person is subject to higher incidents of complications due to an inactive lifestyle, obesity, high cholesterol, smoking and stress, and boy we are under stress.

Madam Speaker, we are seeing persons waiting for diagnosis and treatment for various diseases. An angiogram, that is to decide if your coronary arteries are blocked; the waiting time could be a year as much as two years. And the procedures of bypass and stem procedures, again that is a long waiting time. Caribbean heart care undergoes much of these procedures, but with the borders closed we do not have our professionals coming from abroad to assist with both adult and paediatric surgeries, Madam Speaker. I have painted a frightening picture for you all the right here today.

Madam Speaker, I must raise this pertinent issue that prior to the general election 2020 there were fewer deaths and fewer cases, and immediately—that is of the coronavirus—after the general election there was a sudden spike, an astronomical amount of cases and death. In fact, to this morning it is 4,963 cases and 86 deaths. My heart goes out to the family so passed on and for those people who have been in hospital. The Health Minister must explain this grave seat of fears to the nation in terms of the spike in cases. Where have they emanated?—especially with the borders close. Is it due to the Government ignoring international health protocol for continuous and increased testing as has been articulated constantly by the hon. Member of Parliament for Siparia? Is that why we are in this position today? Lack of the testing?

Madam Speaker, allow me to further paint you another picture whereby prescription drugs. I spoke earlier of that. That falls within the CDAP Programme

that may not be available to most patients and most times again they may have to buy the medication. Madam Speaker, these people do not even have money to buy food to put on their table as much as to buy medication. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, due to the COVID-19 our health institutions are focused on the pandemic but not the NCD patients. They have been neglected. We talk about a parallel health care system, but while the patients are being seen quite fairly good in the hospitals and being quarantine, we still have this cadre of patients where the clinics have been cancelled, where the surgeries have been cancelled, and because of that there is an issue here. The patients are going to get more sick. They cannot afford to buy the medication, and what happens now they cannot even speak to a physician. So their complications of the particular illness get worse and they may even die.

Madam Speaker, in his budget presentation the Minister of Finance made list of seven paragraphs on the health budget and one paragraph of NCDs; and I will elaborate on. Also the Minister has allocated \$6.05 billion to the Ministry of Health, however I wish to remind him that in the previous year the allocation was 6.084 billion. So that is a decrease of less than 1 per cent or 34 million, and I want him to tell this honourable House why is there a decrease. Even the Prime Minister indicated more money for medicine and less for cars. The greatest challenge facing the country today is in the health sector, is managing the COVID-19 pandemic. With confirmed case and deaths increasing on a daily basis it is clear we have a long way to go, before we can claim some kind of victory in this fight. There can be no doubt that COVID-19 pandemic, including our health care professionals and health care workers, and within a six-month period of time the demands on the health care system has never been so overwhelming and overstretched, impacting to some degree on the operation efficiency of the health system. Again, kudos to

the health care workers who tirelessly and selflessly come out day and night to look after this population of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, patient lives are at risk in every aspect when the doctor appointments and clinics are cancelled. But one of the things we have to look at is that when the clinics are cancelled in health centres and in the hospitals, the patients cannot be seen, they cannot be examined and they cannot ask the doctor for a referral because their vision has deteriorated, that they think they may have cataract and they are getting blind and they want to see a specialist. They cannot because the clinics are closed down. Their feet are swelling and they suspect the heart might be swollen, their kidneys might be affected, they cannot get a referral, even a referral to do specialized test. So ladies and gentlemen, Members of this honourable House, so you see we are looking after the coronavirus patients but yet the other parts of the health sector seem to be divorced of any form of management that is. And what is important, the average prescription for anybody with chronic disease is about five to 10 items, Madam Speaker, and more often than not they could only afford just the two that they get from the CDAP. So most oftentimes, as I said earlier, they cannot get it. They do without, they get sick, burden the hospitals system and they die.

And as I say hospital system, Madam Speaker, that somehow our patients, our people, are stigmatized because of their awareness of corona epidemic. Whatever persons or wherever they go they are asked if they have any COVID still, which is true. But somehow their illness seems to be sidelined, and once you suspect that they have a stuffy nose or any short breath or chest pain they are moved into that sort of quarantine area. So that means our people are not being managed as how they should be.

Madam Speaker, I call on this Government to bring forward the proper

figures concerning COVID-19 patients. The Minister must also show the money not only fighting this pandemic but also within the entire health sector. Just to remind this House, coronavirus. Madam Speaker, in 1918 we had the Spanish flu—that was the H1N1—where 50 million people died and 500 million people were affected. That was one-third of the world population. In 2003 we had SARS, that is Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, and that was coronavirus and at that point in time 774 people died. Then in 2019 we had another H1N1 pandemic where you had up to 575,000 people died worldwide and 1.47 billion people were affected. At that time it would have been 15 per cent of the world population; and in 2012 we had MERS; and now in December 2019 we have coronavirus. With the onset of coronavirus the world has been grappling with all sort of scenarios.

In the beginning CDC in Atlantic said one thing, PAHO said one thing, World Health Organization said one thing in the management, but coronavirus diagnosis and management keeps evolving. Nobody knows how long it is going to be here. Remember 100 plus years ago we had H1N1 and in 2019 we had another pandemic? Coronavirus, Members, was here yesterday, it is here today and would be here tomorrow. So it cannot be businesses as normal.

Madam Speaker, every country in the world has been affected by this pandemic. Many clinics and surgeries, as I have said, have been cancelled, but what we want to find out is that moneys have been drawn down from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, we have procured loans from banks outside of the country and domestic for personnel, for medical supplies, for ventilators and for beds; Augustus Long, Arima Hospital, the NCRHA, the Home of Football, Brooklyn Community Centre, National Racquet Centre, many of these facilities had to be upgraded, there is a cost to that, and to put personnel there is a cost to that, to put medical and non-medical supplies there is a cost to that. We need to look at that

cost. Later on came the Couva children's hospital as well as the UWI Campus in Debe among all other facilities, and therefore, the point must be made, Madam Speaker, if we have created this parallel system it must not and should not be neglected of all the areas of critical areas of health care across the country.

However, I and this nation must say thank you to the Member of Parliament for Siparia for ensuring that there was a Couva children's hospital which was fully operation [*Desk thumping*] so that all the Members on the other side—all the Government had to do just send patients there. This reminds me because I am in Cumuto/Manzanilla what the PNM refused to open the Biche High School. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health must tell the nation in no uncertain terms the cost to acquire, operationalize and maintain all these facilities because we far from finish so the cost will increase.

Madam Speaker, the influenza season, the H1N1, is upon us—October 2020 and ends in May 2021. The Health Minister said that the Ministry is trying to avoid the “twindemic”. Agree. He stated that 22,000 doses of the flu shots were distributed in the public health system, but only 3,934 persons took advantage of these free vaccines. Madam Speaker, persons going to these facilities to get these vaccines are going to a hot zone where there are persons who may be positive for COVID, because 20 per cent of patients who have no symptoms may be positive for COVID. On top of that you may have people with sniffles, a little cough, and people who suspect they may have COVID, so they are going to the health facilities for testing as well.

I agree 100 per cent with the Minister of Health and the CMO that the vulnerable population should get the flu vaccine, but in the interim it might make more sense obeying all the public health protocols. Let them go into the school, let the nurse health visitor get there and they can take their time and give the vaccines

so that we could probably get 100 per cent compliance. Because what is happening with that is that we do not want another epidemic in on our hands because we had about 41 deaths for instance so far with the swine flu.

Madam Speaker, I wish to raise a matter that shows the incompetence of the Government for which the Minister of Health has to take full responsibility. *Newsday* newspaper dated Thursday, July 25, 2020—2019 sorry, page 8, headline: “1.3 billion for NWRHA”. The article begins by saying:

“GOVERNMENT will be investing \$1.3 billion from the period 2018 to 2021 into all projects being undertaken by the...”—NWRHA then.

In this very institution in which we are in today, a young brilliant dynamic employee succumbed to medical conditions for which the machinery required for early diagnosis was not working which could have determined the difference between life and death. I want to extend my condolences to the family and I am certain all Members here feel the same way. That is a level of governance coming from the PNM administration where billions are being spent, allocated, and yet critical lifesaving equipment not working.

Madam Speaker, *Newsday*, Friday 04 September, the Minister from St. Joseph said there are about 60,000 antigens test arrive soon. Now, bearing in mind the PCR test that is being done at hospital, that tests your active infection. The antigen test that if you had the infection before, at least 10 days to even a month to develop antibodies. So it only indicates that you have had a past infection. It was also said that the World Health Organization sent a letter to 195 member countries with a request to join the programme called COVAX aimed at providing global access to an eventual COVID-19 vaccine.

So in—September 25th the Pan American Health Organization said be ready for the COVID-19 vaccine. So I ask now what is our campaign strategy for safety

and compliance so that we can actually have the COVID vaccine for our people? [*Desk thumping*] As you know US election is coming up soon and the President, Donald Trump, said that the vaccine will be available so-called on the 1st of November, but—

Mr. Deyalsingh: He serious.

Dr. R. Ragbir: That is the United States.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Dr. R. Ragbir: There is a reason—may I?

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Thank you. The three major houses competition to provide the world for this vaccine: one is Moderna; two, Oxford-AstraZeneca; and third is Firza. The problem with Firza vaccine, that the vaccine must maintain a cold cham at minus 68° centigrade. The other two vaccine houses at minus 20° centigrade. So I know that the Members on the other side will be preparing for the population because the supply of these vaccines must be remained at these temperatures so it will be viable. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, to my dismay, I listened when the Minister of Finance announced a freezing of the filling of vacant posts in the public service for a year. Now, does this Minister know that our state facilities are in need of doctors, nursing and other support staff? This is a crying shame on this Government for as one year persons cannot seek a job. However, I have to ask: Are we going back to the days where if you need a job you had to join a PNM party group or show your PNM card for all of a sudden you get a job? Madam Speaker, I just want to mention before I digress from health a little bit and talk about Cumuto/Manzanilla, about dengue. We have dengue outbreak in the Caribbean just like in Latin America. Brazil has 1.6 million cases of coronavirus, but also Brazil has 1.1

million cases of dengue like the other South American countries. Now Grenada, Barbados, St. Vincent, St. Kitts also have dengue cases, numerous cases, and I say that the Minister of Health needs to talk to the insect vector people, make sure they are in state of readiness for diagnosis and to institute some form of treatment because it is knocking at our doors right now.

Madam Speaker, I can talk on so much, however, I turn to the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla. How many minutes do I have, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Your time expires at 3.56.25.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Thank you. Yes, I want to speak to the constituency that has been neglected by Rowley-led PNM Government since they took the office in 2015 and this shows that the PNM continue to neglect for rural constituencies. I know [*Desk thumping*] the Government will boast that there is a highway coming into the constituency and, Madam Speaker, I have listened to the cries of the people of the constituency, and they have said that they are yet to be consulted on such highway.

Madam Speaker, any discussion on boosting the agriculture sector in Trinidad and Tobago must take into account the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla as it is a food basket of the nation and the Nariva swamp. Madam Speaker, only a couple weeks ago I had the privilege of seeing first-hand the operations of Marper farm and it is one appreciation of the agriculture sector. What Marper farm is, is a propagation farm and for seedlings. I know that the exotic fruits, citrus and cocoa is actually planted there so that farmers can get seedlings and small trees as well. It requires a level of professionalism and appreciating the value that agriculture can bring to the community.

Madam Speaker, I have met with many farmers during the campaign. I heard many horror stories, stories such as farmers not being able to get a good night sleep. Instead they have to camp out on their fields during bearing season to protect

their crops. In so doing, they place their lives and those of the families at great risk, adding to the dangers of crime in the defence of their livelihoods and investments. Therefore, I am requesting that the praedial larceny squad is needed urgently, and I am calling for a dedicated permanent praedial larceny unit to be established either at the Sangre Grande Police Station or the Cumuto Police Station if we are serious about agriculture. [*Desk thumping*] The existing units are in Centeno and Carlsen Field and if your goods are being pilfered, well heaven help you if it is lost. Look at the distance they are coming from.

Madam Speaker, the scourge of rural neglect is not only limited to the agricultural sector and not even fixing the agricultural roads, but is quite visible in the constituency infrastructure. Many roads are and have been dilapidated for years under this administration. Madam Speaker, roads such as Caigual Road, St. Mary Emmanuel Road, Cunapo Southern Main Road, Plum Mitan Main Road, Salmadi Road, Bon Air Road—oh my God, Bon Air Road only “ha” landslips—and Valasquez Road. You know that road is very interesting. It is a main thoroughfare and the road has collapsed so much that people stop their vehicles and the vehicles “ha” to return because they take a wheelbarrow and take the produce that way. That is so narrow the road is now because the rest of the road has collapsed.

I am bombarded with calls and visits to my office by residents and demanding these roads be fixed. The neglect is seen in huge gapping potholes—“ah sure it ha” fish inside there—straggling many roads [*Desk thumping*] some spanning the entire roadway particularly where waterlines have been laid—WASA, a job again. The roadway left for the mercy of the elements carved in water channels across the roadway with every authority distancing themselves from taking responsibility for remedial action. It is here, Madam Speaker, I learnt the definition of an orphan road. But people live there.

Madam Speaker, rural neglect has no place in a government that starves the Sangre Grande Region Corporation for funding only because it is controlled and administered by the UNC, and I want to say [*Desk thumping*] that the next local government election the UNC under Kamla Persad-Bissessar will win it back again. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I am coming to a close. I hear that the Minister talking about connectivity to be provided to the nation. I wish to tell him do not forget Cumuto/Manzanilla as the residents have challenges with getting Internet connectivity for the children as they have to do online schooling. Further to that, children need laptops. I say on behalf of the children of Cumuto/Manzanilla. Give them the laptops now. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I visited a family that got the nation's attention and my heart went out to them. They are in serious need as a child in this day and age has to study by means of an oil lamp. Madam Speaker, I must thank my staff that went into quick action, along with myself, and they were able to relieve with electricity being provided and other resources. Today I want to compliment my hard-working staff in the office as we go through trials and tribulations. On 8th of October, 2020, in the *Guardian* headline we see an article labelled:

“...884 pupils from five schools in the Southwestern peninsula”—who—
“cannot access online schooling...”

We understand that plight with Cumuto/Manzanilla. We have the same plight, no connectivity, no laptops, no good roads, no agriculture access roads. Madam Speaker, I myself, using my parliamentary salary, have started an initiative where I have leased a copier, provided toner, provided paper, so that the 20 primary schools in Cumuto/Manzanilla and the three secondary schools, they could come and copy all the assignments. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, before I conclude, I want to make reference to Government's construction and opening of a spanking new Diego Martin Health Centre. Oh, it is fantastic at 49.5 million. This Government has not only engaged in rural neglect but also neglect of people south of the Caroni bridge and I will tell you why. Why has this Government not initiated construction of the Chaguanas hospital? Is it because it is in Chaguanas? Is it perceived it is a UNC stronghold? The Government must answer these questions.

Now, Central Trinidad has the highest amount of chronic disease per capita in the entire country, and every area, nook and cranny of Trinidad can boast of a spanking new health facility or hospital, but people in Central Trinidad remain in a rented facility. Madam Speaker, I conclude by saying and agreeing with the Leader of the Opposition that this budget offers no hope to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, especially the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla, stand firm, be steadfast, the UNC will return and good governance shall return. Madam Speaker, with these few words I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I wish to recognize this as the maiden contribution for the Member of Cumuto/Manzanilla and I congratulate him for his contribution. [*Desk thumping*] I also want to guide Members and refer them to Standing Order 48(5) with respect to references to Members of Parliament. Member for St. Joseph.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. And I too would like to add my congratulations to the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla on his maiden speech.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to join the debate on the 2021 budget. I would like to start off by congratulating my two

colleagues, the hon. Minister of Finance Colm Imbert for charting the way forward with a very unique budget, a budget which has received widespread acclaim across most intersectors, Chambers of Commerce. Every independent person has come out in support of this budget. I would also like to recognize and thank the Member of Parliament for Arouca/Maloney, the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis, for her excellent work in putting together the PSIP programme.

Madam Speaker, I would like to also register my thanks and appreciation to the constituents of St. Joseph for electing a PNM Government, a PNM representative, for the third consecutive time. [*Desk thumping*] This renewed mandate given to us during a general election is nothing short of historic, and I thank the Prime Minister for the opportunity given to me to serve in this Cabinet again.

The population has regarded the PNM as the right choice, as the best choice and clearly, they have spoken.

3.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I will be responding to my colleague who spoke earlier and I want to just—you see, we must not play politics with health. The Member said that the clinics are closed. Madam Speaker, I checked with the Chief Medical Officer while he was speaking. I checked with the CEOs, south-west. Our outpatient clinics are not closed. [*Interruption*] Why would you say that? What is happening, we are migrating because of COVID to an enhanced tele-medicine platform. People are being called and those who need to come in are being given appointments to come in. So please, let us not play politics with this. Our clinics are not closed, [*Desk thumping*] please. Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: Tell us on Oxford University.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I will tell you that now.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Health. Member for St. Augustine, while you might be new to this Chamber, you are certainly not new to Parliament, the rules apply, please control the crosstalk. That applies to you also, Member for Couva South and also Member for Oropouche East. Please continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. My friend who spoke before me made heavy weather of the fact that the allocation is 6.05 billion down from 6.08 billion. I would just like the Member to know yes, he is new to the Parliament, there is something called the mid-year review where we will come back if we need a further allocation. It is that simple. It is that simple.

Madam Speaker, what have we done in the past five years? Arima Hospital, opened, commissioned and used [*Desk thumping*] as opposed to the Couva hospital which was opened and commissioned and shut down on September 15th before a general election. Point Fortin Hospital, opened, commissioned and used. [*Desk thumping*] The new Hess Benjamin Linear Accelerator in St James, opened, commissioned and being used. [*Desk thumping*] Diego Martin Health Centre, opened on Tuesday and used on Thursday. [*Desk thumping*] San Fernando new labour ward, in use.

What are the plans for the future as far as health infrastructure is concerned? Sangre Grande hospital, on track. Central Block, 540 beds, on track. The Member before me spoke about NCDs and he is right. But you know what is the biggest omission of successive governments in this country? And I blame no one government, no one RHA because we are all to blame for this. He spoke about heart attacks. The biggest omission in this country was not putting a Cath lab at the San Fernando hospital and my colleague from Fyzabad will agree with that. Tenders, the packages are now being opened and evaluated for a Cath lab for San Fernando. It is a PNM Government that is taking care of the cardiac patients in San

Fernando. [*Desk thumping*] Because the public sector only has one Cath lab in North-Central RHA which is grossly overused but successive governments never put emphasis on having a Cath lab in San Fernando and San Fernando is going to get their Cath lab by 2021.

And we are also going to be driving our deeper routes in the decentralization of mental health. Our NCD drive is on. Our HIV/AIDS programme is on. We have signed on—and I do not want to get too technical here—to the 90-90-90 targets for HIV/AIDS. We are now at 80-92-91 and I will go into more detail in that if time allows. Our infant and mortality rates continue to be stellar and are one of the best in the developing world right now.

Madam Speaker, COVID, by necessity, is going to take up a lot of my contribution here today and I want to tell the national community that Trinidad and Tobago is one of over 200 countries suffering from COVID, and many countries, after some optimism, that we saw the cases going down after the first wave, that optimism around the world is taking a backstage to a more sober appreciation that things may not get better anytime soon. Those are the facts. The global situation right now is that COVID has hit 36,832,343 with 1,068,047 deaths. The daily average shows no signs of decreasing. The daily average now, as of September 20th which is when the world has the last set of seven-day rolling averages, is 350,000 new cases per day and deaths are 6,000 per day. That is the global situation.

But, Madam Speaker, I heard the Leader of the Opposition speak about COVID and I am going to make some comments and this is not the typical back and forth and I will tell you why. Members of the UNC and those who follow the announcements of the political leader of the UNC take what we say seriously and when leaders speak, followers tend to fashion their behaviour. It is no secret that after we did very well in the first phase, that the Leader of the Opposition said it

had nothing to do with the health care system but it had to do with sunlight. Right? Your followers listen to that and internalize that and therefore, fashion their behaviour accordingly.

I had to answer questions here in the last Parliament posed by the Member for Barataria/San Juan who said wearing masks is foolish. Now, this is a doctor who happens to be a UNC Member but people will listen. [*Interruption*]

[*Madam Speaker stands*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. But your followers will listen and fashion their behaviour. And then in the Senate, “Puncheon and lime is good for the COVID”. This is serious. If we are to tackle the issue of COVID, you cannot have one political leader saying one thing based on the science, which is Dr. Keith Rowley, and another political leader talking about “sunshine”, “masks are foolish”. Your followers listen to you and I am simply asking the Opposition, if we do something wrong, point it out, point it out but follow the science which does not say that Trinidad and Tobago was saved in the first wave because of sunshine and that masks are foolish. That is the only reason I bring it up. We need to have political solidarity in this.

Madam Speaker, this Government has launched 128 measures to deal with COVID. On January 29th, we started thermal screening at the airports. January 30th, the first travel restrictions. March 12th, our first case. March 13th, the hon. Prime Minister announced the closure of places of learning and on September 28th, the hon. Prime Minister announced the cancellation of Carnival celebrations. The effect of all these 128 measures is to minimize and interrupt transmission to save lives and save livelihoods.

Phase two of this pandemic where we are now at, saw an increase in cases after we started to reopen after May 9th. Our highest rolling day seven-day average

at the peak of our community spread was 121 cases per day but now, it is now down to 51 cases per day which is a very good place to be and I thank all citizens, all organizations, all affected businesses who have rallied behind the call to play their part in this. The population who is now wearing masks, social distancing, is to be heartily congratulated.

At that stage and I acknowledge it freely, we did encounter some problems with testing simply because the demand for testing outstripped our ability to supply it. But now, as we continue, we must redouble our efforts and commitments to these simple public health measures. The equation is simple. It is a very simple equation and we need the Opposition's support. Forget sunlight, forget Puncheon and lime, forget masks are foolish. Please forget that, lead by example. The equation is this: the more we want to open the economy is the more the population has to take on board the simple public health measures. It is as simple as that. That is the equation. More freedoms, you want to move about, the more we have to social distance, the more we have to wear masks and we have to make sure our homes, we do not invite the virus into our homes with birthday parties, celebrations and so on. That will help us get our rolling seven-day average from 51 down even further.

In this phase, Madam Speaker, using the money spent because my colleague who spoke before me wanted to know about the money, we spent roughly \$79 million in our COVID response so far. A lot of this was spent by providing diagnostic tools in the form of pulse oximeters to persons self-quarantining at home. We instituted tele-medicine. We employed hundreds of nurses and doctors. So we are building capacity and building resilience. How many people have passed through the parallel health care system? We started to calculate the figures. In the hospital system, which will be like Couva, Caura, Arima, from 12th March to 7th

October, this parallel health care system, we treated 1,904 persons. A fantastic achievement. [*Device goes off*]

Madam Speaker: The Member whose device has just gone off, could you kindly leave the Chamber?

Mr. Al-Rawi: Yes, Ma'am.

Madam Speaker: And for all Members, could you ensure that your devices are on silent? Please continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yes, so the parallel health care system from 12th March to 7th October, saw 1,904 patients. In other countries that do not have a parallel health care system, these people would normally have to be treated in the regular hospitals and that is what happens when you cannot flatten the curve where demand for hospital beds outstrips supply. In the State and state-supervised quarantine facilities from 12th March to 7th October, we saw 2,680 persons. So the parallel health care system saw, catered for, provided care free of charge to 4,584 persons. [*Desk thumping*] That is a phenomenal performance for a system which we started to build out in January of this year. Absolutely phenomenal performance.

My colleague who spoke before me rightly—and he has every right to raise it because we have raised it, about the number of deaths and almost 90 to 95 per cent of those deaths are unfortunately—and our condolences go out—are for the elderlies with pre-existing conditions. But let us put those deaths in the context of what is happening globally and the best way to do this is by a metric called the case fatality rate or the case fatality ratio where you take the total number of deaths and divide it by the total number of positive cases. So you are comparing apples with apples, like with like.

The global average for case fatality rate hovers between 3 to 5 per cent. It is

about 2.93 per cent which means 2.93 per cent of persons who have a positive test for COVID will die. The country with the highest percentage—and I am not going to call the country's name, I have always avoided that, I will just quote the figure—it is 29.5; 29.5. The lowest country is 0.5 and that is a particular country. It is called a micro nation, very small, very isolated. But the global average is around 2.93. Our rate is 1.72. So we are way below the global average in our case fatality rate. One death is too much. But compared to what is happening in the world, we are way below the global average. So that is another positive metric to measure our response by.

Where are we going forward now with our response? Going forward, we have outlined a strategic objective to take the country from community spread back to cluster spread and that journey starts in October. It will be predicated and based upon three pillars. One, continuing public engagement. Two, the final decentralization of testing and three, the advent of vaccines. My colleague who spoke before wanted to know about vaccines and the COVAX Facility, I will now give chapter and verse on that.

What is our vaccine response? Trinidad and Tobago has joined the COVAX Facility which is to provide participating countries with a safe and effective vaccine in an equitable manner—and I will explain what that means right now—regardless of a country's income status. So countries are divided low, middle, high income. What you do not want is high-income countries dominating the vaccine scene. The objective of the COVAX Facility of which we are a part by Cabinet Note is that 2 billion doses will be supplied by the end of 2021 to end this current acute phase.

The COVAX Facility is a partnership between WHO, CEPI called the Coalition for Epidemiological Preparedness and Innovation and GAVI, the Global

Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation. The mechanism for this, and it is a very good mechanism, and the analogy I use is that it is like a mutual fund. You go to Unit Trust, “yuh give them yuh money”, they invest it in a series of stocks, bonds and shares. It is a portfolio. The moneys will be invested in a portfolio of candidates. These candidate manufacturers are Sinovac, Sinopharm, University of Oxford pioneering the AstraZeneca vaccine, Janssen Pharmaceuticals, Novavax, Moderna, Gamaleya, CanSino Biologics and others. One has been paused because there is a side effect with one person. So the beauty of this is that the others go on. So when you invest in this portfolio of candidates, even though one or two may not pan out, you are still in the game because you have access to the others.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago by Cabinet Note and Cabinet decision has allocated US \$9,741,237 or \$66,142,999.23 for the purchase of vaccines. That is what the Government has done so far. The Member before me wanted to know how this thing will work, this is how it will work.

The Cabinet Note asked COVAX that we would like to have vaccines to vaccinate 33 per cent of the population. Thirty-three per cent of the population is actually about 462,000 persons. However, because the COVAX Facility is built on equity, no one country can get all the vaccines it wants. So in other words, a country with 300 million people will not get 300 million doses of vaccines. What COVAX will do, regardless of the amount you have ordered—and I will take my time here—they will deliver for you in their first tranche 20 per cent of vaccines to correspond with 20 per cent of your population. So in the first instance, we will get 280,000 vaccines. That will go initially to health care workers, the elderly, immunocompromised. Those are the persons that carry the brunt of the fallout of COVID. Therefore, in the second tranche, once production ramps up, we will get our other 182,000 doses of vaccines. So let me repeat that.

Under the COVAX Facility built on the principle of equity, all countries will get an initial amount of doses to vaccinate 20 per cent of their population: the elderly, immunocompromised, health care workers. For us, that translates into 280,000 doses and then we get the balance. So that is where we are with our vaccines. I have given you all the companies that we are in talks with. Outside of the COVAX Facility, outside of that because you want to have as many irons in the fires as possible, we are also having separate talks with Sinopharm out of China. Separate talks. Okay? To give you a comparator to what these numbers mean in terms of vaccines, our current flu vaccination drive right now, we have 100,000 vaccines to give out. Typically, in a flu season, we give out 100,000 to 120,000. So basically, when we get our first shipment of vaccines, we will be doubling the number of vaccines we give out. That is a huge undertaking.

The Member asked about storage yes, one or two of the vaccines in trials have to be stored at minus 60. What we are doing right now is looking at the range of storage conditions for the vaccines to build three purpose-built walk-in chillers and to keep these vaccines off-site, they will not be at C40, with back up with solar energy and diesel. All of that is being prepared now, the logistics. So we are going to be building three purpose-built walk-in chillers because we simply do not have the space in C40 to accommodate 280,000 doses of vaccines on top of the flu vaccines we are now carrying. Okay? So I hope that satisfies the Member who spoke before me and the national community.

Madam Speaker, I did say that moving forward, the strategy to move back from community spread to cluster spread is going to be dependent on testing. We have moved past our early restrictive centralized testing where we had one site at CARPHA. The process of decentralization started way back in May. In May 1st, we commissioned the UWI site. June 27th, we commissioned a separate gene expert

machine in the TRHA; August 16th, we commissioned a gene expert machine in the Eastern RHA; August 21st, we commissioned a new PCR machine at MRFTT; August 25th, we commissioned an Abbott machine in NCRHA, and on September 11th, we commissioned another new Abbott machine at the South-West RHA.

So our current capacity for PCR testing is about 1,300 per day. Right now, the number of samples coming in on any one day is between 400 to 700, so we could turn around those within 24 to 48 hours in most cases but we want to keep it there, we want to keep it there.

The ultimate decentralization is going to revolve around the use of the rapid antigen test. The technology is now at a stage where there is a lot of confidence in rapid antigen tests which did not exist three to four months ago but the technology has improved. These are going to be fast. They are going to allow for point of care diagnosis. We could even take it to remote areas where there is no electricity, so we could identify cases, isolate and interrupt transmission.

It is also very low-cost and let me give you some idea of the cost because my colleague who spoke before wanted to know—and these are my terms—“where de money gone”. It costs the taxpayer of this country US \$100 to perform one PCR test in the public sector, US \$100 which they get free of charge. These rapid antigen tests will cost between US \$5 to \$6, one-twentieth of the price. So you can see the cost savings there with a turnaround time of 15 to 30 minutes. We have ordered into Trinidad two types of rapid antigen tests. Standard F, we have ordered 150,000 of those tests at \$6 each. It is a two-part system. It is a little more complex. It is the actual test cartridge and a reader to read the test.

The sensitivity of this particular test, and sensitivity means the percentage of correct positive tests that you get, is 99.03 per cent which is very, very good. The specificity rate, that is the ability to confirm a true negative test is 98.65 which is

basically on par with the current PCR test and this was not possible three to four months ago. These will be deployed in our primary health care settings, example, our district health facilities: Siparia, Couva, wherever, Chaguanas, our accident and emergency rooms. We have ordered 15 readers: three will be sent to Tobago and 12 will be retained in Trinidad and they come with their own swabs and everything.

We have then ordered 40,000 of what is called a Standard Q test which is a little less sensitive but it has the advantage, it does not need a reader so you could take it into any community. Right? It is akin to a simple cassette-type pregnancy test. Easy deployment, no electricity needed. You could go into small communities, you can go into long-stay homes where the elderly are. The sensitivity of that test, that is the ability to detect a positive case, is 83 per cent and the specificity, that is, the ability to come up with a true negative is 64 per cent. However, there is an organization called FIND which is the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics has done some independent quality control on these tests in Germany and Brazil and their validation has shown that these rates of 83 per cent and 64 per cent are in fact too low and their rates—and we are waiting for their final report—are actually in the 90s.

The Chief Medical Officer will explain and I think the doctors who will speak after me, I look forward to your comments on this because as you know, a certain percentage of these antigen tests have to be validated by a follow-up PCR test. So Member for Fyzabad, please lend us your views on this, but the CMO will explain the protocols. So that is what we are with vaccines through the COVAX Facility. This is where we are now with the extreme decentralization of our testing.

Madam Speaker, before I leave COVID, there is one thing I need to mention and this is where we need the public to understand that these public health

measures, whilst inconvenient, are there for your protection. Three months ago, four months ago into this COVID pandemic, no one knew of the term “long COVID”, no one knew of the term “long-haulers” but now we do. Now we do and it is affecting young people and the elderly. It affects your heart, your lungs, your brain.

4.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker, as an analogy, there was a retrospective study done on SARS patients and SARS is also caused by a coronavirus. Correct? And they are finding that patients suffer from the long-term effect of SARS three and a half years after being infected with SARS. Reason for raising this with the national public, do not take COVID lightly because we do not know the long-term effects of COVID, and I am saying this especially to the young persons.

Lung COVID was not in the medical vocabulary two and three months ago, but now it is. And people who have their viral load cleared, with lung COVID, they cannot even climb one flight of stairs, Madam Speaker. They cannot go to work. So the long-term effects of COVID are not known.

Madam Speaker, one word on the flu vaccine, and I am really disappointed by my colleague who spoke before me, who said that persons who are going to get the flu vaccines in the health centres, and it really disappoints me for a medical doctor to be saying these things. He is saying that they are going into a hot zone. And Member for Fyzabad you know that is not true. A hot zone is where you have active COVID patients being treated. When you go to a health centre, in the parallel line to get your flu vaccine, that is not a hot zone. Why would you say that? It discourages.

And you see that is what discourages people who listen to the UNC because you are opinion leaders in your communities. Do not say these things that have no

scientific basis, because we are trying to encourage people to come for the flu vaccine. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, who is a medical doctor, says we are taking you into a hot zone. A hot zone is the Couva Hospital and not all parts, because I have been there in the cold zones. I do not go into the hot zones of Couva. The hot zone is where you have confirmed COVID patients being treated. Going to get your flu vaccine is not going into a hot zone. So I am appealing to the opinion leaders in the UNC, because your followers listen to you, and they fashion their behaviour because they trust you. They trust you. Your words have consequences, serious consequences.

So you have one half of the country going this way and half of the country going that way. Half of the country being vaccinated and half of the country being told they are going to a hot zone. Half of the country believing the science; half the country being told is the sunlight. Your words have consequences. People look up to you for leadership.

Madam Speaker, in the few minutes I have remaining, I would like to talk about the constituency of St. Joseph, and again, genuinely thank the people of St. Joseph who have elected, not me, they have elected a PNM standard-bearer to represent the people of St. Joseph. They did it in the by-election of 2013. I thank them. They did it in the General Election of 2015. I thank them. And again, they did it in the General Election of 2020, and I thank them again.

Madam Speaker, in touring the constituency post the election, I can tell you the Caiman Community Centre, I was there on Wednesday. It is going full steam ahead. Maitagual Community Centre, full steam ahead. All the roads and bridges in Maitagual finished. Mount D'Or, all their drainage and other infrastructure works, some finished, some ongoing. The community drive car park for the community centre done. Curepe Community Centre refurbished. Infrastructure in

Quarry Drive, done. Computer lab for the residents of Quarry Drive, done. Home village improvement programmes for people who could never get a mortgage, it is this Government that pioneered that programme. And I want to thank both the past and current Ministers of Housing and Urban Development. We gave out some houses again this week. It is a brilliant programme.

The programme targeting small and medium contractors to build houses, going on. Mahogany Court in Mount Hope, going on. Upper Quarry Road that got water for the first time in their lives under the tenure of this Member of Parliament, and I have to recognize the Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis. You would remember, hon. Member you walked with me there in 2017/'18. We went up to the top of Quarry and we told the people: "We will give you water". They got their water. Lemon Drive in Champs Fleurs, they got their water. Caiman, they got their water. The people in Dog Alley, they got their street lights. So Madam Speaker, the work in the constituency of St. Joseph goes on.

In closing, I want to thank most sincerely the people of St. Joseph. I want to thank most sincerely, the people of Trinidad and Tobago who reposed their faith and confidence in the Government of Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley and the People's National Movement. Madam Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (*Fyzabad*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill for the financial year 2021, a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30th September, 2021. Madam Speaker, I wish to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar on her excellent contribution, [*Desk thumping*] one in which she clearly identified the shortcomings of this budget and the challenges that our citizens will face going forward in this financial year.

I also wish to commend the contributions of my colleagues on this side who have spoken, especially my colleague for Cumuto/Manzanilla who made his maiden contribution in this august Chamber.

Before I go in the depth of my contribution, Madam Speaker, I just wish to address a few of the issues raised by my colleague for St. Joseph, the Minister of Health, with regard to, of course, the issue of sunlight. This is something that has been coming all the time. Okay. Minister I know that you are perhaps, not too serious about that. I think the population understands now. But I just want to draw your attention to several scientific studies in literature, which now point to the effect of sunlight on the virus. I am not saying that that is the advice I am giving, but there is scientific evidence. I am not saying that. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Members, please remember your decorum. Please be reminded of your decorum.

Dr. L. Bodoë: I was saying, Madam Speaker, that a reference in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases* well recognized, as recent as the 20th June, 2020, and I am referring the Minister to that, in terms of reading.

With regard to wearing mask, I think we are all now convinced that wearing mask is important. It is part of the advice. But Minister you yourself would have had some doubts in the early stages of this COVID pandemic and you yourself would have had some different advice. Even the WHO, as you know, has been toing and froing on this. And of course as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves we are seeing what is important. It is really evolving. So we have to take this thing with a measure, and so on, as we go forward.

There are a couple other issues that the Minister raised, which I would address in the course of my contribution. Madam Speaker, my contribution today would be focused really on health, especially in light of the COVID-19 crisis,

followed by public administration, and then I will address some issues in my constituency of Fyzabad.

Madam Speaker, we are having this debate under very different circumstances and in very different times as Trinidad and Tobago battles with the COVID-19 pandemic. These very arrangements for speaking in the Parliament is a reflection of the impact of the pandemic and the way we conduct the business of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I wish to commend you and the Parliament for taking the required precautions to protect the health and safety of not only Members but all the staff who work in this building. And I have taken notice, Madam Speaker, that from very early in the pandemic you have taken the steps and the Parliament has taken the steps to ensure the safety of Members and staff, and I think that is to be commended.

Six months into the pandemic, we know a bit more about COVID-19, but there is still a lot more to learn. I have no doubt in my mind that this threat will be with us for a long time, as I mentioned it is evolving, and therefore it is critical how we prepare ourselves going forward as a country if we are to win this battle. And I note some of the measures outlined by the Minister of Health. I take note of those, and of course those are the measures that have been outlined internationally as well.

Before I go further, Madam Speaker, as a medical practitioner myself, allow me to thank all our frontline workers, our doctors, our nurses, our attendants, our ambulance drivers, the police, prison, the coast guard, immigration officers and others and to encourage them to take all precautions as they continue the battle against this deadly virus.

I also wish to sympathize with those of my fellow citizens who have

suffered from the virus or who have lost loved ones to the virus.

I also wish to thank the citizens, Madam Speaker, the majority of whom have taken the advice of the health authorities and the Government and have made tremendous personal sacrifice to ensure that they prevent themselves and their loved ones from being infected. And, Madam Speaker, this is despite sometimes the bashing that they frequently receive from the Minister of Health. So I want to commend the citizens. They have done their part. So they have done what is required of them. But the question, Madam Speaker: Is the Government doing what is required of the Government? And that is one of the questions I want to ask here today in this budget debate.

So, Madam Speaker, it is in this context that I will continue my contribution. The Government has outlined several measures in the budget and I really want to look at whether they have the capability and the capacity to be able to perform and deliver on these measures. And I will do this by way of looking at, perhaps, their recent track record in both areas of health and public administration as to whether they can deliver on their promises.

Value for money, accountability and transparency are essential whenever public money is being spent, and this is what we are talking about here today. And it is our role and indeed our responsibility as an Opposition to ensure that this happens in the Parliament.

Madam Speaker, so let me just delve a bit into the health sector. And I want to quote from the budget document from the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance had this to say on the health sector in his budget presentation, and I quote, Madam Speaker:

“This sector was able to facilitate in the shortest possible timeframe the roll-out of a parallel healthcare system for the treatment and care of COVID-19

patients and did not interrupt the delivery of normal state-of-the-art healthcare services to our citizens.”

This is a two-part statement. I want to say I agree with the first part and I will say why, and I will come back and address the second part of that statement, in terms of interrupting the delivery of the normal state-of-the-art health care services. I agree that Trinidad and Tobago was able to rollout a parallel health system in a short time.

But, Madam Speaker, it would be remiss of me not to point out that this was only possible because of the investments made by the People's Partnership Government in health care infrastructure during the period 2010 to 2015. And Madam Speaker, I am making this point for a reason, and I will come to that reason. And it is because, if you allow me, Madam Speaker, in 2013, a major refurbishment at the Augustus Long Hospital was made and this created a brand new state-of-the-art operating theater and dedicated intensive care beds. And I am happy to know that now the Augustus Long Hospital, instead of being abandoned with the sale of Petrotrin, has now been converted and is now facilitating the care of COVID-19 patients. But of course that was because of infrastructural achievements done in 2013.

In 2014, Madam Speaker, in the face of the Ebola threat, and again the nation needs to know this because this was a big threat in 2014, the threat of the Ebola virus, which as we know ravaged parts of the world. We thought that that threat was going to come to Trinidad. And in preparation for that, there were several infrastructural and procedural changes and preparations which were made at the Caura Hospital and of course now the Caura Hospital has formed one of the limbs in our response to COVID. And again this Government was able, at short notice, to make some additional changes and prepare the Caura Hospital for

treating with COVID-19 patients. Way back in 2014 this work would have started.

And, of course, Madam Speaker, on the 14th of August, 2015, and I remember the day well the People's Partnership Government proudly commissioned the state-of-the-art Couva children's hospital. I have to say this, Madam Speaker. And this facility remained unused for almost five years. The last PNM Government, using a variety of excuses to deny the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago care at an ultra-modern facility.

Madam Speaker, I remember the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee of this Parliament in 2016, touring that facility and being told that everything was in order and being given the assurance that very soon that facility would have been operational, 2016, Madam Speaker. And yet amazingly, this modern facility became operational for critically-ill patients within a matter of weeks and has since served as the lifeline in our battle against COVID-19. I say no more. I leave that at that.

And of course there are two other facilities which this Government has utilized for the benefit of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, in terms of step-down and quarantine facilities, which were built under the previous Partnership Government, and this, of course, I speak, of the UWI Campus at Debe and the National Racket Centre.

I make these observations, Madam Speaker, simply to make the point that health is a continuum and the Minister alluded to that, when he spoke about the failure to deliver and to implement a cardiac catheterization lab at San Fernando. I will mention something about that later on. So I am saying—the point I am making is that health, health structure, health care is continuum and when successive governments build on the platform left for them it can only work for the benefit of citizens.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in his presentation, spoke about the parallel health care system. I agree it is an excellent idea, but the question in my mind is: How well is this working? Whether this parallel health care system is working.

And I want to raise a few issues because I believe strongly and my colleague, the previous speaker, would have alluded to some of the concerns and I believe and I understand that while we have to pay attention to COVID-19 and the management and treatment of COVID-19, it is very important, Madam Speaker, to the Minister through you, Madam Speaker, and it appears that the mainstream health system is quietly suffering and is at risk of falling apart. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, and we in Trinidad and Tobago cannot allow this to happen.

I know funds have been allocated for COVID-19 management, but at the same time in this budget we are seeing the same allocation for the Ministry of Health. And, of course, it is expected that the Minister of Health and the Ministry of Health will continue to perform and deliver the services that are required. And health care in Trinidad and Tobago is not cheap. We have had, in 2019, just over 5 billion spent on health care. In 2020, the expenditure was just over 5.1 billion, and I see that 5.5 billion has been allocated this year, according to the budget documents delivered to us.

Despite this substantial annual expenditure, Madam Speaker, we continue to hear of many complaints in the health sector regarding the shortage of drugs, long waiting time for clinic appointments, long waiting time for service in the A&E departments, and long waiting time for surgical procedures. And these complaints, Madam Speaker, were before COVID-19. I want to make that point very clear. These preceded COVID-19, so I do not want us to hide behind COVID-19. There are issues that need to be dealt with in the health sector, Minister. And I trust that,

you know, whilst you—and I support you and I support the Government in the battle against COVID-19. But at the same time, the regular health sector must not be neglected.

So, Madam Speaker, the regional health authorities, as the delivery arm of the Ministry of Health, continue to be plagued with the issues which are attributable, in my opinion, to poor management and lack of proper systems. The Ministry of Health is supposed to oversee services, but it is really the RHAs that deliver these services.

And let me give you some examples, Madam Speaker. Let us go to the San Fernando General Hospital. As we speak this afternoon, Madam Speaker, I am told that from tomorrow, at the San Fernando General Hospital that renal dialysis patients will have to seek their treatment privately. And why is this going to happen, Madam Speaker? This is going to happen because of the failure of the authority to procure certain reagents, okay, to ensure that dialysis continues at the San Fernando Hospital. This is going to cost patients, sometimes up to between \$900 and \$1,200 out of pocket expenditure.

Also, I am told that there is a shortage of disposable theater gowns, shoe covers and theatre hats for CSSE staff and operating theatre staff. Surely, this is not a funding issue, if we look at the amount that is being allocated to health. So therefore it must be an operational, a system issue in the RHA.

The ATI automatic incinerator, which is used to burn hazardous waste material from the hospital has been out of service for one year, Madam Speaker, and I am informed that the old incinerator is being used and it does not meet EMA and engineering standards and there are very high standards, Madam Speaker, for disposing of biomedical waste.

There is a 25,000 gallon potable water tank which is used to supply the

hospital, especially in situations of emergency, and that has been taken out of service since December 2015.

There are other issues and I am just speaking about San Fernando here, Madam Speaker. All the outsourcing of civil construction and plumbing works has been stopped. It is being carried out by the Chief Operating Officer, and I am told now that when a survey was done, when a cost comparison was done, the in-house labour has been neglected and the authority is paying three times as much to have these services outsourced.

There is also the issue of staff morale which is low because of the failure of the authority to confirm managers, especially certain managers, who have been in acting positions for up to three, four, five years, even though they have passed their relevant interviews.

Madam Speaker, this one would be hilarious, if it was not so serious. The Minister mentioned, but he was very careful when he spoke about the labour ward and he chose his words very carefully. This the new labour ward at the San Fernando hospital, and he said it is in use. But, Madam Speaker, I have a personal interest in that labour ward, not only because I am an obstetrician/gynaecologist, but also because as Chairman of South West RHA, I can personally attest to the fact that the old labour ward had been shifted to create the space for a new labour ward to be developed and, Madam Speaker, five years later on that labour is still not functional.

There was a big hoorah on the 28th of July, this is about two weeks before the general election. There was a lot of fanfare. I think the Minister was expected to be there to open the labour ward, he was not there. Maybe he understood why he should not have come down. But in truth and in fact apparently it was just a, you know, a ceremonial opening and is still yet to be functioning, and I trust and hope

that this would be corrected soon and that the patients of San Fernando hospital will benefit. So that is San Fernando hospital, Madam Speaker.

Let me just give a few examples of the NCRHA, and I am talking again, I as mentioned, about the neglect of the regular health system whilst we treat with COVID-19 in the parallel health care system.

Madam Speaker, recently at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, an electrical fire took place. Fires can take place in health buildings, in buildings, but this fire apparently took place because of the neglect and undue delay in the maintenance of the electrical system. But more than that, Madam Speaker, and this is very ironical, that fire affected the Intensive Care Unit at Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex. And therefore the ICU had to be relocated. And guess where it had to be relocated to, Madam Speaker? The Couva Hospital. An already overburdened facility had to take up the slack for the ICU for Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex for two weeks, simply because of the failure of someone in authority, in charge at the NCRHA to deal with timely maintenance.

Madam Speaker, not only that, the patients who would have had to use that ICU would normally be cardiac surgery patients. For two weeks, those patients' surgeries had to be postponed. And if you are a patient waiting for cardiac surgery in this country, sometimes the wait is a long time. And if you miss your turn, it is not a good thing. So again, managers, management, those in authority, the Minister, has to understand and to take responsibility when these things happen.

And, of course, there has also been the issue at the NCRHA, the issue regarding employment practices and poor procurement practices. Madam Speaker, an invoice recently surfaced in the public domain for janitorial services costing \$76,000 for two days at the NCRHA. Yes, Madam Speaker, two days June 5th to June 7th, \$76,000. And of course, Madam Speaker, we are yet to receive any clear

explanation as to the real cost for the infamous tent rentals in April of this year when, at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, the rental of two tents allegedly cost the authority over \$500,000. So I await some clarity on that and I trust that that expenditure in fact was not real and that could be corrected. So there seems to be no accountability and transparency and highly irregular procurement practices at some of the RHAs. And of course we eagerly await the implementation of the procurement Act very soon.

Madam Speaker, I can go on to the other authorities, but in the interest of time I cannot. I just want to make the point that obviously the boards appointed by this Government and the Minister are failing in their duty, which is a public duty, to oversee the operations of the RHAs and to ensure that the public receives value for money.

Madam Speaker, perhaps it is now time to review, that the RHA system as presently constituted is delivering on its initial promise and mandate. The question that really needs to be asked is: Do we need four RHAs in Trinidad to serve 1.3 million people? I am just talking for Trinidad because the TRHA, the Tobago RHA, of course, is different. It reports to the Tobago House of Assembly. And perhaps serious consideration should now be given for to reducing the number of RHAs from four to two; not with the loss of jobs, I want to make that point clear, not with the loss of any jobs, but really consolidation in terms of management, and so on, two RHAs.

Madam Speaker, before I go on to examine the Government's response to COVID-19 and just to make a few points on that issue, I just want to make one more suggestion, and that suggestion has to do with the delay in getting diagnostic services in our health system. Madam Speaker, ultrasound scans, CT scans, MRI scans, nowadays is like how a blood test was 20 years ago, 15 years ago. These

things are routine, and they are required. Doctors expect them now. It is a normal thing. This is not something exotic like it was, and therefore this is a normal thing that a doctor will depend on these investigations.

Our current system means that we have this equipment in the hospitals. Now the inpatients get priority in the hospital and therefore when you are an outpatient and you have to wait on a CT scan, you are given an appointment and therefore you have to wait. Nothing is wrong. I mean, there is some waiting, of course, but in the interim, things can go wrong and the candle can cost more than the funeral if you wait because, of course, you may have to deal with the complications of waiting.

4.45 p.m.

So I am going to suggest that as part of the infrastructure that we should look at having what we call standalone diagnostic centres. You do not need too much, it is a small country, perhaps one in the north, one in the south, and you have a standalone diagnostic centre where you can go. It is a one-stop shop, you can get your ultrasound, your X-ray, CT scan, your MRI and you do not crowd up the hospital system. So it is just something that I want to throw out for the consideration of the Government going forward, Madam Speaker.

So, the Minister spoke quite a bit about the COVID response, the Government's COVID response. I want say at the outset that we on this side have been very supportive of the measures that were taken. We have been to this Parliament on several occasions. Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition would have met with you and a team, and would have forwarded our suggestions, whether you would have been concerned or not, that is fine, but I am just saying that that was the approach we took. But there was some concern in the public domain about the rapid spread. We are now in the community phase and there was

some concern about the rapid spread from sporadic, and from sporadic and cluster to community spread. Be that as it may, we are in community spread, we have to deal with it, we have to take whatever measures are required, we support those measures.

But I just wanted, you know, to raise a couple of concerns. I mean, it is something that is in the public's mind. You know, constituents have been speaking to me, colleagues have been speaking to me and there is much concern as to why this situation occurred. And one key concern, Madam Speaker, was whether enough testing was done initially. And I think the Minister let it out of the bag here today when he spoke, and he spoke of an early restrictive testing and I think that is the key to it. Really and truly, the testing was very restrictive in the early stages and therefore, we could not really have known the true picture of what was taking place in the earlier stages of this pandemic, Madam Speaker.

And, you know, I had asked questions about the approval of private laboratories for doing testing because obviously the Government, through CARPHA and so on, did not have the capacity in the early stages, and therefore, the option was to do private testing, testing at private labs. And I was a little bit concerned that the length of time the Government took, you know, to approve these private labs and of course, they will come and they will say, well, they had to meet certain standards and so on, that is fine. They have to meet certain standards, although one of the labs that is now doing the testing has already been internationally certified prior to COVID and therefore, there should not have been such a delay. And the question that has been asked in the public domain, and perhaps fairly so, is that the Government deliberately delayed private testing to create the appearance that the curve had been flattened. I will leave that there, Madam Speaker, I will not go beyond that, I will just leave that there. And of

course, the point being is that if early approval of private testing labs had increased capacity, it means we would have been in a much better place and therefore, the positive persons could have been isolated and treated earlier.

The one issue I want to deal with, Madam Speaker, and again, I am happy that I see the Minister has outlined new measures, he has talked about the decentralization of testing, that is all good and fine. I mean, I was going to raise the issue of drive-through testing, as we know takes place in other countries, and so on. The idea really being that you should create an environment and conditions to allow persons to go and have their tests done without fear of being infected or contaminated, and so on. But one of the concerns is the length of time it is taking for the test results, and I talk about the PCR test results, Madam Speaker. And this came to my mind through some very good information I had received, and it is a very sad case again but I have to highlight it. Again, we speak about how things are evolving and it is important to learn from this and I, as a medical doctor, I have to be satisfied in my own mind, but more so, as a Member of Parliament, I have to be satisfied that my constituents, you know, are receiving the best treatment possible.

I know that patients will die, I accept that, but my concern is that are we, and is the system, is the Government doing everything possible to ensure that these patients are given the best possible treatment? That is what I am saying. I am not saying that patients will not die, it will happen. It is happening all over the world. And I am dwelling on this point because I have, from a reliable source a few weeks ago, a very sad case of a young person. The person is in their forties, I do not want to say his or her, who died of renal failure at one of our institutions whilst awaiting a COVID test, that took 17 days for the results to come back. Now why did the patient die? The patient died because the nursing and medical staff did not want to

provide renal dialysis for the patient, which could have saved the patient's life. I cannot blame the staff because they were afraid of course, you know, of getting contaminated themselves.

So there was a situation where when you go to a hospital and if you are suspect COVID, you are put into an isolation room and you are left there to some extent awaiting a test. Now that was a few weeks ago and I am hoping that that situation has changed. I am told that arrangements have been made since then that patients can now be transferred out of the main facilities into perhaps Arima—sorry, Caura or Arima, whatever. But I just wanted to make that point.

And as I talk about renal dialysis, I want to raise on behalf of the population and ask if the Government can look to procure two machines. They are called CRRT machines, Madam Speaker. What are these machines? Now, patients with kidney failure—and we know kidney failure is a big issue with COVID-19 patients—patients with kidney failure sometimes require dialysis but if they end up in the Intensive Care Unit in ICU, they have a challenge, because normal dialysis you have to sit on a chair and it is ambulatory, and so on. When you are in the ICU, you require a special machine, and these are called CRRT machines, and I believe that there is a shortage of those. In fact, I have been told that patients at Couva, sometimes the critically ill patients are not in a position to access these. So I am making an appeal for those to be provided.

The other issues that have been noted at the Couva Hospital is the issue of the staffing ratio at this institution, the nursing staffing ratio at this institution which is unsatisfactory. In the HDU, there are reports of one nurse per 10 patients and in the ICU, there are reports of one nurse for four critically ill patients. In an ICU setting, there should be one nurse to one critically ill patient. Whilst there might be several reasons, one of the main reasons, Madam Speaker, is the fact that

it has to do with the working arrangements. Now the most senior nurses are usually the experienced ones who go to ICU and I am told that they are afraid to turn up for work, not because they will get COVID-19 but because other colleagues might have stayed away and therefore, there will be, you know, just limited numbers on the shift and have to be overworked. So that is one issue. But there is a bigger issue and this issue has to do with how RHAs are run.

And again, there is the feeling that the staff of the NCRHA, and I mean I bashed the NCRHA earlier but now I want to support the staff there. I will tell you why, because there is a feeling that the staff of the NCRHA alone is being asked to bear the burden, to look after the patients in Caura, in Couva, now Arima, and so on. And this is something that the Minister and the Government needs to look at in terms of whether this burden of the human resource deployment for COVID-19 patients can be rearranged in such a way so that, you know, the burden is shared around equally because of course there are many issues associated with this. I mean, there is not enough time to go into the psychological counselling and the mental health issues and so on related to overburdened, overworked frontline workers. And again, I want to thank them. I want to again take the opportunity, it is a tremendous job, it is not easy to go out there every day, you know, and put your life at risk.

And before I leave the Couva Hospital, Madam Speaker, I also understand that the investigations, the blood samples, and so on are being taken from Couva to San Fernando hospital laboratory for readings to take place. There are two issues to this. One, is the issue of safety and the other is time. And I know for a fact that there is a brand new laboratory in the Couva Hospital and I have to ask the question as to why this laboratory is not being utilized for the patients who are housed at Couva?

So, Madam Speaker, you will understand why I have some concerns to whether the parallel health system is working. We have to ensure that the parallel health care system does not fall behind and as I mentioned before, we have supported and will continue to support whatever measures the Government will bring to this Parliament, and whatever measures otherwise that are required, you know, to assist. Before I leave COVID-19 and just speak a little bit about public administration, Madam Speaker, can you tell me how much time I have?

Madam Speaker: Member, your time will expire at 5.07.40.

Dr. L. Bodoë: Okay, thank you. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Seven minutes past five and forty seconds.

Dr. L. Bodoë: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just wanted to raise the issue of the exorbitant cost for human immune globulin which was mentioned in the Standing Finance Committee for COVID expenditure, Madam Speaker, but I think because I just want to ask a few questions about that. The Minister of Health had responded and he seemed surprised about the exorbitant cost incurred by the NCRHA for this particular drug. And the concerns I have is, first of all, that this human immune globulin is not recognized for the treatment of COVID-19, so I want the answers as to whether it has been—were these drugs actually used to treat COVID-19 patients? If so, how many patients benefited? What was the cost per unit of this drug? What procurement process was used and who was the supplier? And what was the total expenditure on this item? Madam Speaker, I raise this issue not because I believe that the Government should not incur this cost to save lives because that is what it is all about, but simply to ensure that the procurement processes used by the NCRHA was fair and can withhold scrutiny.

Madam Speaker, I move on now to the issue of public administration and digitalization. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in presenting this budget,

paid particular attention to the area of digital transformation. He signalled that a fully digital Trinidad and Tobago is central to the growth and diversification of the economy, and he indicated that the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation has been charged with the responsibility of directing the necessary changes to accomplish this objective. While this objective is laudable, Madam Speaker, it is not new. It started during the term of the People's Partnership Government.

As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, speaking at the VII Americas Competitiveness Forum in Panama in 2013, then Prime Minister, the Member for Siparia had this to say, and I quote:

“ICT can best be used as a catalyst for transformation - Education, Community, Business, Infrastructure and Government.

By focusing on educational infrastructure in development we are creating a labour force that is better equipped to deal with the challenges of the 21st century.

We recognise the urgent need for becoming innovative and embracing the latest technologies.”

This was in 2013, Madam Speaker, the words of the former Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC.

So whilst we take note of the Government's intention to beef up the Public Administration Ministry so to speak, because that is the delivery arm of the Government—of Government services, I just want to say and to ask the question really, what has been happening in public administration in the last five years? In fact, the track record of this particular Ministry in the last incarnation of this PNM Government has been particularly dismal, and this has nothing to do with the hard working public officers but mainly to do with the lack of consistency in leadership

at the level of the Ministers in this particular Ministry under this previous Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, no less than five Ministers headed this Ministry during this time. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this Ministry has underperformed in the last five years. Now, the Minister of Finance is hoping to awake the Ministry from the coma that this Government has allowed it to fall in, and I trust and hope that, you know, we can have some stronger leadership in this Ministry because I think going forward, public administration and the digitalization drive will be important for taking our economy out of the crisis it is in right now. But can we rely on this Government to deliver— to deliver on this promise, Madam Speaker? I do not know.

The Minister— you know, I read this budget debate, I read the Minister's statement and he is saying that in relation to the—it is called now MPDT, Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation:

“has been mandated to ensure that high-speed broadband internet access accompanied by the requisite ICT infrastructure is made available for all citizens.”

This is being said in 2020. Madam Speaker, I went back through the *Hansard* notes and in 2015, a former Minister of Public Administration, former Member for San Fernando East, and I quote here, with impartiality, with regard to the same. He is saying here that:

“It is that same resolve...Madam Speaker, that propels our vision to ensure that there is Broadband Internet Connectivity for every citizen who so desires.”

This is 2015, Madam Speaker. The Minister of Finance is saying the same thing in 2020.

So, Madam Speaker, you know what, when you look at what is happening, again, I spoke of the platform, platforms that were left in the health sector. Similarly, in the area of public administration and digital transformation, a lot was done and of course, there is a lot that can be built on. As way back as 2013, the vision of the People's Partnership Government was echoed by the then Minister of Public Administration, Carolyn Seepersad- Bachan, and I quote again here, this was the vision of the PPG:

The Ministry of Public Administration is charged with the responsibility for transforming public service into a 21st Century citizen-centric organization which provides the best highest quality and most accessible services at the lowest possible cost and the least inconvenience to the people of our country.

So that was a vision from then. What has happened one of the initiatives that was introduced by the People's Partnership and which carried on in to 2016 was the Diamond Buzz initiative looking at quality of service in the public sector, and because we know that is an issue now.

But the other thing that troubles me a bit, Madam Speaker, is the issue of ICT access centres. And I saw firsthand how these centres are important. And these centres, the vision then, in 2014, when the PP Partnership introduced these centres was that we would address what is called the digital divide, Madam Speaker. In other words, those underserved, and unserved and underserved areas, you know, would get these ICT access centres. This was a direct initiative of a Ministry under the Partnership called the Ministry of Science and Technology. And the idea was to allow citizens in rural areas to access ICT training, they were taught how to use the Internet and other technology, and they were associated Wi-Fi pavilions so if you had a device you could go and access the Wi-Fi, and so on.

And the plan was between 2014 and 2016 that 44 of these centres would be set up. And four were set up in 2014, Madam Speaker, in the communities of Guayaguayare, Cumana, Penal and a place called Marac, Madam Speaker. And I have been taking the opportunity during this COVID crisis to drive around Trinidad and Tobago and try to find—learn a little bit without breaching the public health regulations. I went to a beautiful beach called Columbus Bay in the south-west peninsula and had to look at it from through my windows for fear of being charged but nevertheless—but I did end up in the community of Marac, and it is really one of the communities that needs this kind of service because you drive and you feel that you are not—you know, you are going to the end of the world basically.

But these are the communities that have to be served and what I am saying is that only four were built under the PPG. Under the last five years, under the last PNM Government, only one more centre was added, Madam Speaker, I believe that is in Todd's Road. And I believe that the Government is madly scrambling now to open one in Carenage in the very near future. But I just want to say that this is a good idea and I support it, and that is the way forward, Madam Speaker

So the point is, Madam Speaker, had the previous PNM Government continued to build on the platform left by the People's Partnership Government, with regard to modernization of the public service and transformation into e-government, we would have been in a much better place today, right. We would have had digitized medical records, we would have had a lot more use of call centres. We perhaps could have been using the technology more, especially in the area of medicine and delivery of social services, and so on, and even things like call in prescriptions, and so on.

So, Madam Speaker, while we look at the measures outlined, we know it is

the future. We are very worried and very concerned whether this Government has the capacity and the ability to be able to deliver on these measures.

Madam Speaker, as I close, just allow me to refer to a few issues in the constituency of Fyzabad, and I want to congratulate the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West in his appointment as Minister of Public Utilities and to invite him to Fyzabad, Madam Speaker, and to ask him to drive along the roads that WASA recently “dig up”, Madam Speaker, dug up, and have left. And you know, this troubles me, Madam Speaker, as a former chairman of an authority, it troubles me to know that you could be in charge of an authority, you know, and you can go and dig up and do work and leave the road in such a horrible state. That just— I cannot understand that. [*Desk thumping*] This is something that is hard for me to comprehend. So Minister, I hope you would bring a breath of fresh air, I invite you to Fyzabad. Come drive on the roads and see for yourself, yeah? So let us hope that we can deal with that.

Yes, Madam Speaker, I also want to extend an invitation to the Minister of Education. There are several schools that have been left incomplete in Fyzabad, including one ECCE school. Many are close to completion, 70, 80, 90 per cent complete and I trust that the new Minister of Education would be able to address the issues with those schools.

There is also an issue with regard to lights on the highway from St. Mary’s Junction to Oropouche, that piece has been completed but there is the issue of lights that are not functioning and I trust that the Minister of Works and Transports would look into that.

As I close, Madam Speaker, I just want to close with a quotation. Well, actually not a quotation but a letter that a resident of Fyzabad sent me and this is something that we need to look at here as Members as, you know, we discuss all of

this, we discuss the allocations, and so on. But this constituent is saying:

Good day, one of the budget highlights are that of the freezing of public service vacancies. My name is—I will not call the name—and I reside at Gowers Well Road. I am postgraduate student University of the West Indies. I was an OJT at SRC and the contract ended in 2016. I was unemployed for three and a half years—three and a half years, Madam Speaker, university graduate—finally received a one-year contract last year. My contract ended last Wednesday and this is very disturbing as I do not know how long I would be unemployed again. Thank you.

So really and truly, this is from a constituent who is expressing her concern and this is really and truly what we really have to deal with, Madam Speaker, as Members of Parliament. And I trust that the work that we do here and you know, will really bring relief to the common, the normal person in the street, Madam Speaker. I want to urge all citizens to sanitize, to physical distance and to wear your mask, and to keep safe and to stay safe. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am heartened by the budget presentation made by my parliamentary colleague from Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance, Minister Colm Imbert. Also, of course, the input of my colleague from Arouca/Maloney, the Minister of Planning and Development, Minister Camille Robinson-Regis.

The Minister of Finance has prepared a budget for fiscal 2021 that is twofold. Firstly, this budget aims at sustaining the increasing economic activity in Trinidad and Tobago by providing the necessary programmes, initiatives and measures to achieve this objective. It is a stimulus budget. When the Government

of Trinidad and Tobago could have chosen austerity, we chose prosperity. [*Desk thumping*]

Secondly, this budget is people-centered. It provides the necessary support for all citizens to both navigate through this present COVID-19 pandemic while ensuring that our citizens can continue to enjoy a decent and acceptable standard of living. All of this is being done while protecting the most vulnerable amongst us. Madam Speaker, despite our present fiscal constraints, we are presenting a budget to achieve a number of objectives.

Firstly, we are utilizing resources to put the economy back on a growth track. Our expenditure to continue our infrastructure programme for fiscal 2021 is in the area of approximately \$4 billion.

Secondly, this expenditure will be utilized to advance a number of ongoing projects including the Solomon Hochoy Highway extension to Point Fortin and the Valencia to Toco Highway, as well as the start-up projects in health, education, housing and transport, and specifically in advancing the digitization technology initiative.

Thirdly, we expect that the multiply effect of these resources injections will permeate throughout our economy and provide the impetus for growth, employment, and a better standard of living for all of our citizens. Madam Speaker, that is what you call a productive stimulus. [*Desk thumping*] To complement Government's injection to improve economic activity, we will also take necessary initiatives and provide incentives for further development and expansion of the manufacturing and other economic sectors over the medium term. Some of these initiatives include building on existing framework to improve our ease of doing business and improve our competitiveness to attract a higher level of foreign investment; expanding our already improving performance of our single

electronic window; finalizing the implementation of an electronic funds transfer window to facilitate all payments to Government, such as taxes and custom duties by electronic means. We will also be advancing our thrust for e-Government by ensuring that all government services, where practicable, are automated.

Madam Speaker, we are seeing progress with our ease of doing business framework. We have reduced the framework for obtaining approvals for the statutory agencies, including the Town and Country Planning Division to build or to develop property. We have also started to move the process for obtaining building permits to an online mechanism. We intend to put in place several fiscal incentives and will continue to identify and remove impediments to the ease of doing business, so that this country can have an appropriate regulatory environment for businesses to operate and generate a higher level of economic activity.

Madam Speaker, the Government will also engage our economic partners and investors in identifying and participating in public-private partnerships, in infrastructure development and business enterprises, both in the energy and non-energy sectors in an effort to drive economic growth processes. Madam Speaker, this is how we put private sector capital to work in this economy. In addition to this stimulus through our investment programme and our incentives to drive economic activity, we will be introducing a number of measures, as well as enhancing other measures that are already in place to ensure that our citizens are lifted out of their respective economic and social burdens that exist in this current environment.

During fiscal 2021, we will go beyond the level of the social and humanitarian support we have provided for our citizens to alleviate the challenges faced in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. That support is presently estimated

at \$6.15 billion and it will be increased as we navigate through the pandemic. In addition to this expenditure, this Government will be introducing several tax allowances to stimulate economic activity and propel the economy toward a positive growth path. For example, we will increase the allowable rate of wear and tear for plant and equipment from 25 per cent to 30 per cent to assist businesses in their operations. We will be providing a boost to the construction sector, especially in housing as we increase our housing stock. In order to achieve our target of expanding our housing stock by delivering 25,000 new homes over the next ten years, we will engage the private sector, in particular, small and medium-sized contractors in our role out of public housing. Twenty per cent of our state housing construction projects would be reserved for small and medium contractors, Madam Speaker. This is how we are going to stimulate and also encourage employment within this economy. [*Desk thumping*]

To assist our housing construction programme, we will be removing the value added tax on the importation of building materials to be used exclusively for approved housing, commercial, and industrial development projects. Madam Speaker, while we are taking steps to expand our housing stock, we will be going even further. The Government will continue to take the necessary steps to provide our citizens with affordable homes. From fiscal 2021 and onwards, we will be making adjustments to some of the existing financial arrangements to purchase or rent a government housing unit, as well as enhancing the existing financing options for housing to be more affordable for new homeowners. These measures will go a long way in alleviating the high demand for state housing from the public.

Madam Speaker, as I mentioned earlier, we will be providing tax incentives on imported building materials for our housing construction programme. This measure is similar to the existing tax concessions granted to developers for

approved tourism projects. We will be extending the existing tourism accommodation upgrade project to continue the provision of additional support to the tourism sector.

This project is a reimbursable grant that will assist in enhancing the financial support required for the upgrade of properties in the tourism sector and tourism product, especially in Tobago.

5.15 p.m.

I now turn into an important issue at the forefront of this Government's ongoing agenda, that is, the availability of foreign exchange. As we expand our efforts to stem the high level of foreign exchange utilized primarily for imports of consumption goods, we are examining novel ways of generating foreign exchange to improve our foreign reserves and to make available the necessary foreign exchange for companies and industries to obtain the required foreign inputs for business activity. We will be transforming the Eximbank to facilitate the growth and expansion of the non-energy exporting sector, enhancing our foreign exchange earnings and assisting businesses in sustaining their employment levels.

Madam Speaker, additionally, Evolving TecKnologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited or eTeck, will now be a facilitator of commercial developments and will be targeting high-value manufacturing firms, particularly those firms operating in niche markets like our Moruga scorpion pepper and Moruga hill rice, and our famous specialty chocolate. We will be revisiting the establishment of an aluminum industry in this country, Madam Speaker, an industry that has growing potential for the manufacturing of high-value products, with spinoff aluminum production in steel pan, textile and garment manufacturing, household products and for cosmetics and petrochemicals. The Government is also engaged in improving the existing framework for companies operating under our

current free zone regime to establish a new special economic zones framework. This new framework will provide a modernized environment with international appeal, with the potential to attract new, dynamic and sustained investments and provide encouragement for new firms to enter and operate. As we work towards the digital technology transformation of our economy, this Government will provide the necessary impetus both at the business and individual levels. I now turn to our thrust to advance Trinidad and Tobago as a digital economy.

Madam Speaker, our investment in digitization and technology, together with our continued commitment and renewed thrust in improving Trinidad and Tobago's ease of doing business, we will prepare our country to compete in this digital age and attract significant foreign direct investment, which will have the positive ripple effect of creating jobs and new streams of foreign exchange. While the move towards a digital economy had become necessary in the globalized environment, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the impetus for a more concerted and accelerated effort on this front. Lockdowns and social distancing protocols implemented to contain the spread of the virus have restricted movement and, in many instances, production activities, resulting in the increased use of digital technology and making remote access to services the new normal. It has forced us as a nation at all levels, government, corporate and personal, to create and adopt new ways to remain productive and ensure business continuity.

Our survival and future development depend on our ability to quickly adapt and to effectively balance the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic with the need to maintain and improve our economic capacity. Accordingly, Madam Speaker, we are moving towards digital enablement of the economy upon which our ongoing institutional strengthening, development and diversification strategies will be grounded. In keeping with our development model, the Ministry of Public

Administration and Digital Transformation will lead this change that will reshape the way we serve the citizens of this country. Our commitment to leave no one behind remains a foremost priority. The main objective of transforming T&T into a digital economy is inclusion, which will allow Government to, firstly, better know all our constituents. This will be achieved with the creation of an electronic population register or e-register and will facilitate the easy identification of the most vulnerable groups so that we can better serve and provide for them. In this same vein, policies and programmes can be better tailored to meet the unique needs of the various citizen groups and facilitate a more equitable distribution of resources, aid and opportunities.

Secondly, reach a greater number of citizens. More citizens will be brought into the system and can be served more cost effectively and in a timelier manner as processes are streamlined for efficiency, and thirdly, provide more opportunities. The digital economy will not only provide an opportunity for the Government to improve our level of efficiency but also, opportunities for the participation of our young citizens who are already well versed and inclined towards the use of new technology, and for entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises to innovate into emerging niche markets and grow their export potential. To stimulate the untapped potential of digital transformation for growth and diversification and encourage the growth of the ICT sector in support of and as a means of navigating the Government's post-pandemic business landscape, we propose over the next two years to finance and provide incentives, where applicable, to entrepreneurs engaged in software and mobile application development; user interface design; call centre operations; quality assurance bug testers; animators; visual effects and electronic media; provide tax credits to businesses which invest in tech start-ups or new tech businesses in technology solutions and digitization as well as in

businesses which create employment in the technology industry, particularly for young people, Madam Speaker. These tax allowances are set at 150 per cent with a cap of \$3 million. [*Desk thumping*] Also, provide Government grants which will be made available for start-up businesses and establish a tech investment fund and a tech promotions and development company, and it will be available to all viable tech start-ups and new tech businesses.

In order to achieve the benefits of our digital transformation thrust, the foundation must first be laid. Having already removed taxes on computers, taxes on digital equipment will also be removed as early as December 2020. Additionally, we are cognizant that a digital divide exists and the Government, via the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, will be embarking on initiatives to bridge this divide by developing the necessary ICT infrastructure and making available to all citizens high-speed broadband Internet access.

Madam Speaker, to ensure that the population participates in this technology transformation of the country, we will provide the facilities and processes for individuals, especially young people, to access the necessary equipment, training and finance. Internet connectivity will also be provided to students through the introduction of a specific mobile device, Mi-Fi, to be used with our mobile devices, and we will also be expanding existing Wi-Fi hotspots and establishing internet cafes in remote areas of the country.

Digital transformation of our economy will impact our patterns of production and consumption and reshape how goods and services are produced, marketed and traded. While many countries have and are implementing e-Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is envisaged that citizens' expectations for delivery of digital services in the post-pandemic era will remain.

As such, this Government will be adopting a holistic, strategic and sustainable approach to digital transformation. To complement our digital landscape, we will be increasing our efforts to achieve full digitization of our Government services. There is an urgent need to improve the efficiency of the public service and this digital thrust will assist in driving the improvement in public sector performance.

Madam Speaker, according to the 2020 United Nations E-Government Survey, Denmark was ranked as the leading country in digital Government. A review of Denmark's digitization journey, which spans approximately two decades, shows the following results: annual savings of €296 million, a 30 per cent reduction in case processing time in Ministries, and a 96 per cent increase in transparency in Ministries and organizations.

Globally, at a micro level, digitization is transforming businesses utilizing technologies that are helping them deliver better, faster and cheaper products and services. Numerous technological advancements have played crucial roles in transforming businesses over time. A digitized economy will embrace the integration of digital technology into all areas of businesses to change the way they operate and deliver value to customers. It includes adopting a cultural change, experimenting with new technologies, and inventing new digital solutions. Madam Speaker, new digital-driven products and services are impacting every industry globally. This includes industries varying from entertainment, to transportation, to tourism. Digital transformation will help businesses create value, gain a competitive advantage, meet customer's expectations and drive more revenue, albeit at a more rapid pace. The end result will be an enhanced way of doing business, greater market penetration and a more robust GDP.

Our journey towards digital transformation now begins in earnest and we will maintain the political will and commitment required to achieve the desired

results. I have just outlined a few of the initiatives that the Government will be undertaking to enhance our productive capacity, provide a better enabling environment for our business sector to sustain a high level of business activity and achieve positive growth for our country. At the same time, we expect that the initiatives that we intend to undertake, together with the fiscal and other socioeconomic measures that we will be putting in place, will bear fruit for the benefit of us all. This investment in the economy is being undertaken while protecting the most vulnerable in our society and creating jobs and other opportunities at the SME strata of our economy. This is a stimulus budget which promotes prosperity and places more money in the hands of the average Trinbagonian. [*Desk thumping*]

One such measure that will increase the disposable income of citizens is the increase in the personal tax allowance from 72,000 to 84,000 per year. For those persons who have been negatively impacted and the vulnerable groups most at risk, I will outline our COVID-19 response strategy. Madam Speaker, there is no doubt that COVID-19 has disrupted the economy of Trinidad and Tobago in an unprecedented manner. It has been a wake-up call of monumental proportions, vulnerabilities have been exposed, thereby forcing a response from this Government to hastily move to protect the social environment.

Madam Speaker, when we decided to close our borders and implement the corresponding lockdown measures earlier this year, we understood the ramifications those measures would have on our citizens, especially the poor and the vulnerable. We understood what this meant. We knew these measures would have impacted negatively on the livelihoods of our people. Madam Speaker, we were confronted with the choice between life and livelihoods, health and economics, safety and the free movement of citizens. We conscientiously chose

life, health and safety. It is because of these decisions that we are here today engaging in a debate in this honorable House. With the understanding that our people's livelihoods will be affected by our decisions, we were not prepared to sit idly by and allow the associated financial implications of the pandemic to inflict unchecked, immeasurable pain and suffering on our people. Without hesitation, we approved a \$6 billion safety net to protect the most vulnerable people, [*Desk thumping*] households and enterprises in our country. This is why our mantra remains, we are leaving no one behind.

To reiterate what was read into the record of this honorable House by the hon. Minister of Finance on Monday last, we established a social and humanitarian support programme in which, 25,101 grants have been paid under the food support programme at a cost of \$17.1 million; [*Desk thumping*] 50,904 grants have been paid to individuals who had been retrenched or who had their incomes reduced or who have become additional beneficiaries under the food support programme at cost of \$219.3 million. [*Desk thumping*]

5.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, 20,500 grants at a cost of 31.4 million have been paid to households that receive meals from the School Feeding Programme and which are not current beneficiaries of food support; 42,451 grants have been paid as income support to current beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grant Programmes at a cost of \$22.5 million; [*Desk thumping*] 33,813 individuals who lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced have received 81,179 grants amounting to \$129.8 million in salary relief or income support grants; 2,818 grants were paid to senior citizens who had not yet received their Senior Citizens Pensions, each grant equating to \$1,500 in food support; 480 grants at a cost of \$1.5 million were paid to individuals who had not yet received their disability

assistance grants, with each grant equating to 1,000 in food support; 1,400 emergency hampers were provided to families in urgent need during the stay-at-home period at a cost of \$500,000; [*Desk thumping*] 25,000 food vouchers which included fresh produce, poultry and a grocery voucher were provided to families in need at a cost of \$6.3 million; [*Desk thumping*] 3,770 families have received rental assistance at the cost of \$16.3 million. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, this is how a caring Government operates. [*Desk thumping*]

Special arrangements for Tobago were also made, where the Tobago House of Assembly was provided with \$50 million to fund the Tobago Regional Health Authority with its COVID-19 related expenses. Madam Speaker, \$5 million was provided to the Enterprise Development Programme to assist small businesses and a special fund of \$50 million was created to provide grants to Tobago hotels and hotel upgrades and financial support. [*Desk thumping*] This instituted humanitarian support system, though unplanned and costly on the economy, was considered by this administration to be an absolute necessity and will continue in fiscal 2021 supported with the necessary allocations, because we understand that the pandemic continues to pose an unforeseeable threat to this country and the rest of the world. Madam Speaker, we have included in our new fiscal package additional measures that focus on technology and social protection which are expected to safeguard the poor and vulnerable in our society.

I now move on to social protection development, Madam Speaker. We will introduce new programmes that are geared specifically towards vulnerable groups, such as, single parents, children and youth and, especially, those who live in communities that are considered at risk. One of the more impactful programmes we will introduce is the integrated community first responders and data management system. This system will quickly identify those households, families

and individuals who faced exceptional challenges and prioritize their needs.

Another intervention targeting at-risk youth is the Community Recovery Programme, which was established by the honourable Prime Minister in July of this year. A committee consisting of social work professionals and community activists was established to design an action plan, which would guide the Government in how we retreat with the issues of victimization, economic deprivation and criminality facing our youth within those affected communities.

For the workforce, especially single parents and those who are victims of domestic violence, we are sensitive to the challenges they face which have been exacerbated by the onset of this pandemic. We will take the necessary steps to provide support schools and day care facilities and fund domestic violence centres, transitional facilities as strategies to end gender-based violence as best as we can.

The facts are that we no longer enjoy the levels of revenue that we did years ago, and it is no secret that the spread of the virus has impeded the strides which this Government made over the past term to stabilize and turnaround this economy. However, we will ensure that the social benefits provided by the State continue to reach those groups who are actually in need. This means that more must be done with less. We have identified the National Social Services Card System as one of the tools which will assist us in efficiently providing social services to the people. The card will use a unique e-identifier which will allow for the tracking of vulnerable persons and/or families, modernize delivery of social support programmes, encourage the use of locally produced goods and develop a register of agencies and individuals supportive of the vulnerable population. This card will assist in the prevention of abuse, double-dipping and corruption within the social services sector.

We move on, Madam Speaker, to digitization. Understanding the demands

and, in some cases, the hardships that are placed on parents, guardians, caregivers and teachers in our society, in light of the reopening of schools, we have removed all taxes on computers, digital equipment and cellphones. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, we are mindful that despite the removal of all taxes on these devices, there are still many persons who are unable to purchase laptops and tablets for their children because they simply cannot afford it. To assist those in need, we have provided the sum of \$50 million [*Desk thumping*] in this year's budgetary allocation for the acquisition of computers for needy students, and we will ensure that those who really need these devices will access them. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, when I can hear exactly what you are saying, it means you are disturbing the proceedings. Thank you.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you. We move on to agriculture. Madam Speaker, this pandemic has reemphasized, as a country, the need to feed ourselves. We can no longer place our food security in the hands of those external to us. We are all happy that this pandemic has pushed many of our citizens to try their hands at agriculture. Madam Speaker, we view this as a window of opportunity to grow the agriculture sector, as such, we have provided a \$500 million agriculture stimulus package to expand production, strengthen value and distribution chains and promote agriculture as an attractive activity and livelihood through facets of our society.

Manufacturing: We intend to continue our support of this viability industry. As a major creator of jobs and contributor of revenue, we will be putting measures in place to improve the ease of doing business, strengthen our VAT refund system, ensuring it becomes more efficient and effective, utilizing VAT bonds where necessary and transforming the Eximbank in a manner that it will facilitate the evolution of the non-energy export sector.

We also intend to establish a new national special economic zone regime, which will attract both local and foreign direct investments. We will also be focused on the development of non-traditional manufacturing sub-sectors which will include scrap iron, steel pan manufacturing, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals and medical marijuana, Madam Speaker. We expect these measures to bear fruit in the form of sustainable employment for thousands of people in Trinidad and Tobago and additional revenue streams.

I move on to construction. It is our strategy to jumpstart the economy through the construction sector, Madam Speaker. In addition to completing those infrastructural projects that are ongoing, we intend to make significant changes to the legislative regulatory and operational frameworks within the industry. This revitalization will have numerous positive spinoffs for our society as it will create jobs for thousands of persons, boost sales within the industry and improve the aesthetics of the country.

Housing, Madam Speaker. Over the years, the Housing Development Corporation has delivered over 50,000 housing units to the people of this country. Despite this large number, there are still many families who remain in need of housing. We are giving a commitment to the people of this country to construct 25,000 new homes on state lands through the accelerated construction programme, Madam Speaker. We are fully aware that not everyone's financial situation is the same, thus, we will introduce different tiers of housing solutions to people.

We recognize that there are still many people who may not be able to afford a \$250,000 home. In response to that issue, we will enable the Land Settlement Agency to construct homes costing less than \$250,000 [*Desk thumping*] utilizing the experiences from the Housing and Village Improvement Programme, and we expect this initiative to deliver a further 10,000 housing units over the next decade.

[*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, for those who already own homes, but cannot afford to repair them and may have turned to HDC for a new home but are still waiting on their applications to be approved, we will be providing home improvement and repair grants of up to \$35,000. [*Desk thumping*]

For those who have no interest in applying for state housing, we will be providing a suit of measure such as the provision of concessional home construction loans with a two-year moratorium on payments. The provision of concessional land purchase loans with a two-year moratorium on payments and establishing housing start grants of up to \$35,000.

We move on to public utilities, Madam Speaker. Water management and water distribution are contentious issues that we as the Government and citizens faced daily. It is less than ideal that in the 21st Century, there are many citizens who still do not enjoy a steady supply of water. We recognize this issue and we intend to fix it. To begin this process, Madam Speaker, we have established a sub-committee which will determine all the issues impeding the provision of this essential commodity by the Water and Sewerage Authority, and based on its recommendations, we will better informed to make the necessary decisions that need to be made. Although we have made overtures to improve our country's domestic supply of electricity and which have, in fact, improved the quality of life of our citizens, we are cognizant that more needs to be done. In light of this, we will continue to facilitate the upgrading of all of T&TEC's substations until we are sure that the people of this nation receive a steady and ongoing supply of electricity. [*Desk thumping*]

We move on, Madam Speaker, to the Workforce Recovery Programme. Apart from the provision of financial assistance to the people, it is important to know that the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme or YTEPP

Limited has partnered with the Commonwealth of Learning for the COL/Coursera Workforce Recovery Programme launched by COL and Coursera to address the employment crisis in Commonwealth nations. Young persons and the employed are encouraged to take advantage of the unlimited access to over 4,000 courses and 400 specializations on Coursera as a means to develop skills which are required for re-entering the labour market. This initiative will commence in January 2021, Madam Speaker. This Government cares about the youth of this country. [*Desk thumping*]

On to Tobago: Tobago unlike Trinidad faces a unique situation. The economy of the sister isle is buoyed largely by tourism and tourism-related businesses. With the ongoing travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the island has faced a significant decline in economic activity. We have been collaborating with the Tobago House of Assembly to provide relief measures to the people of Tobago. Some of these measures include: the Tourism Accommodation Relief Grant; the Business Relief Grant; the Business Relief Loan; the Relief Grant to Tourism Industry Ancillary services, a four-year soft loan facility with a two-year moratorium through First Citizens and Republic Bank for micro, small and medium business, and the Liquidity Support Loan Programme for the credit union movement.

Madam Speaker, to assist the people of Tobago in the area of food security, we will ensure that the allocations to the Tobago House of Assembly provide for the development of the agro-processing sector, the expansion of the Agricultural Access Road Programme and the provision of financial assistance to small and medium enterprises in the agricultural sector [*Desk thumping*] and the infusion of technology, modern farming techniques and research in agriculture.

In the area of housing, we will support the Assembly in the introduction of

the Accelerated Housing Development Programme in Tobago [*Desk thumping*] through the establishment of new housing estates and the provision of home improvement grants and subsidies.

As I conclude, Madam Speaker, I would like to reflect on the words of a great American investor, Warren Buffett. He states the best investment you can make is one in yourself. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has invested in infrastructure, invested in housing, invested in education, invested in SMEs, invested in technology and invested in our people. [*Desk thumping*] Soon enough, Madam Speaker, under the careful watch of this caring Government, we will reap the rewards of these investments as we march closer and closer to developed country status. [*Desk thumping*] In no small way, we are confronting an uncertain world and we have no alternative but to adapt and adopt new ways to navigate these perils. The challenges will call for us to sacrifice and prioritize for the greater good, and we shall prevail. I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rishad Seecharan (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to deliver my maiden address in this august Chamber. I would like to first thank my political leader, the honourable Member for Siparia, Kamla Persad-Bissessar for placing her faith in me. I would also like to thank the constituents of Caroni East for their overwhelming support of my political leader and the United National Congress. [*Desk thumping*] It is with a heavy heart I extend condolences to the family, friends and associates of the late Member of Parliament, Fitzgerald Jeffrey and parliamentary officer, Sheranne Samuel on their passing. Ms. Samuel was a rising star and she has left us too soon. They were both widely loved and respected by all. May they both rest in peace.

Madam Speaker, I would dedicate most of my speaking time to discuss COVID-19 and the Government's management of this deadly pandemic. This

highly contagious disease has made a dramatic impact on the global community. If I may think for a moment of what our faith would be without the Couva Hospital, it was the brainchild of my political leader and the Partnership Government [*Desk thumping*] and although not intended for the treatment of infectious diseases, it is serving the people of this great country with the highest distinction.

In almost every developed country around the world, governments are scrambling to construct new hospitals to treat COVID-19 positive patients. In Trinidad and Tobago, we had the luxury of simply designating the Couva Hospital as the flagship of our health care infrastructure. If it were not for its existence, we would have had to treat our COVID positive patients in our existing hospitals. Could you imagine having to go to the Mount Hope Hospital to seek assistance for your child who may be having an asthmatic attack only to see an ambulance with everyone in hazmat suits rushing into the emergency section? We on this side could not have asked for a greater honour to be bestowed upon the Couva Hospital. Its facilities have and will continue to treat our citizens during this unprecedented global pandemic. Our doctors, nurses and, by extension, our regional health authorities have made extraordinary sacrifices in the battle against COVID-19 and we will be forever grateful as a nation. [*Desk thumping*]

Lastly, I would like to offer my sympathies to the families of those who have fallen to this deadly virus, fallen but never forgotten. And before I begin, congratulations to the SEA students who have moved on to another stage of life. This year was especially difficult and I am sure—I will come back to this topic later in my discussion.

Madam Speaker, the World Health Organization defines a pandemic as the worldwide spread of a new disease. This requires the highest level of alarm and requires that we protect our citizens from sudden, unexpected outbreaks. Their

chief scientist has predicted that the death rate from COVID-19 will be 0.6 per cent should a reliable, safe, effective and available vaccine not be forthcoming, and I sincerely hope that one is. It is predicted that 70 per cent of the world's population will have to become infected before herd immunity is achieved. Herd immunity, right, occurs when a large portion of the community becomes immune to a disease, making the disease unlikely to spread from person to person. I heard the Minister of Health speak of 33 per cent of the population being vaccinated. We cannot achieve herd immunity with 33 per cent.

Madam Speaker, the United National Congress is a constructive Opposition, and we would never abandon the people of this country during this time of crisis. [*Desk thumping*] We would not criticize for criticism sake, but when the Government falls short, we will speak up and the Government has fallen short in protecting us from this deadly highly contagious disease. If you do not test, you do not record a positive result, thus your numbers will be artificially deflated.

The reopening of our country after the national lockdown was grossly mismanaged and has wiped out all of our earlier gains. As we have seen throughout this crisis, the failure to match soaring rhetoric with meaningful action has consequences for our country. Despite all the talk, and it has been extensive, I would give you that, the Government has failed to create a fully functioning test, track and isolate system. They have damaged public confidence and, in turn, put every citizen of our nation at risk.

Madam Speaker, I will treat with the management of COVID-19 in three phases: one, tackling cross-border health threats; two, strengthening our health systems; three, making services, supply and medicines more readily available. Let me deal with cross-border threats first. Madam Speaker, on the 12th of January, 2020, the World Health Organization confirmed that a “novel” meaning, new

Coronavirus had emerged in Wuhan City, China. Dr. Gopeesingh, my political mentor, and internationally renowned medical practitioner made a statesman's plea to this House in January 2020 and subsequently on two other occasions. Many on the other side were in this very Chamber at the time. Fast forward to October 2020, and we sit in this Chamber with masks on our faces and we give our contributions behind screens because we failed to prepare.

Madam Speaker, on March the 12th Trinidad and Tobago recorded its first COVID-19 case. A 52-year-old man with overseas travel and this is where the questions began. A visitor to our shores who returned to Alberta, Canada was formally diagnosed with the virus on March the 11th, a day before our first recorded case in Trinidad and Tobago. Canada had to tell us that COVID-19 was present in Trinidad and Tobago.

On March the 25th COVID-19 claimed its first victim, and may he rest in peace. We were well into the first wave of infection. At this time, you needed to have overseas travel or contact with someone who had overseas travel to qualify for a test, a policy decision that could have easily been changed and it severely limited the number of tests that could be administered to the public. This policy decision with the delay in registering private labs to perform tests severely hampered the true assessment of the virus. Then we went into a national lockdown and a period of apparent calm, only to be confronted by a full blown second wave.

Madam Speaker, on September the 12th the Minister of National Security—he is not here right now—said that the Government was doing everything in its power to deal with illegal immigration which many have blamed for the upsurge in COVID-19 cases locally. However, both he and the Prime Minister publicly stated that there was no evidence to support the claim that illegal immigrants were responsible for the rapid spread and the resulting second wave. So let us take it at

that. So where did the second phase come from? If it was not brought here by illegal immigrants, logic would suggest that it was here with us and when they were boasting that we were No. 1 in the world.

Madam Speaker, on May the 30th phase three of the reopening of the country began with tremendous fanfare after wide consultation with a bipartisan committee. But the mistake that was made was that two super-spreader events were allowed to occur right under our noses. You see, the decision was made to hold the general elections in quick time, while the numbers were still palatable. Thus, as the numbers rose, the election campaigning was an easy scapegoat, but the strange thing is, according to a Ministry of Health official, on August the 15th was that not one infected person indicated that they were present at a political gathering during the election campaign. Okay, perhaps, they were not being truthful, maybe. So how did the second wave happen? How did COVID-19 come out of whatever little pocket it was in?

Madam Speaker, on July the 20th, this administration instructed more than 19,000 SEA students to return to their schools to finalize preparations for the SEA examination. Almost two weeks from the day that these 19,000 students returned to sanitized schools with strict physical distancing in place, Trinidad and Tobago recorded 50 new cases: The Maraval RC Primary School, the ASJA Primary School, the Tacarigua Presbyterian School, the Arima West Government Primary School and the Iere Village Government Primary School were just some of the schools that had to be closed by the Ministry of Health. One month after schools reopened their doors to SEA students, the Chief Medical Officer confirmed that there was now widespread community spread of COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago. The question I would like to ask is, how many students contracted COVID-19 in this period? As many of you with children would know, children

pick up the common flu very easily, and in a short space of time the entire class will become affected. This is no fault to the child who diligently goes to school.

Madam Speaker, COVID-19, another name of it is the SARS COVID-2 virus, is one thousand times more infective than the common cold, that is why I am standing behind this screen. Our children were put at risk because of the decision to send the children to school while a general election campaign was in full gear. Madam Speaker, in most cases, the child would not present with symptoms with COVID-19. The data indicates that children are less affected by adults, and the clinical attack rates in the 0 to 19 age group are very low. That means children could be COVID positive and not be sick, not show any symptoms. That is why schools are the first institutions to close in a pandemic. That is the reason why the schools are closed today.

Madam Speaker, this virus did not fall out of the sky, it was here all along, and with 18,000 students returning to school, coupled with a national election campaign, the virus had the pathway to enter hundreds of homes in this country. We went from a full lockdown to a literal super highway for the virus to travel. These two events should not have taken place concurrently, and was a grave public health mistake. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services quoted a past US President during her contribution, I would like to quote one for this administration. Harry Truman says “the buck stops here” and not that the buck stops anywhere but here.

Moving on to number two, strengthening our health systems. I am not here to only cast blame, let me give some suggestions as well. I would like to discuss syndromic sentinel and event-based surveillance. Madam Speaker, what I wanted to hear in this budget was an increase in allocations for the enhanced surveillance measures that would be implemented to take us out of community spread, and I

did, but it should include testing for undetected disease in some groups, particularly, those at higher risks and with lower healthcare access for symptomatic testing.

COVID-19 data suggests that 80 per cent of infections are mild or asymptomatic, no symptoms. Madam Speaker, 15 per cent are severe requiring oxygen and 5 per cent are critical infections requiring ventilation. The National Institute of Health in America announced the importance of prioritizing tests that can detect people who are asymptomatic. A more lax approach to testing, experts say, could delay crucial treatments as well as obscure or even hasten COVID-19 spread in the community.

6.00 p.m.

With the arrival of the influenza season, surveillance of patients presented with acute respiratory infection as well as influenza-like illnesses/syndromes in the community, would support early detection of emerging COVID-19 but we await for your surveillance roll-out; talk is cheap. As well as, Madam Speaker, pandemic leave is not law, it is a recommendation and many of our most vulnerable cannot quarantine and be without a salary for two to three weeks. Many would choose to conceal their symptoms and carry on doing their jobs, thus infecting others. Madam Speaker, I would like now to move to testing, our testing rate is among the worst in the region. On July the 25th we performed only 6,000 tests for a population of 1.4 million or 4,500 tests per million. Grenada did 48,000 tests per million at the same time. St. Lucia did 13,000 tests per million; Dominica did 14,000 tests; St. Vincent and the Grenadines did 14,000 tests per million and this was at a time when we were reopening the country, asking students to return to school and conducting a general election.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The World Health Organization has stressed from the inception that more testing was needed, we did not do that and now we are suffering the consequences of this action. Our wait times for testing results are horrendous and in many cases have contributed to the deaths of patients awaiting medical treatment. As Dr. Bodoie said, doctors refuse in some cases to operate on some patients with unknown COVID-19 status. Mr. Deputy Speaker, another point I would like to make, consideration should be given to implement alert level prioritization, similar to the system we have to warn our population of an impending weather system. For example, in an effort to spell out the consequences of the increase in cases, the Quebec Government unveiled a series of colour-coded alert levels. Areas coded green would see few restrictions. Yellow zones would see more enforcement of existing rules, orange zones would see a target of added restrictions and red zones would see more widespread closures of non-essential activities. When the scheme was first announced on September the 8th, Quebec City was classified as yellow; Montreal was classified as green. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important to intensify our measures in areas that may need additional resources and even a localized lockdown to curb the progression of the virus.

I would now like to speak a bit about contact tracing. As our country makes a push into the digital economy, which I may add was pioneered by my political leader, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, [*Desk thumping*] our contact tracing has to be robust and reliable. Contact tracing is now as important as putting out fires and catching criminals, but the hiring of additional staff is not the only option available to our nation. The Minister of Finance spoke of an 80 per cent penetration of smartphones in Trinidad and Tobago. The secret of South Korea's successful response was its use of information and communications technology to test widely, perform contact tracing and disseminate information about the outbreak. South

Korea successfully flattened their curve in 19 days without enforcing draconian measures on the population and restricting movement. By March the 17th, more than 270,000 Koreans had been tested in a large part by drive-through and walk-through facilities. It also provided a smartphone app that sends people emergency text alerts about spikes and infections in their local area. Officials had the opportunity to communicate directly to the citizens and impart social distancing protocols via texts.

What is more, the Government facilitated telemedicine via smartphone apps. Its COVID-19 app, for example, gives the patient the ability to input their symptoms, get diagnosed and get connected to a doctor via phone where they would then be screened for COVID-19. Once a South Korean has tested positive or is suspected of coming into contact with somebody who has tested positive, the Government asked you to voluntarily download a self-quarantining app that allows you to monitor their condition and connect them to a doctor if needed. These apps also set off an alarm on a user's smartphone when they have ventured out from their designated area. The South Korean Government then publishes data on a map to show where each infected person has been for the public to view.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Vietnam the Government communicated in clear and strong terms about the dangers of the illness even before the first case was reported. The Ministry of Health in Vietnam has worked with telecom companies to launch an app that is similar to a neighborhood watch system and complements official contact tracing and has helped slow the transmission of the disease. This app includes a map of detected cases and clusters of infections that allows users to declare their own health status.

In the United Kingdom a system called the NHS Test and Trace app is currently in use. The app allows those who have been in close contact with a

person to be identified using their mobile phone. The United Kingdom also uses the Apple/Google Exposure Notification system. It is compulsory for hospitality, tourism, hair dressers and similar services to display a code to a patron before services rendered. I would like to ask the hon. Minister of Health, before you go digital in another sector to please use the country's resources to implement this initiative. We have the technical capability and the manpower to achieve this and the nation will greatly benefit.

Three: Making services, supplies and medicines available and more affordable. The priority given to managing the pandemic has interrupted some health services and programmes at our regional health authorities, including vaccination campaigns, maternal, child and reproductive health services, HIV/AIDS prevention and control and programmes for non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and mental health. On May the 12th, 2017, the Health Minister admitted that some drugs being distributed through the CDAP programme may be substandard. Now is the time to strengthen the CDAP programme as those with pre-existing conditions need access to the medication they require. The situation in our nation's hospitals has worsened with the stress and exhaustion placed on health care workers who are at a high risk of burnout, further straining the capacity of our local health care system.

We on this side would like to see some of the hundreds of unemployed doctors being given contracts to serve the country in its time of greatest need when the health systems are overwhelmed, both direct mortality from the outbreak and indirect mortality from preventable and treatable conditions increased dramatically. In addition, while some populations may not have been considered vulnerable at the outset of the pandemic they may now become so. Among them are workers in the informal economy dependent on a daily income who must comply with

stay-at-home orders, families living in crowded housing with increased risk of domestic violence and little space for physical distancing, and persons without access to running water to practise frequent handwashing. Stress generated by the physical distancing, self-isolation, quarantine, job loss, economic burden, working from home, as well as discrimination and stigma towards persons who have been infected with COVID-19 has triggered isolation, loneliness, fear, depression and anxiety among a large number of our citizens, and induced or exacerbated pre-existing mental health conditions and substance use disorders.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, women are on the front line of the COVID-19 response, making up the majority of health care workforce, thus displaying a key role in ensuring the well-being and resilience of their communities. With school closures, women's child care responsibilities are added to this burden, therefore in addition to being more exposed to the virus these women also face the risk of exhaustion and burnout. The COVID-19 outbreak has also worsened the already high prevalence of gender-based violence. Stress, economic and financial insecurity, as well as distancing measures and stay-at-home orders have exacerbated domestic conflicts and the risk of violence against women. The rapid transmission of this virus and the closure of our international borders pose a unique challenge for our response as international procurement of essential supplies such as PPE, medical devices and laboratory tests. Quality must always be verified as the market is flooded with products produced by unscrupulous actors. The critical need for PPE requires quality assurance processes to ensure that the procured items meet necessary specifications.

Up to 70 per cent of N95 masks which are certified in China do not meet US standards. This was found by the US National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety. These masks did not filter 95 per cent of aerosol particulates contrary

to what their name suggests. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a dentist I am faced with the reality of this pandemic on a daily basis. To perform almost any dental procedure we have to drill and when we drill we force air into the oral cavity which is then pushed back towards us, this is called an aerosol-generating procedure. Dentists are one of the most high-risk persons to contract COVID-19. My staff and myself, we wear full hazmat suits with face shields and surgical masks. Dentistry has become a most difficult endeavour in this pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stated that the virus could spread via particles that remain in the air and has advised for the use of air purifiers indoors. This has now been removed and is subject to further clarification, but the World Health Organization says evidence for aerosol transmission is not strong and the main route of infection is person-to-person spread through larger droplets from coughs and sneezes, but acknowledges that in enclosed crowded spaces with inadequate ventilation, aerosol transmission could occur like a dental practice. I am calling on this Government, I am asking you to please make air purifiers and extractor fans duty free to the general public as a matter of public health emergency. We in the dental community would greatly benefit as we protect our patients and our staff during these difficult times.

Vaccination: With respect to vaccination a vaccine is currently seen as the Holy Grail that would end the pandemic, but according to research done by the Royal Society we need to be realistic about what a vaccine could achieve and when. They said restrictions will be needed to be gradually relaxed and it would take in excess of a year, a year-and-a-half to roll a vaccine out. More than 200 vaccines are being manufactured by scientists around the world at an unprecedented pace. Some of these experimental approaches, such as RNA vaccines have never been mass-produced before and there are questions

surrounding sourcing raw materials, both for the vaccine and the glass vials that the vaccine comes in and refrigerator capacity; the Minister spoke to that.

Dr. Anthony Fauci estimates vaccinating people will have to take place at roughly 10 times the pace that we do our annual flu campaign. This would be a full-time job for hundreds of persons, trained staff. Has money been allocated for this vaccination programme to pay the staff? And what would we do when cohorts of people refuse to take the vaccine?—And there will be many. Do we leave them to fend for themselves or do we have mandatory vaccination for children to go to schools, or for staff in health care facilities and care homes? There are a lot of difficult questions. It is estimated that there will be a vaccine by the end of 2020, some kind of workable vaccine but it would not be widely available. It will be more likely late 2021 or early 2022 for us. The question is, will there be enough vaccines in the tune of billions of doses to be able to give equitable distribution around the world? This is a Government that had serious problems sourcing test kits. Are we to believe that these problems would not arise to get the most desired commodity in the world?

Caroni East, I would like to now spend a briefly—a few minutes on Caroni East, the constituency I have the honour to represent. Water, sanitation and hygiene—“wash”, this is an important component of reducing the risk of infection. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is cruel and unusual punishment that the Government is presiding over an increase in water rates when there are nationals in Trinidad and Tobago who do not receive a supply of this precious commodity. Residents of Lalloo Trace, of Chin Chin Road and Depot Road in Longdenville do not get any pipe borne water, not a drop. They depend on rainwater for survival, and when it does not rain they have to buy water with their limited funds by the truck loads. There are other communities in Caroni East which only receive an occasional

supply and the only time we see plenty of water is when it floods. But the water crisis is not the only challenge facing Caroni East residents, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the disastrous conditions of our roads almost defy description. Welcome Road North and South are probably the worst roads in this country and in urgent need of repaving. Esmeralda Road, which was recently adopted by the Ministry of Works and Transport is also in great disrepair. Ramgoolie Trace North, Boy Cato Road, Ross Trace in St. Helena require urgent repairs. Similarly, the Caroni South Bank Road, Madras Road, McNair Road. Then there is Chin Chin Road, Las Lomas No. 1 Road, David Toby Road, Lalloo Trace, Paul Augustus Road, Broadway Avenue and Rajasthan Lalla Road. These roads are riddled with potholes, broken bridges and craters, similar to what you would see on the moon.

Dr. Gopeesingh brought a Motion on the adjournment on these issues in May 2016, and he pleaded the case for Caroni East; four and a half years later the conditions of these roads have not changed. The poor state of the infrastructure extends to agricultural access roads. The Minister spoke about agriculture, the Minister of Finance spoke in lofty tones of his Government's commitment to the agricultural sector, but there is no evidence of that in the Caroni breadbasket. Pen Trace, Billy Hammond Road and Gillis Road were all paved during the administration of Kamla Persad-Bissessar. [*Desk thumping*] Since then they have been abandoned, creating great suffering for the farmers. The Minister of Finance, his measures announced cannot be achieved without the equitable development of all of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is unacceptable that while there is a move to digitization of our country, that there are people who do not have a supply of water for their daily needs. It is intolerable that roads could be permitted to get in such a condition of disrepair while the Minister speaks of creating a new and modern

society. It is deplorable that food producers see hell to get their produce to and from their fields while the Minister says agriculture will become the backbone of the national economy. This Government must govern for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is the only way they would achieve the ambitious goal of its budget in resetting the economy for growth and innovation.

In conclusion we may not ever be able to completely eliminate COVID-19 but we may get it down to such a very low level where many people are protected, either by a vaccine or having been previously infected. Until there is a treatment for COVID-19, the pattern and magnitude of the virus can only be controlled with the adoption of nationwide, non-pharmaceutical interventions such as personal protective measures, environmental measures, physical distancing measures and international traffic-related measures. We have reached a perilous turning point in the future of Trinidad and Tobago. Supporting people is the right thing to do. We must be very vigilant of our future. After five years of PNM governance the country is more divided and less prosperous. [*Desk thumping*]

Many have lost their jobs, many fear losing their homes and too many have lost hope. This Government must also recognize the specific challenges faced by older job-seekers, many of whom are becoming unemployed for the first time. Living with COVID-19 may be the new normal, but accepting drastic spikes in cases does not have to be. I want to be clear, both individual behavioural changes and proper policy interventions are required, every citizen has a role to play in preventing the spread. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, I wish to congratulate you on your maiden speech in this parliamentary Chamber, Member for Caroni East. I now recognize the hon. Member for Arima. [*Desk thumping*] My apologies, I would like to recognize the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, former Arima Mayor. [*Desk*

thumping]

The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand here today but first I must give thanks to God for granting me life and having the opportunity to officially address this honourable House for the very first time. On that same vein, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am truly and forever grateful to the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley and all the great members of the PNM administration for nominating me as the then candidate for the constituency of D'Abadie/O'Meara. [*Desk thumping*] However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I raise a high note of praise with extreme gratitude for the people of this great constituency that came out, all 11,864 and voted on August the 10th for the right choice [*Desk thumping*] and entrusted me with this honourable position to serve for the next five years as their Member of Parliament.

As my Oath declares, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will serve all my constituents without fear or favour as we continue to build this great and beautiful country. I thank my family for their continued support, and my extended family of Arima and the Arima Borough Corporation where I was first planted and was able to grow in this noble profession and calling of political service. I must also acknowledge all my councillor colleagues, aldermen, chairmen and mayors who under Kazim Hosein, the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development for adding to my life and contributing in some way or another on my journey to this honourable House. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it goes without saying, those of us who serve in local government understand the needs of the people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are here today in this honourable House to officially address the business of moving forward in a time when every country in the world is living with a high level of uncertainty on what exactly is the right step. For the first time in history all countries and its leaders are attacking the same

enemy and learning new ways every day on what should be the best course of action in an era of a pandemic. Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, COVID-19, the coronavirus has placed us in uncharted waters. However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on Monday, October 05, 2020, I felt a level of security, confidence and assurance when the hon. Member of Diego Martin North/East, our Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert laid in this House the Budget Statement 2021: Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, please allow me on behalf of my constituents to congratulate the hon. Minister for his intelligence, his care, for delivering and presenting to us the best and only way forward. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am relieved that in the time of this pandemic our country is in the safest hands going forward with a Government that has a plan and a vision that will take us successfully into 2030. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to say, a chain is as strong as its weakest link. While that may be true I can assure you and everyone else in this House that under the leadership and guidance of this administration there shall be no weak link and not one shall be left behind. [*Desk thumping*] I repeat, Mr. Deputy Speaker, no weak link and no one shall be left behind.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, today I not only stand here as the Member of Parliament for D'Abadie/O'Meara, but I also have the pleasure of serving this beloved nation as the Minister in the Ministry of Education under the judicious leadership of the Minister of Education, Dr. the hon. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly. Mr. Deputy Speaker, while we are greatly supported by a team of Ministry experts, while working with this young lady I can tell you, sometimes you simply need a mother's touch. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the chain that binds this nation together to make it stronger into the future is our children and their right to a sound education. It was the conviction of Dr. Eric Williams, and it is my belief still today, education

is the foundation by which our founding father built the future of this country with a vision seeing beyond colonial days, but seeing way into the future where every single boy and girl would be able to accomplish any dream; they place it in their minds and school bags.

Recently in an article by Noble Philip we are reminded of the fact that Dr. Eric Williams will go on to say:

“...‘education is one of the most important instruments of social change ... one of the fundamental goals ... should be the integration of the diverse racial and cultural elements in the community ... equalization of opportunity and privilege ... a more even distribution of a country’s wealth’.”

Our founding father even ensured that a well-equipped rigorous school teaching and placement programme would be made available to bring out its very best. Mr. Deputy Speaker, today I humbly stand as a product of this vision and dream, a child of very humble means, but given the opportunity and a right to an education—yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, an education system that brings out the very best in our children. I dare anyone in these hallowed halls to claim otherwise. Each and every one of us, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have benefited from a PNM education. Mr. Deputy Speaker, never before has this system been so tested that we are now called to be innovators of this very same vision to ensure not only our survival but the continued success of our future.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I truly believe that for such a time as this it has been ordained by God that this present administration, once again by the voice and the will of the people be given the great responsibility to lead this fight, a fight that we will surely win. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in quoting our *Public Sector Investment Programme 2021*, Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation, this Dr. Rowley-led administration remains completely committed to the promotion and

advancement of education, skills training and human development. [*Desk thumping*] However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been granted the honour of focusing and having the responsibility in the Ministry of Education for the Early Childhood Care and Education Division. The Early Childhood Care and Education sector, ECCE, plays a critical role in this Government's mandate through the increase in equity and access to quality early childhood education.

In ensuring that all these standards are maintained the following achievements are worth highlighting: public education drives are carried out where displays were mounted at various educational districts throughout the country promoting the ECCE and how it benefits the nation's children as we have realized that many persons were unaware of the role of ECCE. Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to expand a bit on the major role and function of this extremely major contributor to affording our child the right start to a successful future. ECCE is the first phase of the seamless education system in Trinidad and Tobago and targets children age three to four years. Its members work to coordinate, develop, manage programmes that are developmentally appropriate and promote the holistic development of young children, thus laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

6.30 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this division is responsible for programming, coordinating, monitoring all the ECC activities, monitoring all the ECCE centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago, advising agencies involved on the proper implementation of the programme, ensuring the physical conditions of all the ECC centres, and making recommendations to the respective agencies for improvement. It provided much needed professional advice where needed in the system. There are many achievements, one would be the seamless transition workshops conducted in all education districts with parents and primary school teachers to

create a strong and equal partnership between the ECCE and primary schools in order to improve educational continuity and facilitate an easier transition process for the children and their families.

Continued teacher training and development for all the members of staff in the following areas: curriculum, special education, early intervention, promotion and implementation of stream, science, technology, research, engineering, arts and mathematics, learning activities, resource making. All these sessions were aimed at improving teachers' efficacy for implementing quality, developmentally appropriate activities whilst meeting the needs of all the children in the ECCE environment.

The steel pan was introduced in the ECC curriculum. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 16 steel pans were distributed to eight ECC centres throughout the country, and 35 teachers and eight administrators have been provided with the necessary training to fully implement pan in the daily curriculum. This process is still ongoing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, laptops were distributed to all the ECC administrators and the process has been since extended thanks to the Minister of Education to all the ECC teachers. It is still ongoing.

Interviews were conducted at least twice per year to ensure adequate qualified staff at all ECC centres. The review and the updating of the current ECC curriculum is ongoing and there is constant consultation with both internal and external stakeholders, with more planned to be on the way.

Work has begun on the development of a quality assurance framework for the ECC sector, to improve quality and accountability. The data collection exercise is the first phase with the QAF as it provided baseline data on the private sector. The ECC census was undertaken during the period January 2019 to July 2019. The data collected will be used to inform driven policy development and decision

making. The data collection focused on three broad areas: demographic, cases of diagnosed or suspected abilities or disabilities as well as teacher qualification. The data was collected from 631 private ECC centres, and 1,729 teachers provided ECCE services to 17,758 three- to five-year-old children.

Following the data collection exercise, training was provided to private providers who participated in the data collection. The training was in collaboration with the Office of the Prime Minister, the Children's Authority and the Student Support Division of the Ministry of Education.

The workshops entitled, "Child Abuse Awareness" and "Early Identification and Intervention Training" were held over a two-day period in the north and the other in the south. The training was the activity for the data collection exercise.

A review of the standards for regulating the ECC services is being done, while the existing White Paper that was created in 2005—currently, the ECCE does not form part of the Education Act and this review is being done to establish compliance standards for the ECC sector.

In response to the pandemic at the start of COVID-19, all ECC administrators were provided with laptops to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning, and the facility as I stated before, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was extended to include the teachers. [*Desk thumping*] Thus far, 70 teachers have already received their devices provided by the Ministry of Education. Because of the Minister's foresight, in the coming months, laptop distribution will continue to ensure that all teachers are provided with the necessary devices. [*Desk thumping*] Additionally, the Ministry of Education further plans to outfit all centres with computers and Internet connectivity.

The Ministry has also recognized the need to equip teachers with the requisite ICT skills, thus the teachers will continue to benefit from the necessary

training. The importance of continuous teacher training is to ensure that they can adequately deliver the ECC curriculum in a developmentally appropriate manner, bearing in mind that screen time at that age is limited but we are preparing these children with digital education in a digital age.

We are also focusing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our learning management system. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, all ECC administrators took the time, energies and effort to ensure that all teachers and all students were contacted. In the coming months, laptop distribution will also be expanded to the children in the ECC and additionally, the Ministry of Education, once more headed by Dr. Gadsby-Dolly, plans to outfit all centres with computers and Internet connectivity.

The Ministry has recognized that the administrative department in the Ministry of Education with the ECC is second to none. Over the past five weeks we have worked hand in hand with a stellar staff headed by Ms. Carol Bhagwandeem. Along with online classes suitable for that age group, ECCs also provided weekly print media as well as daily original radio content on 91.1 Talk City, where at 9.00 a.m. from Monday to Friday, the national anthem, the pledge, the national motto, circle time, bringing our classes closer to you. Our ECC department as well as our communications department worked on this three-pronged approach because this is our children's first foray into the academic world. Thanks to the dedicated ECC teachers and the committed parents, our children will not be left behind.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the ECC community fully understands what I wish all our colleagues on the other side would also understand, we are all in this together. If we put the children first, we are putting our nation first.

As we move swiftly towards the digital education, it is imperative our nation's children are equipped for this new and emerging world. Our Government

intends to ensure that our children are trained well, receive the quality education and guidance to move forward. We are here to ensure that computer literacy becomes the norm and that our children at the age of three will have the necessary tools.

We are well aware that laptops were introduced under a previous administration. There were however flaws and weaknesses too numerous to list. But this PNM administration understands the need to not only provide laptops and access to devices, but to marry the provision of technology with the requisite training and the oversights to ensure a better-managed programme, which will benefit all our children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I belong to a party of planners and doers, with the wonderful Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis, we in D'Abadie/O'Meara, in spite of the global pandemic and great challenges, are neither going to be left behind in 2020 or 2021.

SMC housing initiative in Malabar Phase 3, seven three-bedroom single-family units are ongoing, started June 2020. The opening of the Arima Hospital, 150 beds, and employment opportunities that benefit all of D'Abadie/O'Meara. New housing units are currently on its way in Malabar. The WASA Multiphase Wastewater Rehabilitation Programme, a wastewater treatment plant for the Malabar catchment areas, was recently completed and now operational. The Central Secondary School will have a new two-storey building to house science laboratories, a music room and additional existing buildings, and will commence in early 2021. The Malabar Government Primary School involves the construction of a new primary, which is currently 75 per cent completed targeted for early 2021 completion. The widening of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway east and westbound lanes in the vicinity of the Mausica intersection and the O'Meara intersection. Mr.

Deputy Speaker, clearly D'Abadie O'Meara will be well taken care of. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I end as I began. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to contribute to the 2020/2021 budget debate. I once again give special thanks and acknowledgement to the various groups of persons who have afforded me the greatest opportunity of standing before you, my colleagues and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I am excited and hopeful about the kind of work my Ministry will be undertaking with the future leaders of this country, and with the teachers and parents who stand at the forefront of this very noble endeavour. I look forward to forging greater partnerships with all stakeholders in the sphere of education, and to fulfilling the mandate set by my Government to ensure that no child is left behind, and that includes our special needs children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish again to thank the Prime Minister and the political leader, the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley; the entire PNM executive and the PNM family; my constituents of D'Abadie/O'Meara; the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government; the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government; councillors; aldermen for their past support; the people of Arima Borough; my former colleagues; my predecessor, Brig. Ancil Antoine who walked with me throughout my campaign; former MP for Arima, Mr. Anthony Garcia and the former Mayor and MP Ashton Ford, for their commitment not just to me, but to the People's National Movement; my family, and I also pay tribute to all arms of the Ministry of Education under the astute leadership of the Minister, hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly and her amazing team within the Ministry. I especially wish to thank the Permanent Secretaries of the Ministry of Education, the Deputy Permanent Secretaries, managers and the CEO, who are all tirelessly working to ensure the delivery of high quality education to our nation's children.

Finally, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I salute the teachers, the educators and administrators who continue to undertake their duties with great integrity and commitment, especially during this pandemic and to the nation's youth, I urge you to fully utilize our digital initiatives to continue to grow and learn and innovate wherever you are planted. I assure you that you have my constant and unyielding support, guidance and commitment. I am of the firm belief that together, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we can achieve great heights and emerge triumphant in this pandemic.

I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I would like to congratulate the Member of Parliament for D'Abadie O'Meara on her maiden contribution in this parliamentary Chamber.

[*Desk thumping*]

I now recognize the Member for Couva North.

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (*Couva North*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to enter this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2020.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my political leader, the Leader of the Opposition and Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, for her expression of confidence in me to serve the constituents of Couva North as their Member of Parliament.

Through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I take this opportunity to say a special thank you to all the constituents of Couva North who came out in their thousands for asserting me as their chief servant to represent them in this august House. [*Desk thumping*]

As your Member of Parliament, I want you to know that I am here to fight for you, whether it is about the poor state of the roads, the lack of maintenance of

our water courses, the deplorable facilities for our fisher folks, the lack of job opportunities, the escalating crime in our communities, the lack of support for our families in education, such as laptops for our children, I have heard your cries and I am here to stand with you, to stand for you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to congratulate the Member before me from D'Abadie/O'Meara on her contribution. I sat and I listened, and I heard her speak well about ECC centres and how valuable and important of a role they play in the development of our children's future. I would like to use this opportunity to invite the hon. Member to the constituency of Couva North, to accompany me on a site visit to the Waterloo ECC centre, a centre that was completed by the People's Partnership, but what was left abandoned for the last five years. So that we would be in this together, as she said, and where no child would be left behind. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hinds: Take you by the Brian Lara Stadium.

Mr. R. Ratiram: When I sat here on Monday and listened to the hon. Minister of Finance present the 2021 budget, I was hoping to hear about measures to ease the burden of our citizens. I thought this budget was going to reinstalled confidence in our citizens during these trying, turbulent times, but like most of our citizens, I was sorely disappointed. What I heard from the reading of this 2021 budget was more taxes with the implementation of the dreaded property tax, lack of job opportunities by the freezing of all vacancies in the public service, higher utility bills, higher fuel prices and higher cost of living, which will affect every single one of us. This budget has shattered whatever little hope that was left for our citizens.

The hon. Minister of Finance began by acknowledging the decline in the contribution by the agriculture sector to GDP. By his own words, the hon. Minister stated took place despite consistent investment by the State. Does this sound

familiar, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Well it should, because for the last five years, the Minister of Finance has said the exact same thing for every single budget. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in evaluating its agriculture policy in every budget between 2015 to last year, it is clear that this PNM Government has thrown in the towel on agriculture. [*Desk thumping*] Not only that, but what anyone can easily see is the breadcrumb trail of broken promises that this PNM Government has left behind.

Every budget day since September 2015, the hon. Minister of Finance religiously comes to this august House to tell the country what the Government recognizes, what they intend to fix, what they have targeted, yet the contributions of the agriculture and fishing sector to GDP remains well below the 1 per cent target.

In his budget presentation last year the hon. Minister of Finance was only too eager to boast that, and I quote:

“...our Prime Minister is the first Prime Minister who has seen the benefit of having an advisor on agriculture in the Office of the Prime Minister.”

Yet, Mr. Deputy Speaker, four days ago, the Minister of Finance told the nation that even with numerous generous incentives and the availability of cheap state land for production, investors and farmers have been unable to overcome consistently the structural impediments inherent in the agricultural sector. That said, I was expecting to see somewhere in the Draft Estimates of Revenue, a reimbursement to the Consolidated Fund for every single dollar spent behind that so-called advisor on agriculture. [*Desk thumping*]

Do you know what else I did not see in the estimates, Mr. Deputy Speaker? A sum of \$500 million representing a stimulus package to the agricultural sector. The Minister of Finance attempted to invoke smiling faces by sending persons into a frenzy when he gave the impression that there is some additional 500 million for

an agriculture stimulus package, even alluding to the fact that it represents a 70 per cent increase over last year's allocation. This is not only a total untruth, but a shameful contradiction of the facts. [*Desk thumping*]

In the first instance, nowhere, and I repeat, nowhere in the estimates is this 500 million to be found. Nowhere in the Bill was it to be found. The question that arises therefore is whether the Minister is counting his eggs before they are hatched. Where is this 500 million coming from? If it is not represented in the accounts, why is this PNM Government misleading the population? Do they intend on borrowing more from their friends, family and financiers at exorbitant interest rates, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

If one looks at the realized expenditure in the 2021 allocation, it is only \$695,267,700, which is approximately 63.6 million less than the 2020 estimate of \$758 million. In other words, an 8.4 per cent decrease over last year's allocation for agriculture, and that is what this budget represents. I pause there for this disputation to sink in, as I move on the macro picture for agriculture.

With respect to the macroeconomic plan for the agriculture and fisheries sector, this PNM Government has none whatsoever. There is an absence of data under this PNM. Immediately after this Government came into office in 2016, according to the Central Bank Data Centre, the total agriculture sector output declined by 23.4 million. This represented a 6 per cent decline from 2015 when the Partnership was in office. It therefore comes as no surprise that no data was presented for the years 2017, 2018 and 2019 on agriculture's contribution to GDP. This Government is hiding the statistics to cover up their incompetence in the sector.

What we have seen over the past five years is a declining annual allocation, which in 2016 was about \$1.18 billion that whittled down to a meagre 592 million

in 2020. This fiscal year, the Government has allocated approximately 695 million and expect a miraculous turnaround in agriculture and fisheries. If one examines the state of agriculture at the macro level, one can easily see that the issue is not just the level of investment into agriculture and fishing but for the past five years, the PNM has been, as the saying goes, “spinning top in mud”, operating without any plan for this sector.

The World Bank in a statement on food security and COVID-19 indicated that they are alarmed by a potential rise in food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the World Bank also noted that many countries and organizations are mounting special effort to keep agriculture safely running as an essential business. Focus on mounting food insecurity should serve as a notice to Trinidad and Tobago to set definite targets for food production. Sadly, the PNM’s plan, their so-called “Roadmap to Recovery”, is weak when it comes to specific and measurable targets for food production. This Government has failed to put the nation to work in food production. Despite this Government’s ranting about the agricultural sector being the focus, data from the Central Bank Economic Bulletin for July 2020 shows that the general level of employment in the agricultural sector has not improved under this Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is interesting that the Minister of Finance spent most of his contribution on agriculture, pointing to the failures of his PNM Government in the sector. They have spent over 275 billion in five years, but nothing has changed in the agricultural sector. [*Desk thumping*]

When it comes to renewal of state leases, they have failed. When it comes to strategic investment in the sector, according to the Minister of Finance, the PNM has failed. The Minister simply mentions spending 500 million, but what will be the implementation of this? Another failed promise waiting to happen.

For over five years they have promised to develop a comprehensive agricultural sector plan with a view to significantly increasing the sector's contribution to GDP and employment. Is it any wonder why the Minister of Finance admitted four days ago that, and I quote again:

“...the contribution of agriculture to national”— GDP— “declined...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, where is the plan? Where is the plan? Where is the plan?
[*Desk thumping*]

One of the fundamental and key components to any agricultural sector plan is an agricultural census. Without such a census there is no empirical data on which to formulate a proper plan. The hon. Minister of Finance promised to introduce a wide-ranging programme of tax and duty concessions, subsidies and waivers for agricultural chemicals, vehicles, fishing vessels, equipment and pest control. The fact is that many of these concessions and waivers were already given under the People's Partnership. [*Desk thumping*] But this PNM Government, instead of working on tangible ways in the first instance to assist with the registration of new farmers, and secondly, to assist the farmers in accessing these concessions, they have missed the mark entirely.

If the Government was not doing such a great job, why then did the Exchange farmers come to this Member of Parliament stating that their members are no longer in receipt of subsidies, because the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has refused to honour their cultivation agreement?

This Government also promised to provide financial assistance for the rehabilitation of abandoned or underperforming estates. However, as I am sure is the case all over the country, in Couva North, between Union Village and Orange Valley, there is a massive ongoing land grabbing activity which this Government seems to be facilitating.

7.00 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite their promise to improve compensation to farmers—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6), “the Government is facilitating land grabbing”? 48(6), please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, I would like you to extract, withdraw that statement. And when I say, you can decide how you want to format it but I would like you to withdraw. Withdraw, so you need to acknowledge. Yes, I withdraw and you proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Guided accordingly, I withdraw. Thank you for the guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite the promise to improve compensation to farmers for losses of natural disaster, farmers, bona fide farmers came to me complaining that they are waiting on compensation for over one year now. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, perhaps the most glaring of these broken promises was the assurance to provide financial assistance and financial support including readily accessible credit facilities and fiscal incentive including reduced rates of taxation for farmers, yet still farmers from the goat and sheep sector have met with me and complained that they have to pay high commercial rates for electricity.

In the 2018 budget presentation the Minister of Finance announced the launch of an agricultural support programme with grants to both new and existing farmers of up to \$100,000. He further stated that the PNM was committing 20 million in the first year of this programme.

In October of 2019 the hon. Minister returned to the Parliament one year later promising that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will then launch the programme. Since then in my discussions with stakeholders and in my

search for an update on this programme, it was pointed out that well over 1,000 persons applied for the grant but only three from Tobago were fortunate enough to receive funding for this initiative.

As we are on the subject of feedback from industry stakeholders, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a fear that with mass joblessness across the nation and high prices of imported food, families' nutritional requirements are suffering under this PNM Government.

Based on my stakeholder consultation there is an urgent need to establish and price a basket of goods to determine if families could afford to purchase these goods to cater for their daily caloric intake of 2,000 calories. We on this side know that families are suffering under this Government due to the numerous requests of food card and hampers and the number of persons coming to our offices for assistance. Initiatives must be put in place to facilitate the conduct of a survey of living conditions to establish the level of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago but this Government by their taxation policies are ignoring these basic needs of the masses.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, farmers live in constant fear of their crops, machinery, vehicles, pumps and other equipment being stolen at any given moment. This has a crippling effect on a farmer. Having met with several farmers I understand the pain that farmers endure when crops are stolen, stripping them of their livelihood.

Farmers are reluctant to make reports claiming it is a waste of time with a success rate of less than 1 per cent. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I saw posted on the social media page of a prominent goat and sheep farmer a plea to the hon. Minister of Finance for resources to be urgently allocated to our praedial larceny officers. The sad part is that despite spending billions of dollars each year on a national budget, the Praedial Larceny Squad remains understaffed, underfunded and frankly are left out-manoeuvred by the criminal elements that torment our nation's farmers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I turn now to the challenges affecting our fisherfolk. Due to the closure of Petrotrin regular gas became unavailable to our fishermen. Did the former Cabinet even consider for a moment what this would mean and how this would impact on the lives of our fishermen? No, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they did not.

Did they consider that the operating cost for our fishermen was going to increase? No, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, now they speak of the liberalization of the fuel industry. This will, again, create an additional burden on not only the fishermen but every single citizen who will now be at the mercy of the gas station owners. This soon-to-be-formed cartel will now control how much we pay at the pumps affecting every single industry across the board. In other words, with the liberalization of fuel prices our fishermen are now at the mercy of the big fish.

Let me turn to the youth in agriculture. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the youth of our nation are looking around for opportunities. There is massive joblessness and a high level of graduate unemployment. The agriculture sector presents an opportunity for them to become self-sustaining agri-entrepreneurs. However, if they try to get financing to participate in the sector, they are faced with a long list of obstacles. This budget presentation offers absolutely nothing to address these issues. And what are these issues? One, a young person's first challenge when they approach the Agricultural Development Bank or their credit union is land tenure. If they are able to get over the land tenure issues and scrape up the funds to farm, they have to fight off praedial larceny attempts and general security issues such as what happens to farmers when they are making their exit out of the Central Market in Port of Spain.

While they are preparing their crops, they find that the subsidy regime is not

to their advantage for fertilizers, pesticides and equipment. Then having faced these first three, if by some miracle they are able to reap their harvest, they face the deplorable state of agricultural access roads. By the time the exhausted young farmer arrives at the market, they face the uncoordinated and harsh pricing scheme for their produce that earns them barely enough to pay their costs and their lenders. And finally, they have to do it all over again, day in, day out, rain or shine, Sunday to Sunday, no holiday.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I submit on behalf of all the farmers of this nation our pineapple farmers, our cocoa farmers, our rice farmers, our fruit and vegetable farmers, our root crop farmers, our livestock and dairy farmers, our beekeepers and including our fisherfolk, that unless this Government owns up to the poor and failed state of the agriculture sector after five years of government we cannot make the sector attractive to new farmers and to the young people of our nation.

This Government has proclaimed that they will position agriculture as the engine for economic transformation however, when you turn to the Roadmap to Recovery and its report for agriculture it fails to present a decent plan. What it does mention however is that the industry is to benefit from a 500 million stimulus package and this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the hat from which the Minister of Finance pulled the rabbit straight into his budget presentation. [*Desk thumping*] The Roadmap to Recovery does not have any details on how this 500 million will be spent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to tell the hon. Minister that goals must be SMART. Goals must be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound but instead, Mr. Deputy Speaker, their Roadmap to Recovery had no specific target, no measurable target, no targets whatsoever. [*Desk thumping*]

Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is no yardstick that the stakeholders in

the sector can use to determine the success or failure of the plans. By comparison however, if one turns to the UNC's economic transformation master plan you will plainly see our plans for agriculture and fisheries laid out as cogent solution for the sector. [*Desk thumping*]

One of these is that the Government create an agriculture park in strategic locations throughout the country to kick-start new agricultural activities by leasing 5,000 acres of Caroni land to registered farmers and private sector investors. Nowhere in this budget presentation does the Government speak to mandating local content for agriculture. We on this side proposed this via a buy local agricultural campaign. What the PNM put forward as they pursued their objective of taxing our nation into prosperity is a tax to be imposed on luxury food items and there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is where the fundamental difference lies. On one hand you have a progressive approach towards food security, while on hon. Members opposite seem to embrace only regressive thought and policy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what the hon. Minister of Finance is proposing as a solution for the challenges facing the agriculture sector is a pie in the sky precision, vertical, digital, technological-advanced agricultural system. These are far removed from the real issues that farmers are currently facing. Farmers are more concerned about the basic necessities required to effectively execute their trade, such as the renewal of land leases, their security of tenure, development and improved maintenance and upgrade of agricultural access roads, proper irrigation and drainage systems, timely payment of subsidies and incentives and an improved concession structure for all farmers. This is what is definitely going to assist our farmers in uplifting the industry.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the issues specific to the consistency of Couva North. At this time I will not

speaking about the deplorable road condition along the Chandernagore Perseverance Road, the Waterloo Main Road or the road leading to the Carli Bay facility. I will not speak about the poor lighting at the Bay. I will not refer to the jetty that needs rebuilding so that fishermen will not have to wait for the high tide to cast off or to come back in from fishing. However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will use this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Carli Bay, Orange Valley and Brickfield fishing community who face several difficulties on a daily basis as they ply their trade. These issues, if addressed, will bring significant improvement to the many fishermen not only in Couva North but across Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to highlight the pressing issue of safety and security, an issue that not only presents itself to our fishermen but to every single citizen in every walk of life. Mr. Deputy Speaker, can you guide me with how much more time I have, please?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have just about 12 more minutes.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much. The woes of these fishermen started when their safety is compromised as pirates and illegal immigrants are allowed to roam freely into our unprotected borders. Our fishermen are at mercy of bandits who attack them, not only out at sea but also on land, and as they prepare to earn their daily bread and their nets, boats and engine are sabotaged and stolen. Mr. Deputy Speaker, these young men are also beaten and killed.

Let me take you on a trip down memory lane when the bodies of Anand Rampersad, Brandon Kissoon, Hemraj Sooknanan, Leslie De Boulet and Shiva Ramdeo were fished out of the Gulf of Paria. Still missing are Jason Baptiste and Justin Kissoon. They were slaughtered and their bodies were dumped at sea. My heart goes out to the families of these young men, and to all the families that have lost a loved one because of crime.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on November 08, 2018, it was reported in the Trinidad *Guardian* newspaper that the Minister of National Security stated that:

“...border security initiatives will involve getting 14 Coast Guard interceptor vessels up and running in the shortest possible time.”

This is in 2018. The article went on to say that the cost of getting the interceptors operational was a \$6 million, and that these vessels would be strategically placed to defend out porous borders.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, can the hon. Minister of National Security advise, other than the two interceptors that were handed over at Charlotteville as reported on the 4th April, 2019 in the *Newsday* newspaper, what has happened from then to now to provide security for our fisherfolk, taking into consideration that as recent as one month ago another fisherman lost his boat at Carli Bay Fishing Facility. Has the refurbishment works of these 12 vessels been completed? Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second.

Mr. R. Ratiram:—over the years—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second, Member. Minister of National Security, you—

Mr. Young: I am looking for my Standing Orders.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please do. Please do.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, can I continue?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, over the years Couva North has become a destination point for local and international tourism. Persons come from all over the world and from all corners of our country to visit the beautiful 85-foot Hanuman Murti, the historic Siewdass Sadhu Temple in the Sea, the SDMS Indo-Caribbean Museum and the resplendent Scarlet Ibis roosting in our mangroves. While we enjoy the ambiance of these precious sites, visitors are traumatized to

traverse some of the worst roads with countless potholes which I witnessed first-hand throughout the constituency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I take no pleasure in saying that in some parts of our constituency the main roads cannot be distinguished from agricultural access roads. For five years the level of neglect that the constituents of Couva North have faced it is one that is very sad. Bridges are impassable, and those that are on the verge of collapse have remained that way to this very day. Drainage issues plague the constituency, and because of negligence after only a few minutes of rain flooding occurs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the level of poverty and unemployment I have witnessed in Couva North is extremely depressing. Couva North was once the heart of the agriculture and agri-business activity. It pains me, as much as it pains my constituents that after wanton neglect and excuse upon excuse from central government, Couva North cannot tangibly benefit from the 275 billion that this PNM Government has expended over the past five years.

I now turn the country's latest pest, the giant African snail. Since 2018 the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in the bulletin debate of fiscal 2019 stated:

A giant African snail is not just something that looks repulsive but carries and is capable of carrying meningitis and if handled with bare hands there can be severe consequences.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in that same speech said that the giant African snail move from Diego Martin to Orange Grove to Santa Cruz to Couva to Tarouba. This snail has moved all over the country but two years later the response by the Government is still to play catch up. They have moved at a snail's pace and has even succeeded in being slower than the giant African snail

which has now overrun the nation. Across the nation farmers are plagued by the giant African snails. When I visited the Cunjal food crop project in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland it was prevalent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, right in our constituency of Couva North I have met with farmers and constituents who are plagued by the same the phenomenon. As a result of this mismanaged malignancy, farmers and citizens throughout the country are losing the fight against this dangerous pest in their farms and their kitchen gardens.

During this time of despair agriculture has provided the comfort for many families struggling to cope with the COVID-19 global pandemic. With unforeseen lay-offs resulting in mass unemployment, breadwinners need a means to provide for their family. Many citizens found solace in micro agriculture by way of their kitchen gardens, and as such were able to ease their grocery bills. Some even turned to agriculture as a previously unforeseen way of earning a living. Perhaps it is an old and unfortunate twist of fate that as oil prices remain low and global economies are surrounded by uncertainty, agriculture has stepped up to the plate. However, what this has proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is that agriculture will forever stand tall as a pillar of stability when all else comes crashing down upon us. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is time to return to giving agriculture the respect it deserves.

In concluding, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say to all our citizens that Trinidad and Tobago is now facing its darkest hour and the people need the UNC more than ever. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in our fight to recover I want us to always remember the five years of prosperity this country experienced under the astute leadership of the hon. Leader of the Opposition the Member of Parliament for Siparia the hon. Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker,

[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I would like to congratulate you, Member for Couva North, on your maiden speech in this parliamentary Chamber. [*Desk thumping*] I will now recognize the Member for Laventille East/Morvant. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Adrian Leonce): Good day and thank you for the opportunity to participate in this 2020/2021 budget debate.

I would like to lend my voice to those who have gone before me on this side in congratulating the Minister of Finance and his team for the work that went into this budget presentation. I am sure it was not an easy task given our current economic circumstances, however, I am very optimistic that the measures cited will create the kind of opportunities at this time to foster economic stability, growth and development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you are aware I was recently appointed in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Under the leadership, wisdom of the hon. Penelope Beckles, it gives me great satisfaction to report to this honourable House the work that the Ministry has been doing quietly with respect to urban revitalization in this portfolio. I would also like to share with you the proposed plans for this fiscal which will bring much needed relief to the residents of east Port of Spain and environs.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is responsible for the development, regeneration and revitalization of some of the country's urban spaces. The Government recognizes that some of the core areas of our urban regions need some attention. As such, the Ministry is committed to improving the living conditions of residents in east Port of Spain and environs. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we all know east Port of Spain which stretches from

Charlotte Street in Port of Spain to Lady Young Road, Morvant, the Eastern Main Road in Laventille, includes communities like Morvant, Never Dirty, Caledonia, Beetham, Sea Lots, Katanga, Picton and we can go on and on. These communities which are densely populated, are for the most parts situated on difficult terrain and steep topography which increases its vulnerability to withstand natural and man-made disasters. This also poses some constraints in effecting infrastructural works and the provision of basic services in some areas. Therefore, the Government through the Ministry and its implementing agencies namely East Port of Spain Development Company Limited is focused on alleviating poverty in this area through a series of holistic measures. This is in keeping with the Government's vision for the development of the wider metropolitan district of Port of Spain as a vibrant, resilient and sustainable city.

As such, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry's strategic intent is to transform and revitalize east Port of Spain by improving the physical infrastructure and providing socioeconomic opportunities that will add value and enhance quality and standard of living for the residents of this area. This will be achieved through infrastructural upgrades, housing projects and the provision of business opportunities for private sector investments and entrepreneurial activities.

The East Port of Spain Development Company is responsible for carrying out infrastructural upgrades in east Port of Spain. The infrastructural projects funded under the IDF are carried out mainly by small contractors and workers from within the communities thereby contributing to its economic growth which is very important for the residents within the area.

As you may be aware, there are still and exist urgent development issues in Port of Spain regarding the use of outside lavatories. To avoid widespread public health implications, as well as issues concerning environmental sustainability, it is

important for us to adopt practices with respect to the management and disposal of solid waste and sewerage. As such, the East Port of Spain Development Company plans to continue the latrine eradication programme. Over the last five years 280 families have directly benefitted from this through the construction of over 180 units. There have also been 50 local small contractors employed on this project, not to mention the number of economic linkages that continue to support and sustain local business within the community.

Upgrades to sporting and recreational facilities such as pan yard upgrades are also considered to be a significant economic driver, contributing to the development of small contractors and providing local employment. [*Desk thumping*]

7.30 p.m.

Additionally, residents will access quality sporting facilities. Some of the projects proposed include upgrades to play parks, construction of gyms and upgrade to hardcourt facilities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is anticipated that these interventions will lead to safer communities and an improved quality of life for residents. The desired outcome is to create communities that have attractive spaces for living, working and investing, so as to increase the opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. In addition to infrastructure works carried out by the East Port of Spain Development Company, and in keeping with the Government's sustainable development thrust, the Ministry will be implementing the Urban Regeneration Component of the IDB funded, Urban Upgraded and Revitalization the programme.

This programme will facilitate the upgrading and revitalization of certain areas in the country, including east Port of Spain. The aim is to improve the quality of life for low to middle income families along the East/West urban Corridor.

Some of the objectives of the programme are to develop infrastructure of informal settlements on state owned lands, to provide housing subsidies to assist eligible citizens with new construction or purchase of low cost housing to undertake home improvement projects. The programme will also revitalize some of the country's urban public spaces.

With respect to improving the infrastructure within informal settlements, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the urban residential infrastructure component of the programme will finance a cohort of independent urban residential infrastructure sub-projects to either upgrade living conditions in informal settlements on state lands, or to develop planned residential subdivisions in well located state owned greenfield sites. This will focus along the country's urban corridors and on sites not previously upgraded. The specific investments of this component will include construction or upgrading of resilient site infrastructure, including drainage systems, wastewater management systems, roads, accessibility systems, street lights, potable water supply, fire hydrants and the social infrastructure such as community centres, recreational facilities with gender sensitive designs wherever appropriate. It would also address the solid waste management, including recycling collection points, receptacles within the upgraded settlements. It will also include the regularization of an electricity supply.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Land Settlement Agency, is forecasting that it would generate employment opportunities for approximately 290 persons under this component of the Urban Upgrading and Revitalization Programme during this fiscal period. The regularization of designated squatter communities involved the incremental development and upgrade of physical infrastructure and the provision of services within designated squatting communities and land settlement areas. This includes the paving of roads, implementation of drainage and sewage systems,

the provision of potable water, electricity and other needed amenities. The LSA, which has responsibility for the Squatter Regularization Programme, also undertakes remedial works to address environmental degradation in areas. The LSA is projecting to undertake ongoing and proposed surveying and construction activities in certain communities, including Alexis Street in Morvant, for the implementation of Government's tenancy policy during the 2021 fiscal period.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

This policy seeks to offer titled instruments to certain eligible categories of squatters and occupants of state lands that were not captured by state lands in the Act of 1998. However, potential beneficiaries would have to show proof of occupation of LSA's designated areas cited in the Act, as well as land settlement areas prior to June the 14th 2014. A squatter occupant in possession of the tenancy agreement will now be able to be regularized. Like COC holders, beneficiaries of the policy will also be eligible for the thirty-year statutory lease, and following that the 1999 year deed of lease issued by the LSA. Madam Speaker, this means more families will be able to move forward and enjoy the attendant benefits of a legitimate land owner. [*Desk thumping*]

The Land Settlement Agency also undertakes infrastructural projects related to the regularization and regeneration of neglected squatter communities within the greater Port of Spain area and environs. This endeavour also provides opportunities for microenterprise and community development to address employment and other social issues. In the last five years the LSA has been able to complete 32 projects in six communities including Laventille and Belmont. These projects generated employment for over 400 hundred persons from within these communities. In fiscal 2020 to '21 the LSA proposes to undertake several new projects in seven communities which will create employment opportunities for approximately 230

persons. The Housing and Village Improvement Programme, which is now into its fourth phase, targets impoverished rural pre-urban communities with neglected infrastructure and poor quality housing. The programme is geared towards improving the housing and living conditions of beneficiaries at both the individual and community levels. It would utilize a self-help approach. This means the State will provide fiscal and technical resources while the beneficiaries provide sweat equity.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry through the LSA utilizes small contractors within the community or environs to facilitate the development and upgrades of basic infrastructure, utilities and the services. The use of small contractors also allows for the construction of low cost starter housing units. Families who do not require new construction are able to access home improvement grants to assist with projects to improve their living conditions. This programme also facilitates a construction skilled training component, which is of significant benefit to the youths in these communities in preparing them for jobs in the construction sector.

In light of our current economic circumstances this programme has not only positively impacted the standard of living and quality of life in low income families, but has also made a meaningful contribution to the national economy through the home construction sector, and the backward linkages it inevitably creates. The programme also spells good news for the Government's housing programme as it reduces the demand for public housing under the HDC. The LSA has already undertaken the necessary social surveys and identified seven communities for intervention including the Beetham community. This will see the construction of approximately 82 single family units and 21 apartment units.

Madam Speaker, during fiscal 2020 to 2021, the LSA is expected to create employment opportunities for approximately 1,500 persons under the Housing and

Village Improvement Programme. Small and medium contractors initiatives to build basic housing units for less than 500,000 can be a real game changer for the 83 per cent of persons on the Ministry's housing database whose monthly household income is less than 9,000. The units will provide much needed relief for those seeking mortgage. Madam Speaker, given the housing needs of residents in east Port of Spain, this initiative is certainly worth exploring once service lots can be identified in existing housing developments, infill sites or available government land area developments. The Home Improvement Grant and Subsidy Programmes provide much needed funding for low income families to effect critical repairs and upgrades to the housing stock, therefore reducing demand for new units through the HDC Accelerated Housing Programme.

The home improvement subsidy which forms part of the Urban Upgrade and Revitalization Programme will be implemented in fiscal 2020 to 2021. The Ministry through the programme monitoring coordination and evaluation unit will provide subsidies nationwide to finance approved home improvement projects for currently occupied homes, which will enhance the basic living conditions of eligible low income households, as well as facilitate new construction on property that is already owned by potential beneficiaries or the acquisition of low cost housing, which will directly serve the housing need of low income households and decrease reliance on the State. It is worth noting though the wider socioeconomic impact of these programmes as many families are able to benefit from it both directly and indirectly through the creation of jobs for skilled and semiskilled workers, and suppliers of construction and housing related goods and services.

Madam Speaker, the Government is mindful that economic sustainability is key to the successful revitalization of east Port of Spain. This involves creating opportunities for sustainable jobs and nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit of

citizens, particularly those in east Port of Spain, which would lead to an increased earning capacity. This will go a long way in creating economic growth and financial independence. The urban regeneration component of the Urban Upgrading and Revitalization Programme will finance building refurbishment site, street-scaping infrastructure and landscaping so as to improve the attractiveness, resilience and sustainable use of urban public spaces and facilities. An operations and maintenance plan will also be financed for each upgraded place of our facility to help promote sustainability. This is quite an innovation since globally such investments are today seen as integral to harness the potential of urbanization.

In addition to this revitalization programme east Port of Spain will also implement a number of transformational strategies in fiscal 2021 through its social and economic programme to benefit the residents of east Port of Spain. This includes the Business Improvement District Programme and Marketing Campaign, which is the rebranding and enhancing the physical image of east Port of Spain to attract new business and investment and fuel the economic activity. It is anticipated that the increased aesthetic appearance, strategic positioning and robust marketing strategies of the Eastern Main Road will improve and will act as a catalyst to encourage investors to anchor their business there, and create opportunities to rejuvenate a business community spirit.

Another one is the community impact centres, where the refurbishing of community impact centres to encourage and improve delivery of government services to communities in east Port of Spain. This will help persons with life skills that would encourage better attitudes and more positive behaviour geared to transformation within the communities. Additionally, the skills training component of the programme will support job creation and entrepreneurial pursuits. Another programme is the education to production. Training young persons in the

construction sector and developing their entrepreneurial acumen through the education to production programme. The Construction Skills Training Programme has thus far successfully trained approximately 111 semiskilled men and women from east Port of Spain and environs. This training will make them more marketable for future employment and/or business start-ups in the construction sector. The Youth Entrepreneurial Programme targets secondary school students and school leavers to understand various aspects of owning and managing a business enterprise. Thus far, over 400 young persons have benefited from this

Madam Speaker, this programme will provide a more productive outlet for the abundance of energy, creativity and risk taking attributed to our youth while promoting entrepreneurial proficiency and trade certification. Adopt-a-School programme is another programme. This programme aims to assist schools in the east Port of Spain to acquire technology, to ensure the readiness for online learning, and to help level the field for the children of east Port of Spain.

Urban agriculture is one of the programmes that I like, Madam Speaker. At a time when food security is a priority objective for this administration, East Port of Spain Development Company has developed the urban agriculture project aimed at establishing small scale community farms in east Port of Spain to provide a reliable source of quality food much like the Gonzales Food Park in Belmont. This initiative can have a wide ranging positive impact on communities, including economic growth, entrepreneurship, job creation and improved health. This very worth like project will utilize abandon lots, thereby reducing opportunities for crime and delinquency in the area. The sporting programme is designed to engage at risk youths in productive activities which would enable them to use their talents and help them to develop character, discipline, as well as modified and antisocial—as well as modify any antisocial behavior, and facilitate positive social

integration into society. The programmes facilitate inter-community interaction and integration while encouraging healthy lifestyles and positive life affirming choices.

Madam Speaker, the New City Mall, Eastside Plaza and No. 43 Independence Square have collectively been part of the urban landscape for more than 20 years. These business entities were initially established to serve as business incubators for developing entrepreneurs in merchandise sales, service crafts and other commercial activities. They are also provided store fronts at affordable rates. Over the years they have evolved into a thriving platform for small entrepreneurial business ventures that are creative productive employment opportunities. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, as part of its strategic plan for these commercial entities, has since re-examined the entire concept of culture, tenant mix, value for money, and the total shopping experience by customers within the city. The vision is to rebrand these three malls as a single entity under the Port of Spain shopping complex. This will create a business environment that is conducive to entrepreneurial goals, in keeping with Goal 2 of Theme IV of the national strategic plan in *Vision 2030*. This will result in a better value for business housed there and enhance shopping experience for the customers.

Madam Speaker, we do however recognize that some infrastructural and refurbishment works will be required in the new fiscal to accomplish this goal. In so doing, the refurbishment works of Eastside Plaza will be facilitated under the Urban Regeneration Component of the Urban Upgraded and Revitalization Programme. This will improve the attractiveness, resilience and sustainable use of this urban public space and facilities. The renovation will improve the health and safety conditions of the building, increase the building accessibility and functionality, and revamp all the building's electrical, mechanical, plumbing and

air condition systems. The project will also see the introduction of new cost-saving green building initiatives such as thermal installation of the roof, installation of a chilled water air condition system, and enhanced optimization of natural lighting. With respect to No. 43 Independence Square, renovations will include an additional floor to facilitate space for training and educational programmes. There are also plans for the creation of a new concourse at the ground level to be branded as a culture alley to connect to New City Mall.

Madam Speaker, due to the current economic conditions and ensuing financial constraints, the projects will be executed in four phases, utilizing proper project management methodologies. There are also plans for a proposed expansion of the New City Mall which will provide an additional 8,113 square foot of rentable floor space. This will involve the construction of a new entrance with space and a contemporary façade. We are of the firm view that this project will not only enhance the building ascetics and functionality, but it will be done to benefit the mall's stakeholders including its micro-business owners, customers and the wider public. The redevelopment, which will encompass the additional floor space, upgrade of air condition, electrical, plumbing and installation of the escalator and elevators and redesign of the façade will be treated as one project divided into four phases. It is anticipated that phase one of the project will start in fiscal 2020/2021.

As you can see from the policies, programmes and initiatives presented here, the Government through the Ministry and its agencies are ever responsive to shelter and socioeconomic needs of our citizens. All of the development programmes are designed to alleviate poverty and to improve the earning capacity of citizens in east Port of Spain. Our role at the Ministry is to improve the standard of living for deserving citizens, and we take the role very seriously. In positioning the Ministry to do more with less, the Ministry is determined to be more adaptable

to our changing environment, and to be ready to respond in a holistic and responsible manner. As such, we are committed to doing our part to fuel economic activity within the formal and informal sectors through construction of our built environment and housing related projects as this will generate employment opportunities for small and medium contractors, skilled, semiskilled, unskilled workers, as well as provide business opportunities through backward linkages which can contribute to stabilizing the economy.

As such, we are committed to reducing the infrastructural and socioeconomic disparities experienced by those communities in east Port of Spain. One of the most strategic ways to accomplish this is through the state's intervention as this will serve as a catalyst for the regeneration of east Port of Spain by providing programmes that benefit the residents of the area. We will contribute to this development of our human capital, encourage economic opportunities and create vibrant and sustainable communities. Madam Speaker, we are committed to engaging all stakeholders in order to bring about the kinds of socioeconomic development that is required to achieve significant and sustainable transformation of these communities. In so doing, we at the Ministry will continue to develop innovative policies and programmes and re-engineer our processes and service delivery mechanisms so that they would serve the needs of our stakeholders, including existing and potential clients of our Housing and Urban Revitalization Programmes.

I would like to say that Laventille East/Morvant is ready to join the Government in all of its initiatives in improving and becoming a better part, a better player, in the development of Trinidad and Tobago. We are eager and we look forward to improving our agriculture in utilizing the available land, and initiating programmes to master techniques, and to develop livestock and different

agricultural produce, which we can bring and put towards the School Feeding Programme, or we can put towards just basic food hampers within the community. [*Desk thumping*] Laventille East/Morvant is also looking forward to being part of the digital transformation and technology, to being part of innovation, developing new awareness and new avenues of services. Young people have been contributing and expanding on ideas.

I recently launched an online app where we can access services through going online, hence reducing the amount of persons that are necessary at the office, and this was done by two persons from the community, and two young persons at that. So we look forward to doing more work like that. We are also eager and looking forward to improving with our education within this COVID-19 situation, and I would like to take time out to congratulate the young persons that would have done the SEA, and I would like to congratulate them for doing the exam, completing the exam, and whatever their achievements were, understanding that this is just a stepping stone in moving forward. There is a community in Laventille East/Morvant called Bagatelle where they formulated a model for this COVID and how they would use the restrictions to help educate young persons within the community that do not have all the necessary amenities, and we look forward to applying for the laptops for the new students, having the Mi-Fi devices, and putting forward spaces where these young persons can learn.

We also look forward—Laventille East/Morvant looks forward to helping and being part of the manufacturing sector. We started garment manufacture with school uniforms. We have also done a significant amount of masks. We have started some woodworking. There is currently some young men doing benches to assist in the furniture for the young children as home schooling is important.

Sporting groups in our community, because contact sport has been stopped

temporarily, they have committed to assisting with different initiatives within helping the community, whether it be assisting in putting together hampers or distributing hampers, or just giving general assistance within the community.

I am excited and Laventille East is excited also in being part of this very challenging and trying time, and we understand that things are different, and there is a new way forward, and we look forward to being part of a positive change and positive movement within Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity for making this contribution, and God bless you all. [*Desk thumping*]

8.00 p.m.

**PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE
(ADHERENCE TO)**

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I crave your indulgence before I move the Motion on the Adjournment to raise something of particular interest concerning the privileges of this House. Madam Speaker, may I go ahead? Madam Speaker, this is the House of Representative and in here whilst we argue the great political issues of the day we respect each other and we respect the Chair of this House. Madam Speaker, we are offended that one who sits amongst us, who just arrived here, Madam Speaker, is posting on Facebook, during a sitting of this House, not just juvenile and puerile comments about our work in this august House, but comments also seemingly to reflect negatively on the Chair of this House. Madam Speaker, we will have none of that and I therefore beg you to caution this new Member for St. Augustine before I am obliged to move a formal motion of privileges at this early stage of this session.

If that was the habit of that Member when she sat in the other place, we

here—

Madam Speaker: Member, I know where you are going, but I think we could just leave that. I realize the Member has now arrived here.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: But, Madam Speaker, we here will neither entertain nor condone any of that type of behaviour. [*Desk thumping*] So, Madam Speaker, I just wanted to draw that to your attention because that is not what we are accustomed to. So, Madam Speaker, I would not like to have to move a motion of privileges on this matter and I trust after today it will stop. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, the particular post by the Member for St. Augustine had come to my attention well prior to this matter being raised by the Leader of the House. Hon. Members, every Member of this House is entitled to be addressed by the title Honourable and consequently a certain decorum is expected of each of its Members. And that specifically pertains to the regard and the respect to which Members must hold for the dignity of this House. The duty to safeguard, uphold and protect the dignity of this House is intrinsic to its membership.

Hon. Members, for a Member to encourage or engage in a practice of disregard for the dignity of this House is analogous to the medical condition of myasthenia gravis. And the medical practitioners amongst us may be able to explain further. Hon. Members, the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the posting of the Member for St. Augustine is that it is a reflection on this House and its Chair which was intended wittingly or unwittingly to impinge its dignity.

This Parliament is new and this conduct is also new and unfamiliar to this Chamber. It is not only to be regarded as unparliamentary and maybe requiring an apology, but it is not to be tolerated as a practice. If continued it could lead to very serious consequences. Therefore, the behaviour of this or of similar nature is not to be repeated and I am sure the more experienced amongst us who have a duty to

guide would also do what is their duty in guiding.

I do recognize that many Members are new to parliamentary practice, procedure, and its Standing Orders which I expect they will soon come up to speed. Further to assist all Members in their acclimatization, I have requested the Clerk that she circulates amongst you all our procedural bulletins. I trust all Members shall be guided accordingly. Thank you. Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

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

Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Monday the 12th day of October, 2020 at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.08 p.m.