

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, March 26, 2021*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

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

Forty-Third Annual Report of the Ombudsman for the period January 2020 to December 2020. [*The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Esmond Forde)*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT**Cannabis Control Bill, 2020****(Presentation)****The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi):**

Madam Speaker, I have the honour to lay the:

Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Cannabis Control Bill, 2020.

URGENT QUESTION**Shipment of AstraZeneca Vaccines to T&T****(Delay of)**

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Health: In light of the recent raid of an AstraZeneca vaccine facility in Italy, could the Minister state whether this would delay the shipment of vaccines to Trinidad and Tobago through the COVAX facility?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am sorry to disappoint my friends opposite. As everyone with knowledge of this issue has stated, from the hon. Prime Minister, to myself, to the Chief Medical Officer, to PAHO, we have told this country on

several times that the AstraZeneca vaccines we are getting through the COVAX facility in the first instance are manufactured in an AstraZeneca plant in South Korea. So I am really sorry to disappoint my friends opposite, that is still on track. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, can the Minister of Health confirm whether he has written to the COVAX facility to determine whether future shipments of the remaining 70,000 vaccines to Trinidad and Tobago will be delayed?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We have no such information at this point in time. Again, I am sorry to disappoint the UNC that so far the other 77,000 doses, according to COVAX and PAHO, are on stream at this time to be delivered by May. So I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Supplemental. Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Minister, I am sorry to disappoint you when the UNC first wrote for vaccines and requested vaccines for this country. Could you indicate the new process to be implemented for returning passengers, including citizens returning to Trinidad and Tobago, who have evidence that they have been vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus?

Madam Speaker: I would not allow that as a supplemental question. Out of order. Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Could the Minister—in light of recent developments, could the Minister indicate when the 351,000 vaccines from the other facility would be coming to Trinidad and Tobago?

Madam Speaker: Again, I would not allow that as a supplemental question. Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, can the Minister indicate when we will be getting the future shipments of vaccines from the COVAX Facility that he outlined?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, I thought I just said that the other 77,000, as we are advised, are due by May. We do not have an exact date as yet, but COVAX and PAHO have committed to supplying us by the end of May, and I thought I answered it already. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are seven questions for oral answer, but we understand that question one—

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker, the Member for Oropouche East is directing racist comments—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Charles: I did not hear it.

Mr. Young: I heard it.

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I take strong umbrage—

Madam Speaker: I am on my legs. I am on my legs. [*Interruption*] Member for Couva South. Member for Couva South. Okay. So I want to caution us all. Okay? And there seems to be something that happens from that marker, that aisle that runs north-south. Okay? That aisle, something happens. Okay? But, I want to assure all Members, even if they sit to the west of the aisle, they are part, an integral part of this Chamber, and as much as if they sat to be east of that aisle, all right, and at the same level of behaviour that I would expect from hon. Members sitting to the east of the aisle, that same level is also expected of hon. Members sitting to west of the aisle. Okay?

I have heard what the Member for Laventille West has said. Unfortunately

or fortunately, nothing has filtered up, but Members are reminded that the Chair does not have to hear it. If a Member raises, it is something that I must cast my eye upon. I would ask us all, while I am in no way trivializing what the Member has said, it is really a great infraction if it occurred. I am going to ask us all, in the spirit of what our citizens are asking of the nation, including all of us here, that we try to abide by their wishes. There is a bigger duty on us as exemplars.

And to let Members know—know while a certain amount of, you know—I do not even want to call it taunting, but let me put it in this way. Taunting is not allowed, racism is not allowed. And while I am on my legs, it is becoming a practice for us to be accusing each other of bullying. And while bullying in itself may not be unparliamentary, I think accusing one another is at the least insensitive to the pain that a lot of our citizens, many of them children, suffer from bullying. So that we should not trivialize that at all. So we are going to embark on our business in a very serious way. We are going to embark on our business in a spirit of best Westminster model that we have adapted for Trinidad and Tobago. Okay? Let us proceed. Leader of the House.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you, Ma'am. That was well said, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are seven questions for oral answers. I am informed that Question No. 103 has been withdrawn, and so we will answer the six remaining questions. There are four questions for written response. [*Interruption*] That is quite all right, Ma'am. There are four questions for written response and the responses are available and will be circulated. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Reopening of Schools

(Status of outstanding Repairs)

78. Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Given the reopening of schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago in February 2021, could the Minister inform this House of the status of all outstanding school repairs?

Value Added Tax and Import Duty

(Details of)

83. Ms. Khadijah Ameen (*St. Augustine*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

Could the Minister provide:

- a) a detailed list of all luxury items that are subject to value added tax and import duty as of January 2021; and
- b) a detailed breakdown of the revised list of items exempted from value added tax and import duty?

Moruga Road Rehabilitation Project

(Details of)

86. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

With regard to the Moruga Road Rehabilitation Project from Petit Café to Marac Village, could the Minister:

- a) provide a detailed breakdown of the utilization of the \$178 million allocation including identification of the work done from the fiscal year 2017;
- b) indicate the expected completion date of the project; and
- c) state whether there was any cost overrun and if so, what was the value?

Domestic Tourism Market

(Steps taken to Incentivize and Revitalize)

95. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts:

Could the Minister inform this House on the steps that will be taken to incentivize and revitalize the domestic tourism market?

Vide end of sitting for written answers.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following question stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Rodney Charles:

Free Approved Astra/Zeneca Vaccines (Offer of the Government of India)

103. Could the hon. Minister of Health state whether Trinidad and Tobago was one of the 30 countries which took up the offer of the Government of India in January 2021 to make available free approved Astra/Zeneca vaccines and if so, what was the result?

Question by leave, withdrawn.

Online Classes across Various Levels (Standardized Assessments for)

81. Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Could the Minister indicate whether any plans have been finalized or discussions held to standardize assessments for online classes across various levels?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the issue of standardized assessments is one which is under intense discussion at this time, the most familiar example being the SEA. A committee was recently formed and should be soon convened to deal with a form of this national standardized assessment, and the findings of this committee will be used to assist and inform decisions on other standardized assessments such as the

National Test and the NCSE National Certificate of Secondary Education.

However, the emphasis of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is to continue the necessary work to ensure that face-to-face school can resume in some form for our children, even as we explore the use of adaptive technology systems to assist those with learning gaps, especially in basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Ms. Haynes: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. But has any deadline been set for the report of the committee so that we can get a timeline for this?

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The timeline for the report of the committee is nine months from the date of their formation.

Ms. Haynes: Thank you. And in the interim, how are we aggregating the data to ensure that there is some accurate measure of student performance within the school system at this time?

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, teachers are conducting assessments during the term and also end of term assessments based on the different schools to assess student performance and student engagement and learning during this time.

Means Test for Devices

(Implementation of)

82. Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Could the Minister indicate why the means test for devices has not been implemented?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Government has allocated 50million for the purchase of devices for students. To ensure that the devices are given to those most in need, a means test must be completed for all applicants. Twenty thousand devices have been procured from this allocation and delivery of the first tranche is

expected in April 2021. Based on this time frame, the means test will be launched on April 12, 2021, which is close enough to the delivery date of the devices so that those who qualify would not also benefit from device donations from other sources, as these donations through the Adopt-a-School Programme and other NGOs, and so on, are currently ongoing.

Ms. Haynes: Thank you, Minister. Is there any accurate recordkeeping of the students who would have received devices from various places? Outside of the Adopt-a-School Programme, there are a number of other device donations going on, so do we have that data to include when we do this means test?

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Data has been collected as late as February from principals indicating which are the students that do not, at that time, have devices.

Wireless Internet Services in Moruga/Tableland (Implementation of)

89. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation:

Could the Minister update this House on the implementation of wireless Internet connectivity services throughout the constituency of Moruga/Tableland?

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago carried out an investigation of wireless Internet access in the Moruga/Tableland constituency in early March 2021. Based on the spectrum monitoring exercise conducted as well as submissions made by operators in response to coverage request from the Authority during 2020, it was determined that the operators

identified have the following wireless Internet coverage: one, two mobile cellular operators, TSTT and Digicel, populated areas along all the main roads within the constituencies, such as Naparima/Mayaro Road, Moruga Road, Rochard Douglas Road, Penal Rock Road, including the La Lune and Marac areas.

Additionally, TSTT, through fixed wireless Internet access, is available along populated areas along the Naparima/Mayaro Road between San Pedro and Hindustan, populated areas around the junction of Moruga Road and Rochard Douglas Road, and populated areas from the junction of Moruga Road and Penal Rock Road to the south coastline.

Further to the aforementioned operator provided services, Cabinet, in November 2013, approved the establishment of the community-based ICT access centres in ICT underserved areas across Trinidad and Tobago. The purposes of these centres was to establish a user-friendly technology enabled environment within the communities as well as service traditionally underserved groups such as the physically challenged, the elderly and the at-risk youth. The communities were identified using the results of the 2007 digital divide survey conducted by TATT.

At present, six such centres are being successfully operated in the communities of Carenage, Cumana, Guayaguayare, Marac, Penal and Todds Road. The constituency of Moruga/Tableland has seen the establishment of a flagship access centre at the rural fishing village of Marac. This centre has played a pivotal role in connecting and serving its community. One of the centres is offering free Internet access, and during the period January 2020 to December 2020, there were 1,068 users of the cyber-cafe facility and 302 users of the Wi-Fi patio. In 2021 an additional centre is scheduled to be rolled out in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Ms. Benjamin: Could the Minister inform the House of how many hotspots are to

be set up at their proposed locations for the TT Wi-Fi in Moruga/Tableland?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, I do not have that information available with me at this time. I am sure if the Member presents another question, it will be answered.

Ms. Benjamin: Could the Minister state the criteria to be used to determine the possible locations for the TT Wi-Fi?

Madam Speaker: I think having regard to the response that was just given that it would have covered the question as asked now.

Ms. Benjamin: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Decreased Number of URP Groups

(Reasons for)

90. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Could the Minister provide the reasons for the decreased number of Unemployment Relief Programme, URP, groups?

- a) throughout the country; and
- b) in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, with respect to the Unemployment Relief Programme, there has been no decrease in the number throughout the country. In fact, in March 2020 to present time, a period which we can identify as the COVID-19 period, there has been an increase in crews throughout the country to assist with unemployment relief during this period. Since 2016, there are 15 crews which comprise 10 persons per crew in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland. This has been consistent and remains the same at present with an overall number of 150 persons per fortnight. Thank you.

Ms. Benjamin: Can the Minister give an estimate of the amount—the allocation allotted to URP and what has been spent for the entire budgeted period from October 2020 to present?

Madam Speaker: Well, I would not allow a supplemental, the question with respect to what was spent. And I believe you are asking about the increase, I believe the Minister answered that question already.

Ms. Benjamin: Okay then, Madam Speaker.

Increased Unemployment in Moruga/Tableland

(Steps taken to Alleviate)

91. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Labour:

Could the Minister provide the steps being taken to alleviate the significant increase in the level of unemployment particularly among young people in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland?

The Minister of Labour (Hon. Stephen Mc Clashie): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am happy for the opportunity to respond to my good friend and Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland. Permit me first, Madam Speaker, to enquire about the source of the data used by the Member of Parliament in determining the significant increase in the level of unemployment, particularly among young people in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland. I am interested to know whether this statement is based on official data, or from some other source like a hat or something. We must be careful, Madam Speaker, about making statements that are unsubstantiated by facts. [*Desk thumping*]

Notwithstanding, the Government remains committed to creating decent jobs and protecting the rights of workers, especially our youth. The Ministry of Labour provides employment and training opportunities to nationals of Trinidad and

Tobago on an ongoing basis, which have a direct impact on unemployment and youth unemployment rates. Three notable programmes are the On-the-Job Training Programme, OJT; the Farm Programme and the world of work/community outreach programmes offered under the National Employment Service.

Madam Speaker, the OJT Programme offers trainees between the ages of 16 and 25, induction into the world of work and focuses on the acquisition of practical skills and experience within public, private and non-governmental organizations. During the period January 2019 to February 2021, 83 trainees confirmed from the Moruga/Tableland area were placed in organizations. Due to the limitations of data collection not occurring on a constituency basis, it is possible that even more of the 1,546 placements that arose in the OJT south region could have been taken up by representatives from the Moruga/Tableland area.

Madam Speaker, Moruga/Tableland has traditionally been regarded as constituency with an agricultural focus. Through the Farm Programme, which provides seasonal employment for persons varying from six weeks to eight months throughout the year on Canadian farms in the Provinces of Ontario and Alberta, 75 people or persons from Moruga/Tableland obtained employment in 2019. Notwithstanding the COVID pandemic, there were 34 such placements done in 2020.

Additionally, the Ministry of Labour, in its attempt to enhance the employability of young person conducts world of work and community outreach programmes in secondary schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago. These are aimed at preparing students for the world of work. This ongoing activity is arranged according to region, not constituency. Notwithstanding this, I would like to inform, Madam Speaker, that during the period January 2019 to January 2021, the San Fernando office of the National Employment Service would have assisted

482 students from various schools [*Desk thumping*] that attended various schools in the Moruga/Tableland area.

These efforts, Madam Speaker, have continued even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted lives and livelihoods. Even greater strides in addressing employment and employability of persons in Moruga/Tableland will be realized with the coming on stream of the Moruga Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park, and as Government pursues its capital projects as enunciated in the *Public Sector Investment Programme 2021*, including the construction of the Moruga multipurpose youth facility and the Moruga highway. These projects will provide both direct and indirect employment opportunities for persons living in Moruga/Tableland, inclusive of young persons. I thank you, Madam Speaker [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, given that the CSO's most recent data is two years ago, what is your Government doing to bring the unemployment and underemployment data up to the current reality, as I would have appreciate if the Minister would have stated he did not know?

Madam Speaker: As a supplemental question, that question is out of order. Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Ms. Benjamin: Is the Minister hiding the unemployment rate? [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member, the question is out of order, and also there is a certain innuendo that I want to suggest is not acceptable. Okay? Do you have another supplemental question? Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, based on the wide range of statistics that have been presented by the Minister of Labour here this afternoon, could the Minister of Labour inform this House in relation to the national employment registry, how many persons who lost their jobs since 2015—

September of 2015, have been reintegrated in terms of employment in Trinidad and Tobago?

Madam Speaker: Out of order.

**Tobago House of Assembly Virtual Carnival
(Accuracy of Reports of Moneys Spent)**

104. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts:

Could the Minister state whether the reports that the Tobago House of Assembly, THA, spent approximately \$2 million on virtual carnival in 2021 are accurate?

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. In response to the question, no, reports that the Tobago House of Assembly spent approximately \$2 million on virtual carnival in 2021 are not accurate. The Division of Tourism, Culture and Transportation of the Tobago House of Assembly, through the Tobago Festivals Commission is charged with the responsibility for planning, coordinating and implementing Tobago's festivals. In fulfilment of its mandate, approval was sought and received from the Executive Council for a project called Virtual Tobago Carnival 2021, which is intended to facilitate the recording, streaming of virtual carnival events and a documentary in conjunction with carnival interest groups on the island at a proposed cost of \$2 million.

Objectives of the virtual Tobago carnival would be to develop a unique future Tobago carnival festival to be marketed in its source markets, so as to enhance the Tobago tourism offerings and to inject funds into the creative sector in Tobago, which will assist in stimulating the local economy while Tobago tourism prepares for opportunities post the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, no funds have

been expected and the Tobago Festivals Commission is still in the planning stages.

2.00 p.m.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE

Cannabis Control Bill, 2020

(Extension of Time)

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

Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, having regard to the Second Interim Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Cannabis Control Bill, 2020, I beg to move that the Committee be allowed an extension of two months in order to complete its work and submit a final report by May 31, 2021. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

MINISTER OF FINANCE

(LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN)

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas the Minister of Finance has demonstrated his inability to competently execute his duties to bring certainty, confidence, stability and growth to the national economy;

Be it resolved that this House express its loss of confidence in the Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, it gives me no pleasure to bring this Motion to this honourable House. I am a taxpaying citizen of Trinidad and Tobago and I am sure that I echo the sentiments of all right-thinking patriotic citizens—[*Desk thumping*] of this country, when I say that all that we want is good, sensible, transparent, open,

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

honest governance in this country. [*Desk thumping*] What we need is a government that cares for the citizens of this country which works towards improving the quality of life, our standard of living, access to resources and fair and equitable distribution of the assets and the resources of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Member: Well said.

Mr. D. Tancoo: The role of the Minister of Finance in this context therefore is very paramount. The performance of this Minister is directly related to the economy, the state of the economy and the quality of life of our citizens. So when the Minister of Finance fails, Madam Speaker, our businesses suffer; our children suffer; our farmers suffer; our families suffer; citizens from Cedros to Charlotteville suffer; citizens from Port of Spain to Penal suffer.

Madam Speaker, the role of the Minister is critical because it is the Minister who is responsible for the preparation of the annual budget passed in this House and from which expenditures are made to facilitate the introduction and the implementation of the Government's policies. Importantly, it is from the Minister of Finance that funds are expended to every Ministry, state board, statutory body and service commission in Trinidad and Tobago. But we all know, Madam Speaker, that there is a difference between allocation and disbursements as Members opposite are also aware. Because Ministers may come to the Parliament and make the grandest of promises and commitments on behalf of the Government and on their own portfolios, but it is the Minister of Finance that controls the purse strings and therefore it is his responsibility and his role that we must examine carefully when we are looking at the state of the economy and the state of all the— as Corporation Sole, of all the entities under his control.

Madam Speaker, an examination of the *Gazette* dated September 09, 2020,

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

shows that the Minister of Finance is responsible for 28 specific functions, named functions in the *Gazette* including: Managing the Consolidated Fund, budgetary control, fiscal and monetary policy, debit management, divestments, lotteries, pensions, et cetera, but that is not all, Madam Speaker. In addition, the Minister is directly in charge of nine statutory bodies, including: The Unit Trust, the Office of Procurement Regulation, National Insurance Board, et cetera. But even that is not all. The Minister of Finance is also responsible for 24 wholly owned enterprises, owned by the citizens of this country and managed or mismanaged as the case might be by the hon. Minister of Finance. Those 24 wholly owned enterprises include: First Citizens Holdings Limited, the National Investment Fund Holding Company Limited, Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre Management Limited, Union Estate, et cetera. And, yes, there is still even more. This Minister of Finance has fiscal responsibility for two majority owned enterprises and 16 indirectly owned enterprises, including: the First Citizens Bank Limited and a series of First Citizens subsidiaries and associated companies.

Madam Speaker, in total, this Minister's portfolio gives him oversight of some 54 financial entities in addition to his role and responsibility of approving policy for every single Ministry of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. As such, Madam Speaker, the performance of the Government, the performance of the country, the performance of the Minister is critical for our examination, it is directly related to the health of the economy. And today my colleagues on this side and I will present our case to show the abysmal failure of this Minister of Finance and the state that he has put this country in.

Madam Speaker, let me make it absolutely clear that I understand, we understand on this side that the Government has the majority in the Parliament. We

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

understand that the Members opposite exceed us in number and as a result of which since they would have already gotten their directives they would come today and defend, hopefully, their Minister of Finance and when the time comes to vote they will vote in his favour. The predictability of the end result of the vote does not however prevent us from doing what is our job. [*Desk thumping*] We have a job to do and our job is to keep the Minister of Finance and the Government, to hold them to account. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, this Minister of Finance has been in office for the past five and a half years. I want to present some general information with regard to indicators which will guide us to what he has brought us to. When this Minister of Finance took office in September 2015, he met an economy that had grown. The economy had grown between 2010 and 2015 in real terms—[*Desk thumping*] by \$2.2 billion. That is a real figure. In nominal terms, Madam Speaker, between 2010 and 2015, the economy, the GDP, the gross domestic product of this country had grown by \$24 billion. [*Desk thumping*] He found an economy that was growing, that was developing and that is despite the challenges of energy sector product prices and production.

Even the non-petroleum sector was growing. It had increased between the same period, under a government led by the hon. Member for Siparia, the non-petroleum sector had grown by 11 per cent in real terms, Madam Speaker, and this was led particularly by improvements in the services sector, the financial, insurance, real estate, transport, storage, distribution and restaurant subsectors. That was the track record of growth and development; that was the track record of performance by the Government led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, when she was Prime Minister, [*Desk thumping*] and that is what the Minister of Finance

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

inherited.

Economic growth, Madam Speaker, and then in came the Minister of Finance, the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East. You see, I know where he is from even though he does not seem to know where South Trinidad is. In he came like a virus, like a sudden deadly virus and the Trinidad and Tobago economy—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on—

Mr. D. Tancoo:—went into shock and collapsed.

Mr. Al-Rawi:—Standing Order 48(4) and 48(6).

Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member for Oropouche West, as far as certain words that you just used, I uphold the Attorney General's objection, particularly, having regard to what the world has suffered recently. I think you should retract those words and I am sure you can find another way to put over what you would like to say. So retract those words—you do not repeat them, and find another way, please. Thank you.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I do so retract, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I was referring to some figures from the gross domestic product. I want to continue to do so. Let us look at the *Review of the Economy 2020*, the Government's document. I looked specifically at the GDP, at basic prices, at basic constant 2012 prices, because this is one of the primary indicators used by economists to measure the performance of an economy.

Madam Speaker, in 2015 the gross domestic product constant prices, basic prices, 2015, the last year of the Government led by the Member of Parliament for Siparia, the GDP at the basic prices was \$164 billion. In came the Minister of Finance, the hon. Minister of Finance with us today, within the first year, Madam

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Speaker, GDP dropped by \$10 billion to \$154.9 billion; 2017 it dropped again to \$151.7 billion; 2018 it dropped again to 150 billion; 2019 it dropped again to \$148.6 billion and that, Madam Speaker, had nothing to do with COVID.

As a matter of fact, as a matter of record, using the figures that the Minister himself provided in his budget presentation on the last occasion, in every single year since this Minister has been Minister of Finance in Trinidad and Tobago, the gross domestic product has dropped in every single year. [*Desk thumping*] That is an indictment against the hon. Minister's performance. That is also proof, Madam Speaker, that the economy collapsed before COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

The manufacturing sector which he has boasted about in 2018 that had been turned around and is making great progress, that very same manufacturing sector actually fell by \$2 billion between 2015 and 2019 [*Desk thumping*] under his hand. And I repeat, this had nothing to do with COVID, this is before the advent of COVID. COVID just made it worse. So we know that when the Minister of Finance eventually provides the information with regard to the GDP for 2020, it would be substantially worse than it is again today. What that tells me then, Madam Speaker, is that for the entire process, from 2015 when he took office to current, his contribution, the contribution by the Minister of Finance via the GDP would have collapsed every single year under his hand. [*Desk thumping*] But let us look at other indicators, Madam Speaker.

Central government revenue: From 2010 to 2015 even in the face of falling energy prices and production, Madam Speaker, government revenue increased by 30 per cent under the hand of the hon. Member for Siparia, an increase by over 30 per cent. Again, just like with GDP, in year one as soon as the Member for Diego Martin North/East came in, as soon as he occupied office, GDP dropped by 12—

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

sorry, revenue dropped, government revenue dropped by \$12 billion. In fact, over the entire period of time from 2015 under his hand to 2019, revenue fell by over 41 per cent under his hand.

Hon. Member: “Ohhh lord.”

Mr. D. Tancoo: Tax revenue fell by 38 per cent, Madam Speaker, tax revenue. And that is despite the Minister’s attempt. You would recall, Madam Speaker, that the hon. Minister introduced VAT on 7,000 food items in an attempt to widen the tax base. The result was the opposite. Instead of increasing tax stakes, less tax was received.

Capital revenue in the last fiscal year was a mere 14 per cent of what it was when he took office, Madam Speaker, capital revenue. The Current Account balance which was minus \$50.6 million, and this is noteworthy, Madam Speaker, the Current Account balance which was minus \$50.6 million in 2015 when he took office, at last count has reached minus \$13.5 billion. And this is projected to continue to get worse.

Madam Speaker, what about debt. In addition to picking the nation’s pockets with regards to NIF, VAT, the failure to pay VAT and tax refunds owed to persons, the failure to pay Government creditors, access to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, in addition to accessing funds through all of those mechanisms, Madam Speaker, the Government has continued to borrow, and the Minister is on record as recent as two or three days ago advising that he will continue to borrow.

I have said it before in this House, Madam Speaker, and it bears repeating, that there is nothing wrong with borrowing funds. What is absolutely wrong is what he is doing with it. There is no track record, nothing to show for it. Worse than that, the net public sector debt in this country is now the highest it has ever

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

been in our history at \$122.2 billion. What is perhaps worse is that our debt to GDP ratio at last record was 82.7 per cent. That was in December last year. Over the last three months this would have gotten progressively worse. That figure probably would be closer to 90 per cent now and it will get worse going down the road to the end of the year.

This Government now owes, Madam Speaker, over \$133 billion to local and foreign creditors and institutions. That is where we are today under this Minister. What is perhaps of greater concern is the growing foreign debt of this Minister's borrowing, the growing component. We have moved from 2.3 billion, from owing US \$2.3 billion in debt under his hand to currently owing \$4.7 billion. In five and a half short years this Minister has increased the amount of foreign borrowing, the amount of foreign debt that this country has, without having created new capacity to generate foreign exchange.

Madam Speaker, my other colleagues will raise issues and talk about foreign reserves, the fact that when he came in we had 12 months' coverage. Today we have eight months' coverage and that is being eaten away. My other colleagues will speak about employment and the fact that even today we have no evidence, no true figure for what unemployment is. Earlier today one of my colleagues raised the issue trying to get some final figures, what we do know, Madam Speaker, is that the Member for Siparia in October last year provided evidence in this very House to show that over 65,000 jobs have been lost and that was before COVID. Over 65,000 jobs have been lost under this Minister's hand between 2015 and 2019. [*Desk thumping*]

But how did we get here? It is clear that the economy is in crisis, Madam Speaker. It is clear that the economy is in peril and it took this Minister five and a

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

half years to actually admit it. When the Minister took office he found an economy that was growing. The statistics I just gave, Madam Speaker, prove that. There was investment; there was new business start-ups; there was growing employment; there was foreign direct investment; there was confidence in the economy; there was activity in every sector and it was clearly visible. In came the Minister of Finance and he immediately began disassembling and dismantling the business environment, the economic infrastructure and the confidence that had taken us so much effort and time and structure and policy and strategy to build. But this was an election campaign that they started from day one, Madam Speaker; from the very first day this was an election campaign. You see, the plan was always to start off by saying things are bad, what we found was very bad and then say we have a plan, we are building a plan, we are creating a plan and then say, well okay, there is some level of stabilization, finally, stabilization and turn around just in time for the election.

The titles of the Minister's budget carries that plan right through: 2016, "Restoring Confidence and Building Trust"; 2017, "Shaping a Brighter Future"; 2018, "Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path"; 2019, "Turnaround"; 2020 "Stability, Strength, Growth". But the facts that I just provided shows that we did not have turn around, stability or growth. [*Desk thumping*] Far from improving, Madam Speaker, this country has gotten worse. You see, the issue was never about transparency; the issue was never about good governance; the issue was never about accountability; the issue was never about the people. It was always about the public relations.

The 2021 budget—so we spoke about the five budgets and their plan and their structure. The 2021 budget, because they have already gone through the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

restoring confidence, there is a crisis shaping, putting the sustainable path, turnaround and stability. So they have already gone through those five, their five years have passed. You know what they have just done, Madam Speaker, is revert back to the first one. Under their hand they have gone back to the first one. The Minister's last budget was titled: "Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation". It is the same narrative, the same story, things are bad again. The only difference is he has already spent \$300 billion, \$300 billion of our dollars. The only thing that has changed is \$300 billion had been spent and the narrative, we have moved now from the blame Kamla to blame COVID mantra.

Five days ago, Madam Speaker, and I counted the days, five days ago I saw an episode of *Criminal Minds* in which a man who—there was a gentleman who was busy setting fires so he could run in to out the fires. One of the key analysts in the show described that as hero syndrome. The creation of a problem to run in to solve it to make it look like you have made some level of achievement. I see a parallel here, Madam Speaker. You see, in the Minister's haste to build up the narrative that things were bad so he could build up his own image and make the claims that he has made which were already proven by the statistics are not true. In his haste to do that he created the very problem that he was identifying.

From the very first day the Minister step into office he ran up and spoke to everybody, he started talking about the economy running on fumes. Remember that, Madam Speaker, the economy running on fumes. They had maxed out the overdraft, there was no money to run the country, like Chicken Licken running all over the country complaining that the country was bankrupt, that the Government had no money. That is the message they fed to the business community; that is the message they fed to the international investors; that is the message they sent to the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2021.03.26

international lending institutions and that was the message that they used to justify not paying the Government's creditors, forgetting the wage negotiations; to block payments to contractors; to refuse to pay outstanding VAT and tax rebates to businesses and individuals; to starve local government of resources; to close down state enterprises; to restrict access to foreign exchange and to sell off state assets. The hon. Minister created the very crisis of confidence under his hand, he created it that he was complaining about in 2015 when the economy that he met was growing. He created the problem. The difficulty he has now is that he cannot hide it anymore, it is open for everyone with eyes to see. [*Desk thumping*]

This crisis of confidence was identified by a Central Bank report, just recently, published this year, in which economic uncertainty is defined and in which they described as economic uncertainty as having moved from moderate levels in 2014 to high and elevated levels of economic uncertainty under this Minister's hand. This, Madam Speaker, our state of the economy now is a self-inflicted wound. In every budget this Minister would come to the House and make pronouncements of grand plans and things he was going to do. We all remember the famous game changers, six game changers of things that would change the future of this country, they have not done any of those. [*Desk thumping*] Remember the Roadmap to Recovery, Madam Speaker. Even the Roadmap to Recovery tells that they did not have a plan, because they have now also abandoned that plan just like they have abandoned a multiplicity of plans that they brought to the Parliament and occupied parliamentary time discussing, but had no intentions of implementing.

Madam Speaker, I recall the plywood factory in La Brea. I recall the dry dock that they were supposed to be building that would create impetus and

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

employment in the southern peninsula. And Ministers opposite have had multiple occasions in which they have also brought plans, policies, programmes and initiatives that they proposed to do. My colleagues will treat with those, that they proposed to do, but the Minister of Finance did not facilitate, there was no funding for it. Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Finance withholds VAT and taxes from businesses he puts them at a significant disadvantage, he puts them in danger because it affects their cash flow. That is common business sense, the Minister knows that. So when you do not pay these individuals they run themselves into debt and when the Minister eventually comes and says, here, hold a bond, here, hold a bond, and the first payment for several years down the road what that is in effect doing is the Government is forcefully borrowing from these very same people putting them at loss. Is it any wonder then that business confidence has collapsed?

When the Minister has watered down the procurement legislation so that—when he has watered down the procurement legislation, when he has failed to fully implement the legislation as it exists now, when he has failed to bring the regulations to implement those regulations, he leave open the perception of corruption. It is therefore no surprise to anyone, thanks to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the Minister of Finance, it is no surprise that Trinidad and Tobago's ranking in corruption perception index continues to fall. When the Minister of Finance speaking about the Trinidad and Tobago economy, tells the country in June 2020, in the run-up to the general election and I quote, Madam Speaker:

“Simply put...this Government, and my team at the Ministry of Finance”—
thanks to—“this Government and my team at the Ministry of Finance,

we”—meaning the country—“are in a good place.”

But just two months afterwards he goes to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to withdraw and this is what he had to say in the report that was submitted by the hon. Minister in this very House and I quote:

The Government faced a severe cash constraint which put it at a major risk and as a result there was an urgent need for cash, there was an urgent need for a cash injection to the Consolidated Fund—and pay close attention, Madam Speaker—to avert the potential for reputational risk arising from the nonpayment on account of insufficient fund.

How can anyone have confidence in this Minister, Madam Speaker? He knew that the economy was in crisis, he knew that the country was in bankrupt since before the general election, but in order to create the narrative he was saying otherwise. Under his hand this country has become bankrupt. [*Desk thumping*] When the Minister of Finance accepts and recognizes that the National Insurance Board fund is in crisis and still takes money out of that fund to put it into the National Infrastructure Fund, further creating and worsening the crisis in the national insurance fund how can anyone have confidence in the Minister's action.

When the Minister of Finance illegally tried to enforce the property tax in Trinidad and Tobago—

Madam Speaker: I ask you to withdraw the word “illegally” please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Duly noted, Madam Speaker, duly withdrawn. When the Minister of Finance attempted to introduce and implement the property tax it took a UNC Opposition, it took the Opposition to take it to court to prove that the Minister's actions were illegal. When there is \$10.5 billion in excess liquidity, Madam Speaker, in the vaults of commercial banks, this highlights what we already know,

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

there is liquidity, nobody is borrowing, nobody is investing and the reason for that, Madam Speaker, is nobody has confidence in the Minister of Finance at all.

Madam Speaker, the ease of doing business, we have moved from 79 under our tenure, under the leadership of the Member for Siparia, to 105th under this Minister. And that is not all. We are now ranked 174th out of 190 countries for enforcing contracts, 160th for paying taxes, 158th for registering property. Is it any surprise that things are so bad why business has no confidence, business persons have no confidence in this country, Madam Speaker?

Basso Mai who is from my constituency from Ceno Trace she has no idea, Madam Speaker, of what any of these indicators are, but she knows that she is in grave difficulty, she knows that the country is in crisis. Madam Speaker, we know that the Member of Parliament will come here, the hon. Member of Parliament, the Member for Diego Martin North/East would come here to blame Kamla again. But all he has to tell us today is having spent 300 billion of our dollars, Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Your time is now spent.

Hon. Member: Hallelujah.

Madam Speaker: Member, you have to beg to move. [*Crosstalk*] You beg to move?

Mr. D. Tancoo: I beg to move, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro.

Mr. Paray: Madam Speaker, I second the Motion and I reserve my right to speak.
[*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

2.30 p.m.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I brought with me two pages to take notes. I am afraid I was only able to use one. I really do not understand the presentation of the hon. Member. It is very difficult to respond to what he said because he said basically nothing [*Desk thumping*] except, Madam Speaker, to put on record a number of untruths which he and his party, the hon. Member, have been stating for years. So let me deal with all of those untruths before I go into my response. One of them was that it was not true that the country only had three days of money available to it when we took office in 2015. They seem to be very afraid of people being aware of that fact, but I think it is important to refute the Motion by indicating that the economy at this time is in very good hands, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] But when we came into office in 2015, the economy had collapsed, and let me give you the indicators of a collapsed economy.

When we demitted office in 2010, Madam Speaker, the money in the Government's account at the Central Bank was in credit. In credit, Madam Speaker, in May of 2010, in the amount of \$6 billion. When we came back into office in 2015, the other Government had spent every cent of that \$6 billion in credit and had run up the Government's overdraft to almost \$9 billion, hence the fact that when we came in 2015, there was three days' money left in the Treasury. Three days, Madam Speaker. So they took a positive balance in the Government overdraft of \$6 billion and changed that to a negative, minus \$9 billion. They burnt up \$15 billion in Government cash, Madam Speaker.

In addition, Madam Speaker, the National Gas Company has always been a safety net for successive Governments. From time immemorial that has always

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

been a very profitable company, and it had built up reserves under the PNM of \$14 billion. They raided the cash balances of the National Gas Company and spent a further \$14 billion out of the NGC's deposits. That takes you to almost \$30 billion in profligate expenditure under the other side. They also increased Government expenditure, Madam Speaker, from \$46 billion to \$63 billion, and continued to spend like there was no tomorrow while oil prices dropped from \$100. That is the kind of prices they enjoyed. We in this period, between 2015 and 2021, have never seen an oil price of \$100, but under that Government, they enjoyed oil prices of over \$100.

Oil prices began to collapse in July of 2014, Madam Speaker, and they watched that price collapse from over 100, to 90, to 80, to 70, to 60, to 40, which is where it was when we came in, in September 2015. But they spent money like water even though the national revenues were shrinking rapidly; irresponsibility. That is what we had to deal with, Madam Speaker. They also gave wage increases in real terms of over 20 per cent. Because when you consolidate COLA and you increase allowances, you cannot simply look at the nominal increase in wages, you have to look at the whole increase. They gave wage increases of over 20 per cent but they did not pay the back pay. So one of the things we had to do over the period, with an oil price dropping from \$100 to \$25, was to find \$6 billion in back pay. And I am proud to be part of a government that did whatever was necessary and took the right decisions, and we paid every cent of that \$6 billion in back pay.
[Desk thumping]

You see, Madam Speaker, the hon. Members opposite live in fantasy land—fantasy land. Imagine taking expenditure from \$46 billion to \$63 billion and you have no source of funds, and you are watching the oil price collapsing, you are

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

watching the gas production going down, you are watching the oil production going down, but you are spending money like water. That is what we had to deal with, and that is what this Minister had to deal with. All of this ole talk is a figment of their imagination. Let me also put into the record what the facts are, the real in the economic indicators between 2010 and 2020, and let me deal in particular with this mythology that the economy grew. In 2014, the economy contracted under the previous government by 0.9 per cent, Madam Speaker, and that was with an oil price of \$100. Somehow with an oil price of \$100 and oil production and gas production much higher than it is now because we have declining production. We are a mature province. So that means that our oil fields rapidly declined and you have to keep producing them. So with declining production, but much more than we have now, and the oil price double what it is now, they managed to have negative growth in the economy in 2014. What did we do, Madam Speaker?

We were faced with a very difficult problem. We had to reduce expenditure from that ridiculous figure of \$63 billion without crashing the economy which we managed to do successfully, and we managed to bring expenditure down into the \$50 billion range, and as a result of our revenue measures we were able to increase revenue, Madam Speaker. There are a number of things that we did, very innovative; we changed the entire oil and gas taxation regime, Madam Speaker, from a profits-based taxation regime to a volume-based taxation regime, because in a profit taxation environment in the energy sector, when oil prices are down you are not going to get one cent. And in fact, because of the incentives given to the energy sector by the other side, irresponsible incentives, tax write-offs, capital expenditure write-offs, accelerated capital expenditure write-offs, because of the low prices of oil, one of the major oil companies, the largest gas producer in

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Trinidad and Tobago, BP, came to see us in the last quarter of 2015, just after the election, and presented us with graphs and tables to show us that because of what they had done, BP was not going to pay us any money until the year 2024. That is what we were facing.

So, very quickly, applying expert knowledge, expert techniques, we revised the energy taxation regime immediately, moved it away from a profits-based system to a volume-based system and put an across-the-board royalty of 12½ per cent on all oil and gas production, and that doubled the revenue from petroleum, Madam Speaker. That is what we did. That is the kind of innovation that is resident in this Minister of Finance and this Government, and therefore, we were able to grow revenue. Remember oil prices collapsed in 2016 to \$25; collapsed from \$100 to \$25. Gas production going down, oil production going down, and yet because of innovation, and because of knowledge, and because of expertise, and because of hard work, Madam Speaker, we were able to arrest a decline in revenue and grow our revenue back up from just over \$34 billion to \$47 billion in 2019. That was no mean feat, Madam Speaker; no mean feat.

And when I look at all the statistics that are available, Trinidad and Tobago's inflation rate—what was the headline inflation rate in 2012? It was 8 per cent, Madam Speaker. It continued at that level above 5 per cent right down to the general election of 2015. What is the headline inflation rate today? It is less than 1 per cent, Madam Speaker, and we have maintained headline inflation at 1 per cent or less for the last four years. [*Desk thumping*] Deliberate policy actions of this Government. What was food inflation under the UNC? It was 18 per cent in 2012. What was food inflation in 2019? It was less than 1 per cent. These are all policy measures of this Government; [*Desk thumping*] all initiatives of this Minister of

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Finance and this Government, Madam Speaker.

Unemployment: Unemployment has remained steady in the 4 per cent to 5 per cent range under this administration no matter what challenges we have faced, Madam Speaker. So those are the facts and I happen to have—they like to quote and misquote from official documents. I happen to have the Monetary Policy Announcement of the Central Bank dated March 26, 2021—I believe that is today—and I shall read from it:

“Domestic economic conditions are yet to fully stabilize from the COVID-19 shock. During the fourth quarter of 2020, the energy sector experienced significant...production falloffs for natural gas, liquefied natural gas and petrochemicals.”

Production falloffs.

“On the other hand...”—and this is not me speaking, Madam Speaker, this is the Central Bank—“indicators monitored by the Central Bank suggest that”—the—“non-energy sector...is slowly recovering, fueled by...construction...finance and insurance... [*Desk thumping*] Headline inflation remained contained at 0.8 per cent (year-on-year) in February 2021, with food inflation decelerating to 2.3 per cent...”—in February 2021.

So who am I to believe, them or the Central Bank?

Madam Speaker, I understand what the other side is all about, you know. They cannot get over the fact that the population adjudicated on them in 2015, and found them wanting. [*Desk thumping*] They cannot get over the fact that it was not just corruption, but it was their performance as a government that threw them down in 2015. [*Desk thumping*] And they cannot get over the fact that the population adjudicated on them again in 2020. [*Desk thumping*] And again, they

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

cannot get over the fact it was the perception of corruption if they came back in or that they would fail to perform again as they did in 2010—2015. They cannot get over the fact that the last election was won on two fronts; it was won on our government's fantastic response to COVID-19, and it was won on our government's economic performance over the 2010—2015 period. [*Desk thumping*] Because what we have been able to do in the last five years, Madam Speaker, with an oil price shock in 2015, 2016, and another oil price shock in 2020, in the first three months of 2020, and an economic shock that the entire world has suffered because of COVID-19, we have been able to keep this country running.

We have been able to make sure people get their salaries on time, we have been able to preserve as many jobs as possible, we have kept people whole, we have kept sectors moving, we have kept industry ticking over, Madam Speaker, and all of that under extremely difficult economic circumstances; the prices of our major commodities have simply collapsed. And that was before COVID those commodities prices had collapsed, and yet we were able to grow revenue from petroleum by 100 per cent, Madam Speaker, between 2016 and 2019.

So since the hon. Member did not say anything that I really need to respond to, could you tell me how much more time I have, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Your time expires at 3:01:32.

Hon. C. Imbert: I have 15 minutes. Nice. As I said, the hon. Member said nothing of significance [*Desk thumping*] so let us now talk about what this Government is doing.

Madam Speaker, I want to put into the record an article from the World Economic Forum. I do not expect Members opposite to know what that is, but it is

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

the International Organization for Public-Private Cooperation. An article dated November 2020, by John Letzing, Digital Editor, Strategic Intelligence for the World Economic Forum. This article is all about debt management during COVID-19 and I would just like to quote from it.

“The debt load in the”—United States—“has only continued to rise, far exceeding the size of the country’s economy as measures are enacted to cushion the impact of COVID-19. The US is not alone - governments around the world have been borrowing heavily as they seek to counter the pandemic. While this does not necessarily come as a surprise, the relatively subdued reaction among...experts might.

The pandemic...”—is—“further reshaping how many people think about sizable public debt. Those who may once have been spooked by the concept are okay with it now...

So, even as countries like the UK register record debt...and the public debt-to-GDP ratio is expected to hit 140% in developed...”—companies—“many experts have a general recommendation:”—and this is—“keep borrowing.

Not so long ago, it was received wisdom that a country’s public debt load should stay well shy of the size of its economy. In the US, public debt amounted to...60% of GDP on the eve of the global financial crisis...”—in 2008—“and the European Union’s founding treaty actually spelled out a public debt cap of 60% of GDP. But like”—many—“other things that...have been...”—previously—“taken for granted, the pandemic has...scrapped that EU guideline - as policy-makers scramble to prop up”—their—“economies. Long before COVID-19, many experts were criticizing the single-minded obsession with...”—curtailing—“public debt as ‘foolish,’ while noting that

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

debt raised to defeat the Nazis in World War II - presumably a justified expense...had yet to be paid off.

Governments have been borrowing from a broad range of investors, including pension funds...central banks have...”—put—“some of their most reliable backers - the US Federal Reserve has been buying \$80 billion in Treasury securities per month.”

So when we look at what is happening around the world, Madam Speaker—and this is not unique to that World Economic Forum. I have the Fiscal Monitor Update from the IMF which is telling us exactly the same thing, that countries all around the world should ensure that their economies keep moving by borrowing money to drive the engines of industry. So that when I see commentary using data and learning from 2010, 2005, 2015; when I see commentary that is obsolete, and useless, and irrelevant in the face of COVID-19, I wonder when the persons who have the ability to comment on where our economy is going will get serious, Madam Speaker.

I wonder what the Members opposite would have done when faced with the COVID-19 shock. Would they have cut expenditure by \$20 billion and retrenched 30,000 public servants? Would they have devalued the dollar to 15:1, Madam Speaker? Because, from all that they say; from all that they say, I gather these are the prescriptions from the Members opposite. I gather those are their prescriptions. I just want to say what we have done in the last 12 months because I consider that to be the most important thing that we have done. In terms of putting money in the hands of businesses, I heard a comment about VAT refunds, but it escapes the fact that we have put out \$3½ billion in the middle of COVID to deal with VAT refunds; [*Desk thumping*] \$500 million in cash and \$3 billion in bonds, and I heard

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

the hon. Member make a weak attempt to denigrate the bonds.

But the fact of the matter is that the VAT bonds that were issued by this Government in 2020, were fully tradeable, fully encashable at 100 cents on the dollar. In fact, as soon as we had issued the bonds, within a couple of days I got a message from a banker, loudly proclaiming to me that he had just encashed for a client the first VAT bond at 100 cents on the dollar. That is what this Government did. So we gave them these bonds that are equivalent to cash. They could keep them, use them as security, or they can cash them as they see fit. Three billion dollars' worth of VAT bonds in the middle of a pandemic, Madam Speaker.

What else has this Government done during the last 12 months, Madam Speaker, and what would they have done differently? What would they have done differently? We have given out hundreds of millions of dollars in income support and salary relief grants because one of the things that we recognized during COVID, and this is why this Minister of Finance moved with alacrity to access the necessary funding, to go to the Heritage Fund, to go the multilateral financial institutions, the IDB, the Andean Bank of Latin America, the World Bank, the private investment climate in the United States, the domestic banking sector; we moved with alacrity to access the necessary funding so that we ensure that people had food on the table during the COVID-19 pandemic. That was one of the first things that this Government did, make sure that people would not starve [*Desk thumping*] as has happened in so many countries.

Even in developed countries, I remember, Madam Speaker, seeing a video of people in Italy; Italy, a developed country, where people were starving, Madam Speaker, because of the COVID-19 lockdown and because of the fact that it took that country's Government a little while to mobilize itself to provide relief to its

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

citizens, but not us, Madam Speaker. Within weeks we had mobilized through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services food support directly through hampers, through food cards, through food baskets; \$30 million we gave to the churches for them to distribute through their food grant programme and helped over 100,000 people. [*Desk thumping*] That is what we did. We looked at every aspect of the economy and what should be done about it. We provided soft loans to the private sector interest-free, moratorium for the first two years; concessional financing for the credit union sector; \$50 million in grants for the hotel sector in Tobago; everything that the Ministry of Health required to do its business and to create a parallel health sector.

Madam Speaker, the parallel health sector of Trinidad and Tobago is the envy of the world—the envy of the world. [*Desk thumping*] There is no other country in the world that was able to create and maintain a parallel health sector as we have; no other country in the world. You look at CNN, you look at BBC and you will see hospitals were overflowing all over the world in developed countries, Madam Speaker. Not in Trinidad and Tobago, and this is because we in the Ministry of Finance mobilized the necessary funding to make sure there were salaries for health care workers, equipment for the hospitals, and we in fact were able to open new hospitals. [*Desk thumping*] We were able to mobilize financing so that we could open the Point Fortin Hospital. [*Desk thumping*] The Arima Hospital, Madam Speaker, that is a fantastic achievement on the part of this Government and I am proud to have been part of that.

In addition, Madam Speaker, as borne out by this Central Bank report, we did not stop there. We recognized that cash flow is the engine of every business in this country. So we also used some of the funding that we got from the Heritage

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

Fund, and from the multilateral agencies, and from the domestic banking sector to pay bills, to pay arrears of bills. Billions of dollars in bills left for us by the other government when they had that crazy election spending in 2015, where they just awarded contracts “free sheet”, ridiculous contracts at twice, and three times, and four times the market rate. Did not pay the contractors and left us holding the bill to come and pay afterwards when we came in, and we have painstakingly over the last five years dealt with these arrears, systematically reducing the liability of the Government to contractors. Billions of dollars spent in 2020 to reduce arrears to contractors.

Billions of dollars spent, Madam Speaker, to stimulate construction in housing, in infrastructure, in community facilities and so on, because we in the Ministry of Finance recognized that we had to keep things going. And I would ask any one of them what would they have done differently, Madam Speaker? What would they have done differently? Would they have devalued the dollar? Would they have sent public servants home? Would they have stopped the senior citizens pension? Would they have scrapped social welfare grants? Because when you listen to them, when you listen to their critique, you get the impression that that is their solution: devalue the dollar, retrench people, stop spending on social welfare. You get the impression that that is their critique, Madam Speaker, but we are not going to do that.

We have a medium-term macroeconomic plan, Madam Speaker. Medium-term macroeconomic plan, and with all the ole talk from their side I will put paid to the untruth that they are trying to propagate. If what they were saying is true, if what they were saying was true, we would not have won the 2020 election [*Desk thumping*] but let us put that aside. If what they were saying was true, then it would

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

have been impossible in the height of COVID-19 for this Government and this Ministry of Finance to be able to maintain an investment grade rating with Standard & Poor's, and maintain our investment credit rating—sorry, our credit rating with Moody's in the middle of COVID, May and June of 2020, while the virus was raging, while all you are seeing in developed countries is people lining up by a row of coffins. I mean, the scenes from the other countries, Madam Speaker, terrible. When you look at Italy, they come in with trucks to pick up coffins. That was not happening in Trinidad and Tobago.

The middle of COVID, countries all over the world locked down, yet we in the Ministry of Finance, using expert consultants both externally and locally, were able to maintain our international credit ratings while every country in Latin America and the Caribbean was losing theirs. Every one of them was losing their rating. We maintained ours, and because of that achievement this Minister of Finance was able to go onto the international capital market in June of 2020, in the middle of COVID, and contrary to the nonsense that I hear from the other side, we were able to raise US \$500 million on the international capital market in two hours. In two hours it was oversubscribed by 100 per cent within an hour, Madam Speaker. And I asked the bankers, I asked the arrangers of finance who were working for the Government, I said, “How come in the middle of COVID Trinidad and Tobago Government could raise US \$500 million in two hours with 100 per cent oversubscription at an interest rate of 4½ per cent over 10 years? How? How was it possible to do that?”

3.00 p.m.

They said, Minister, you do not understand the regard that the international community has for Trinidad and Tobago under this Government. [*Desk thumping*]

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.03.26

You see, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and we continue to get unsolicited offers from international banks to provide financing for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago because our reputation in the international world remains intact and remains high. [*Desk thumping*] So I really do not know what to say about this Motion.

When we came into office, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was US 5.6 billion. As of yesterday, it was over US 5.7 billion. So what they talking about the country bankrupt? [*Desk thumping*] So US \$5.7 billion in the Heritage Fund, over TT \$30 billion—actually closer to TT \$40 billion, that is not a sign of bankruptcy. [*Desk thumping*] They just throw out words, empty words but everybody in this country is aware of the difficulties that we have had. Everybody is aware of the balancing act of this Minister of Finance to keep the economy going, to keep spending in the productive sector, [*Desk thumping*] to make sure those who are most in need get help and yet make sure that our metrics, our ratings—

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

Hon. C. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]—and I reject this Motion. [*Desk thumping*]

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Madam Speaker: Okay. Before I call upon the Member for Couva South, the Whip has just passed something to me that is ascribed to the Member of Parliament for Tobago West. I just want to again remind Members, we spent a long time last year dealing with how unacceptable, inappropriate it is for Members who should be engaged in the people's business to be sending messages on social media during the sitting. There are two aspects. The fact that you are sending and secondly, the nature of what you are sending. Okay?

So that I want to caution all Members, we have dealt with this, I thought we

were past this. I know sometimes, regardless of the matter that is being debated, Members tend to get very anxious to want to speak and they may end up speaking on their devices. I want to tell all Members that the practice of engaging in social media while the House is in session is unacceptable. It is not to be tolerated. All right? So that, if it is this has been generated from the Member for Tobago West, I would ask her to disengage from that.

I am quite cognizant because the Parliament in the last two weeks had been engaged in certain hemispheric sessions concerning misinformation and the use of social media. So I am quite cognizant of the fact that things can generate all kinds of places. What I am asking all Members is to desist from using their devices for that purpose during the sessions. And if it is the Member for Tobago West, to which this Twitter post has generated, I will ask the Member to desist from that and I extend that to all Members. Member for Couva South. [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Cudjoe: Madam Speaker, [*Inaudible*] privilege. I have not been on social media the whole time I have been sitting here and I strongly refute whatever it is being thrown my way, Madam Speaker. I have not been on social media and I demand that it be retracted please, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Tobago East—

Ms. Cudjoe: Tobago West.

Madam Speaker: Tobago West, I am sorry. One, I could appreciate your angst if you did not. I did not accuse you of anything, I am saying if generated from you. All right? And as I said, I appreciate the type of world we are living in with respect to the potential with social media. All right? So I am asking Members to desist from sending while the House is in session.

And I am also asking Members, because of the threats against what we do that come from social media, that we all have a duty to safeguard the spread of

disinformation by means of social media. So whichever way, I hope that no Member in this Chamber is engaged in the practice of using social media while we are in session, whether it is really genuinely from the Member or is a form of disinformation.

MINISTER OF FINANCE
(LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN)

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. After having listened to the Minister of Finance over the last 30 minutes, I am sure that the business community, the labour community, the wider civil society and the people of Trinidad and Tobago will continue to have no confidence in the Minister of Finance and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in relation to the handling of the economy, the diversification, the growth and creation of employment. There is absolutely no hope under the Minister of Finance and the Member for Diego Martin North/East for Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

And, Madam Speaker, we on this side could have told you, even before this response from the Minister of Finance, what he will say. He will blame Kamla. [*Desk thumping*] He will tell the population we have to borrow because we were running on fumes when we came in. We in the Opposition want a devaluation and they want to blame COVID for the reduced revenue from oil and gas and methanol. We know the script of the Minister of Finance and hapless Government led by Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley. [*Desk thumping*]

And, Madam Speaker, I came with a prepared text to make a brief contribution here but after having listened to the Minister of Finance, it is my responsibility to put on the record and rebut that this Minister has to be living in a fantasy land and is the individual having the largest ego as it relates to being a

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

stranger to the truth and what the reality is in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the Minister, before he ended his contribution, boasted of a parallel health care system that was the best in the world and to the point that he could not have reminded us what Trinidad and Tobago has become under the Minister of Health and where he has been the Minister of Finance for the last six years or approximately six years. Because from being told by Oxford University that—

Dr. Moonilal: What is happening there?

Madam Speaker: I usually do not have a problem hearing the Member for Couva South. All right? And I am just going to ask all Members to please desist from crosstalk, loud talking, continuous conversations. All right? Because I know the Member for Couva South has the ability to drown out this Chamber, I really would not like him to have to do so for how we are interrupting him. Please continue, Member for Couva South.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Minister of Health boasted, and every day we heard it, that Trinidad and Tobago was told by Oxford University that we were the best in the world but under the Minister of Finance, we have been reduced as beggars in relation to [*Desk thumping*] the provision of vaccines for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, in relation to the parallel health care system that they have boasted so much about. Today, thousands of our very own citizens cannot get basic surgeries done [*Desk thumping*] in our health care system in Trinidad and Tobago. Thousands of our citizens remain stranded outside of the shores of Trinidad and Tobago, [*Desk thumping*] not knowing when they will come in and there is a brain drain in terms of nurses exiting Trinidad and

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Tobago because they have no confidence in the Minister of Finance and no confidence in his colleague, the Minister of Health.

Madam Speaker, it is also important for me to be able to tell Trinidad and Tobago, and once and for all put a rest to this narrative that the PNM continues in trying to hide their incompetence and their lack of development for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Because they continue to tell the country that when they came into office that the Treasury was empty. And the biggest contradiction I heard was towards the end of the contribution of the Minister of Finance when he said that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund still had approximately US \$5.6 billion in it. That was the figure that was left by Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar and her government. And he said that because the sum of money was in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is a testimony that Trinidad and Tobago was not bankrupt.

So the fact remains that when they came into Government, they met a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that had approximately US \$6 billion in it. How could have the Partnership Government, led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, bankrupted Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker? In addition to that, the economic indicators will reveal or have revealed that the foreign reserves led by the Partnership, led by Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the foreign reserves stood at approximately \$13-plus billion and that is the legacy of sound, economic management on the part of the Kamla Persad-Bissessar-led Government.
[Desk thumping]

And, Madam Speaker, the PNM has spent approximately \$300 billion. In fact, I think—and I stand to be corrected—it is \$290 billion and they have drawn down approximately US \$900 million from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, so

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

that it is further testimony that the country was not running on fumes. There were adequate resources to govern Trinidad and Tobago and that is the foundation they have attempted to navigate for the last six years.

And, Madam Speaker, it is important for us to remind Trinidad and Tobago that when Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar led Trinidad and Tobago and spent moneys, it was moneys that were spent towards the development of this country and towards improving the quality of life and standard of living of all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And this was clearly demonstrated, Madam Speaker, in the projects; the projects that were executed by the government led by the Member for Siparia because we have a track record of showing what we achieved. You have spent approximately \$290 billion, you have drawn down \$900 million-plus from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, what can you show to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? We on this side can still show the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we delivered over 100 schools. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, we can also show to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we refurbished over 100-plus health centres. We built—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1). [*Crosstalk*] This has nothing to do with the tenure of the Member for Siparia. [*Continuous crosstalk*] [*Madam Speaker rises*] Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1) because respectfully we are not debating the tenure of the Member of Siparia, for the last five minutes as the hon. Member has been engaged. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Overruled.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Attorney General should have paid attention to his colleague, the Minister of Finance, [*Desk thumping*] when the Minister of Finance said that the Government led by the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

Member for Siparia spent money like water. I want to show where the water went in terms of the allocation of resources. [*Desk thumping*] You all are strangers to the truth and today we will put rest to that. [*Desk thumping*] Because if you cannot deal with the facts, Attorney General, you could take “ah walk”. [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Take back “de walk”.

Madam Speaker: Member, that is unacceptable. You are speaking to the Chair. Okay? And the only person who can send people for a walk here is the Chair. All right? So please retract that.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: I retract, Madam Speaker. At no point in time—

Madam Speaker: Just now, just now. We are not having a— Member, we are not having a conversation. You retract and please proceed.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I retract. It is important for the Attorney General to know also that we spent moneys as it relates to ensuring that over 74-plus per cent of the population have clean water in their taps when we were in power. Today, WASA collapsed after six years and three successive Ministers of Public Utilities. The workers of WASA do not know if they are coming or going, [*Desk thumping*] and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago do not know when there will be a reliable water supply into their homes and in their taps after a Government that has been led by Dr. Keith Rowley in two terms. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, it is important for the citizenry of the country to be reminded that there was infrastructural development as it relates to the construction of the Valencia bypass, the Diego Martin Highway, the highway to Point Fortin. And in addition to that, projects that we are all proud of as patriotic citizens of

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

Trinidad and Tobago today, the Couva children's hospital, [*Desk thumping*] the Cycling Velodrome, the Aquatic Centre. And we understood that we had a responsibility for the well-being of the nation's children and that is why the Member for Siparia spent moneys on laptops, textbooks and uniforms for the children of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is why too that under her stewardship as the Prime Minister of the country, her government was praised. Her government was praised by the General Secretary of the United Nations for having achieved the status of universal early childhood education for the young children of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, and that is how the money was spent.

We also focused on crime-fighting, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1), again respectfully. Perhaps I do not know if you have been paying attention because I see the Clerk was with you. So I apologize if you did not hear—[*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: No, no. AG, so I will just ask you to retract that last statement also.

Mr. Al-Rawi: I am sorry. I was just wondering if you want me to clarify.

Madam Speaker: No. [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: So I retract, Madam Speaker, of course, most respectfully.

Madam Speaker: Okay, retract and sit. Okay? And again, I am the sole arbiter of what is relevant. You may stand on a Standing Order or anybody is entitled to, I am the final arbiter of that. Please proceed, Member for Couva South.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will remind the country—I do not have to remind them because we spent money on the construction of police stations in Arima, [*Desk thumping*] in Piarco, in Maloney, in Cumuto, in Brasso, La Brea, Oropouche and Moruga, and we ensured that GATE was expanded to

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

include technical and vocational courses.

And, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, having nothing to speak about in terms of achievements and what he can boast about, attempted to berate the Member for Siparia and our government at that time for gifting the Government of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to a five-billion-dollar outstanding back pay for the labour movement. Again, that was never gifted, that was negotiated between parties; [*Desk thumping*] recognized majority unions, their representative employers, whether the CPO, at whatever state entity, under the rule of law, under the Industrial Relations Act of Trinidad and Tobago, and that was achieved through the collective bargaining process.

And, Madam Speaker, when we assumed office—the Member for Diego Martin North/East seem to have forgotten. When the Member for Siparia emerged to be the Prime Minister in May of 2010, Trinidad and Tobago was now emerging out of what was called—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1) again, please.

Madam Speaker: Member for San Fernando West, the Minister of Finance in his contribution made certain comparisons with one period versus another period. Okay? So that I take this as responding to that. Please continue, Couva South.
[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. How much more time do I have?

Madam Speaker: You have just under four minutes.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I said, the Member for Siparia took the reins of leading Trinidad and Tobago at a time when Trinidad and Tobago was on the cusp of or climbing out of a global economic meltdown, and she led Trinidad and Tobago by not bawling and crying and blaming and moaning

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

and groaning. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: 48(1), Madam Speaker. I rise on 48(1).

Madam Speaker: And, Members, everybody has a right to rise on a Standing Order and while everybody has a right, it is also not a right to be abused. Okay? So I ask Members to be tolerant when another Member rises and leave it for the Chair to determine. Attorney General, I overrule and would also say that we also have other rights you could exercise in here when we have a little challenge. Member for Couva South.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. True leadership was demonstrated between May of 2010 to 2015, when we grappled with the economic hold, the financial hold of over \$22 billion as a result of Clico. We met contractors who attempted to hold my colleagues hostage in the Diplomatic Centre demanding that the government of the day settle over \$5 billion in debts that were owed to contractors and at a time when they failed to offer zero, zero per cent to the labour movement at the time. It was the government led by the Member for Siparia who displayed leadership and ensured that she facilitated the free and fair collective bargaining process, [*Desk thumping*] and as a result of facilitating that process, over 135 negotiations were settled and leadership was found to settle over \$400 billion in back pay. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Finance comes to this House and attempts to create the narrative that we misspent, “they eh know where the money gone, we wasted the money, spending like water”, and so on, they must deal with the reality of what they have done. He, as the Minister of Finance, could not have boasted of one success story. [*Desk thumping*]

Today, NIBTT is in shambles, Madam Speaker, from a financial point of

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

view. The Minister of Finance wants to put workers back to the 1930s when workers in this country did not have the right to engage in free and fair collective bargaining. It is unheard of in this country where a Minister of Finance has gone into unchartered territory, unparalleled territory and he has ordered and launched an investigation into a collective agreement that was legally arrived at between both parties. And he would not tell the country that he collapsed on the job because he was the line Minister for NIBTT [*Desk thumping*] for the last six years. The negotiations started in October of 2019 and finished in 2020 under his watch. And if the Minister of Finance was doing his job, certainly from a tripartite point of view, NIBTT has a chairman that directly reports to him as the line Minister.

And I want to say there is no hope in the Minister of Finance for the next four and a half years because he will continue to dissipate the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] Today, the UNC continues its charade, its charade of no confidence Motions on key Cabinet Ministers. In January, they moved a Motion of no confidence in a Minister of National Security. All they fired were blanks. In February, they moved a Motion of no confidence on the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. Again, they fired blanks. Today, they are moving a Motion against our illustrious Minister of Finance and from the first two shots, they were also blanks. [*Desk thumping*]

But, Madam Speaker, there is not much to respond to. As the Minister of Finance said, he had two pages, I had one and I still could not even fill a quarter of the one. Oropouche West who is the mover of a Motion of no confidence against a Minister of Finance, you should come here articulating, for your own position, the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen The. Hon. F. Khan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

flawed fiscal and monetary policy that this administration is implementing. That is the justification for a Motion of no confidence. You spoke nothing of fiscal nor monetary, so your presentation is in fact a non-presentation. [*Desk thumping*]

The only comment I have on Couva South is that he spoke of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and said we met money in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Yes, we did. But let me just remind the citizens of this country on an issue with the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. The Act demands that when the Minister of Finance presents his budget, he has an estimate of oil price. If the actual realized oil price for the fiscal year is higher than the estimated price, half of that revenue has to go by law into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So when your administration benefitted from US \$100 oil price, you did not estimate that, that was a windfall. So by law, you had to put money into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. But what you did, you spent all the money on the expenditure side and then borrowed to put into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. It is the only time I have heard in my life that people borrow to save and that is the ridiculousness that went on under that administration.

3.30 p.m.

But Madam Speaker, as the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, my portfolio demands that the Minister I work closest with is the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance, and to a lesser extent, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, is responsible for the collection and generation of revenue in this country. The Minister of Finance collects and generates most of the revenue. But as Minister of Energy and Energy and Energy Industries, I have the responsibility for the collection of royalties in the form of Treasury Deposits and the Minister's share of revenue under the production sharing contracts, which is used to pay

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen The. Hon. F. Khan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

petroleum taxes and royalties, and the rest is deemed to be profits, and these moneys are then reimbursed into the Consolidated Fund.

But Madam Speaker, last month I came to this House to defend my stewardship as the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. I dealt in particular with prices and production and the operation and policy issues and the investment levels in the energy sector.

Today, in support of the Minister of Finance, I will have a discussion on the fiscal and revenue issues as it relates to the energy sector. The Minister of Finance assumed office at a time when the main revenue earner, the domestic energy sector, was impacted by falling production and depressed global energy markets, which saw commodity prices plummet as much as—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, 44(10), please. I rise on Standing Order 44(10).

Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member please continue. Remember it is a debate. You are a seasoned Member. I am sure, while you might not be familiar with what 44(10) is, there is a similar one in the Senate. So I would ask you not to be too married to your notes, please. **Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** Madam Speaker, trust me, I know how to debate. So we had a situation where crude prices was as high as \$100 in 2011 to 2014. Petrochemical prices, methanol and urea were in the vicinity of US \$500 per metric ton. The signs of falling energy prices was evident in 2015. Notwithstanding the predicted fall in revenue, particularly in oil and gas revenue, by some 9 billion, the then Government only reduced expenditure by 3 billion.

The Minister of Finance, our Minister of Finance, was confronted by a situation of substantially reduced revenues and a recurrent expenditure that was for the most part non-discretionary. What was the Minister of Finance supposed to do in such a situation? Some of the same persons who were the architects of our

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen The. Hon. F. Khan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

predicament were very vocal in their recommendations. And as the Minister of Finance rightfully said, the recommendations came fast and furious by the very people who were the architects of the demise; devalue the dollar, increase taxes, cut the size of the public service, retrench workers. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance in his wisdom rejected all these issues forthright. [*Desk thumping*]

I would delve a little more into what the Minister of Finance said. On the revenue side, what made matters worse, when we came into office the country's largest gas producer, the Minister of Finance mentioned it, came to us. I was in the meeting with the Minister of Finance, when he showed us their forecast for tax liability. BP, the country's largest gas producer, indicating to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries that they would have no tax liability until 2024. That is not an easy thing to hear you know. And the reason I will now outline to this country was not only declining production and soft prices, but it was also largely due to the more than generous fiscal incentives that were offered by—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 55(1)(b), please. We heard thisbefore from the Minister of Finance.

Madam Speaker: Please proceed.

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: In an effort to boost upstream investment, Madam Speaker, the UNC threw the baby out with the bathwater, and let me explain. Effective the 1st of January, 2014, upstream companies because of fiscal policy by this then UNC administration, were eligible to claim 100 per cent write-offs on capital expenditure for exploration in the year in which it was expended. For those of you who do not understand taxes, let us explain that. An exploration well costs approximately US \$50 million to US \$100 million. A company is now being

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen The. Hon. F. Khan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

offered to write off that entire cost in one year, the year in which it was expended. That is ridiculous.

Additionally, these very companies, after getting an exploration write-off of 100 per cent, were allowed to write off tangible and intangible development costs in an accelerated fashion: year one, 50 per cent; year two, 30 per cent; and year three, 20 per cent. The situation was further compounded by loss relief, when you could have carried 100 per cent of your taxable income over into the other year.

Madam Speaker, it is no wonder that with these more than generous tax incentives that were offered to the oil companies, no wonder that BP could have come to this Government and say they do not have a tax liability until 2024. What did the Minister of Finance do? The Minister of Finance eh, not the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. The Minister of Finance in 2017 stopped the 100 per cent exploration write-off, period. In 2019, the loss relief for production companies was limited to 75 per cent of taxable income, instead of the 100 per cent. The generous capital allowances that I outlined there, 50, 30, 20 in three years, were now reduced to five-year in a straight line, which is 20, 20, 20, 20, 20. Because of that, it may sound here as simple, that plugged a major tax leak and it earned this country, because of the actions of the Minister of Finance, hundreds of millions of dollars per annum.

Madam Speaker, I leave the best for last. The Minister of Finance mentioned it, but oil companies pay PPT which is petroleum profit tax. Petroleum profit tax is a profit tax, but in an extractive industry, you cannot tax on profit. You have to tax on volume. And it is because of the actions of the Minister of Finance when he imposed on the 1st of January, 2018, a 12½ per cent royalty across the board on all gas production. In my opinion, Madam Speaker, it is the single most important

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen The. Hon. F. Khan (cont'd)

decision this Minister of Finance has ever taken in the interest of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

And let me tell you why, effective January 01, 2018, on the initiative of the Minister of Finance, imposing the 12.5 per cent royalty on natural gas, the measures resulted in royalty income increasing—listen to these figures—from \$400 million in 2016, to \$3.5 billion in 2019; [*Desk thumping*] all that by the stroke of a pen, from the Minister of Finance. That is a whole lot of money, you know. From \$400 million to \$3.5 billion. The impact of the pandemic lowered royalty incomes, obviously, to \$2.5 billion in 2020, which was still much higher than the 2016 royalty revenue of \$400 million. So, Madam Speaker, based on that alone, the Minister of Finance has worth his keeps. He has generated tremendous significant additional revenue for this country.

We have spoken about LNG leakage. I do not have the time to cover that. But everybody knows that we said, in the Spotlight on Energy, that there was leakage on the sale of LNG. We have plugged that leak partially. We are still working on it and all that was in consultation with the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister. And we have done well there. We have negotiated what is called a new Train 1 formula, and that is serving this country extremely well.

I would like to spend the next couple minutes on the restructuring of Petrotrin. Because, as Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, operationally I knew Petrotrin was in problems. I knew that the refinery was losing money. I knew that for every barrel of crude we imported and refined, we were losing \$6.00. I knew that insufficient capital was being invested in exploration and production.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen The. Hon. F. Khan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

However, it is when the Minister of Finance evaluated the balance sheets in a very critical and clinical manner that we realized that there was no hope for Petrotrin. Let me just quote something here:

For the year 2016, the company auditors advised that Petrotrin could not utilize its deferred income tax asset of approximately 3 billion, as the auditors were of the view that the company would not be profitable for the foreseeable future. As a result, the asset was impaired and was written off, leading to a loss for the year of \$4.9 billion in 2016.

We “cyah take ah hit like dat”. So it is when the Minister of Finance actually went through the balance sheet and the accounts of Petrotrin, we knew we had no choice. It was not only an operational issue. It was a hardcore financial issue. And the Minister of Finance was very, very instrumental in the success of the restructuring of Petrotrin. It was driven by the Prime Minister in conjunction with the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, but very, very fundamental to the restructuring and the success of that restructuring exercise was the Minister of Finance.

I move on now to oil. Trinidad and Tobago is set for a major boost in production of oil, which has been facilitated by fiscal incentives, pilot by the Minister of Finance to increase oil production. Effective January 01, 2020, in computing supplemental petroleum tax payable, production companies can now claim an investment credit of 25 per cent—previously it was 20 per cent—of capital expenditure spent on mature oil fields or 25 per cent of qualifying capital expenditure on enhanced oil recovery project.

Additionally, as this Parliament will recall, in the last budget, effective January 01, 2021, the threshold for the imposition of the supplemental petroleum

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen The. Hon. F. Khan (cont'd)

tax for small onshore operators was increased from \$50 per barrel to \$75 per barrel. So this would give the lease operators more cash flow to invest in their operation and to create more petroleum so that we could get more taxes. It will create more employment. It will create more economic activity in the oil belt.

So, Madam Speaker, I say on behalf of this Government that this Government has full confidence in the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance. And may I remind you, he is also Chairman of the People's National Movement. [*Desk thumping*] Specifically, the Minister of Finance has implemented sound fiscal and monetary policies to steer this economy through two major black swan events, low energy prices and COVID-19.

And I want to close, Madam Speaker, on a very serious note, and let me say this, this is not political now. When the average Trinidadian wakes up on a morning he still has a job. Their children have schools to go to, whether it is virtual or whether it is in person. There is no shortage of basic commodities. There is a functioning health care system. There is functioning public service. There is functioning activities in this country. It looks no different than it was in March of last year. Not many countries in the world can say the same. [*Desk thumping*] So I want to ask this country to let us count our blessings as a nation.

And to the UNC and its activists, stop the vitriolic negativism. It is doing the country no good. It is serving no useful purpose. It is hurting the nation. Let us work together. We are in a pandemic. We are in a crisis and all hands have to be on deck for us to evolve and to live a happy life for Trinidad and Tobago in a post-pandemic world. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

2021.03.26

allowing me to join this debate, coming after the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. I would like to compliment my colleague, the Member for Oropouche West for bringing this timely Motion, [*Desk thumping*] and he was powerful and he laid a case that all our Members on the Opposition side will show the population of the failure of this Minister of Finance over the last five and a half years, Madam Speaker.

I listened to the Minister Energy and Energy Industries just now and I just want to remind him that his Motion on the Opposition Private Members' Day is still alive and well, [*Desk thumping*] because his Members never allowed that debate to go to a conclusion. And they never allowed to take a vote on that Motion of no confidence in the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. So I just want to remind him, when he said that we are firing blanks, his Motion is alive and well on our Order Paper, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries made two points in trying to defend his colleague, the Minister of Finance. He talked about the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, that under the PP Government they borrowed to put funds in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, Madam Speaker. Who does that? Who borrows to put money to save? Madam Speaker, I just want to remind him when the Minister of Finance read out the balances in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. At end when the PP Government demitted office, it was according to the Minister of Finance, approximately US \$5.6 billion. And today the fund stands US \$5.7 billion approximately. But during the period of time over the last five years, as Minister of Finance, he removed over US \$2billion from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

Now, if the PP Government did not borrow cheap at low rates to fund or put

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

2021.03.26

in for savings, and based on the investment climate over the last five years in the stock market and internationally, because of the healthy fund that the PP Government left in 2015, it was due to that they were able to pull out US \$2billion to save this country, Madam Speaker. Because over the last five years, this Minister of Finance never put in any funds into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So it is because of the astute leadership of the PP Government, led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar and a Minister of Finance in Larry Howai, this is why this country has been able to get proper credit rating based on that healthy fund that is in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So I just want to put that to rest, Madam Speaker. Because they like to blame the PP Government.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in his debate and the Minister of Finance talked about capital allowances that the PP Government brought and gave to the energy sector, Madam Speaker. And the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries also raised it and he talked about BPTT official. Madam Speaker, that same BPTT official that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries quoted or talked about in his debate is one Norman Christie. And I just want to read out a quote by the outgoing President Norman Christie of BPTT and he talked about those same capital allowances, that under the PP Government that they bought, and I want to quote his words, Madam Speaker. It was in the *Trinidad Express* March 14, 2018 and it was an interview at the Queen's Park Savannah in his office, Madam Speaker. And Norman Christi says:

“Those incentives which allow BPTT to bring forward its capital expenditure allowances were instrumental in supporting BP's decision to invest US \$6 billion in Trinidad and Tobago during the period 2011 and 2017, which led to the construction of the Juniper platform, the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

2021.03.26

establishment of TROC...and the discovery of”—over—“2 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas in the Savannah and Macadamia exploration wells, off Trinidad’s east coast.”

So that is good business decision, Madam Speaker. Because of that, this is why this country and this present Government is enjoying that buffer, because without that buffer we would have been in a worse off position in this country than we are today, Madam Speaker. So I really do not know where this Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—that is why we brought that Motion of no confidence.

Mr. Hinds: Would the Member give way?

Madam Speaker: Member for Laventille West, are you rising on a Standing Order?

Mr. Hinds: I am asking whether the Member would give way.

Ms. Ameen: Nooooo.

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine, you will have your turn. All right? Let us try to be a little courteous inside of here, all of us. So I think, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, you are asked if you were going to give way.

Mr. D. Lee: No, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: No. Please continue.

Mr. D. Lee: He can meet me in the corridor if he wants to talk to me. So Madam Speaker, those are the two points I just want to rebut to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in his contribution, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, after the Prime Minister's position in a country, in my view, the second most important position is the Minister of Finance. I know some people say the Attorney General, but I beg to disagree. Because even within the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

Attorney General he is required to get funding from the Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker.

And so, the position of Minister of Finance being held by the Member for Diego Martin North/East for the last five and a half years should not be taken lightly. So when we brought this Motion of no confidence in the Minister of Finance, it was not frivolous, it was not vexatious. It was because we studied his performance over the last five and a half years, along with the entire country, Madam Speaker, of his performance as Minister of Finance and that is why we brought this Motion because it is long overdue, based on what has happened in the country for the last five and a half years, Madam Speaker, under his watch. [*Desk thumping*]

And it is not only the Opposition thinks that way, Madam Speaker. Just recently, I know they do not like articles, Madam Speaker, but Curtis Williams just in February was also saying in his business article that it is time for the Minister of Finance to go and that is because of assessing the Minister of Finance, nothing about his personal character, but his ability as Minister of Finance over the last five and a half years. If you go back on the deficits underneath his watch, Madam Speaker, that the Member for Oropouche West mentioned, for the last five years is deficit upon deficit upon deficit. And in 2020 the deficit has risen to about over \$16 billion negative, Madam Speaker.

When you look at the economic growth under the Minister of Finance, it has been all negative with the exception of 2018, when he had predicted, the Minister of Finance predicted a 1.9 projection, positive. The Minister got 0.1 and that is because of some projects that the PP Government had put in place that bore fruits in 2018, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] So this Minister of Finance has nothing

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

2021.03.26

to boast about over the last five and a half years.

Now, the Minister of Finance and all the Members of the Government want to believe that nothing happened, that the problem that we are facing is because of COVID-19. COVID-19 started for this country, literally one year ago, sometime in March 2020. So when we use the word COVID-19, and the 19, we want to believe that it started somewhere in 2019. It might have started in China in 2019. But for the country, it literally started in March 2020, Madam Speaker. But 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, Madam Speaker, under this Minister of Finance watch, one has to ask: What did he put in place in those four years leading up to the pandemic that has put a blow, and I agree it has put a severe blow financially, on our country, globally also, Madam Speaker.

But if this Minister of Finance had been doing what he had promised, Madam Speaker, we would have been in a far better place than we are today. And those are not my words, because just like the country, I was hoping against hope that this Minister of Finance would have produced what he said we would have produced in the four years, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Madam Speaker. Because when you look at all his budgets, he has promised everything; the world, that we can see clearly. We are going to see growth. It is going to have turnaround and just have hope and this country will be in a better place under the PNM administration. And that is far from the truth, far from the truth, Madam Speaker. Because when you look at 2018, and it was promised, I can see clearly now. I remember somewhere between '18 and '19, the rain has stopped, the sun is shining. And, you know, nothing has happened.

When you look at the Point Lisas Industrial Estate right now, the Minister of Finance is responsible for fiscal measures and the Minister of Energy and Energy

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Industries, and I agree with the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, that they have to work closely together, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the Minister of Finance, because of the revenue situation. When you look at the revenues under this Minister's watch and his budgeted revenues he has failed to meet any of those targets, Madam Speaker, any of those targets from 2015 to date. He has failed to reach any of his targets and his budget presentation that he has brought in front of this House in the Appropriation Bills year upon year, Madam Speaker. So I do not know what this Minister of Finance is seeing that the whole country is not seeing. Madam Speaker.

Now, the Minister of Finance read out from the latest bulletin, I believe from the Central Bank. He said he just got it hot off the press. We do not have the luxury of having that. He quoted some numbers and we do not have the luxury of seeing those numbers to really validate whether it is so, Madam Speaker. I am not saying that the Minister of Finance is not telling the truth, Madam Speaker. But time will tell with those numbers. Because I really believe when you look at what has happened in January, February, that the Minister of Finance had a press conference, I think in February, and he talked about a deficit where he had to borrow and he took out money from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and also had to borrow either locally or internationally to meet a deficit, Madam Speaker. And that was just in January and February, a couple months ago, so we as a country, it is not because of COVID-19 that we are in this situation financially. Because if this Minister of Finance was doing the job with the Government, we would have been able to be in a better place, Madam Speaker. I said that before, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, I just want to turn to a couple things that the Minister, I

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

2021.03.26

feel that he lacks confidence. When you look at the infrastructure of this country, the Minister of Finance is responsible for funding all of his colleagues Ministries. They depend on him. So I will be surprised what they are coming to say today in support of the Minister of Finance, because he has starved them for funding. When you look at works and transport, it is starved for funding.

When you look at national security, it is starved for funding. They cannot do what they had promised in the Appropriation Bill; in their budget statements, they fall far from where they are supposed to be, Madam Speaker.

4.00 p.m.

So, even in infrastructure works because of the revenue numbers not being there, and is not the Opposition's fault that the revenue numbers are not what the Minister of Finance said. He has a duty and care to bring up those revenue numbers. [*Desk thumping*] He has to be able to attract foreign direct investments.

When we talk about foreign direct, in the last five years under his watch, under the Minister of Finance's watch, it has been pittance, Madam Speaker, compared to under the PP Government. So even FDIs, when you look at the international credit ratings over the last five years, Standard & Poor's have dropped our rating, Moody's has dropped our rating, the Minister of Finance brought in Fitch, to sort of bump up the rating and he is—you know he is playing around—the Minister of Finance is playing around with his rating agencies, because we are in a far worse position today, Madam Speaker. Our debt to GDP is over 90 per cent and I do not know—we are—some people say we are in a danger zone but the Minister of Finance said he will keep on borrowing, so I do not know when will be the danger zone for the Minister of Finance. And when you look at all the business chambers and all the economists, they are fearful because of the debt trap that the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Minister of Finance is laying for the young, the future generations of this country.

I read an article about \$96,000 per individual, per individual to pay back. Madam Speaker, businesses, Madam Speaker, businesses have been suffering under this Minister of Finance, especially small and medium sized businesses.

An article came out recently where the CEO of the business chamber quoted over 1,000 businesses have closed down and shut their doors. When you take 1,000 businesses, by four or five employees, that is four or five thousand people who are on the breadline plus their families, Madam Speaker. And the Minister of Finance has no plan, because he was asked, the Minister of Finance was asked what is your plan? He said he has no plan, Madam Speaker, he has no plan. So he has no plan, the Minister of Finance has no plan to take us post-pandemic out of this COVID-19 situation, Madam Speaker. So how could we have confidence in this Minister, over the last five and a half years, he has failed this country, he has failed the population and we must have confidence in him that he can lead us post-pandemic.

Madam Speaker, businesses are suffering and when you look at divestments, the Minister of Energy talked about—one of the divestments is NiQuan. Just two weeks ago, I think was last week they opened NiQuan, but when you read the papers and the information that I have that NiQuan in Petrotrin in Pointe-a-Pierre, NiQuan is having production problems, Madam Speaker. So I really do not know about these divestments.

I also want to ask—divestments—I understand, it is alleged that Tru Valu Supermarket, which is part of the Home Construction, which is under the watch of the Government because of the Clico bailout. I understand as alleged, that they have been—the supermarkets have been sold to someone, Madam Speaker. So I

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Lee (cont'd)

want to know who that someone is, Madam Speaker, because I understand is a friend, and I hope and that is fine.

Madam Speaker: Member. Member, please get back on track, please get back on track.

Mr. D. Lee: So, Madam Speaker, as I come to an end, we are in a debt trap caused by the Minister of Finance. The country has lost confidence, I think the Opposition has lost confidence in the Minister of Finance, and I support this Motion, all my colleagues support this Motion, Madam Speaker. And I am sure at the end of the day even the Ministers on their side might support this Motion, Madam Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Joseph. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to join this debate. Madam Speaker, it is no secret that we are in challenging times and have been. However, the Minister of Finance, my friend and colleague the hon. Colm Imbert, has proven to be up to the task and all of us on this side support him, [*Desk thumping*] every single one of us.

Madam Speaker, it is no secret that a nation's health has a profound impact on the economy of a country in reducing production losses, increasing productivity, and making sure there is no social exclusion and these interconnections are well-known. I would put on record today how this Minister of Finance, my colleague, is preparing for the post-COVID world, a post-COVID world to be characterized by recovery and I would demonstrate what we have avoided by the Minister of Finance in the health care system.

But before I go that way, I need to put on record and reply to the Member

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

for Couva South who spoke about nurses and brain drain and to my friend from Fyzabad, because they put it on record today about a brain drain and the Minister of Finance cannot finance nurses. Unfortunate, because I keep saying for the UNC to succeed Trinidad and Tobago must fail. The facts are these, listen to the facts about this brain drain Fyzabad and Couva South is talking about.

In the South West Regional Health Authority, yes, 75 nurses left, but do you know why? The majority of them was due to retirement, two were senior, 70 junior, left. But what Fyzabad and Couva South would not tell you is that they hired 295, so you have a net gain of 220.

In North West RHA, five migrated and 50 resigned, but do you know where those 50 went? To other RHAs, all redeployed and 162 rehired. North Central RHA, yes, three resigned, but do you know why? Because two were living in deep south and went to South West RHA, but according to Fyzabad and Couva South there is a brain drain. ERHA: one resigned, one migrated. Out of a total complement of 6,116 this is negligible but there was a net increase because for COVID alone we hired 607, those are the facts. Why do you paint Trinidad and Tobago in a bad light at every opportunity? There is no brain drain, I have given you the figures. But, Madam Speaker, I now go to where we are in this, health, COVID, post-COVID recovery.

According to the World Economic Forum, the rate of the global economic recovery relies heavily on the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and I will be focusing on that. And it is no secret that other economies and industries have collapsed, health care systems have collapsed, and I will demonstrate how this Minister of Finance has financed the health care system to make sure we never collapsed; never, ever come close to collapsing.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Finance has made available not to the Ministry of Health but to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, \$332 million in COVID treatment alone, [*Desk thumping*] \$332 million. And this expenditure resulted in the resilience of our health care system. It has tested the strength and resilience of the health care system.

Madam Speaker, most of this went into funding the parallel health care system which the Minister of Finance spoke about, which is the envy of the world and which allowed us to make sure our curve was always flat, [*Desk thumping*] always flat. Our hospitals were never overwhelmed, never. Because of the Minister of Finance, we decreased the burden on the health care system, so people could have access to healthcare, as accustomed to. It reduced transmission of the disease and when you do that, more of the economy can survive. It mitigated shortages of everything from PPE to pharmaceuticals, and it made sure we had a standardized healthcare delivery system.

Madam Speaker, you know we have to be grateful of as country. This country in setting up the parallel health care system, these figures are going to stagger people now, because it is the first time I am getting an opportunity to tell the country what the country did for our citizens.

We passed through the health care system seeing about COVID over 12,000 persons; 12,000 persons that if we did not finance the parallel system would have gone into our regular health care system, which would have crashed. Our state-supervised hotels saw roughly 4,654 people, our hospitals over 3,000 persons, the figure I have here is 3,125. Our step down facilities, about 3,905, that had to be funded, that had to be funded, and other categories over 1,000. So it is over—between 12,000 and 13,000 persons passed through a parallel health care system

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

financed by the Minister of Finance. And that is how, now, we are poised to recover in such a way that would not have been possible if we did not finance this.

The World Bank has stated, that the blow is hitting hardest in countries where the pandemic has been the most severe. And if we are to recover and if we are to prosper, we had to make sure that the effects of the pandemic were not severe in Trinidad and Tobago. And let me put these facts and figures into the public domain, because this is how the world will measure us. The world will measure us not on what a UNC says but what the facts and figures say. These facts and figures are as such, the global case fatality ratio is over 2 per cent to 3 per cent, ours is 1.78. We are below average, as far as case fatality rate. It means we can recover faster, less people here die because of COVID, because of the funding made available.

Our positivity rate right now is 6 per cent or lower. For the past nine weeks, it has been that, down from a high of 38 to 43 per cent during the community spread phase. We are pleased and we should be as country, whether you are UNC or PNM we should be proud of our country. But I know that is difficult for my colleagues opposite because they always feel for them to succeed Trinidad and Tobago must fail. As I said once you can hate the PNM, but do not hate your country.

These are the facts that the international agencies judge us on, so we are pleased that funding of the parallel healthcare system as measured by mortality, case fatality, hospitalizations, ICU admissions, and overall positivity rate is evidence, incontrovertible evidence that the expenditure made possible by the Minister of Finance has benefited all 1.4 million people of Trinidad and Tobago regardless of race, colour, creed or political affiliation.

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

And in that time, in that time, not one health care worker lost their jobs, [*Desk thumping*] not one. They could pay their bills, they could buy food. And this is our response to COVID-19 as opposed to sunlight, as opposed to bleach, [*Desk thumping*] as opposed to hydroxychloroquine, as opposed to Puncheon and lime, and as opposed to building a dome, that is our response. [*Desk thumping*] Sunlight, bleach, hydroxychloroquine, Puncheon and lime and dome was your response. Where would the economy have been with that response? You know why? Because funded science. We funded science, and is science that has saved this country, not voodoo medicine, not sunlight and not bleach.

Madam Speaker, I just want to show again how this Minister of Finance has funded essential infrastructure works in the health care system. There was a time when the hon. Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar said that she, the hon. Member, was building hospitals using NGC money and nothing could have been further from the truth than that. That is what you call being strangers to the truth, to quote something from my colleagues opposite.

Madam Speaker, the Arima Hospital funded by the Minister of Finance with loan funding \$1.8 billion, 150 beds completed by this administration, this Minister of Finance.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The Point Fortin Hospital finished, 106 beds, \$1.5 billion for the people of Point Fortin, funded by this Minister of Finance my friend and colleague. The redevelopment of Port of Spain Central Block, ongoing, something which the Members opposite refused to do, absolutely refused to do. They were waiting for an earthquake for thousands of people to die in this country. They studiously ignored the clear and present danger that was Central Block being built now, 540

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

beds, \$1.2 million.

Sangre Grande Hospital for the people up in the east 34 per cent complete, 106 beds, \$1 billion. Ministry of Health, admin building \$249 million; construction of the Diego Martin Health Centre, finished, \$55 million; the LINAC Project in St. James, \$84 million; a grand total in health infrastructure that this country should be thankful for, from Point Fortin to Sangre Grande to Diego Martin to Port of Spain, a grand total of \$6,139,731,131.69. Does that sound like an economy in collapse? Really? Really, Members opposite? And it was not funded from NGC, as once claimed by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, it was not funded from cash, all of this is loan funding.

Madam Speaker, my friends opposite just cannot resist painting Trinidad and Tobago in the worst possible light for international partners, from bad talking us with the Australians to make sure we do not get the boats, to wishing the imposition of sanctions by the United States. They would have loved that. And then writing to a foreign power and saying we are reeling from the Coronavirus. For them to succeed Trinidad and Tobago must fail. But this administration and this Minister of Finance will ensure that we do not fail. We will succeed, [*Desk thumping*] we will succeed. Because you have a Minister of Finance who is erudite, firm, generous, and is in tune with the needs of each his Ministries in very, very difficult times. And I must say, as Minister of Health, I thank him every day for making the funds available for the Ministry of Health.

4.20 p.m.

Let me bring it down now to the personal level, in the five minutes I have left, the four minutes I have left. Regardless of race, colour, creed or political affiliation, what small people depend on the Minister of Finance for, let us take one

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

issue, dialysis. We fund, across Trinidad and Tobago, 1,283 people on dialysis. That is 1,283 people who depend on the Minister of Finance, sending funds to the Ministry, to make sure they stay alive. Do you know what that costs the country? In fiscal year 2020, it cost this country \$177 million, which was made available. Does that sound like a Minister of Finance as being portrayed by my colleagues opposite? On behalf of that 1,283 persons of all political affiliations, of all creeds, of all races, Minister of Finance, I say thank you [*Desk thumping*] because without you, Minister of Finance, they would not have a life today. They would not have a life. You will never get the thanks for it but, today, on behalf of 1,283 dialysis patients, thank you, Mr. Colm Imbert, the Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to say, thank you again, to this one patient at St. James. There is one patient at St. James, who every month gets \$90,000 worth of free oncology drugs, one patient. One patient, \$90,000. [*Crosstalk*] “You hear meh friend”? It is PNM. That is the level of debate. I do not know if she is a PNM or he is a PNM. It does not matter to us on this side. It is a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] But Naparima wants to go down the political thing and the race thing. If it is a PNM.

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

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. We do not see PNM or UNC. We see people. [*Desk thumping*] We see people. [*Desk thumping*] Every creed and race—**Mr.**

Deputy Speaker: Member, one second. One second, Member.

Mr. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6). He is implying I am a racist, which I am not. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, thank you, thank you, thank you. [*Crosstalk*] Am I to rule now? Overruled.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I come to a close, I have demonstrated, clearly and conclusively, that we are in a position post-COVID to come out of this in a better shape due to the astute leadership of the financial situation of this country, by my colleague, the hon. Colm Imbert, and we on this side thank him. We on this side recognize him, and we condemn this Motion as vexatious. We condemn this Motion as being totally irrelevant. We condemn this Motion as a red herring to hide the inaccuracies of the UNC, and we support our Minister of Finance. Long live the Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now recognize the Member for Fyzabad. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad): Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Dr. L. Bodoë: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to join this debate. I had not plan to make any intervention but, of course, there are some things I need to respond to. As usual, the Member for St. Joseph, in his very enthusiastic manner, would want to give the country the assurance that all is well in Trinidad and Tobago. But before I go there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to congratulate my colleague [*Desk thumping*] the Member of Parliament for Oropouche West, for bringing to this House a very timely Motion to examine the performance of the Minister of Finance, and toalso congratulate my colleagues who have already spoken in support of this Motion.

I do agree with the Member for St. Joseph that the health sector is very important and, of course, the support that is given to the health sector. There are many factors involved and so on but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister spoke about the issue with the nurses, and I just want to say—the Minister said that there is no brain drain. The truth is that nurses are migrating, because they are working

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Dr. Bodoë (cont'd)

2021.03.26

in very challenging terms and conditions of employment, and I am very much aware of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The fact is that the registered nurses in all of our health care public institutions are working on 2013 salaries, so this is an issue that needs to be addressed and this is where the financing comes in. Three outstanding collective periods: 2014 to 2016, 2017 to 2019, 2020 to 2022 are outstanding.

The number of nurses the Minister boasted of having, are not hired on the permanent establishment of the registered nurses. I am informed that there are PCAs, Patient Care Assistants and Nursing Aides, so they are really not registered and fully qualified nurses. And, therefore, of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that would have been the concern of the TTRNA in terms of what quality of nurses would have replaced those who have left, especially according to their release in terms of those who are manning the Intensive Care Units and the High Dependency Units and, of course, that is very important in terms of the quality of nurses. So, I just make that point again. And, of course, this goes against the Decent Work Agenda to which Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory as a member of the International Labour Organization. But, more importantly and most important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister quoted the figure of 6,116 nurses, and I am sure that these nurses would be happier and would have been in a better position had they received their vaccinations, Mr. Deputy Speaker [*Desk thumping*] as frontline health care workers. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we hear all this shouting across the floor and, you know, the very enthusiastic Minister of Health, but the question really remains—and the Minister speaks about the science and using the science, and that is fine. And before I talk about the science, there is always this issue here, Mr. Deputy

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Dr. Bodoie (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Speaker, about the issue of sunlight and so on. But, in fact and in truth, the matter is that the issue of hydroxychloroquine was approved by the FDA as an emergency drug. [*Desk thumping*] There were many issues, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that were not very clear. We are now one year into a pandemic and everything has evolved, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Even in the beginning, there was the issue of whether a mask was of any value, going to be any value, and that was changed. The Minister himself was not sure, initially, about whether masks would be of value and, of course, as the science evolved, we found out what was correct and what was, you know, useful and what was not useful. So I just want to say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

But talking about the science, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I just want to say that we on this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we on this side, it is bandied about we are unpatriotic and we are not—you know, the PNM and the Government has to fail. We are here to support. We are here to keep the Government to account and we are all patriotic citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] And our track record will show that in the beginning, almost one year ago, the Leader of the Opposition, together with Members of this side, had a meeting with the hon. Prime Minister and offered to assist in the management of this COVID crisis going forward. [*Desk thumping*] That has not changed. We remain committed, and we remain committed to doing what is best for Trinidad and Tobago.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister went through the pains of boasting about the parallel health care system, and we are very happy for that. We are very happy that we were able to put in place and fund a parallel health care system. But, again, how were we able to do that so quickly? The Minister correctly pointed out that there are no other countries in the world who have a parallel health care

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Dr. Bodoë (cont'd)

2021.03.26

system. But our situation was unique, because the hospital that formed the basis of the parallel health care system, was a hospital built by the People's Partnership Government that was sitting there for five years. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, five years, we were told that this was a hospital that was not completed, it was still being commissioned. There were many stories, you know, and all sorts of excuses, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about why the hospital could not be utilized. Come a pandemic, and within two weeks we were able to use that hospital. [*Desk thumping*] So I make no apologies for that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We are very happy that the facility was there. Likewise, Caura Hospital has proven to be, you know—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, one second, one second. Again, Member for Couva South and Minister of Finance, if you all want to have any conversation, you all are free to exit the Chamber and so have it please. Right? We are not tolerating the crosstalk. Proceed, Member for Fyzabad.

Dr. L. Bodoë: Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Caura Hospital has proven to be very useful, very important, a very important facility in this fight against COVID-19, but the population needs to understand that, of course, preparations were being made in 2014 to upgrade this facility by taxpayers' dollars being spent this time under the People's Partnership Government, and that was put in place in anticipation and preparation in case the Ebola virus, which was prominent in 2014, a major threat, in case that came to Trinidad. Luckily it did not come to Trinidad and Tobago, but our preparation in 2014, ensured and allowed this facility to be easily converted and to be used to fight COVID-19.

Again, the basis of the parallel health care system, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Augustus Long Hospital, which has been used as a facility in the south, there was

an investment by the People's Partnership Government in 2013, a big investment that allowed this facility to, again, be easily converted. And, of course, we have to remember the UWI Debe Campus and the Racquet Centre which we use as step-down facilities. So, yes, there was a parallel health care system which was easily created, but the basis of that and the foundation of that was laid many years before, during the time of the People's Partnership Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we speak about the parallel health care system and, you know, I just want to point out—and the Minister is right—that additional funding was allocated for the parallel health care system and, therefore, the normal funding would have gone to the health sector in the normal course of things. And, therefore, the question that needs to be asked is: What is the condition with the normal or what we call the regular health care system? We are speaking about the parallel health care system. That is fine. But there are also many challenges, many issues, in the regular health care system.

And if we look at some of these issues, the Minister boasted about one patient receiving cancer care drugs and so on, but just last Sunday in the *Sunday Express*, there was also the issue of many patients who were not able to access their drugs. So, just quoting one patient and giving one example does not necessarily mean the system is perfect and it is working. [*Desk thumping*] There are many shortcomings. There are many issues. I do not want to go into the fact that we have not been able to complete the National Oncology Unit. That is a different matter. But, even recently, a few weeks ago, the Cancer Unit in San Fernando General Hospital suffered some lil issues, I mean, where patients had to be turned back. The newspaper report showed that 50 patients had to be turned back for a minor issue, a minor plumbing issue, and these are management issues

that can be dealt with and have to be treated with, you know, at the RHA level.

But one of the things, again, we speak about the shortcomings in the regular health system where, about two weeks ago, an eye surgery list had to be cancelled because of a shortage of drugs. Whether this was due to a lack of funding or a lack of availability of the drug Vigamox, I am not in a position to say.

Now, the Minister spoke about the investment, the heavy investment in those patients who require renal dialysis. I agree that that is a major problem but, on the other hand, another problem that the Ministry funds is the cardiac programme, the Cardiac Care Programme and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in looking at the budget allocations for the last few years—now the external patient care programme, the cardiac programme, is really used to fund—I just want to put this in perspective—procedures such as coronary artery bypass grafting and it is also for stenting and for angiograms and so on. Unfortunately, except for Mount Hope Hospital, Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, those procedures are not available, at the moment, in San Fernando or the Port of Spain hospitals. But it is a major issue. Cardiac care is a major issue and in the budget presentation, the last budget presentation, they were in the committee stage, the Minister of Health promised that the cardiac catheterization laboratory at the San Fernando Hospital would have been constructed and implemented in this financial year. That is a very important facility because, at the current time, the Government spends the amount of about \$30 million to \$40 million a year outsourcing these procedures. If you were to build that facility, it would cost in the region of maybe 50, 60 million and, therefore, one can easily realize that within a year or two that money would be recovered. But I was surprised when I asked the question and Minister responded in this very House on the 26th of February, that that cardiac catheterization lab has

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Dr. Bodoë (cont'd)

2021.03.26

been put on hold, because of funding issues and because it is no longer a priority. I am not certain that that is a good enough explanation and, again, it speaks to the funding allocations with regards to what is a priority in Trinidad and Tobago.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the issues that were raised, there are many issues that were raised but, I think, again, the Minister is speaking about the science, using the science. And I am saying that if we are using the science, the science of vaccination says that, okay, we are in a position now to vaccinate our population and, therefore, you know, we have had this issue, this gap, I am hoping that what we are reading, that very soon, next week, we are going to have our first shipment of COVAX vaccines. I look forward to that, and I am sure all our health care workers, especially our frontline workers, our doctors, our nurses, health care assistants, administrators in the health system and all the other frontline workers will get their vaccinations. We have the reports of persons in the prison system, in the immigration system and police officers and so on, and I am sure they are looking forward to that.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think it is very timely. We, as an Opposition, it is our role, it is our duty to hold a Government to account. [*Desk thumping*] It is nothing personal against the Minister of Finance, but it gives us an opportunity to be able to examine the performance of the Government, and I think Motions like these are timely and very important, and with those few words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

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

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] I rise

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

to begin my contribution on this Motion of no confidence that has been raised against what is, in my opinion, judicious management of the public purse by the Minister of Finance over the past five years. This hon. Minister of Finance has and continues to manage the financial resources of our country with prudence, intelligence and confidence in the decisive measures he continues recommend and implement to secure our financial standing, despite the harsh economic realities we faced today. Throughout my presentation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will recognize the erstwhile efforts of a Government which, in the midst of very strange economic circumstances, deliberately implemented policies and projects to ensure that no citizen is left behind.

It is through compassion and care for the citizenry of our beloved nation, especially those who are susceptible to the prevailing socio-economic and other life challenges, that I can stand here with confidence and say that, indeed, no citizen is being left behind. In fact, 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. The records will demonstrate that over the last five years, the budgetary allocations to the Ministry with the key responsibility for welfare and the well-being of the vulnerable, has been consistent at approximately \$5 billion [*Desk thumping*] reflecting an unwavering commitment to those on the margins of our society.

As a government, we embrace the popular adage attributed to the great Mahatma Gandhi, that the true measures of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members. Mr. Deputy Speaker, many persons may be unaware that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services provided

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2021.03.26

financial support to almost 350,000 vulnerable individuals and families in 2020. And when we considered that the average household, according to the last census, consists of at least three persons, we recognize that this equates to over one million beneficiaries.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker, I am happy to report that over the last five years, the hon. Minister of Finance has ensured that funding for the major welfare grants, which provided support to our vulnerable population, has been maintained. The Senior Citizens' Pension and the Public Assistance Grant, the Disability Assistance Grant and the Food Support Programme, the core grants of the Ministry, were all paid on time and in the correct amount. [*Desk thumping*] Government expended over \$5 billion, making payments to over 175,000 individuals and households.

Madam Speaker, I am extremely pleased to inform this House that notwithstanding our challenging economic circumstances, this Government has not shirked its duty and commitment to the vulnerable population to which I alluded earlier. In fact, I can stand here and declare that there were no cut backs or decreases in the grants we continue to provide to the vulnerable persons in our society. As to date, they are still afforded the opportunity to engage in a decent quality of life and, for this, I thank the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, 44(10). The Minister is reading a text speech.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, again, hon. Minister, welcome to this House, but we know it is a debate, and I will ask you and all other Members, when they join the debate to remember it is a debate and not to be so tightly tied to their notes. Please proceed.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Thank you, Madam Speaker. We are dealing with a debate

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2021.03.26

concerning finance, and I have a lot of figures.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services was faced with the dilemma of continuing to provide services to clients already in the system. At the same time, we provided emergency services to persons affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. At no time, since the onset of the pandemic, there has been any delay in the payment to senior citizens, to our disability or to our public assistance grants as stated. And during the heights of the pandemic, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, benefited from various services as follows: Additional food support was provided to 25,101 households who were already existing beneficiaries of this programme; food and income support were also provided for 51,493 for a period not exceeding three months to households whose members were retrenched, terminated or experienced reduced income. A total of 20,497 households, whose children received meals from the School Feeding Programme, but were not current beneficiaries of food support, also received support from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and food support to current beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Grants were provided to 42,451 households and food support was given to 2,818 households of pensionable age persons who applied for Senior Citizens Pension, but their matter was not determined. Food support was also provided to 488 households where they applied for the Disability Assistance Grant but their matter was not determined.

Emergency hampers were provided to 1,400 families in urgent need during the stay-at-home period, and this project was executed in collaboration with the 14 municipal corporations. Food vouchers, market boxes were provided to 24,999 families in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries during the stay-at-home period. Rental assistance support was granted to 4,322

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2021.03.26

households where a member was retrenched, terminated or income reduced. Madam Speaker, 1,841 houses in Tobago benefited from food and income support for an initial period, not exceeding three months, to families whose members were retrenched, terminated or experienced a reduction in their income. The Ministry also provided assistance in the form of income, food or rental support to over 173,000 individuals and families who were impacted by the measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. All in all, Madam Speaker, we spent \$335 million on social support related to COVID-19, and we thank the Minister of Finance for this. [*Desk thumping*]

I have outlined these programmes and the cost to the national economy, if only to indicate to those on the opposite side where the money was spent. I also wish for this House to note that for various reasons, including double dipping, insufficient information provided, some persons would not have received their support that they applied for. At the end of the day though, the Ministry is satisfied that we have done our best in providing support to citizens of our beloved nation in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I wish to publicly thank the Minister of Finance for making these payments possible. [*Desk thumping*]

The evidence is clear that this was a substantial contribution in the fight against poverty. The investment assisted in closing the poverty gap and reducing inequality. The Government's investment through the safety net programmes offered by the Ministry, also contributed to building household resilience during the pandemic. Following the delivery of the national budget in fiscal 2021, which was aimed at Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation, it was clear that our economy's position towards full recovery, as the burden of adjustment is shared by all, with the understanding that things are only going to get better as we

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2021.03.26

all work together.

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 lives of the most vulnerable of our country, and ensuring that no one is left behind. To this end, in fiscal 2021, the Ministry continues to remain afloat, as it embarks on a number of key strategic projects to assist in, not only meeting its core mandate, but working in partnership with other Government Ministries and external agencies to achieve Government's agenda.

In fiscal 2021, the Government continues to provide support to vulnerable individuals and families, at an expenditure that is in excess 480 million on a monthly basis and support for such individuals and families for the year, so far, are as follows: Permanent food support, 29,864 households at a cost of \$107.2 million; Public Assistance Grant, with expenditure to date being \$167.4 million; miscellaneous grants—and these are all up to March 2021, so we are just talking about, to date, this year—families also benefited from a number of other grants like household furnishings, medical equipment, funeral grants, house repairs along with others. This cost was \$27,802,108.

Disability grants, 25,432 persons with a disability benefited at a cost of \$312,694,118.

4.50 p.m.

So, Madam Speaker, I wish to turn to services for older persons. Over the last six years Government introduced measures aimed at providing greater protection to our ageing population. In the 2021 national budget I pointed out that the number of older persons accessing the senior citizens' pension moved from 86,280 by the end of fiscal 2015 to 104,000 persons by the end of fiscal 2020. As

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2021.03.26

at March 2021, this figure has climbed to 107,000 persons. So older persons are now in a much better position to overcome the many challenges they encounter, and more than 71 per cent are receiving the maximum senior citizens' pension at \$3,500 per month.

Madam Speaker, more than 85 per cent of our population over 65 years are currently in receipt of our senior citizens' pension. The Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago spends over \$353million on a monthly basis on senior citizens' pension. And guess what, every month for the past six years we have paid all our older persons on time and the correct amounts that are due to them. The expenditure up to March 2021, was \$2,114,345,000. As further testimony of this Government's care for its elderly population, \$703,000 was spent on five senior citizens' activity centres to ensure that those who have contributed so much to the development of our society have a place where they can still feel and remain productive.

Moreover, mindful of the fact that not every family is in a position to take care of their elderly, this Government paid \$3.9 million to house 91 residents in community care homes in fiscal 2020, and a further \$1.1 million to house residents in eight homes for the aged. So, Madam Speaker, as we recognize the reality of an ageing population in Trinidad and Tobago, the refurbishment of older persons' homes continues to be at the front burner of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And a contract was recently awarded for works to be undertaken on 12 self-contained units at Chaguanas.

One of the main strategic projects being undertaken is the implementation of the Social Mitigation Plan under which there are a number of components which are due for imminent roll-out and have received the requisite funding for, and I

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2021.03.26

thank the Minister of Finance again. Following its approval, the total sum of \$1 million have been allocated to projects which will see the completion of Phase I of the plan and to achieve this objective the Ministry contracted a consultant for the implementation of this plan. To date the Ministry is on the verge of rolling out the core components or deliverables under Phase I of the project where significant value is expected to be derived. And among some of these values are the Social Support and Empowerment Unit; Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme; Integrated Social Enterprise Management System, which we call ISEMS; community health and wellness centres.

One of the core projects for this fiscal involves the accelerated establishment of its Social Support and Employment Unit, and this unit will be operationalized as an integrated one-stop shop to enable citizens to access all the Ministry's services with a single office visit or a visit to the website. And we intend to ensure that this model serves as the response to the multifaceted and complex needs of our families. This unit will also facilitate coordinated social intervention by the Ministry in an efficient manner wherever and whenever the need arises, and of course we thank the Minister of Finance again for this.

Another initiative to be rolled out during the fiscal year is the Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme, Uplifting People, called STEP-UP. This programme will be implemented across the Ministry in tandem with social services, the empowerment unit, to work with families' households with a view to building resilience and graduating persons from various financial grants. So this is not now about just people receiving a grant but it is also about empowering them to be able to move forward. I am pleased to inform this honourable Chamber that in fiscal 2021 we expect to see the digitalization of all of

our grants that are not currently in our electronic database. And through this programme called ISEMS, our Integrated Social Enterprise Management System—what will ISEMS do? It will provide technological framework for the decentralization of the social services; it addresses many of the overwhelming operational and technological challenges in the delivery of social services; it will provide a technological framework for the decentralization of social services; improve the effectiveness of the social services through automation and integration of business processes; it will provide real-time reporting and analysis of the social service data. It provides a client portal so that clients can interact directly with the Ministry, and this will enable greater efficiency and effectiveness in the processing of our grants.

The introduction of this technology will also facilitate an integrated, more dynamic and responsive system, and by extension a more effective solution to the issues often raised by our end users. The principal benefit of this exercise, Madam Speaker, is the decrease in the Ministry's response times to persons who are in need of assistance. The digitalization of recipients' information has an additional quality control benefit which will now enable persons to share this information on a real-time basis with other Ministries and agencies to remove the possibility of persons double-dipping into already scarce resources.

As at March 2021, some significant strides have been made in moving this project forward. There is already marked improvement in the system in the processes and the procedures and we are looking forward to continuing this programme and hoping that by July/August it will be operationalized. We already procured Fujitsu Limited to implement the ISEMS project at a contracted value of \$10,778,636.41, and again we thank the Minister of Finance for accommodating us

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2021.03.26

and providing this finance on this important aspect of our digitalization effort. The work of the Ministry is guided by the United Nation's agenda for sustainable development through the Sustainable Development Goals and the Government's National Development Strategy, *Vision 2030*, and the Ministry's plan is guided by *Vision 2030* therefore we build upon this for our developmental goal. And to help cushion the effects of the economic downturn and vulnerable groups and build the resilience of the citizenry in Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry developed the National Social Mitigation Plan with the theme of "Building Resilience to Secure our Nation".

Madam Speaker, the Ministry proposes to establish a community wellness centre to promote the issue of mental health and wellness while providing access to these services at the community level. The eradication of poverty, social injustice and inequality depend on a lot more than the distribution of grants and services and it is against this background that many of our programmes, our grants, our services at the Ministry are designed to help persons transition from dependence to a sense of empowerment, self-reliance and sustainability, and in this regard there are a number of additional developments coming from the Ministry.

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

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Five minutes?

Madam Speaker: Your speaking time is now spent.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Finished?

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, let me first congratulate the mover of the Motion, the MP for Oropouche West for this most timely Motion as we prosecute the performance of the Minister

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

of Finance over the last five and a half years. But before I get in there let me just remind the speaker before, that it is all well and fine to speak about how the Government spends taxpayers' money with very little information on how the Government earns money. And one of the important characteristics of the Minister of Finance over the last five and a half years, there has been very little creativity in earning money [*Desk thumping*] and he has depended on borrowing and that is where the crux of this matter is in terms of prosecuting his performance.

Madam Speaker, there are two critical issues that I would like to traverse today in putting our case before this House and before the national community as to his performance, whether he has delivered on this mandate to lead this country forward into 2030. Madam Speaker, let us first deal—I know the Minister spoke quite clearly in terms of how he has dealt with the pandemic; the Minister of Health also spoke clearly about that as well, but, Madam Speaker, I want to put forward the position that I have very little quarrel with the medical response because I think we have done pretty well medically, but the economic and social response has been found wanting. And these two areas lie flat and solely with the Minister of Finance and his policy positions on how he has dealt with the effects of the pandemic.

Madam Speaker, as the Minister when he made his contribution, he said that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so I want to review very briefly on what those outside of the UNC is saying because the speakers on the Government side have made a hue and cry that we are obstructionists and we do not support. I just want to share with this House, outside of the UNC, what the general public is making of the performance of the Minister. Madam Speaker, let us go into the belly the beast, the business leaders and what they are saying about our current economic situation.

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Mr. Paray (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Madam Speaker, if I were to draw your attention to a headline in the *Express* newspaper, as recently as March 15, 2021; it is headlined, “Economic storm brewing”. The President of DOMA, Madam Speaker, Mr. Gregory Aboud, he called on the Government to provide key leadership to prevent a country from facing what he called “an economic pandemic”.

Madam Speaker, I want you to take note that Mr. Aboud is not a UNC activist as the Minister likes to depict all critics of his Government and his policy as being UNC activists. Mr. Aboud told the newspaper, Madam Speaker, in that article that a:

“...gloomy economic situation and...An economic pandemic is upon us.”

He said that:

“Trinidad is making...slow, inarticulate moves with respect to our economy’.”

Madam Speaker, he also identified that:

“Many of the major decisions being taken...”

And if I were to just read this carefully:

“...devoid of the input and participation of those who know economics and who are the experts in business management,”

Madam Speaker, in other words what Mr. Aboud is saying there is that the Government does not know what they are doing and its decision makers are inept.

[*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, he identified that a:

“...tremendous...—shrinking of the economy is—“...taking place...”—more so—“...in the retail and distribution sector.”

What that means, Madam Speaker, you are putting more and more businesses out

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

of business and they are sending home workers, and that is the “shrinkage” that Mr. Aboud is speaking about. Madam Speaker, he also went on to acknowledge that—as I said, the retail and distribution forms the greatest amount of small businesses and he identifies them as being very vulnerable and are being threatened with extinction. Now, Madam Speaker, he did not say “collapse”, he said “extinction”, because when you collapse you can rebuild; but when he looks at it as being a point of extinction, we are talking about a serious economic problem in this country. But, Madam Speaker, we in the UNC, we have been saying this for several years in and out of this Parliament and we continue to plead with the Government to proactively deal with the crisis before us. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, if we were to just look at another senior businessman in this country who is the head of the national Chamber of Industry and Commerce, Mr. Gabriel Faria, he also in an *Express* article on March 15, 2021, he too says that several sectors face permanent demise because of the Government’s handling of this pandemic. So, Madam Speaker, again, when you have key business leaders in this country using such very hard and tough terms, such as “Permanent demise”, it must signal to us in this country that we are heading down the wrong road. Listen to what Mr. Faria said, Madam Speaker:

“...the role of leadership in any environment is not to explain the reason for failure but to change the outcome.”

In other words, Madam Speaker, Mr. Faria is saying, “Stop the blame game and excuse-making”.

There are multiple reports, Madam Speaker, of businesses that have gone out of the business and those that are on the verge of collapse as they indicated. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance’s bungling of the response to the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

2021.03.26

COVID-19 has dug this country into a deeper financial hole. Madam Speaker, if I were to rely on the reports of the World Bank, it has compiled a study on effective economic responses to the pandemic by certain countries and said that such nations did things like introduce timely measures to help the poor and vulnerable. An example of that was waiving electricity bills under a certain value. When reading the report, Madam Speaker, they identified that:

Householders in rural communities were given food staples and hygiene products, especially in the rural communities.

Madam Speaker, the report also indicated that:

Some countries, taxes and customs payment was set aside for a period to offset some of the increase in cost for small businesses.

Madam Speaker, there was also an increase in equitable social welfare spending and proper management of the process. What we found here in our experience, Madam Speaker, there are still hundreds of people who come to our offices has MPs saying that they did not get their grants, they did not get the application—and I appreciate the Minister's excuse that there were double-dipping and that there were wrong information and so on, but the numbers alone, Madam Speaker, it shows some weakness in the process by which it was done and I think that is something that lies flat in the hands of the Minister of Finance and his failure to find appropriate policy and process to make sure it reached the most amount of people.

Madam Speaker, in several countries the agricultural sector got an immediate boost and provided a lot of short-term jobs. Bank loans for the “small man”, Madam Speaker, were frozen for a period of time, and these are all sitting inside this World Bank report of 2021. Madam Speaker, Ministers of Finance in

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

other countries introduced policies, especially in emerging markets that created a boost in the confidence of their own internal economy to make sure that business would be encouraged to spend in order to create new jobs and to drive revenue. Several of the countries, Madam Speaker, unemployment benefits, social assistance were increased; relief packages for the poor was implemented; again, policy differences, the delivery impacted much more people in some of those jurisdictions while we still fight with a lot of conversation about not getting grants, and so on. And, Madam Speaker, what was very unique in one of the areas, corporation taxes were deferred on condition that companies kept on their workers so they were able to keep employment and keep jobs.

Madam Speaker, let us just look a bit about the macroeconomics that this Minister of Finance has created over the last few years. I want to refer to the *Guardian* newspaper, an article by the Business Editor on the 17th of February, 2021, under the headline, “It really is time for Imbert to go”. Madam Speaker, the Editor lamented in that article that:

“Instead of tackling head-on the need to adjust our spending to meet the reality of our situation and move quickly to transform the economy...”— Minister Imbert—“...spent five years being a shop keeper, cutting here and there...blaming the UNC for our hardship.”

Madam Speaker, in the article it further said that:

“The structural problems”...—that—“...we face...are completely based on our reluctance to take decisive action to ensure value for money and...”— that the—“...investment into the future of the economy.”

Madam Speaker, again, in line with what the public is seeing, the performance of the Minister, another article on June 17, 2020, months before this

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Mr. Paray (cont'd)

one, Curtis Williams wrote on their headline, “Time to move on from Imbert”. The journalist said, Madam Speaker—and, Madam Speaker—

Mr. Scotland: He is an economist?

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, as an independent view, what he identified in that article, what we need—and you do not need to be an economist to make this pronouncement, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] What we need—this is common sense; A level Economics students would tell you this. What we need is a technically sound Finance Minister, one with ideas on how to build a sustainable economy and someone who sees integrity of the numbers as being important. And I will return to the issue of integrity of the numbers shortly, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I chose to cite these two independent sources because the UNC has been repeatedly making these points and has been accused by the Government of being negative and unpatriotic. Madam Speaker, not only does the *Guardian* and Curtis Williams and other journalists have a view as well, if I were to draw your attention to an *Express* article of February 20, 2021, by a former PNM Minister of Government, Mr. Ralph Maraj, [*Desk thumping*] headline, “Resign, Imbert, Go!”. He said that the Minister’s, Madam Speaker, main proficiency is in politicking. Madam Speaker, Mr. Maraj had something very important to remind this country, he said that:

The Minister of Finance has a—“...trademark arrogance, sneering and cynicism.”

Madam Speaker, these are not the words of this Member of Parliament, neither those on this side; these are people who are now in private life and have an opinion as they gauge the pulse of the country.

Madam Speaker, Mr. Maraj said that:

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

2021.03.26

The world is leaving us behind but Mr. Imbert provided no plans for economic restructuring, greater productivity, smaller Government and private-sector stimulation.

Madam Speaker, again, that is the view of the country as espoused through the eyes of journalists in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, let me talk quickly about the integrity of numbers. This is causing, Madam Speaker, the incompetency of the Finance Minister to intensify. The Government, Madam Speaker, has deliberately refused to establish the National Statistical Institute which was promised in the PNM's 2015 general manifesto—general election manifesto. That was six years ago, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Government has also refused to provide the required resources for the Central Statistical Office, so we are being provided with outdated figures which serves the Government's "propaganda machine" just right. Madam Speaker, we do not have updated statistics on the number of workers who have lost their jobs, the number of SMEs that have closed their doors, the number of manufacturers affected by lost markets, Madam Speaker. We do not have correct statistics on oil and natural gas production and therefore there cannot be accurate budgetary forecasting, Madam Speaker. You would recall in 2019, Madam Speaker, the Minister's average of natural gas production was way out of sync and this threw off all the budgeting numbers that he provided during the budget of that year, Madam Speaker. But even without updated statistics, Madam Speaker, we have anecdotal evidence about the impact of the economic decline under this Minister of Finance.

The data indicates, as I mentioned before, that hundreds of medium-sized businesses, small and medium-sized businesses have had to shut down their

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

2021.03.26

operations. The manufacturing community, Madam Speaker, has also been hit with a triple whammy of reduced demand, supply chain problems and foreign exchange horrors. So, Madam Speaker, the Minister has not addressed these. He has not successfully been able to address this from 2015 till today. There are some actions but it is making very little or no progress because of wrong policy. Madam Speaker, while I have heard the Minister, his response has been strictly borrowing, borrowing, borrowing, borrowing, and I have not heard any conversation about earnings. And, Madam Speaker, the promise of diversification has again come to zero, the Minister has made no effort in restructuring the economy over the last five years, five and a half years.

If I were to refer you back again, Madam Speaker, to the *Business Guardian* of June 17, 2020, the Editor wrote:

“This Government is the first”—Government—“in 40 years to have gone through its five years in office and not attract a single major project.”

But really, Madam Speaker, how could we in this country attract foreign direct investment when we remain at 105 on the ease of doing business index? Which country, which investor wants to come into Trinidad and have that deal with that kind of delay in Government service?

Madam Speaker, there is also this issue of Customs and Excise which falls squarely under the Minister's hand that has been causing severe pain to the business community as well. There was a new import structure and fee system implemented by Customs Division and that is creating a huge humbug for the small business community. Madam Speaker, Mr. Aboud in an article again, because again as key business leaders they appear to give their views on these matters. And if I were to quote him, he said:

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

2021.03.26

This is a—“...foolish policy, implemented in a stunt-like manner...”—and that it would—“...deaden the investment climate...”

Madam Speaker, if things are going so well as represented by the Minister of Finance and those who spoke before, why do you have these key business leaders taking the view that they have presented? Something is not right and the policy direction of the Minister and this Government is not in line with what is expected, from as Mr. Aboud said:

People who understand business and understand investment and understand sectorial business management.

Madam Speaker, and to top that off, because by the Minister's own hands there is an issue of labour and a shortage of workers on the port itself, and that was identified by the port acting CEO, Mr. Robert Ramsubhag, at a parliamentary sitting just recently. So, Madam Speaker, you know, the Minister again, he fails to address these issues time and time again. Madam Speaker, I also want to touch briefly on some more commentary that comes out from the public domain. In all of this, Madam Speaker:

The Minister continues—every time somebody speaks on an issue that is against his policy he shoots down his critics and postures himself as a repository of all economic ideas.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn your attention to a commentary again by Mr. Selwyn Cudjoe on May 21, 2018, and this is what Prof. Cudjoe had to say:

“I am always struck by Colm Imbert's casual cruelty; his notion that he possesses superior wisdom; is always...right; and his access to privileged information makes his utterances irrefutable. Such advantages, he believes, give him the right to demean and insult anyone he chooses.”

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

2021.03.26

That is the words of Prof. Selwyn Cudjoe, another independent person who is outside there in the community who is giving you the pulse of what he sees happening in the country.

So, Madam Speaker, in last minute that I have, I just want to say that sharp reality is that the Finance Minister has failed miserably in managing the economic pitfalls from the COVID-19 pandemic [*Desk thumping*] and the crisis far from the continued sole dependence on the energy sector that is not providing similar returns of the previous year. Madam Speaker, although the Minister is a man of great lyrics, he could put all our artistes to shame, regrettably though, while he is indulging in his own gratification, the Trinidad and Tobago economy is going to hell in a handbasket. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Works and Transport. [*Desk thumping*]

5.20 p.m.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Unfortunately, I have no rebuttals because most of that was newspaper clippings and quoting from sources that I will not comment on. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, regarding the Motion that is before us today, I would like to say that it is baseless, lacks substance and without merit. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance is by far one of the most astute, competent Ministers of Finance that we have seen in the last decade in this esteemed House. In fact, he has exhibited the capacity to work with so little, after the country's resources were ruthlessly plundered, yet we have been able to accomplish so much. This is a Motion which I can easily stand and speak about, because clearly this Minister of Finance has demonstrated his capacity to execute his duties to bring certainty, confidence and stability to the national economy. Madam Speaker, we

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

tend to forget that over the period 2010 to 2015, our economy was somewhat flat. However, expenditure rose from 64 billion in 2010 to 63 billion in 2014, or by 37 per cent.

The incoming Minister of Finance had the task of reducing expenditure and restoring discipline. Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister made it abundantly clear in his mandate to this administration and all Ministers, that we are to approach our portfolios ensuring transparency, accountability and value for money in our activities. The Minister of Finance has ensured that this mandate has been adhered to by all public officers.

With this in mind, the Ministry of Works and Transport, through its implementation agencies, embarked on many programmes and projects over the years 2015 to 2021.

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, for the fourth time again the Minister is reading.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: To achieve quality infrastructure—sorry.

Madam Speaker: Yes, Minister. [*Interruption*] Members, I am standing, please. So, Minister, of course you know it is a debate. Members are allowed some leeway when they come in with technical information, but other than that, it is a debate.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam, that is just the run-up. “When he start to get bouncers, he would not stand up.”

Permit me now to elaborate on the achievements of the Ministry of Works and Transport. Madam Speaker, no more reading. The Ministry of Works and Transport undertook over 2,000 projects between 2015 and 2021. Under the Highways Division alone and the PURE Unit over 644 projects completed, thanks to the support from the Minister of Finance. Madam Speaker, 109 projects ongoing, again thanks to the Minister of Finance; 131 projects upcoming, thanks

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

again to the Minister of Finance.

Some of the projects completed: the Port of Spain East-West Corridor transportation project, known as the Curepe interchange, and I will come to that a little later on. Walkovers completed. The Sea Lots walkover, the Diego Martin walkover, the Cipriani/Valsayn walkover, the water taxi walkover. Additionally, 427 projects under the Programme of Upgrade Road Efficiency, the PURE Unit, and 202 projects under the Highways Division, thanks to the Minister of Finance.

Ongoing projects, major projects: The Diego Martin overpass project commenced in August 2017. The restart of the Solomon Hochoy Highway extension to Point Fortin, thanks to the Minister of Finance—and I will come to that later on again. The start of the Churchill Roosevelt extension from Cumuto to Sangre Grande; start of the Valencia to Toco single-lane highway; widening of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway. The San Fernando waterfront and Lady Hailes Avenue project commenced in July 08, 2020—thanks to the Minister of Finance. The Maritime to Morvant improvement project started in August 05, 2020, thanks to the Minister of Finance. Road rehabilitation and slope stabilization on the Moruga road to be upgraded to a first-class road. Additional 80 projects under the Programme of Upgrade Road Efficiencies, and the Moruga Fishing Port facilities, all those are ongoing projects.

Madam Speaker, under our bridges and landslip programme, 14 projects completed, eight projects ongoing and 50 projects upcoming.

Madam Speaker, under the sea sector, thanks to the Minister of Finance again, three new passenger ferries were purchased. We must remember the debacle we had when we came into office, where our fast ferries were not being maintained by the previous government. It put us in a tailspin, and thanks to the Minister of

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Finance we were able to purchase three brand new, state-of-the-art ferries. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, if you go to the port now, you would see being erected a new crane, almost 20 years in the making. Finally a brand new crane costing TT \$77 million, €9.23 million, being now installed at the port, thanks to the Minister of Finance again.

Madam Speaker, under our drainage programme, over 1,000 projects completed, an additional 300 ongoing. Under coastal protection, 14 projects completed and 15 projects about to be started.

Madam Speaker, our Licensing Office—what we met at the Licensing Office when we came in, we left in 2010 a plan to modernize the licence office. Unfortunately, a loan that was afforded to the Government in 2011 to modernize the entire licence office, and to set up three new offices, 90 per cent of the money was used to build one building in Caroni, leaving in the account \$36 million. What this Government was able to achieve, again by listening to the Prime Minister and getting value for money, and being given the approval by the Minister of Finance, we utilized that \$36 million.

What we were able to achieve at the Licensing Office for that \$36 million—and I want the population to understand how this Government spends their money—because at the Licensing Office we were able to open a new satellite office in Sangre Grande. We have plans to construct a new licence office in Arima to the tune of \$25 million. We have upgraded the Port of Spain—San Fernando offices are to be upgraded. The Princes Town office is to be upgraded. We have also implemented the UTurn system. All that from the money that was left by the last Government, which should have facilitated three new buildings and to

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

modernize the Licensing Office.

But our main gains at the Ministry of Works and Transport during the 2015 to 2020 period, was, I would it put it under the procurement exercise that was implemented, again under the guidance of the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister.

Madam Speaker, I want to go to the San Fernando to Point Fortin highway. We would recognize that when this Government came into office, what we found was that there was a highway heading to Point Fortin with a contractor who had abandoned the job. What this Government decided to do was to repackage that highway—this is after we went to court and were able to restart the highway. We broke that highway up into several packages, tendered it out, where local contractors were able to compete with the foreign contractors.

What you found happening on that highway was—and I want to get the figures clear—under the previous government that highway was being built at \$111 million per kilometre. Remember, the contractor said he could not finish it for that price. This Government went out, broke up the packages and we were able to bring in that highway at \$66.4 million per kilometre. But what is stunning is that a similar highway, the Cumuto to Sangre Grande highway, similar terrain, with a proper tendering process, this Government was able to bring in that highway at \$80 million, a difference of \$31 million per kilometre. You multiply 31 million by 47 kilometres, and you would see the amount of money that was being wasted on the one highway to San Fernando.

Similarly, with the procurement measures that we put in place, again under the guidelines of the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister, the Curepe Interchange. The Curepe Interchange under the previous Government was close to

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

\$550million. We were able to complete the Curepe Interchange, with the procurement measures that were put in place, below the contracted sum of 220million—\$219 million.

Madam Speaker, I also want to speak a little bit about the PURE Unit. We also initiated procurement at the PURE Unit, and prior to 2016, the PURE Unit utilized a system where they had fixed rates, and the job was basically given to suitable contractors based on a fixed-rate price. What we did at the PURE Unit, we decided to use, again, proper procurement and a proper tendering process. Just to give you an indication, I would not call the names, but on one project using the PURE rate, the reduction that we got on just a \$500,000 job, came in at \$100,000 lower than the PURE rate. In other words, we were able to reduce the cost to PURE by close to 20 per cent, just by using proper procurement and a tendering process, and giving everyone a fair chance to complete. These are some of the things that we would have put in place at the Ministry of Works and Transport, to ensure that the financial crisis did not stop us from achieving the things that we wanted to.

Madam Speaker, let me speak a little bit about—because when we talk about big projects the average man on the street, he does not feel that that is getting down to him. Let me talk a little bit about the URP. In 2015, the URP budget was \$700million. Compare that to the budget that the URP has from 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 180 to \$200million. We have been able to do the same amount of projects with that money.

Mr. Charles: Standing Order 48(1), the relevance to the Minister of Finance.

Madam Speaker: I would ask all Members, it is unparliamentary to suck your teeth. Member for Naparima, your point is overruled.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you. Madam Speaker, we were able to achieve this on the guidance of the Minister of Finance. That is the relevance of it. In 2017, our budget 2018 was \$200 million, \$182 million in 2017, \$182 million in 2018, and as I said, you compare that to 2014/2015, where the URP budget was \$725 million.

In 2014/2015, with a budget of \$725 million, there were 9,000 people enrolled in URP. Under this Government and prudent management and guidance from the Minister of Finance, we were able to enroll 33,000 people in URP, and do 150 projects with 20 per cent of the money. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, this is some of the things that the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister have instilled in all the Ministers, to ensure that the citizens of this country's money is not squandered. As I said, we were able to achieve several projects at the Ministry of Works and Transport, and we were able to save the taxpayers a significant amount of money.

Madam Speaker, the COVID pandemic has brought increased challenges to Trinidad and Tobago and the region. This is a time that we need leaders who are willing to put aside their political aspirations, desires and agendas and look towards more national and patriotic conduct. The Minister of Finance has undertaken fiscal measures geared to stabilizing the economy, facilitating growth, reducing unnecessary expenditure, avoiding a debt crisis and still providing for the most vulnerable in the society. This he has done with diligent determination, fairness, directness and sometimes fierceness, required in these times.

The magnitude of work under the Ministry of Works and Transport in this challenging time speaks for itself, and I have only skimmed the surface. What this proves is the phrase "doing more with less" is highly possible and has been

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

achieved by this Government. The Minister of Finance has had to take the harsh decisions—

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, 44(10) again. He continues to read word for word. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Point noted. Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, what this has shown is that the Minister of Finance has taken the harsh decisions that no other Minister of Finance was willing to take. However, what we should be doing today in this esteemed House is showing respect for his efforts [*Desk thumping*] instead of this baseless attempt to discredit his performance as Minister of Finance.

Madam Speaker, I speak as the Minister of Works and Transport. I want to thank the Minister of Finance for his guidance and the courage that he has shown to take this country from the problems that the previous UNC government had left this country in, in 2015, to the point where, even during a pandemic, our country could be viewed as a country that has actually provided for its citizens in this difficult time. To the hon. Minister of Finance, I congratulate you. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you.

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me to join this most important debate on a Motion of no confidence against the Minister of Finance. I want to congratulate my colleague from Oropouche West for a very comprehensive and factual presentation [*Desk thumping*] when piloting this Motion. The Member for Oropouche West sounded like a real Minister of Finance, [*Desk thumping*] critically analyzing the economic indicators, and the failure of this present Minister of Finance, in managing and diversifying the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Madam Speaker, there is an article in the *Guardian*, and I think that article in the *Guardian* is very instructive and relevant to this present debate. The article is entitled, “It really is time for Imbert to go”, Wednesday, February 17, 2021. [*Desk thumping*] I did not say this. These are the words of the Trinidad and Tobago *Guardian*.

Mr. Young: Madam Speaker, 55(1)(b). Like they are passing articles among themselves, the same Curtis Williams, tedious, tedious, tedious repetition.

Madam Speaker: Please continue, Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is really time for the Minister of Finance to go, because if after six years you fail to diversify the economy, you continuously record the lowest revenue for the last decade, you continuously increase the public debt to the highest ever in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, reduce the forex imports and cover, and then you want to come here and stand as the Minister of Finance—then you want to stand here as the Minister of Finance and ask your Cabinet colleagues to express confidence in you? We say no more, Minister Imbert must really go. [*Desk thumping*]

Then you can tell how bad the situation is, when the PNM B team has to come to defend the Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*] Imagine they asked the Minister of Works and Transport to come to defend the Minister of Finance, when he cannot even defend his own track record. Today we are faced with bad roads, a crashed sea bridge, and he comes to talk about—and that Minister—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1).

Madam Speaker: So, remember Member, this is about the Minister of Finance, so whatever you are going to say, tie that back. It is not about the Minister of Works and Transport.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you for your guidance, Madam Speaker. I am just rebutting what the Minister would have said earlier on. The Minister spoke of the Curepe Interchange project. “You know, up ‘til now, nobody know who own Kay Donna. Up ‘til now, nobody know how much that land cost for Kay Donna.”

Madam Speaker: I really think that you need to come back to what this debate is about. This is not about Kay Donna or the ownership of that. If you are rebutting, then rebut based on what was put on the record. I am not going to allow you to extend this to all sorts of things you wish.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. There were several issues that the Minister of Works and Transport raised in terms of the area of finance. Based on your ruling, I will move on to some other areas. One area in particular I would like to go to is the Minister of Finance’s continuous incorrect narrative relating to the overdraft account, the Exchequer Account. The Minister said that when he inherited office he was told that there was only money for three days in this country, and that that account was in credit in 2010, when the People’s Partnership took power; and when we left power that account went into overdraft. Well, that is absolutely false and incorrect—false. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 55(1)(b), as the third speaker to literally repeat this point.

Madam Speaker: And I will have to agree. So I give you one second to see if you are developing that in a different way, if not, I will rise and ask you to move on.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I would like to quote from the Auditor General’s report, which I do not think any Member of the House had quoted from when it comes to the Exchequer Account. If you would allow me to quote from page 4 of the Auditor General’s Report, Public Accounts of Trinidad and Tobago 2018,

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

2021.03.26

which says that:

“The Exchequer Account which is the bank account for the Consolidated Fund was overdrawn by...”—\$40.2 billion—“an increase of \$3.7 billion or 10.0 % when compared with the previous year’s balance of...”—\$36.5billion.

Hear what the Auditor General said:

“This account has been consistently in overdraft since 2003.”

So it is absolutely false for the Minister of Finance to come to say that the account was in credit in 2010, when in fact the Auditor General is telling us that this account has been overdrawn [*Desk thumping*] since 2003. Madam Speaker, if that is not misleading this Parliament, I do not know what is. It is absolutely false. The Minister has placed on the public record, on the *Hansard* of this country, sitting as the Minister of Finance who is responsible for the country’s finances, comes to put false matters on the record. Is he disputing—is the Minister disputing what the Auditor General is saying in the report? We have to get the facts. But then this comes from a Minister who told this country that we are turning around, when in fact it was really a whole run around, an entire run around. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister said that the economy is now in good hands—it is in good hands. Imagine the Minister of Finance tells this country that the economy is in good hands but this is their legacy. They have shut down one of the most essential organizations of this country that earns forex which is Petrotrin; shut it down. [*Desk thumping*] Over 100,000 persons are unemployed today.

Madam Speaker, we have unfinished schools. We have no diversification of the economy. The Minister is giving us facts and figures but it is not parallel to what is happening on the ground. The people of this country are suffering. So

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

2021.03.26

while the Minister could come here and gloat and beat his chest about the figures and facts, this is not benefiting the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] It is not benefiting them.

Under this Minister of Finance, Trinidad and Tobago has been placed in a very embarrassing position where we are continuously being blacklisted by the European Union Global Forum. We have passed all of the laws in this Parliament, and this falls directly within his portfolio [*Desk thumping*] because he said as soon as he became the Minister of Finance he received a letter from the Global Forum, that was since 2015. We are now in 2021. We have passed the laws since last year, and Trinidad and Tobago still remains on that blacklist—still on the blacklist. [*Desk thumping*] We are totally embarrassed by the non-performance of this Minister, not only locally but regionally and internationally. [*Desk thumping*] That is what it is.

Then I heard the Minister of Finance saying, well, we had to withdraw moneys from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for salary relief grants. Madam Speaker, do you know people in Barataria/San Juan are yet to receive their salary relief grant, one year since the pandemic? An entire year has passed and no one—and persons in my constituency did not receive a grant. People come to my constituency office to tell me that they have to be evicted because they cannot pay their rent and are still waiting on the rental assistance grant. [*Desk thumping*]

The Member for Diego Martin West, now Prime Minister, always uses this line: “Where de money gone? Where de money gone?” Madam Speaker, I heard they spoke of a parallel health care system to deal with COVID, state-of-the-art, best in the world. Based on some documents that were provided to us at the Standing Finance Committee of this Parliament, do you know that the same

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

2021.03.26

parallel health organization that they boast about today, while nurses, doctors and other frontline workers were denied PPE, you know how much they paid for tents in this country in one regional corporation? Madam Speaker, \$1.4 million to rent tents—\$1.4 million to rent tents. [*Desk thumping*] They could have built an entire building for that money, than pay \$1.4 million to rent tents.

That is the state-of-the-art parallel health care facility that the Minister of Finance stood up—stood up in this Parliament to defend. Madam Speaker, it is totally embarrassing—totally. It is a misuse of taxpayers' money in this country—total misuse.

Madam Speaker, you would remember that the Minister of Finance in 2018 told us, “Do not be worried, we have six game changers”—six. Dragon Field, game over, but they were allowing sanctioned individuals and sanctioned aircrafts into Trinidad and Tobago. NIF, the reform of Petrotrin, Sandals; game over. La Brea dry dock facility, that is probably still on dry dock, and two state-of-the-art ferries, we learned one recently had to turn around for mechanical issues. Total failure in terms of how they are going to turn around this economy.

There are other issues that I want to raise when it comes to the misinformation that this Minister of Finance has placed on the record and that has to do with NGC. Every single time they would come to this Parliament, they would come to the Parliament and say that the People's Partnership withdrew all of this money from NGC. It is \$12 billion that was withdrawn from the period 2010 to 2015, not \$16 billion as incorrectly stated by them all of the time. [*Desk thumping*] Again, false.

5.50 p.m.

Madam Speaker, do you know as soon as they assumed office in September

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

2021.03.26

2015 to December 2015, they withdrew \$2.1 billion from the NGC? Immediately? Madam Speaker, do you know that they took, in total, \$6.9 billion from the NGC—hold on—and then they added from that 6.9, \$11.2 billion from the HFS? A total of \$17.6 billion from the HSF, from NGC and they do not have a single school that they built to show for that. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, all they have to show is cutting ribbon for the United National Congress People's Partnership projects in this country. [*Desk thumping*] They can show the Couva children's hospital, they can show the Point Fortin Hospital, the Trinidad and Tobago tennis centre. Those are projects of the United National Congress Government, [*Desk thumping*] led by the hon. Member for Siparia, one of the best Prime Ministers we have ever seen in this country, Madam Speaker, because they were guided with people in mind, a people-centred government, not friends, families and financiers.

And, Madam Speaker, the Minister, he would like to—the Minister would in fact like to talk about—again, let me go back a little bit into the overdraft, please, that in terms of the overdraft, Madam Speaker, do you know it is this same Minister of Finance who chastised United National Congress government for using a facility such as the overdraft, was the same one who came to this very Parliament to increase the ceiling to withdraw more money out of the overdraft, today leaving that account in overdraft by over \$40 billion? Madam Speaker, those are the facts. That is what is stated in the Auditor General's Report of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, there is another issue, another issue that falls directly at the door, at the feet of this Minister, that is the procurement legislation.

Hon. Member: Oh yes.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, since 2015—Act No.1 of 2015—that Act was

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

passed in the last—in the previous government, the People's Partnership Government. The Minister—we are in 2021—has not fully implemented the procurement Act but instead what they did was gut the legislation. They watered down the legislation so much that they would now have no oversight of certain things such as medical services. So the same tent I talked about earlier on with respect to procurement, the regulator cannot look at that; accounting services, for auditing services, for legal services. Madam Speaker, those are things—

Why is the Minister of Finance not proclaiming the procurement Act, Madam Speaker? [*Desk thumping*] We call on this Government to ensure that that Act is fully implemented before they do any sale of any refinery in this country, [*Desk thumping*] before they decide to privatize the port, before they decide to sell NP gas stations [*Desk thumping*] in this country. Madam Speaker, there must be transparency and accountability when dealing with the assets of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] There must be accountability, Madam Speaker. But just now we will hear what happens with WASA. Just now we will hear about WASA and I expect the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West to tell us about WASA.

Hon. Member: Oh yes.

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, they talk about how they won the election. Madam Speaker, in my hand here I have a letter from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to tell you how they won the elections.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, no displaying. Your back was to me so I could not see—

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker:—but no displaying. All right?

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, may I ask how—

Madam Speaker: If you could turn this way, I would not have the difficulty that I had.

Mr. S. Hosein: May I ask how much time I have again?

Madam Speaker: You have four minutes.

Mr. S. Hosein: Four minutes. Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, let us talk about how they won the general election 2020.

Madam Speaker: All right. So this has to do with the Minister of Finance?

Mr. S. Hosein: Yes, please, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: All right. So I am giving you a few seconds because this is about the Minister of Finance.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, during that period for December 2019, the Government spent \$77 million on COVID food cards; \$77 million. I do not know much or many persons in my constituency benefited from this, Madam Speaker. In fiscal 2020, they spent \$193 million on food support programmes; \$193 million. And for the month, Madam Speaker, when you look—the election was in August 2020. When you look at August 2020, July 2020, June 2020, Madam Speaker, you have 6,735 cheques being issued; 7,152 cheques issued in July; 7,895 cheques being issued in an election year.

Madam Speaker, we believe that this was not distributed equitably and fairly to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, that is where the releases from the Ministry of Finance went. Because when Naparima and Oropouche East and Siparia and St. Augustine complain that their constituents are not benefiting, Madam Speaker, we must ask where this \$193 million in food support went. We must ask those questions, because it is for the Minister of

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

Finance to account to the people of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] how their moneys were spent. It is their hard-earned taxpaying dollars, Madam Speaker. But we have seen what this Government has done. They have, in fact, ensured that when they pass laws in this Parliament, those laws benefit them financially, Madam Speaker. And we must remember those are the ones who have the high-rise buildings [*Desk thumping*] and give taxes to themselves, Madam Speaker, tax breaks for themselves.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(4) and (6), and I insist that the hon. Member retract those allegations. [*Crosstalk*] He just said it straight.

Madam Speaker: Member, 48(6) and I therefore think you should find another way to say what you want to say. So withdraw that and find another way to say what you want to say.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I will find another way by saying that—

Madam Speaker: Do not do that. I asked you to do something first.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I withdraw. And, Madam Speaker, when you pass laws in this country, make sure it does not benefit yourself but the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(6).

Madam Speaker: Again, I allow you one other opportunity, retract it and find another way. If not, move on.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, withdrawn. And there is one last issue—I have one minute again?

Madam Speaker: You have about sevenseconds.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I am saying that the Minister of Finance needs to go. We have no confidence in this Minister of Finance, and I thank you very much.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

2021.03.26

[*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Education. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The Member for Oropouche West, in moving this Motion, Madam Speaker, said that the performance of the Minister of Finance impacts the quality of life for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and in particular our children. And the Member suggested that the Minister of Finance has failed to perform this duty and therefore, this Motion of no confidence is necessary in this Minister.

And we are asked to support this Motion of no confidence in the performance of the Minister of Finance. But I, in fact, stand here and I want to uphold the Minister of Finance's performance. I want to indicate that the Minister has performed well. The Minister has performed creditably, the Minister has performed outstandingly, [*Desk thumping*] and I want to use, as evidence, the provisions for education that have been made in the budget presented by the Minister of Finance and how these provisions have served the people of Trinidad and Tobago and in particular the quality of life for our nation's children; over 230,000 of them. And when we speak of the Minister of Finance and what he is doing and how it affects our citizens, we have to pinpoint what really has been done, especially for those most vulnerable children of our society.

In the face of all the challenges, Madam Speaker, in the face all the challenges with the prices of oil and gas, in the face of the challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, this country has stayed afloat, and let us not overlook that fact. This country has been able to function, to stay afloat and all thanks to the sagacity displayed by the Minister of Finance.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

I base my confidence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the performance of this Minister during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of education. A cliché term may be that “our children are our future”, and cliché though it may be, it does not make it any less true that we have to protect our vulnerable citizens and it is up to us as the Government, it is up to the Ministers who are serving to ensure that this is done.

The response of the Ministry of Education in this crisis posed by COVID-19 had much to do with the Minister of Finance’s understanding of what was needed to mitigate against the challenges that were presented in the education sector and his political will to make sure that financial provisions were put in place to support the initiatives to mitigate against these challenges.

To prevent a learning crisis, as presented globally by COVID-19, from becoming a generational catastrophe, the UN recommended certain provisions, and three main issues had to be addressed. And I want to go through these three issues and identify how the Minister of Finance, in the performance of his duty, was able to deal with these three main issues as recommended by the UN and therefore impact the lives and the quality of life of over 230,000 of our citizens.

The first recommendation:

“Suppress transmission of the virus and plan thoroughly for school re-openings”—and we are looking at the performance of the Ministry of Finance in this area.

The Minister of Health has spoken copiously on the role of the Minister of Finance in the fight against COVID-19, and the effect of this role and the provision of funding for the fight against COVID-19. It means that over 230,000 students who

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

may have lost hope when institutions closed in March of 2020, have a hope at regaining some semblance of normalcy.

Again, through the work of the Ministry of Finance in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the Prime Minister and these financial provisions to suppress transmission of the virus, allows our students who are doing exams to be out to schools. And we want to thank the parents, the teachers, the students themselves, and above all, the Minister of Finance for assisting in the suppression of the virus which allows this to happen and allows our students, over 230,000 of them, a chance and a hope of regaining some normalcy; direct response to the provisions and the policies of the Ministry of Finance in conjunction with the Minister of Health.

And for them alone—on behalf of those 230,000 students who have some hope, who have seen exam students go back to school because of the measures taken through the Minister of Finance and the Ministry of Health, on behalf of them alone, I express confidence in the Minister of Finance [*Desk thumping*] because it is his policies and provisions that have made this suppression possible and allows these students to have hope that they will regain some normalcy soon.

Our colleagues in St. Vincent, Jamaica, Barbados, they wish that they can be in the position as we are now, and it is directly from the Ministry of Finance, the provisions made; the Ministry of Health working in conjunction with that, that allows us to be where we are now. So I say, for that alone, confidence should be expressed in the Minister of Finance and his work.

The second recommendation made by the UN, taken into consideration by the Ministry of Finance in the execution of his duty would be:

“Protect education financing...”—protect education financing.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

You see, even the UN acknowledges that the effect of COVID-19 on government budgets is crippling. Even the UN acknowledges that. And sometimes I wonder if it is only the UNC that does not understand that and keeps saying that there is no cause—no reason that COVID-19 should have impacted our economy. I want to read something from the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, in addressing the Ministers of Finance of the African Union and that was this Monday gone here. She said:

“Our health statistics are relatively good but our economies are devastated.”

Our health statistics are relatively good but our economies are devastated.

“Our governments are...”—relatively—“successful in treating the global pandemics health side, this has served to hide the true economic devastation of COVID from the world,’ said Mottley who spoke as Chair of the World Bank Development Committee.”

So if you do not want to listen to what we are saying on this side, or what the Minister of Finance has said ad nauseam, that COVID-19 has had a serious effect our budgets and our revenues and our expenditure, listen to it from someone else who is saying clearly about the crippling effect of COVID-19 on our budgetary allocations.

And the UN is saying, in light of this fact, it may be that some governments may take money from education and put it into other areas, keeping our country fed. You would have heard the Minister of Social Development and Family Services the expenditure to do that, ensuring that jobs are kept. You would hear the Minister of Finance speaking about that, the Prime Minister speaking about that, the effort to do that, and in the light of doing those things, education budgets may

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

suffer. And the UN is making the recommendation that that not be so. What was the response of the Minister of Finance of Trinidad and Tobago?

In 2020, 10 per cent of the total budget was spent on education. In 2021, allocations made in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, 9.3 per cent of the total budget for education, showing again that the sustenance of the budget for education, the recommendation of the UN was followed by the Minister of Finance. Why should I not have confidence in a Minister who understands the situation and takes advice from the right people? [*Desk thumping*] That is a Minister who is performing his duty. That is a Minister who understands the challenges and understands the need to continue the investment in over 230,000 of our young citizens.

And for that again, the Minister of Finance, on behalf of those young citizens for whom this investment will bear fruit in the later years, I want to thank you for your sagacity, I want to thank you for your shrewdness in ensuring that the education sector's budget has been maintained, even in these crippling challenging times, to ensure that the future of our country is sustained and maintained.

In 2021, out of that 9.3 per cent of the total budget that went to education, 2billion of that alone went into salaries for primary and secondary ECCE teachers for those 230,000; \$50 million in the HELP loan fund to help our tertiary students; \$400 million allocated for GATE. And I keep hearing, you know, there is no GATE, no HELP; all of these are measures to help the most vulnerable to ensure that even in difficult times they are seen about; \$35million for national scholarships; \$22 million for national bursaries, all in the COVID time, all in the time where other Prime Ministers are admitting that their budgets are crippled by the COVID. We have maintained the investment in education driven by the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Minister of Finance to ensure that the most vulnerable are taken care of, to ensure the investment in our your people.

The effect of this work by the Ministry of Finance is to increase the quality of life for over—and if we include the tertiary sector now—over 300,000 citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And I must not have confidence in this Minister of Finance? [*Desk thumping*] I have full confidence in him because I have seen the evidence of how he is planning to take care of the future of this country.

The third recommendation of the UN, with respect to the education sector:

“Build resilient education systems...”

And how have the policies of the Minister of Finance done this? How has he impacted in this area?—building resilient education systems.

One main area is ensuring that teachers keep engaged and paid. And I would have mentioned the 2billion figure out of a total of \$4.7 billion allocated to the education sector; \$2 billion in salaries to our teachers alone. And I can tell you that globally, in some countries when the effects of COVID-19 were felt, the first persons to come off the payroll of the Government would have been teachers because schools were closed. That did not happen in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is not by chance. It is a decision made by the Ministry of Finance, the Prime Minister, the Government to ensure that our teachers are kept on the payroll, and to ensure that the resilience—that they are the tip of the spear in bringing to the education sector is maintained, not by accident, made by a decision of the Minister of Finance. And, Minister of Finance, I thank you for that and our teachers, over 13,000 of them in Trinidad and Tobago, thank you for ensuring that the decision was made to expend hard-earned funds— difficult times— [*Desk thumping*] but to expend that to keep them on.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

How else did the Ministry of Finance help to build education resilience? By allocating over \$100million for devices and connectivity to facilitate online education. This became necessary to keep our population safe, keep our children safe, and it was important to dedicate and to invest this. And by April we will be seeing the fruits of this investment as our children begin to receive from the Government—they have already begun to receive over 20,000 devices through the corporate sector and they will begin to receive from the Government devices that are suited for online learning and will help them as we make the transformation to our blended learning. And that again is through the initiative of the Minister of Finance and for this, the children will thank you; for this, our future will be kind to this Minister of Finance because of his investment in the future of our nation.

[Desk thumping]

How else has he built educational resilience? How else has the Minister of Finance taken that advice coming from the UN to do this? Our teachers, most important, on our payroll, desirous of teaching our children in times when they could not see them face to face, it is through collaborations with the units like Commonwealth of Learning, through collaborations with CAF this has happened, because of the payments to these institutions made possible through the Ministry of Education by the Minister of Finance. And we were able to benefit from online training since March2020 ongoing up to now, because of these payments facilitated through the Ministry of Education by the Ministry of Finance, and so our teachers are able to learn how to deliver online, building resilience.

And if something happens in another situation, God help us, where our teachers cannot come back in the face-to-face collaborations with our students, they would be trained, and that again, it is not by chance. It is because we are able

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

to make financial contributions to these institutions to allow this to have happened in 2020, stretching even now into 2021, and it will be continuing, making resources available for teachers, showing them how to do online content, showing them how to teach. These are things that have built resilience into our systems and they are not by chance. It is through positive action coming from the Minister of Finance and we want to thank you for that. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have shown that in the performance of the Ministry of Finance, as it relates to the education sector, the budgetary allocations have been sustained and the Minister of Finance has shown clear understanding of the global crisis presented by COVID-19. Even as schools closed, they had to be prepared for reopening. And so even with the schools closed, there was money allocated, over \$140 million expended to ensure that the schools are prepared for reopening as we have been able to do.

So I want to echo the confidence of the population shown in 2020. I want to represent the views of constituents of St. Ann's East and I want to support, unequivocally, the contributions of my parliamentary colleagues who have gone before me and who will come after me to show clear evidence, not old talk, not bacchanal talk, not rum shop talk, to show clear evidence that the Minister of Finance has been judicious, sagacious, shrewd, wise and diligent, and Trinidad and Tobago is all the better for his public service. [*Desk thumping*]

I reject this Motion. It is as inept as the attempt made to move it, and I declare full confidence in the Minister of Finance on behalf of the 230,000 primary and secondary and ECCE students; on behalf of the 230,000 students; the 300,000 students that we have brought into the tertiary sector, on behalf of all of them, I want to say to you, Minister of Finance, we thank you. We thank you for your

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

2021.03.26

service, we thank you for what you have done and what you will continue to do as the people of Trinidad and Tobago elected you to do in 2020. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Tabaquite. [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Anita Haynes (Tabaquite): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for recognizing me as I contribute to this most important debate. It was almost evident that the Minister of Finance may not have been able to hear the other speaker from the volume levels we had to endure just now.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, I sat here and I listened to the contributions of the other side. The Motion, a very important Motion which was brought by my colleague from Oropouche West, says that:

The Minister failed—“...to bring certainty, confidence, stability and growth to the...economy”—of Trinidad and Tobago, which is his job as Minister of Finance.

As I listened to the Minister of Education, it appeared that when COVID-19 appeared, the Minister of Finance—that is when his job began. Because the Minister of Education came to tell us that the reason we as a nation ought to have confidence in the Minister of Finance is because in April of 2021, students would get devices and benefit from a device programme. But this is the same Minister of Finance in 2015 that told us that this nation, before COVID, had no money to provide devices to those same students. [*Desk thumping*] So, you know, when you sit here and you think—make it make sense. That could never make sense that we must congratulate the Minister of Finance for a problem that the Minister of Finance created in 2015 from a policy decision. It could never make sense.

So when I was listening to the Minister of Education, I do not know if you

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

are familiar with the term “reaching”, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but that was a reach from beginning to end to get the Minister of Finance some sort of accolade for a job that was clearly not well done; clearly not well done. Because at no point; at no point did the Minister of Education, in a celebration of what mediocrity at best—because all we were told is the Minister of Finance, through his policy decisions, enabled us to meet the UN’s standards. But let us be clear about something. Let us be very clear about something.

When you are talking about spending and investing in education—you know, we listened to a budget presentation last year. In that budget presentation, the Minister of Finance spoke about Mi-Fi. I do not know if anybody remembers that. I do not know in whose constituency—anybody here? All of us represent citizens. Who has the Mi-Fi devices? Received the Mi-Fi—well, I see one. Nobody else has received Mi-Fi devices from the Ministry of Education because—and I assume the Ministry of Finance has not provided the necessary funding to acquire these devices.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we listened—as I listened to all of the contributions—I sat in the House for the majority of the time this debate was going on, and what I noticed was an exercise in gaslighting. If you are not familiar with the term “gaslighting”, it is all that we received from the Government Bench today. The population would have been listening on, questioning our sanity, questioning our perception of reality, questioning if we even live in the same Trinidad and Tobago that they live in, because this pretty picture of this amazing Trinidad and Tobago that is doing so well, could never be the same Trinidad that we are existing in at this time.

6.20 p.m.

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

The Minister of Education spoke about the future of our nation, and that the Minister of Finance, we ought to thank him for enabling our students to be in a positive hybrid space. A joint select committee of this Parliament chaired by a Member of the Government that is discussing what is happening in the hybrid virtual learning space, Mr. Deputy Speaker, told us in this Parliament, it is part of the public record, that over 47,000 students have not accessed virtual learning since the schools closed last year. So who are they saying thank you to? Who are they saying thank you to, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Because when you are attempting to paint a very pretty picture, when you are attempting to gaslight an entire nation, there are people who live here. Lived reality must supersede whatever storytelling we are getting from the other side. [*Desk thumping*]

When you come to tell us about, let us say thank you for preserving the scholarship space, and then in October of last year reduce the number of scholarships to 100, that could not make sense. [*Desk thumping*] When you tell me that the Ministry of Finance is responsible for being very prudent in their allocations by keeping the education budget as a top priority, \$6 billion, and then when we look at the breakdown of where the money is being spent, we cannot see where the investments are being made. Think about that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence!

Ms. A. Hayes: Think about that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When you come and you give me the numbers of students, and you tell me about devices but you do not tell me about connectivity because now we do not mention Mi-Fi because nobody has received it, and then tell me that I must have confidence in a Minister of Finance who made all of these promises—and I will go through some of the promises from

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

2021.03.26

2015 to now, because he did not become Minister of Finance when COVID started, he was Minister of Finance well before that. And so, you know, you listen to Members opposite convince a well-educated, well-connected and tuned in population, a population that pays attention to what goes on here, and you wonder if they are even able to convince themselves.

You know, the Minister of Health in his response to this contribution spoke about all sorts of things, all sort of things, but at no point in time was he able to convince any of us that he believed the Minister of Finance was doing a good job. As a matter of fact, I thought we moved a Motion against the Minister of Health, he spoke so much about himself and what he was able to do, and then in the end kind of swing it back to the Minister of Finance. And, coincidentally almost all of the speakers did that. The Minister of Works and Transport spoke about the Minister of Works and Transport, and then said, “it is because of the Minister of Finance I was able to maybe do this”, when we know the Minister of Works and Transport is not working. Right? [*Desk thumping*]

And so you had this space today, you have a space where, as the Member for Oropouche West showed us, the numbers say one thing. The numbers tell a very important, a very accurate story. You came from a space where the Member for Mayaro spoke about what it means for business confidence and what our economy is able to do, what our business persons are able to do in a depressed economy. You came from a space where the Member for Couva South was able to speak about employment and what it means for employment figures which we are not sure as to today any accurate amount of data as to how many persons are unemployed in this country at this time. You came from a space where these matters were being discussed on this side, and on the other side you got stories,

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

2021.03.26

you got fairy tales because that was the only thing they were able to give us.

Because if you exist in Trinidad and Tobago, if you exist as a student in Trinidad and Tobago right now, those of us who are representatives in this country, we know what that list of persons who are requesting devices looks like, and it is not just persons on this side. I am sure in your MP offices you have the same problem, where the list of request for devices, or the list of request for hampers, or the list of request for assistance in home repairs, the list for where people are requesting assistance to meet their most basic standard of living exceeds our ability to provide. That is a problem we are all facing. And if in your office as a Member of Parliament you are getting increasing requests for jobs, you have students coming out of school, you have persons who graduated as far back as 2015, say, “please, any which way, help me find a job”. If you can have that as your daily experience as a Member of Parliament, and then you could come here, you could come here and say you have confidence in the Minister of Finance, that you have confidence in his ability—because the Motion was clear—to create confidence, to create growth, Mr. Deputy Speaker, then you are not being honest with your constituents. [*Desk thumping*]

There is no way, there is no way as a representative—because that is what we all are here today—you could sit in your office on whatever your office day is, sign all of these forms, find all sorts of ways, or even the poor Minister of Education had to go to private sector donors to adopt a school to get the laptops for schools. Imagine that? You had to go outside of the space and could not find—you found the money after a pandemic. Now the pandemic is the excuse for all sorts of cuts in expenditure, eh, but you found the money after a pandemic to allocate to devices, but in 2015, devices were not important. In 2016, devices were not

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

2021.03.26

important—same Minister of Finance, eh—2017, devices were not important, 2018, the year of the turnaround, devices: not important. [*Desk thumping*] Pandemic hit and you are telling us about a depressed economy because of the pandemic but all of a sudden, you could find the money for the devices.

And that in and of itself should tell you what we have is a management problem. It is a management problem at the top. Now, I would have accepted, had any of the Members opposite argued that it is not the Minister of Finance's policy, and that is why the Motion should not have gone the way it did, that it is a government policy, and they all sit there all together and make these bad decisions together and enact it, and that is why we should not blame the Minister of Finance. But nobody did that. As a matter of fact, they individually thanked the Minister for whatever little they think they are providing to the citizens of this country. So, what that tells us is at the top you have a person who is making policy decisions. You have a person in the person of the Minister of Finance who is saying this is where the money ought to go, this is how it ought to be spent. We have a person in the Minister of Finance who is equally not telling the population where new sources of revenue would come from. You have a person in the Minister of Finance who has read a number of budgets, a number of budget statements, and that person has not at any point in time felt the need to hold himself accountable to promises he is making year, after year, after year.

So when we bring a Motion of no confidence you have to ask yourself, what inspires confidence? Where this confidence comes from. Because if you use that starting point, you understand that confidence comes from a place of trust. That if I can trust you to deliver on what you said, then I would have confidence. But if you could come here year after year, repeat the same first half of your budget

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

2021.03.26

statement, and somewhere in the middle, then you can ultimately—I can say without fear of contradiction that I ought not to have confidence in this person because there is no trust. I have built up no trust with this person because in 2018, you told me we were going to get a turnaround, and before we knew it, we had the shutdown of Petrotrin. [*Desk thumping*] I do not know if that was the type of turnaround that you were expecting but it certainly was not the type of turnaround I was expecting, and so there was a breach of trust.

Now, the population is looking on, and there was only one promise that this Minister of Finance made that we could all say with absolute certainty he delivered on, and that was the promise of zero, zero, zero. That promise he has stuck to from beginning to end. As so what we have as a nation is, zero accountability, zero transparency, zero performance, zero deliverables, and that is what we got from this Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*] It is a litany of broken promises. My colleague from Barataria/San Juan raised the game changers. My colleague from Oropouche West, I think—you know, I spoke about this in my time in the other place, that it is your most basic level primary school political communications that will tell you, say in the beginning, “things hard, tighten your belt”; say somewhere in the middle, “things gettin better, let us pat ourselves on the back”; and say in the end, “look at things we have, look at how many things we can give you”.

The budget of 2019, the budget for fiscal 2020, which was before the pandemic, we had dubbed it “the condense milk budget”. Because I sat on a panel discussion with the now Minister of Public Admin, who sat trying to justify unnecessary increases in spending, in a budget prior to a local government election, prior to a general election. These things are part of our public record. So, all the years before: prudent fiscal management, “we curbing the spending, we

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

doing this, we doing that”, and then right before an election, before COVID, before the election, the local government election of 2019, you start to see spending creeping up, because the narrative was spun to us that things were turning around with no evidence to back it up. No evidence whatsoever, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, we have a Minister of Finance that from the beginning of his tenure spoke to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and told us there is no room for us to work with you, what you get is what you are getting. Remember, “dey eh riot yet”? This is the same person, eh. This is the same person.

So, when we stand here and we say we have no confidence in the Minister of Finance, we know that we speak for the population of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] If we ran our political system on data and data analysis, there is no way, no way the People’s National Movement would have put the same Minister Imbert as the Minister of Finance. There is no way. Because the data would show you he is probably the most unpopular Minister on that side. So they are aware that the population does not have confidence, when you hear, as a member of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, you hear Minister Imbert, they refer to him as the “taxman”, because you are paying all these taxes and you have no idea where the money is going. [*Desk thumping*]

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we stand here as representatives, not just of these 19 seats, but of a wider population of persons who are looking on, we understand that you have to start with the economy. You have to start by building confidence that whoever is in charge, charged with our fiscal—

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

Ms. A. Hayes: Thank you. Whoever is charged with our policy-making from a fiscal level, from the Ministry of Finance, that that person ought to be a person

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

who the population can have confidence that when they make promises, they can be kept, they can be worth it and that they will govern from a space of understanding that what we need as a population is creativity, innovation, new revenue generation, and that it must be done from a space that includes consultation and being willing to listen. And if there is one thing we are sure about, and Terrence Farrell will agree, that this Minister of Finance does not listen to anybody else. And so we can say for sure that we have no confidence in the Minister of Finance, and I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on this Motion in this House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I have to complain about one thing in relation to the debate so far from my colleagues on this side, I have to say that they have overlooked the fact that the Minister of Finance is not just one of the country's most outstanding Ministers of Finance ever, [*Desk thumping*] he is certainly one of the country's most outstanding Members of Parliament also. [*Desk thumping*] If you go to Paramin and you go through Maraval, you talk to the people, they will all tell you how excellent he is as an MP—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second, Member. Again, Members we are not tolerating that banter across the aisle, please.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the mover of the Motion and all the speakers, but I listened to the mover of the Motion very carefully, the Member for Oropouche West, and very early he proceeded on a fallacy.

And this Motion is rooted in a fallacy. And that fallacy is a very simple one: that

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The. Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

2021.03.26

the economy of Trinidad and Tobago was doing well in 2015. And if it is one thing Petrotrin exposed, was that statement is not true, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The signals had started to appear in 2013, and as energy prices were buoyant and the revenues were high, my friends on the other side were not paying attention. Keep in mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that my friends on the other side between 2010 and 2015, five years and three months, high energy prices, a buoyant economy, failed to make a contribution to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund out of revenues. And if you could make such a failure, if you could fail in that manner, then I do not expect you to see the warning signs which were presenting themselves as early as 2013.

And when you behave that way in Government, I expect that you would come on a Friday afternoon in Port of Spain and build a case on a fallacy, that the economy was doing well in 2015. And go and ask your friends, go and ask your friends, all of them you quoted, go and ask them the truth. So, on that principle alone, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Motion fails. [*Desk thumping*] I listened to the Member for Mayaro, who is my Member of Parliament, and he built a case that was not the UNC versus Colm Imbert, he built a case that was not the Member for Oropouche versus the Minister of Finance. He built a case of Curtis Williams, Gabriel Faria, Gregory Aboud and Ralph Maharaj versus Colm Imbert. He has made himself a surrogate for these men. This is not the MP for Oropouche West's Motion, and MP for Mayaro did not stand to defend his colleague's Motion. He stood to speak in favour of rubbish, of rubbish that has been written, and offered—I am a constituent of Mayaro—not one scenario from his constituency of challenges in the constituency arising out of COVID, dislocation, opportunities provided by the Government through the Minister of Finance to survive. Absolutely nothing.

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The. Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

Mr. Hinds: “They ungrateful.”

Sen The Hon. C. Rambharat: If I had 20 minutes—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second. Member, again—

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: If I had 20 minutes—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Minister. Again, I am not tolerating that, Laventille West. [*Interruption*] Okay, please, no feedback. I am not tolerating it. Proceed.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: If I had 20 minutes, I would have told the Minister of Finance some stories about my constituents on the east coast. But instead MP for Mayaro prosecuted the beliefs of Williams, Faria, Aboud and Maharaj, and on that basis and that basis alone, that contribution fails. [*Desk thumping*]

And I could give you some headlines, you see, my contribution is not rooted in what anybody writes, you know. It is rooted in the fact that I live here. But I could tell you, COVID on the reference to “permanent demise” that MP for Mayaro—those words, I could give you some articles: “COVID-19 Claims Nearly 73,000 US Businesses With No End In Sight”, July 29, 2020, *Forbes*. “Massive Drop In Business Travel Could Be Permanent”, Business Continuity publication, December 21, 2020. “Nearly 16,000 restaurants have closed permanently due to the pandemic...”, ABC News, 24 July, 2020. And that is the United States that can print currency to bail itself out. They have just passed a trillion dollar bailout, running on the strength of the fact that they could print currency. And if in the United States you are seeing businesses go out permanently, and you are seeing sectors like the cruise ship industry, the massive cruise ship industry upon which North American agriculture depends heavily, unlikely to resurface in anywhere near the form we have grown to know it, if the massive cruise ship sector cannot

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The. Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

2021.03.26

survive COVID, then some of our constituents in Mayaro, San Juan, Oropouche West, Chaguanas East, Diego Martin North/East, Laventille and so on, will have some hardship. They will have that, and thankfully they have a Government and a Minister of Finance who was prepared to respond in even the difficult circumstances. [*Desk thumping*]

I listened to my friend, the Member of Parliament for Barataria/San Juan, and I know there are only two former youth parliamentarians in the Parliament now, MP for San Juan and myself, but I have moved on to an adult parliamentarian and he has remained a youth parliamentarian. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] Because I want to ask him—he was in the other place with me. He was in the other place with me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and every time Petrotrin came up in the other place, I asked the Member for Barataria/San Juan the same question over and over: How were you going to meet the bullet payment that was due? It is on the *Hansard*. Consistently, I have asked the question, and to this day, to this day not a Member now and in the past from the United National Congress can tell the country how they were prepared to make that bullet payment that was becoming due. [*Desk thumping*]

And you could sit comfortably on the other side and talk about WASA and the port. You know why? You will never have responsibility for those entities again. [*Desk thumping*] Because instead of dealing with WASA, you encouraged WASA to hire. [*Desk thumping*] We met a bill to a security company in Chaguanas of \$200 million to stop people from hunting agouti and lappe, when you introduced the moratorium. You never tried to deal with DESALCOTT. You created the problem of DESALCOTT. [*Desk thumping*] You have no interest in dealing with it. You had no interest in dealing with WASA because you were busy allowing

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The. Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

2021.03.26

your management to make deals with the union, himself to himself. [*Desk thumping*]

And you do not have the courage. You did not then, and you will not have the courage to deal with the port and WASA. [*Desk thumping*] And it is under this Government and the Minister of Finance recognizing that we cannot sustain DESALCOTT, we cannot pay for water that we do not receive, we cannot continue when you had the opportunity, when you funded people to exit WASA, you ended up with more employees. You must have created history in doing a VSEP and exiting workers and ending up with more. And you never will take responsibility for that. And let me tell you what the Minister of Finance had to deal with. When you talk about the economy was doing well; the economy was doing well for the contractors. Let me tell you this. Let me tell you this: When I came in as Minister, EMBD is under me, the development cost—I have told the country this but I am reminding you today, because suddenly you know about numbers. Let me give you a simple number to digest today: The development cost in the Caroni VSEP, 2003, my colleague MP for Couva South is there, when we made the commitment—

Mr. Lee: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1), the relevance, please.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: When we made the commitment—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Mr. Deputy Speaker, he knows I am coming to the fact that the Minister of Finance had to find money in the difficult time to pay the legal cost of fighting some of these claims in the court. That is why he stood up. The development cost for a lot of land was on average \$181,000. And when you left in 2015, you left with an average development cost three times that, \$512,000 to develop a lot of land to be given to the workers for free. In fact, in some sections

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The. Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

2021.03.26

of those Caroni lands, a 5,000 square foot parcel of land was costing \$1.2 million.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what they do not want me here to say is what I am about to say. We could have bought land for those workers in Valsayn and still save the country money. [*Desk thumping*] And I want to ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to ask the country, I will give you two examples today, because the Minister of Finance in “banga” season had to help me as a first-time Minister, find money to pay these legal fees because we could not as a government sit there and see these claims being paid. And I will give you two: there was a claim in EMBD for \$326 million. We eventually settled that matter for \$25 million. Who foregoes \$301 million? There was a claim, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for a \$102 million, all ready to be paid, and with legal fees found by the Minister of Finance in “banga” season, that matter was settled with the payment of \$5 million. Who foregoes \$97 million? Who foregoes 40,000 tablets? Because that is what \$102 million is, you know, 40,000 tablets in the schools. But if that was paid, nobody was going to give the school tablets. The taxpayers of this country would have lost that forever, and in “banga” season we found the money. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is the Minister of Finance—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, one second. One second. Member for Naparima, I spoke earlier. I spoke earlier.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: This is the Minister of Finance who on his own initiative, based on his discussions with his constituents in Paramin, conceived the idea of an agri-incentive in 2018 of \$100,000. And that agri-incentive is in place, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And let me tell you, constituents are happy to get it. And I will tell you, it is not PNM constituents alone, you know. It is not PNM-held constituencies, you know. I will tell you today that when I examined the records

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The. Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

2021.03.26

before coming here as at today, 50 per cent of the 100,000 grants have been given out in constituencies represented by my friends on the other side. People from Felicity, Ecclesville, Carapichaima, Pepper Village, Longdenville, Rio Claro/Mayaro Road, Chaguanas, Tabaquite, Ravine Sable and Mamoral. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as the MP for Mayaro knows, I ran against him in 2015, and included in the list are people who walked with him and campaigned against me, and they have been given the grant because they are outstanding farmers deserving of it, under the hands of the Minister of Finance.

6.50 p.m.

The Minister of Finance has been able to find the money so that we could push the distribution of leases, a long neglected thing in this country. And when I see those Notes going to Cabinet, it is farmers from David Toby, Thick Village, Dow Village, Oropouche, Ben Lomond, Brasso, Rio Claro, Cuche, Cumuto, Penal and constituencies held by the PNM.

And the most important thing I will say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is this Minister of Finance in this difficult period even after the spending on the COVID, who has found 500 million to put in the line, as a line Item in the budget of the Ministry of Finance to stimulate and secure farmers heading into the long term. And that 500 million when you see the projects that it involves, covers every constituency in this country in relation to roads, land tenure, 10 million for finally replacing those 35-year-old pumps in Plum Mitán, settling the issues of the packing houses, expanding the seed bank which we brought back into operation after 2015, seed bank in Chaguaramas, matters relating to cocoa, Tobago, youth farmers, young farmers, young people, technology, that is what the 500 million is for. And it is there because of the concerns, he comes from a farming constituency

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Sen. The. Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

2021.03.26

representing farmers and that \$500 million is to prepare our farmers for a stronger long term future in this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you very much and I want to say I am here not only to express confidence in my colleague, the MP for Diego Martin North/East, and to express confidence in my colleague the Minister of Finance, but to express confidence in the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you.
[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Couva North. [*Desk thumping*]
Proceed.

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (*Couva North*): Thank you, thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to join this debate on this important and timely Private Members' Motion brought by my esteemed colleague from Oropouche West, which states:

Whereas the Minister of Finance has demonstrated his inability to competently execute his duties to bring certainty, confidence, stability and growth to the national economy;

Be it resolved that this House express its loss of confidence in the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I go into my contribution I want to use this opportunity to respond to some of the issues raised by the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. And I just want to say, with respect to that 500 million that he closed off speaking about, that is a complete insult to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, because even the Minister himself admitted that the 500 million was put into the budget of the Ministry of Finance and not into the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to do agriculture issues. [*Desk*

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

thumping] And I will go later into my contribution and say more on that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But he came and he spoke about tablets, 40,000 tablets and finding money for 40,000 tablets. But I want to tell the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries that if his Government and if his Minister of Finance was serious about finding moneys for tablets, because we recognized that over 46,000 children in this country are without electronic devices, and if they were serious, they would have negotiated the rent and try and save some money from the rent so that they can pay for tablets and electronic devices for our students in school. [*Desk thumping*]

He came and spoke about bullet payments in Petrotrin and bills in Petrotrin. But I want to remind him of one of their supporters, a gentleman by the name of Malcolm Jones, and it seems as though they are suffering from amnesia because they forget the bills that Malcolm Jones ran up that has caused the problems in Petrotrin. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is clear that the world has gone through some rapid changes in recent time and in order for our small island developing state of Trinidad and Tobago to survive both at this time and in the future, some sound financial and strategic management of the economy is definitely needed. However, as my colleague, the Member for Oropouche West piloted this Motion today, and pointed out that the growth and stability of our economy has been compromised by this Minister of Finance, and in reality, despite what that outgoing government may want us to believe, we are in the middle of an economic crisis. [*Desk thumping*]

While the Members on the other side may want to blame everyone else; they may want to blame the moon from in Oropouche or the star from in Siparia; they may want to blame COVID-19; they may even want to blame all the challenges

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

2021.03.26

faced outside of Trinidad on the international global market and the international financial environment that businesses in America and so forth face, I want to say to this Minister that the economy of Trinidad and Tobago crashed long before COVID came. [*Desk thumping*]

So do not come here, Mr. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, to talk about businesses that got closed down in the United States and how many thousands of business that got closed down in the United States because of COVID. Because before COVID, right here in Trinidad and Tobago, they were responsible for closing down businesses like Seafood Industry, [*Desk thumping*] like ArcelorMittal, like Petrotrin, before COVID, sending home hundreds of thousands of persons to be out of a job. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, looking at the T&T *Gazette* which outlined the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance and on that list we see items like:

“Borrowing (Local and Foreign)

Budgeting/Budgetary Control...

Consolidated Fund...

Divestments...

Infrastructure Development Fund...

State Enterprises (Corporation Sole)

Strategic Planning and Execution...”—among a long list of areas of responsibility.

Today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am going to focus my contribution on the aforesaid areas of responsibility under the Minister of Finance as it relates to agriculture, land and fisheries. Because you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is the Minister of Finance who has ultimate responsibility for the budget and for the

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Consolidated Fund to which all expenditures are charged.

One would assume, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the line Minister, the various line Ministers, there will be some level of discussion between a Minister and the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will discuss with the Minister of Finance during the budget cycle for which two things are usually determined, either the annual allocation to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for the financial year ahead or for the adjustment of the allocation, if any, at the mid-year review.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin North/East was appointed as the Minister of Finance on August 29, 2015, upon which every year the Minister of Finance came to Parliament and read a budget, delivered a budget statement. His plans for agriculture however, seem to be like a broken record, repeating broken promises, after broken promises, after broken promises, [*Desk thumping*] year, after year, after year. And after five years of failing to achieve what this Minister of Finance has promised year after year, we on this side, and I am certain the majority of our citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago have lost all confidence in this Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you may allow me I want to go into the budget statements of 2016. Let me just take you back to where the mismanagement and the incompetence all started. The Minister stated that and I quote here:

“Food production must be made affordable and competitive. We must reverse the decline in agricultural production and create a strong, modern, prosperous and competitive agriculture sector.”

A few years after, in 2018, the Minister of Finance in his other budget presentation, he made the following statement:

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

2021.03.26

“However, despite all of these incentives, which have been in place for years, the number of persons engaging in full-time agriculture and agro-processing continues to decline. Full time agriculture is no longer attractive to many people and is seen by many as unviable.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that by itself is a confession of a failure by the same person who earlier said we must reverse the decline in agricultural production and now he is saying that it is unviable, it is unattractive and that less persons are interested in agriculture. It is because what they have done, and I should say what he has done to the agriculture sector in Trinidad and Tobago, this PNM administration has totally destroyed agriculture here in Trinidad. [*Desk thumping*] And after five years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance has done absolutely nothing, not one thing in his management of our borrowings through divestment or worse yet in his function for strategic planning and execution, to change the adverse position that our country finds itself in with respect to declining food production.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we look at food production as outlined by the Minister of Finance in his *Review of the Economy* and its contribution to GDP, Mr. Deputy Speaker, reading from the *Review of the Economy*, “Appendix 1”, line Item, “Agriculture, forestry and fishing”. In 2015, the contribution of this line Item to agriculture to GDP was \$1,468,000,000; in 2016, \$1,361,000,000; in 2017, 1,468.2, a little less than 2015 which was 1,468,400,000. In 2018 however, the figures of this line Item for “Agriculture, forestry and fishing”, to GDP the contribution was 1,327,000,000 and in 2019, 1,283,000,000.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we can clearly see from the figures presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, his own document the *Review of the Economy*, that food

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

production and the contribution of agriculture to GDP in this country under his stewardship has consistently been declining and they have been destroying the sector year, after year, after year, under his watch. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this country witnessed after five years of a failed economic policy in making food production available, the Minister finally revealed his plan October last year, when he said that fruits such as apples and grapes which has been available in every food stall and every vegetable stall are now deemed luxury items. And because of the utter incompetence and failure of this Minister of Finance to manage our leaking forex problem, they place a tax on the importation of apples and grapes deeming it to be a luxury item. He did not come to speak about luxury items like Mustangs and like yachts, he came to identify apples and grapes to be luxury items. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, by classifying apples and grapes as luxury items and placing tax on them, clearly this Minister of Finance has a problem with what citizens of Trinidad and Tobago eat. Much in the same way that the previous speaker, the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, his Cabinet colleague, who now wants to deny our citizens mayonnaise and ketchup since citizens are eating themselves to death, when in fact the truth is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that citizens are starving under this Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

Some families do not even know where the next meal is coming from, but clearly, clearly, I should say the Minister of Finance has a problem with what people are eating. And if not, then why, I would like him to tell me, why as one of his first measures this Minister of Finance made over 7,000 zero-rated food items subject to VAT. Over 7,000 food items that the distinguished Member for Siparia when she was the Prime Minister, she saw it fit to remove VAT from all these items. [*Desk*

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

2021.03.26

thumping] You know why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because she cared about the citizens and the ordinary people of Trinidad and Tobago, because she has been one of the most caring and compassionate leaders this country has ever seen, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, our Member of Parliament for Siparia.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what type of Minister would talk about making food production available but with the stroke of a pen do the exact opposite and remove zero-rating from over 7,000 food items? In his first budget presentation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he speaks of the ADB, the Agricultural Development Bank being adequately resourced and I quote what he said:

“The Agricultural Development Bank will be adequately resourced to allow farmers readily-accessible credit.”

And before those on the other side jump up and say that ADB is not under the remit of the Minister of Finance, let me remind them that ADB is a majority owned state enterprise and its responsibility to the Minister of Finance as Corporation Sole. [*Desk thumping*]

So with respect to ADB funding, if we go to the *Draft Estimates*, we see that in fiscal 2016, ADB received allocation of 25million. In 2017, consistent with all the pie in the sky promises that he brings to this House, an estimated 95million was allocated. However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we look at the Revised Estimate, nothing, zero, and of course the Actual expenditure for 2017 to ADB was also zero from the same Minister who in his budget said he wants to adequately resource the ADB. Where did this money go? Where this \$95 million was spent? Was it spent to complete the cost overrun Tarouba Stadium which final cost was way beyond the initial cost? Or was it used to give out pressure washing contracts to the “Wives Club”. We ask ourselves, where did this \$95million go? [*Desk thumping*]

Minister of Finance
 (Loss of Confidence in)
 Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2018, in his budget presentation, from nothing, the Minister placed into the budget an allocation of 50 million for ADB. When we look at the Actual expenditure for 2018, we see only half of what was being allocated for that organization. When we turn to fiscal 2019, the estimated 25 million, Revised Estimate, same 25 million but when we look closer, 2019 Actual was nothing. So he put figures there just to come and speak of it in this House but when we reflect and we look back of what was actually done, nothing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and what this signals is a Minister of Finance who says one thing and does something totally different from what is said. So when he says, “I can see clearly now, blue skies are ahead of us”, I warn the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to nail up your windows because a hurricane is coming. [*Desk thumping*]

In October last year when the Minister presented the budget for fiscal 2021 and I quote:

“...we are committed to insulating the economy against the impact of shortages and supply chain disruptions. For the next 5 years, we are placing expansion of our domestic food supply...”—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes, Member.

Mr. R. Ratiram:—“...at the top of our national...”

—thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“...domestic food supply at the top of our national policy agenda.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if this is the case, could the Minister of Finance kindly explain to us why, since making that statement, the wholesale price of animal feed has risen by anywhere up to 14 per cent? He did absolutely nothing compared to what it is he said. When we turn now to this 500 million agriculture stimulus package, I come to one of the key issues which is where this package actually

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

2021.03.26

exists. And we see, he said in the budget that this \$500million is under the Ministry of Finance Head 18, Item 04, Current Transfers, Sub-Item 42, Fiscal Incentive Programme for Farmers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the first instance this is very interesting because he came here as though this was some new line Item when in fact it was there from before, and when we examine what took place before, the 2020 Estimate was 25million but when we look at the Revised Estimate for 2020, it was only onemillion. While farmers suffer out there, from 25 million in 2020, only one million. Hundreds of persons are still waiting for flood relief grants from that Divali flood that took place quite in 2018, in the Constituency of Couva North. [*Desk thumping*] Where did the money go? Five hundred million he claimed that he placed there and when you look at what has been orated by the hon. Minister of Finance, we recognize he comes with all the pie in the sky plans and projects, but in fact nothing, nothing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member.

Mr. R. Ratiram: I thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for San Fernando East. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am becoming very concerned about those on the other side. I think they are becoming more and more disconnected from reality. [*Desk thumping*] It is amazing to me that we have a Motion here in the Parliament that seems to be based on comments by UNC party hats in the media. Some of them given a platform by a business editor that is completely without credibility. We have the Member for Oropouche West talking about—

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. B. Manning (cont'd)

2021.03.26

complaining, sorry, about reading in the Parliament, completely missing the irony of his statement. We have those on the other side complaining and accusing the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Education for a shortage in devices, when there is a global shortage in devices at present. They are not listening to the people of this country and they are disconnected and I am concerned.

The Minister of Finance is extremely qualified, he is experienced [*Desk thumping*] and has been a safe pair of hands during these turbulent economic times. I would like to thank him also especially for not listening to bad advice. Bad advice purported by persons who are supposedly independent in our media, many of them proclaiming and promoting austerity measures.

I would like to ask those on the other side if they were in office at this point in time, heaven forbid, would they implement austerity measures on the people of Trinidad and Tobago? And let me tell you what that means. Austerity measures call for mass firings in the public service, it also calls for devaluation of our currency which would dramatically increase the price of everything and also a dramatic increase in utility rates. Is that what the Members on the other side would want at this point in time?

The challenge with that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that this poor advice flies in the face of advice that this Government has received from various international multilateral agencies. And these organizations include: United Nations, the OECD, the World Bank and even the IMF. We have an IMF study coming out of 2016 which concluded and I quote that:

“Austerity policies do more harm than good...”

Who are we supposed to listen to, Mr. Deputy Speaker, international agencies or persons who clearly have an agenda? It goes on. The IMF summarized that:

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. B. Manning (cont'd)

2021.03.26

“...a growing consensus among economists across the globe now think, that... austerity economics increases inequality and instability, and undermines growth.”

Is that what those on the other side want?

In 2013, we had the macabre circus of the IMF publicly apologizing to Greece for forcing them to implement austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. They apologized. Coming out of that the IMF stated publicly that “we failed to realize the damage austerity would do to Greece”. That is what they said. Those are not my words. That came directly from the IMF.

The Minister of Finance has not failed to accept the reality of this failed strategy. And I appreciate that and he refuses to take such advice. What we have done is implemented people-centered economic policy which is has been used to put this country back on course while protecting the most vulnerable amongst us. That is what the Minister of Finance has done. Let me explain for a second. Instead of failed austerity we have chosen a policy of prosperity; instead of devaluation we have kept the cost of imported essential items stable. Exchange rates are a function of demand and supply, interest rates and purchasing power parity. What the Minister of Finance has been doing is bringing our demand for foreign exchange in line with our reduced supply of that foreign exchange. And that is sensible policy during these challenging times. And he has been doing this while not increasing the cost of essential imported items such as food and medicine. That is caring people-centered policy. Not a policy that calls for the mass firing of hard working public servants and a dramatic devaluation of our dollar which increases the cost of living in this country during these challenging times. It makes no sense. But let us talk about exactly how we got here.

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. B. Manning (cont'd)

2021.03.26

In 2008, we had the financial crisis which caused a global downturn in the world economy. This dramatic reduction in economic activity caused a prolonged collapse in global oil and gas prices. But in the face of all of that, that did not stop those on the other side from profligate and extravagant spending and a feeding frenzy of corruption during their time in office. That did not stop them. We had collapsing revenues in the face of a global downturn in economic activity, but yet those on the other side delivered several of the largest budgets in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. That is what they did. That is not sensible. All the time our revenues are falling but our spending and borrowing had been dramatically increasing.

In 2014, we were faced with a situation where Saudi Arabia decided to challenge their opponents, I would say, or competitors in the shale oil drilling sector. They did that by flooding the world market with cheap oil. This dramatically reduced the price of oil and of course the revenues that Trinidad and Tobago would have earned from our energy sector. Again, that did not stop them. In 2015/2014, we had the largest budget in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. When the Minister of Finance came into office in 2015, he was faced with an absolute and complete mess. There were billions of dollars in outstanding payments, he was met almost gleefully by the then Governor of the Central Bank who said there were only three days of funding left to run the country. That is what he was faced with; that is the reality of the situation we were in, all in the face of persistently low energy revenues and oil and gas prices.

7.20 p.m.

He spent almost all of his last term in office trying to stabilize this economy while unraveling the mess left by—the mess, sorry, left by the former government

UNREVISED

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. B. Manning (cont'd)

2021.03.26

and billions of dollars in outstanding payments. To this day in the Ministry of Finance, we are working diligently to unravel some of the outstanding payments left by those on the other side between 2020 and 2015. Many of them do not even have any supporting documents. The documents were either misplaced, and in some cases, intentionally destroyed. That is what the Minister of Finance faced. Those on the other side refused to admit and accept that. So between 2015 and 2020, some very tough economic decisions had to be made to stabilize this economy.

So here we are, faced with an economy in shambles, energy revenues in collapse and billions of dollars of outstanding payments. Through all of this, the Minister of Finance held steady. During that period, there was still funding to ensure that over 75,000 workers in the state sector were paid in full and on time. He also ensured that schools and hospitals functioned, state services delivered effectively. There was persistently low inflation of 1 per cent. By 2000, government revenue had increased by 27 per cent over 2016; CAL was returned to profitability after billion-dollar losses; the deficit had been reduced to 2.5 per cent of GDP, down from 9.5 per cent in 2016; public sector debt stabilized at 65 per cent; stable exchange rate, and an HSF and foreign exchange reserves around \$6 billion and \$7 billion respectively. We were on the path to sustainable growth by the year 2021, but then, of course, we were hit by COVID.

During this time of COVID, the Minister of Finance has ensured that our social services programmes were well funded and over the past few years we have had to dip into the HSF at various points, but we have done so reasonably, Mr. Deputy Speaker. All of this talk about raiding the HSF is absolute nonsense. For the past five years, the HSF has hovered around \$6 billion in terms of assets under

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. B. Manning (cont'd)

management, and we have recorded an annual return of approximately 5 per cent every year. The HSF funds are invested in global equities and fixed income, and it has a well-diversified portfolio. The Minister of Finance has even made timely amendments to the HSF legislation so that citizens could receive financial assistance during this pandemic. Despite judicious and timely withdrawals over the past few years, the assets have remained steady.

During this time of COVID-19, the Minister has funded a comprehensive social and humanitarian support programme which has kept our economy going while leaving no citizen behind, and that is a promise that this Government had made to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and it is one that we will keep. Programmes such as food support, salary relief grants, emergency hampers, rental assistance, grants to religious bodies, grants to our cultural artistes; we provided support for companies and individuals, able to keep afloat during these challenging times. That is people-centered policy.

Now, the path forward: I saw one commentator in the media who had said that the Government had no plan and I would like to debunk. The Government has a plan and the plan has been one of investment. It is a sensible plan, and it is one that has been recommended by the various international agencies. It is the policy of prosperity. We have decided to invest in the economy in infrastructure, in education, in housing, in revenue projects and digitalization. Those on the other side—someone had asked: What revenue generating projects have we invested in? Clearly, they missed the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate which is on the way. I would in turn ask them the same question: When they were in office, what revenue generating projects did you begin? I promise you, the answer is nothing. Absolutely nothing. Yet they come here today, disconnected from reality as ever,

Minister of Finance
(Loss of Confidence in)
Hon. B. Manning (cont'd)

2021.03.26

asking: What revenue projects have we invested in? We have done that and I promise you, going forward, you will see even more.

Going forward: we are diversifying this economy along the lines of competitive advantage. We are restarting all of the work suspended on various projects.

Investment in digitalization: this is to prepare our economy to be more efficient and to improve our ease of doing business; investing in green energy projects to keep our obligations to the Paris accord. We have already signed agreements to produce a solar park which will produce 150 megawatts of energy—of renewable solar energy to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] We have invested in downstream manufacturing, the redevelopment of Port of Spain projects; all of these are investments which keep our people employed and build a better Trinidad and Tobago going forward.

Let me close by saying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are calling on the business community and the general population to adapt to the changing times. This is a time for creativity and a reformatting of our economy. It is not business as usual and things will never be the same, but by working together and supporting the Minister of Finance, Trinidad and Tobago will once again be on the path to sustainable growth and development. I thank you, Minister of Finance, for your diligence and hard work, and the people of Trinidad and Tobago also thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):
Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move

Adjournment
Hon. C. Robinson-Regis (cont'd)

2021.03.26

that this House do now adjourn to Friday, the 9th day of April at 1.30 p.m. Mr. Deputy Speaker, at that time we will do:

“An Act to make provision for the maintenance of public safety and order through discouraging membership of criminal gangs...”

—April 9th at 1.30 p.m.

Greetings

Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. Hon. Members, before I put the matter for adjournment before the House, as we all know Spiritual Baptist—Shouter—sorry. As we all know, Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day will be held next Tuesday, and before I put the question on the Adjournment of the House, I will now invite Members to express their greetings. I will just sit in order to let the other Members enter the Chamber at this time. Let us hold on a couple seconds, Members. [*Pause*]

Hon. Members, I will now recognize, Mr. Foster Cummings, the MP for La Horquetta/Talparo. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport (Hon. Foster Cummings): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, on March 30th, in Trinidad and Tobago, we celebrate the repeal of the prohibition against the Spiritual Baptist religion. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a celebration that we, all as citizens of this country, must pay attention to because if we look at the history of this situation back in 1917, the Prohibition Ordinance was passed prohibiting the Spiritual Baptists from practising their religion. It is one of most draconian pieces of legislation ever passed in this country, and therefore, it came as a significant item of freedom that, in 1951, that draconian legislation was repealed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the religion of the Spiritual Baptists can be traced back to the

Greetings
Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day
Hon. F. Cummings (cont'd)

days of our forefathers, former slaves, coming out of Africa, and it is indeed a fusion between the traditional African worship and protesting Christianity. We know and we have read of the many stories of the Baptists being prosecuted and taken to the courts for practising their religion, and if only to remind us that we must not return to a place like that in this country, and that every creed, every race and every religion must find an equal place, it gives me great pleasure on behalf of the People's National Movement Government to extend to the Spiritual Baptist community all best wishes for a celebration that will take place on Tuesday.

We know that under the current circumstances, the celebrations will not be as they would usually be, attended by thousands throughout the country because we are in the middle of a pandemic. But we know that throughout the various churches throughout the country, people will still meet in their numbers to celebrate this occasion. We commend—wish to join with many in commending the Government for what has been done in terms of assisting the faith in moving forward, in particular the grant of lands to the Baptists at Couva for the construction of a grand cathedral and headquarters for the Spiritual Baptist faith, and in addition, lands for a memorial site for the burial of the dead.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, once again, on behalf of the Government, I wish to extend to all members of the Spiritual Baptist faith—and on this occasion, I will not say “Shouter” because that really was a term given to the religion by those who prosecuted the religion. It is really a bit derogatory. So I would say to all members of the Spiritual Baptist faith, a very holy celebration. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I will now recognize Ms. Michelle Benjamin, the MP for Moruga/Tableland. [*Desk thumping*]

Greetings
Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day
Ms. Benjamin (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I too would like to join with the Members of this House and with the United National Congress, to bring greetings to the Baptist community. It is my pleasure to be afforded the opportunity to speak and bring greetings as we commemorate the Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day, which will be observed on Tuesday 30th March. This year we celebrate the 69th year of the repeal of the Shouter Prohibition Ordinance, an Ordinance which lasted for a period of 34 years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it aches to think of 34 years during which the Shouter Baptists were unable to practise their religion. For 34 years they were beaten, they were jailed just for praying to God. During this time of observance, we remember some of the heroes of the Baptist movement: Archbishop Elton George Griffith, Barry Oswald Taylor, Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler. These men stood firm—heart, body and soul—for the repeal of the Ordinance. History has it that one day Elton Griffith heard a voice from the heaven saying, “I am sending you to set my people free”. Thus began the journey of a man whose work in the movement led to the repeal of the Ordinance. After a very lengthy debate, eventually on the 30th of March, 1951, the Ordinance was lifted and the Shouters were free to practise their worship without fear of punishment or arrest. That day Griffith, then a deacon, and Pastor A.J Balfour, held their first unmolested or uninterrupted spiritual meeting outside the Legislative Council Chamber after the repeal of the 34-year ban.

The history of Trinidad and Tobago cannot be told without the story of the Spiritual Shouter Baptist. From my point of view, in Moruga/Tableland, this is a faith that has provided strength for many believers across the country, region, and I dare say the world. My constituency of Moruga/Tableland is a true representation

Greetings
 Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day
 Ms. Benjamin (cont'd)

of the culture of Trinidad and Tobago, for it demonstrates the rich, diverse and colourful people that we are. We are also home to the Merikins who form the company of villages, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and among their numbers were the strong believers of the Baptist faith. The lessons of the Spiritual Baptists are taught every day in Psalms such as Psalm 30, verse 5:

“...weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

And in the songs we sing, a favourite of mine being:

“I...”—saw—“The Lighthouse shinning in glory

I...”—saw—“the Lighthouse, Amen!”

Personally, having grown in a strong Baptist household and community, I can attest to the value of our daily offering of prayers and thanksgiving as we stay true to our beliefs and serve our community. I particularly remember powerful stories of Spiritual Shouter Baptists as a child growing up in the community and saw how the faith itself was used as a vehicle to develop churches, the physical community infrastructure, as well as playing an important role in the lives of its members. Persons aspire to hold leadership positions in the church, with those positions came the responsibility of carrying out the way of life of a Spiritual Baptist.

When a woman became a mother in a church, she became an example for all young women in the community. And when a man became a bishop, his life was lifted up in service. As a young person I always understood those values of discipline, patience, belief and faith, despite whatever journey life may take us on. As we look to the future, acknowledging that we are standing in this Baptist community on the shoulders of those who laid the foundation for us, though the journey may be long, in praising the Lord, we shall never be weary.

Greetings
Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day
Ms. Benjamin (cont'd)

2021.03.26

Today, the Spiritual Baptist faith is recognized as a unique indigenous religion of Trinidad and Tobago, successfully fusing the expressions of Africa with the traditional tenets of Christianity to produce a religion which is vibrant, expressive and dynamic, and mostly, and totally, and for all that are worshippers in the faith led by the Holy Spirit. The Spiritual Shouter Baptist community continues to be a beacon of hope and love to Trinidad and Tobago, and it was in recognition of this, that on the 26th of January, 1966, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago officially set aside March 30th as Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day, a public holiday, a truly momentous movement by a caring government, a UNC-led government.

To the Spiritual Baptist community and to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago I say, have a happy and holy Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day. May we use this occasion to strengthen our resolve, to assist our country to rise above the gloom and doom to higher levels of performance, creativity and success. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, as Trinidad and Tobago celebrates Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day, I also extend warm greetings to the Spiritual Shouter Baptist community. This holiday is representative of our rich heritage and history in our twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Our country is the only country in the world to celebrate this day by way of a public holiday, and as we mark this special occasion let us never forget it was the unique coming together of elements of protestant Christian doctrine and the rhythms of Africa that gave birth to the Shouter Baptist religion.

On this day, we reflect on the hardships and obstacles endured by the Shouter Baptist faith in order to gain the right to freely and overtly express the

Greetings
Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day
Mr. Deputy Speaker (cont'd)

2021.03.26

vibrancy and dynamisms of their religion. The history of the local expression of this faith serves as a reminder that the estimable freedoms and liberties enshrined in our Constitution should neither be taken for granted nor abused.

I therefore take this opportunity on behalf of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and behalf of my family to wish you and all of Trinidad and Tobago, a spirited and holy Spiritual Shouter Baptist Liberation Day, 2021.
[*Desk thumping*]

Easter

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, before again I put the question of the Adjournment of the House, I will also now invite Members to bring greetings on the occasion of Easter. I recognize the MP for Diego Martin North/East. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you Mr. Speaker. There are two issues associated with Easter that perhaps needs an explanation. Easter is the most important Christian celebration because it celebrates the resurrection of Christ. The second most important is the birth of Christ at Christmas, and often we hear the phrase, “on the third day he rose again”. The history tells us that Christ was crucified and died at 3.00 p.m. on Good Friday, and yet when the women went into the tomb on Sunday morning, he had already risen. So in our normal calculation that would seem like two days, but in the Hebrew calendar and in the Hebrew reckoning of time the day ran from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. So the day on which Christ died was the first day, 6.00 p.m. on the Saturday was the second day, and then after that was the third day, and that explains the reason for the saying, “on the third day he rose again”.

I will also like to speak about the fact that Easter is celebrated at different

Greetings

2021.03.26

Easter

Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

times in the year and the date constantly changes. In the Western tradition of the church, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the new full moon which occurs on or immediately after the spring equinox. The church recognizes March 21st as the spring equinox. As such, the dates for Easter may range from the 22nd of March to the 25th of April. So they are dependent on the moon. The word “Easter” itself is a little difficult to explain. In the original language of the gospels, the Greek word “Pascha” is used for Aramaic form of the Hebrew word “Pesach”, which means Passover.

During the first three centuries of the church, Pasach refers specifically to the celebration of Christ, passion, and death. By the end of the 4th Century, it also included the Easter vigil, and by the end of the 5th Century, it referred to Easter itself. In all, the term signified Christ as the new Passover lamb, together with the mystery of the Last Supper, the sacrifice of Good Friday and the resurrection on Easter, the new Passover.

It appears that the word “Easter” itself, the various languages followed that route; the Hebrew/Greek route of “Pasach”. If you look at the romance languages and the non-languages, they all followed that route. But St. Bede, a great historian of the Middle Ages, tells us the word “Easter” seems to originate in English around the 8th Century AD and is derived from the word “Ēostre”, the name a Teutonic Goddess of the rising light of day and spring. It is thus that the origin of a word “Easter”, that the church baptized the word to denote the first Easter Sunday morning when Christ our light rose from the grave.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when one looks at the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I have always found that the gospels of Matthew and Luke have far more content than the other two. I would simply, therefore, like to read from the

Greetings

2021.03.26

Easter

Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, which gives us the insight into the resurrection of Christ, and chapter 28 reads as follow:

“After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb...behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightening and his clothing was white as snow. The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men. Then the angel said to the women in reply, ‘Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.’ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Behold, I have told you.’”

So we Christians, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we celebrate in Easter, Christ’s descent into hell and his resurrection. We believe that Christ died on the cross for our sins and for the sins of all men, and now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

On behalf of the PNM, we, the Government, would like to wish all the population of Trinidad and Tobago a most happy and a holy Easter as we celebrate this, the most important Christian festival of the year. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

7.50 p.m.

Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to extend warm greetings on behalf of the United National Congress in the celebration of Easter, the most important religious event in the Christian calendar. As I bring these greetings, the Christian community is still engaged in our 40 days

Greetings

2021.03.26

Easter

Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

of fasting, a Lenten period of prayer and fasting which affords all of us the opportunity for deep soul-searching and reflection. Properly entered into, this period prepares us for a truly authentic experience of the joy of Easter. As the script says:

Jesus rose from the dead to herald in a new era in humankind's relationship with the Almighty God.

Easter is a time when we remember the incredible sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he made as well as the miracle of his resurrection. It is a time that fills us all with an inspirational message of rebirth and renewal. I know at this moment in the global history, many persons are experiencing difficulties and challenges. However, the Easter celebration reminds us that love has triumphed over hatred, mercy over sinfulness, goodness over evil, truth over falsehood, hope over despair and life over death.

Easter is a message of rebirth and forgiveness and it also gives us hope that no matter what happens or may have happened in the past, each new day carries with it the promise of a new beginning, a chance to do better, an opportunity to make a positive difference. Deep and honest reflection allows us all to see where we could have done better, where we have fallen short of expectations and what needs to be done in the future. Easter gives us the spiritual power and resolve to do the work, accept the discipline and to make the sacrifices that are required to build a new, just and equitable society.

So, as Trinidad and Tobago joins the world in celebrating the Easter holiday, I encourage all of us to continue our efforts for personal and nation building and we call on every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago to use this Easter holiday and Easter reflections to rise to a new way of thinking and action and so that we can all

Greetings

2021.03.26

Easter

Ms. Haynes (cont'd)

be the best type of citizen that we can be. Let us cast away all bitterness, anger, resentment and accept the invitation to the newness of life, to concentrate on the positives in each endeavour and for all of us to have faith to see the great hope that Easter brings for us. So a happy and holy Easter to all from the United National Congress. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, it is my esteemed pleasure to join you in extending Easter greetings to our Christian brothers and sisters and Trinidad and Tobago. In the Christian faith, Easter is the commemoration of the resurrection when we celebrate the crowning truth of our faith in Christ and the hope of salvation.

Prior to the feast of Easter, believers in Christ partake in a 40-day period of prayer, fasting and alms-giving known as Lent which culminates with the celebration of Easter Sunday. It is during this period of self-reflection and preparation that we allow ourselves to welcome the risen Lord and rejoice in his triumph over sin and death. And I quote:

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

And that is a quote from Romans, chapter 6 verse 5. Let this time be a period during which the light of the risen Christ illuminates the consciousness of all of us so that we may live in the joy of the resurrection and share that joy with those who have yet to experience it. I pray that through the time of physical distancing, your faith will be strengthened beyond measure and that your hearts open to receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

On behalf of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and on behalf of my family, I take this opportunity to wish you and all of Trinidad and

Greetings

Easter

Mr. Deputy Speaker (cont'd)

Tobago a very happy, holy and safe Easter. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 7.55 p.m.