

Leave of Absence

Tuesday, December 23, 1997

SENATE

Tuesday, December 23, 1997

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, leave of absence has been granted to Sen. Martin Daly for the period December 17 to December 28, 1997.

**SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT
(REVOCAATION OF)**

Mr. President: I have received correspondence from the office of His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, as follows:

"THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By His Excellency ARTHUR N. R. ROBINSON,
President and Commander-in-Chief of the
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

\s\ Arthur N. R. Robinson
President.

To: MR. DENNIS NANCOO

In exercise of the power vested in me by section 40(2)(a) and section 44 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and all other powers thereto me enabling, I, ARTHUR N. R. ROBINSON, President as aforesaid, do hereby revoke your appointment as a temporary member of the Senate, made by instrument dated the 8th day of December, 1997.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President
of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at
the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this
22nd day of December, 1997."

SENATORS' APPOINTMENT

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I have also received correspondence from the office of His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago as follows:

"THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By His Excellency ARTHUR N. R. ROBINSON,
President and Commander-in-Chief of the
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

\s\ Arthur N. R. Robinson
President.

To: MR. VINCENT CABRERA

WHEREAS Senator Nizam Baksh is incapable of performing his functions as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, ARTHUR N. R. ROBINSON, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 40(2)(c) and section 44 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, VINCENT CABRERA, to be temporarily a member of the Senate, with effect from the 23rd day of December, 1997 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator Nizam Baksh.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President
of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at
the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this
22nd day of December, 1997."

"THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By His Excellency ARTHUR N. R. ROBINSON,
President and Commander-in-Chief of the
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

\s\ Arthur N. R. Robinson
President.

To: MRS. NIRUPA OUDIT

WHEREAS Senator Martin G. Daly is incapable of performing his functions as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago.

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NOW, THEREFORE, I, ARTHUR N. R. ROBINSON, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 40(2)(c) and section 44 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, NIRUPA OUDIT, to be temporarily a member of the Senate, with effect from the 22nd December, 1997 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator Martin G. Daly.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 19th day of December, 1997."

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senators Vincent Cabrera and Nirupa Oudit took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

APPROPRIATION BILL (BUDGET)

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ending December 31, 1998, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Finance*]; read for the first time.

Motion made, That the next stage of the Bill be taken at a later stage of the proceedings. [*Hon. B. Kuei Tung*]

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the accounts of the Trinidad and Tobago Television Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 1996. [*The Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism (Sen. The Hon. Brian Kuei Tung)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the accounts of National Broadcasting Service of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended December 31, 1996. [*Hon. B. Kuei Tung*]
3. Report of the Auditor General on the accounts of the Strategic Services Agency for the period July 1 to December 31, 1996. [*Hon. B. Kuei Tung*]

4. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the accounts and financial statements of the Southern Roads Development Project for the year ended 1996 December 31 as required by Loan Agreement No. 8/OR-TT between the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean Development Bank. [*Hon. B. Kuei Tung*]
5. Auditors' report and financial statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Forest Products Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 1996. [*Hon. B. Kuei Tung*]
6. The report of the Environmental Management Authority for the year 1996. [*Hon. B. Kuei Tung*]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following questions stood on the Order Paper:

Development Projects (Land Payment)

1.
 - i. Could the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources state whether all lands acquired, used or entered upon in Tobago by the State for the development projects have been paid for?
 - ii. If the answer is in the negative, will the Minister state in detail for those parcels of lands not paid for:
 - (a) their acreage, location and boundaries, owner/s, and purpose for which the lands were acquired;
 - (b) the reasons for the delay in effecting payment? [*Sen. Dr. E. Mc Kenzie*]

National Strategic Development Framework

2. Could the hon. Minister of Planning and Development state:
 - i. How long the current team working on the preparation of the National Strategic Development Framework has been working on this project exercise;
 - ii. What target date has been set for its completion? [*Sen. D. Mahabir-Wyatt*]

Municipal Corporations Act 1990

3. Could the hon. Minister of Local Government state:
- i. How long the head of the Technical Committee on the Implementation of the Municipal Corporations Act 1990 has been employed on this project;
 - ii. What target date has been set for the completion of the project? [*Sen. D. Mahabir-Wyatt*]

The Minister of Public Administration and Information (Sen. The Hon. Wade Mark): Mr. President, I would like to move, with the concurrence of the Senators in question, the deferment of questions Nos. 1, 2 and 3, for two weeks.

Questions, by leave, deferred.

APPROPRIATION BILL (BUDGET)

The Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism (Sen. The Hon. Brian Kuei Tung): Mr. President, I beg to move,

That a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ending December 31, 1998 be now read a second time.

Mr. President, this is a money bill and was recently approved in the other place on December 19, 1997. It provides for expenditure of TT \$11,287.3 million, including capital repayments and sinking fund payments under the various heads as have been indicated in the schedule of the Bill.

Mr. President, one can say that my purpose today is two-fold. Firstly, to report briefly to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago on the progress we have made over the last two years; and secondly, to set out the steps we must take in achieving our objective of creating opportunities for all.

Mr. President, this Bill charts Government's economic and social policies for the next fiscal year; it highlights how we intend to build on the progress we have achieved thus far; it shows how we propose to improve the well-being of our people and introduces new initiatives and programmes in priority areas that will bring us closer to achieving our objective of creating opportunity for all.

When I say opportunity, I mean the opportunity to benefit from continuous learning; to save and invest for the future; to build assets and participate in the growth of Trinidad and Tobago; and for all to share directly in the economic

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benefits. The policies in the Panday Administration are all-embracing. They intimately touch the lives of every member of society, they provide the platform for economic transformation, export-led growth and the creation of permanent employment opportunities.

Mr. President, let me review our progress to date. There is no gainsaying the fact that the economy is growing and expanding and the economic indicators are moving in the right direction. Growth in 1997 continues to be strong and will record a rate of 3.2 per cent with expansion in the petroleum, manufacturing, distribution and tourism sectors. From all indications, this growth has been driven not only by the oil-based sector but, moreso, by the strong performance of the petro-chemical and non-oil sectors.

In the non-oil sectors, the major contributors have been construction, manufacturing, the distributive trade and the financial services sector. We have worked at reducing the level of unemployment to 14.5 per cent by the second quarter of 1997—its lowest level in 13 years—through the creation of 14,000 jobs during the first six months of 1997.

However, the most recent data for the third quarter of 1997 indicate an unemployment rate of 14.9 per cent, which is not unusual for the third quarter as school leavers and graduates represent an increase in the labour force. This level is still considerably lower than the rate of 16.3 percent prevailing at December 1995, when we took office. Nevertheless, we know that we must create even more jobs and at a faster rate and this we intend to do.

1.45 p.m.

We have generated budget savings of over \$1.2 billion in two years. Price increases have been kept at manageable levels, averaging 3.8 per cent in 1997. Our overall position on the balance of payments is expected to record a surplus of US \$224 million by the end of this year. The country's gross foreign reserve is US \$400 million more than what it was in November, 1995 when we took office, and at the end of October was equivalent to four or five months of our import needs—some one and a half months higher than the internationally accepted benchmark. We have also met all of our domestic and external debt obligations, and have reduced our debt service ratio to 17 per cent, down from 33 per cent in 1993. In 1998 we will bring it down to 10 per cent. This is extremely good news for the nation, Mr. President, since it means that our citizens will have to give up a much smaller amount of their income to service the country's external debt. It will allow us to devote more resources to other more pressing needs.

Since coming into office in November, 1995, this administration has shown its commitment to addressing the social condition of our needier citizens. In 1997, some of the initiatives in the social sector included:

- the disbursement of a disability assistance grant for disabled persons 40 years or over who are unable to work;
- the establishment of a community development fund for financing social and infrastructure projects developed by NGOs and community-based organizations;
- the introduction of a domestic support programme to assist the disadvantaged and less fortunate in coping with their circumstances;
- the establishment of a walk-in assessment centre for the homeless, and a drop-in centre in Port of Spain for street children;
- the enhancement of the school transportation system which provided 12,671 seats per day on 141 routes for 50 schools, and the school nutrition programme which fed 76,500 children daily;
- the expansion of the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) which, this year, generated 183,000 jobs at a cost of TT\$158 million;
- the provision of the special URP Training Programme to some 17,000 women;
- the establishment of a hardship relief programme for the provision of additional relief in the payment of water rates to recipients of pensions and public assistance.

This programme was introduced by the Ministry of Public Utilities, and some 5,781 pensioners benefited during the year.

Mr. President, we not only maintained, but also expanded our physical infrastructure. Projects completed over the past two years included schools, police stations, health centres, hospitals and fire stations. We have also fulfilled our promise to address crime in a meaningful manner through the establishment of an Emergency Rapid Response system in Port of Spain, San Fernando, St. Joseph and Chaguanas. The command centre is due for completion in early 1998. The hon. Minister of National Security will provide us with more detail with respect to this emergency rapid response system. In support of this effort, we have brought to this Parliament a number of pieces of legislation which are intended to accelerate the system of justice. Additionally, over \$1 billion have been allocated

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to the Ministry of National Security. This represents approximately \$158 million more than the revised estimates for this year.

Let me now turn to the policies and strategies for 1998. We expect to collect \$11,140 million in revenue in 1998; some \$908 million more than we would have done in 1997. Oil revenue is estimated at \$1,690 million, or 15 per cent of total revenues. The non-oil sector is expected to generate \$9,450 in revenue. Budget expenditure, on the other hand, is estimated at \$10,695 million. The major areas of expenditure include education, which accounts for 16 per cent of our expenditure bill; national security, 9 per cent; health, 8 per cent; and social development, including old age pension and social assistance, 6 per cent. Let me reassure you, Mr. President, that our policies and strategies for 1998 will maintain, and even accelerate, the momentum of economic advancement towards which we have worked so hard.

Let me take the opportunity to outline some of our fiscal considerations. As part of our tax administration reform process, I propose to establish a special unit, the Internal Revenue Service, which will have primary responsibility for the administration and collection of all Government revenues. The Internal Revenue Service will be supported by updated and new legislation relating to revenue generation and collection. One of the benefits of this approach will be the greater co-operation and collaboration, including the exchange of information, among Government's revenue collecting agencies and organizations. To complement the Internal Revenue Service, we propose to establish an Internal Affairs Division within the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. President, the final phase of the reduction of the Common External Tariff (CET) is scheduled to be implemented on January 1, 1998. However, Government proposes to exercise the option to delay the implementation of this final phase until July 1, 1998, at which time this position will be reviewed. I would like to point out that this country's stance on the Common External Tariff does not represent renegeing on our Caricom obligations. It is our right to exercise this option. I would also like to bring to your attention the fact that this country is the most advanced of all Caricom member states in implementing the phased reduction of the Common External Tariff.

I propose to delink the mortgage interest relief from contributions to the National Insurance Scheme, approved pension plans and annuities. Accordingly, the current tax deduction of \$18,000 per annum will apply only to mortgage

interest payments including payments on bridging finance. This measure will take effect from January 1, 1998.

In 1994, in an effort to ensure the payment of land and building taxes, an amendment to the Income Tax Act was made, whereby a claim for mortgage interest paid on owner-occupied properties was not allowed as a deduction unless land and building taxes on the property had been paid in the year of income. This resulted in the taxpayer who did not pay land and building taxes on time suffering a number of penalties. I propose to address this irregularity in the system by amending the existing legislation to allow the mortgage interest as a tax deduction, provided that the appropriate land and building taxes have been paid.

As we continue to attract major investments from a variety of sources, we must now formulate an investment code which will target those categories essential for further diversification of the economy. I propose to publish in the first quarter of 1998, a comprehensive investment code which will set out clear guidelines to all investors, local and international. The basis under which incentives will be approved for a project will be predicated largely on the extent to which new ventures will deliver a fair return to investors, as well as to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, the export allowance has been available for a number of years. This allowance was intended to enhance the industrial/manufacturing sector by providing a tax incentive to new industries during their infancy which would then be withdrawn once these industries became mature. To date, no industry has been weaned from this allowance. Furthermore, we must be mindful of our obligations under the various international trade agreements which tend to view export allowances as export subsidies. I propose to eliminate the export allowance commencing January 1, 2000. This will be contained in the 1998 Finance Act.

The pooling of assets for capital allowance purposes was introduced in the 1995 Finance Act, with a view to streamlining the determination of wear and tear rates. I propose to revise the provisions related to balancing allowance and charges to allow the proceeds on disposal of an asset to be deducted from the residual value of the pool in the particular class. This will defer the recognition of a balancing charge or allowance until the entire pool has been written down. In addition, I propose to amend the Income Tax Act to allow computer equipment to be included under Class C, in the Seventh Schedule to the Act, where the applicable rate of wear and tear is 33 per cent.

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Mr. President, there is no reason why ESOPs (Employee Stock Ownership Plans), apart from being an attractive saving instrument, cannot be used to strengthen employees' ownership of the organizations in which they are employed. I propose to make these plans more transparent, attractive and investment friendly to employees as well as employers. As a short-term measure, I propose to amend the Income Tax Act to allow shares of parent companies, whether registered locally or abroad, to be held as assets of an ESOP where the plan allows for such asset participation.

Approvals to establish profit sharing plans will be granted to foreign companies with ESOPs where the shares of the company are listed on an approved overseas stock exchange and the employees to which the plan relates are restricted to the following categories:

- a) where the foreign company is registered under the Companies Act, the employees of the foreign company, who are employed in Trinidad and Tobago; and
- b) employees of a subsidiary of a foreign company where the subsidiary is either incorporated in Trinidad and Tobago or registered under the Companies Act.

Mr. President, there is some ambiguity under the Income Tax Act as to whether only publicly quoted companies are allowed to establish ESOPs. I propose, therefore, to amend the Income Tax Act to make it abundantly clear that similar facilities are indeed applicable to private companies.

As a long-term measure, I propose to introduce ESOP legislation that will provide incentives for employees to own shares in the company in which they are employed. This legislation will also make provisions for such issues as eligibility, participation, relief from income tax, and the compliance certificates of independent auditors. Additionally, interest paid on funds borrowed to finance the purchase of shares in the company will be 100 per cent tax deductible in the hands of the members.

I propose to place the Unit Trust Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago on an equal and comparable footing with its competitors. Accordingly, the Unit Trust Corporation will be restructured into a Public Limited Liability Company and listed on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange.

Based on our evaluations of the operations of the URP, it has become apparent that the programme must be reviewed to provide for greater efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and accountability. In addition, in light of the thrust to empower communities, the URP will be placed under the aegis of the regional and municipal corporations of the Ministry of Local Government. This will commence with the 1998 programme. We believe that the decentralization of the URP will provide for a more equitable distribution of the resources of the programme.

Mr. President, Government is also proposing to institute a properly structured maintenance programme targeted at maintaining all public buildings, government offices and properties. This new programme will require a more efficient property registry which will fall under the aegis of the Ministry of Finance. Furthermore, budgetary funds allocated for these projects would be reserved as blocked votes.

The Municipal and Regional Corporations are responsible for over 5,000 kilometres of roads, which is more than half of the total road network in the country. Due to inadequate funding over the years, local government bodies have been unable to implement the required works to ensure that the local road network is satisfactory. Accordingly, I propose to allocate 50 per cent of the Road Improvement Tax to the Ministry of Local Government, commencing in 1998. These funds will be provided as reserved votes and, therefore, would not be used for other activities.

Mr. President, in 1998, Government will move urgently to have published, in accordance with established procedures, a single minimum wage order. This proposed minimum wage will be \$7 an hour. This amount of \$7 an hour was determined by a tripartite body consisting of the unions, employers, and the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives, which gauged the basic survival needs of an average family.

2.00 p.m.

To complement the minimum wage we will introduce legislation to cover all workers with respect to basic terms and conditions of service including vacation leave and sick leave. These legislative measures will ensure that every worker in the country is assured, at least, a minimum standard of protection.

Mr. President, to further aid in the development of the small business sector I propose to increase the loan guarantee level of the Small Business Development Company (SBDC), from a maximum of \$150,000 to \$250,000. I propose to increase also the asset value threshold for qualification as a small business at the

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SBDC from \$500,000 to \$1.5 million. These amounts exclude the value of land and building assets. Government will also increase this level of funding to the SBDC by \$8 million in 1998. Additionally, the SBDC will soon establish its own leasing company which will provide equipment leases to small businesses, thereby assisting and reducing the initial capital requirement at start up.

I also propose to use the services and facilities provided by FUNDAid to make funding available to potential young business people. In order to make the facility provided by FUNDAid more widely available to several additional areas in Trinidad and Tobago, Government will be providing \$28 million in loan funds to FUNDAid over the next three years. For the year 1998, the sum of \$12 million will be made available to FUNDAid for young business people.

Mr. President, it is critical to provide for the well-being of the individual and the society at large. As a result, we must establish a social security system that guarantees, at least, an adequate minimum level of financial support to individuals in the years of their retirement. Our aim is to introduce a system which ensures every citizen, at least, a guaranteed minimum pension equal to Government's old age pension. This guaranteed minimum pension will be reviewed periodically so as to maintain a decent standard of living. Accordingly, I propose to bring to this Parliament legislation to reform the existing social securities system in order to provide more secure benefits for all citizens.

Mr. President, the new system will be two-tiered. Benefit and contribution rates under the national insurance system will be upgraded to provide a guaranteed minimum pension to all categories of workers. This will form the first tier of the system and will ensure that every worker is entitled to these guaranteed minimum pensions. The second tier of the system will provide an investment link benefit for individuals earning over a particular level of income. In developing a mechanism for Central Government employees, the proposal will allow for individuals to contribute to a pension account similar to the second-tier investment link benefit.

We will also introduce for daily, weekly and hourly paid workers a pension system similar to the proposed plan for the monthly paid Central Government employees. The new system will also protect the employees from losing the benefits of employer contribution by taking hardship refunds of member contributions only, and thereby losing a pension upon retirement.

Furthermore, in reforming the pension system I propose to introduce legislation which will lay down clear ground rules for the distribution of pension

fund surpluses. In this new system individuals will be entitled to claim an annual deduction of up to \$12,000 which will consist of full deductions for contributions to national insurance, to the investment link scheme and to an approved pension plan or annuity.

Mr. President, a major benefit of the new system is the harmonization of the old age pension and the national insurance pension. This will result in a higher pension for recipients of national insurance. In order to bring further relief to our senior citizens and in keeping with our commitment to review benefits on an annual basis, I propose to increase the payment to old age pensioners from \$420 to \$520 per month. Furthermore, we will review the income level for qualifications for old age pension. It is common practice for employers to provide employees with life insurance benefits. However, the income benefits derived are taxed differently. In the case where the benefit is paid directly by a group life policy, the benefit is tax-free. However, if it is paid through a pension plan, it is subject to income tax. This anomaly has to be corrected. Accordingly, I propose to amend the Income Tax Act, section 28 which will allow the lump sum death in service benefit paid through a pension plan to be tax-free.

Mr. President, research has concluded that, perhaps, the largest contributory cause of lung cancer is cigarette smoking. In advancing its health promotion efforts, this administration is currently developing a national no-smoking policy. A first step will be to restrict smoking in government offices and buildings and to limit advertisements for sale of tobacco products. To complement this initiative, Government has decided to increase the excise duty on cigarettes from \$2.10 to \$2.50 per pack of 20 and so in proportion. The rate of excise duty will apply as well on cigarettes of CARICOM origin.

Mr. President, a major obstacle encountered by the poor in acquiring adequate housing is the inaccessibility to financing. We, therefore, propose to set up an innovative financing mechanism to assist these citizens. The Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company (TTMF) will give a concessionary rate on lending to eligible applicants. Any low income earner can approach the TTMF and, given proof of tenure, can borrow \$10,000 interest free. The interest rate goes up incrementally by 2 per cent thereafter for every \$10,000. Accordingly, I propose to raise a tax-free housing bond in an amount of \$300 million and make these funds available for financing low cost housing for this sector.

Mr. President, single-parenting has become an increasingly common feature of the family life landscape, with single mothers dominating this landscape. Today,

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women are the breadwinners in more than 35 per cent of households, and of these, about 20 per cent are headed by single mothers. Single mothers, faced with the demands of child-rearing on restricted budgets, are among the most vulnerable to difficulties in accessing education, employment and property. I, therefore, propose to allocate initially, the sum of \$25 million to be utilized in programmes such as education, job readiness and skills development for single mothers. A committee to be appointed by Cabinet will begin the task of designing and implementing such programmes early in the new year.

In developing the required educational opportunities for our young people, Government also proposes to establish a National Community College. An initial sum of \$7.5 million will be provided for the implementation of Phase 1 of the National Community College to be established by NIHERST.

I also propose to make available to all public servants a computer loan facility equivalent to 80 per cent, up to a maximum of \$15,000 of the purchase price of a computer. This loan will be interest-free, to be repaid within three years.

Mr. President, our administration's strategy is based on the principle of opportunity for all. The initiatives outlined here today have been developed for the greatest benefit to the greatest number of citizens. With an eye to the future, we have focussed on creating an environment in which individuals have the resources to help themselves. This administration is committed to improving the quality of life, and creating opportunity for all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Sen. Danny Montano: Mr. President, this is Christmas week and just two days before a big day for many of us in this country, it is alarming to note that the attention of a major part of the population is diverted to their families and to their religious interests and responsibilities. Certainly alarming to note that their interest and attention has been diverted away from this very important occasion here. Alarming to note further, that having this debate at this time of the year really amounts to a subversion of our constitutional and democratic rights and freedoms and really, we are not in a position to adequately fulfil our constitutional responsibilities as we believe them to be. Nevertheless, we on this side will rise and say what we feel must be said. Notwithstanding, I want to point out that the fact that we are here on Tuesday afternoon, two days before Christmas Day, the architect of that is a man who wears Marxist clothing.

Mr. President, I listened with great interest to the contribution of the Minister in the other place and again here this afternoon. I was disappointed; not only by what he said, but more so by what he did not say. The Minister has made a naked appeal to his business associates. He has made a very short, concise statement saying, "No new taxes." That will appeal to some of the business men in the community who have a simple direct interest in the fiscal measures and who do not necessarily want to know the economic framework within which they are operating. But many of us would very much like to have more detail as to exactly what is taking place.

I would venture to suggest that in this country we do not have the routine of having a state of the nation address by either the Minister of Finance or the Prime Minister. The tradition has been that the state of the nation address, as we know it, becomes part of the budget statement of the Minister of Finance. Not having that, what the Minister has done is virtually come into the Parliament with a huge bundle of documents and said, "Read this," and that is what we are left with. There is really little else that we must do. I cannot accept that and I have great difficulty with that. The contribution in the other place was a little longer and much of it was filled with chastisement of the prior PNM regimes, and this Minister is a product of the history of the PNM.

I just want to tell you something about what the PNM stands for here. Last week Friday a very serious personal situation occurred. My stepson was afflicted with viral encephalitis, a most dangerous thing. We tried everything that we could. I must say I have notified the station that the police officers who rescued him were extremely kind, gentle and very considerate and I have written to the officer in charge of the station thanking him. But the point is this: we as a family were unable to have him treated in any way at any of the private hospitals except Mount Hope—thank God—where he is being properly and effectively treated. We have every hope that he will recover safely. But I want you to know that thank God for the PNM that we have Mount Hope.

Just to talk a little about what the Minister of Finance did not say. He said nothing about his financing policy. We see in the budget documents that he intends to borrow \$3.1 billion and that there is a bias to foreign borrowing. Why? There are serious implications in terms of liquidity of the economy and of the currency risk that we as the nation bear when he does something like that. We are given absolutely no information. He has said absolutely nothing about foreign exchange. Absolutely nothing! He has made vague statements about providing

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sustainable permanent jobs and job growth and yet he has enunciated no policies, no programmes that are likely to create that situation.

We are also facing a situation where the long-term development of infrastructure and roads is reaching crisis proportions. The infrastructure that we now have is not going to meet the needs of the country 10 or 15 years from now. The existing major roads that we have require serious expansion and widening. Sir, I am not even beginning to refer to the road that is now three lanes and is expected to fit onto a two-lane bridge.

2.15 p.m.

What about the Government's plan for the media and the Green Paper? What is happening at ICN? We have heard absolutely nothing.

Sen. Tota-Maharaj: This is a budget!

Sen. D. Montano: I suggest to you that the Minister has said boldly and proudly, "No new taxes." The fact that the statement itself is not original—in fact, we are mindful of the fact that the promise came from a president of the United States who said that and lost the elections subsequently. We are mindful of that, Sir.

The Minister has made a lot of weather about revising the pension system and the NIS contribution. He said that he has allowed a \$12,000 tax allowance of contributions to pensions including the NIS contributions. He has also made a statement to the effect that the NIS benefits are going to be increased, at least up to the level of existing old age pensions. In fact, it is likely to go even further as those pensions are revised in the future.

Let me just advise Members of this honourable Senate what the state of affairs is regarding NIS. The Minister has also indicated a basic minimum wage rate of \$7 an hour. For somebody who is permanently employed all year long, that would work out to approximately \$14,000 a year. What it means is that under the existing NIS scheme the employee pays one third of the contribution and the employers pay two thirds. Assuming a wage rate at the minimum level, the employer's contribution amounts to 4.6 per cent of his total salary. Sir, there are several businesses in the metropolitan areas, where most of the employees are earning that kind of wage, and the employer has to bear the cost of the NIS.

We have been told that the contributions have to go up; to what level? An employer of a small business is going to wake up one morning and find all of a

sudden that his level of contributions could be anywhere from 20 per cent of his payroll. And that in the same breath that the Minister is saying he is going to generate measures for permanent employment. I would venture to suggest that the exact opposite is likely to occur.

Mr. President, the absence of specific information in the budget is almost frightening. What has become very clear is that the Minister is bankrupt of ideas. He has no idea where to go from here, and unless somebody from this side or outside says where he should go, he really does not know where he is going. A classic example of that is the zigzag with the pension allowance. Sir, businesses and businessmen cannot plan for the future when you zigzag. You have to set a very firm policy and follow it for a long time. The Minister said in the other place that he wanted to raise the rate of savings from 17 to 25 per cent without enunciating how he was going to achieve this. He then said that he is putting in a \$12,000 pension allowance. What has this UNC Minister done that was not already there? He has done nothing!

What he has done is taken the opportunity to chastise and criticize the previous PNM regime, only to come back after fact, and say, "Well, you know what? You were right all along, we have to go back and put in the allowance for pensions." But in doing that he has completely overlooked—because he simply does not understand—the benefits and needs derived from the contributions to the credit union movement and the savings incentives that the PNM administration had encouraged. Therefore, we are left with a vacuum.

What has been happening is that the Minister said this year's budget is consumer friendly. The word "consumer" keeps cropping up. All three of the budgets are consumer spending orientated and not orientated toward savings. I have said it before, all the incentives in this budget are to encourage the consumer to spend rather than to save. We have gone backwards into the era of the 1970s and early 1980s when the country was having a party. I venture to suggest that the Minister is having another party. We are wasting our resources and that he calls business experience and acumen.

Sen. Mohammed: UNC style!

Sen. D. Montano: In his last budget, the Minister in an inexplicable move to encourage savings in TT dollars decided to put a tax on the interest earnings of foreign currency deposits. What did the Minister expect would be the result of that? Did he expect increased savings? No, Sir, this is not rocket science, this is

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very simple. What actually happened was that there was a decline in the balances carried with the banks of about US \$100 million. Balances moved from US \$584.2 million in September 1996 to \$472 million in July, 1997.

Those deposits were not converted into TT dollars as the Minister may have expected. He did not generate a bias to hold TT dollars. All that happened was that money was moved to an offshore location; it just went. Then we have a foreign exchange crisis and everybody wonders why. With the Government unable to articulate specifics as to how it should encourage indigenous savings and growth in the country, we on this side are getting a very strong impression that the economy is out of their control. They do not know what to do or when they should be doing it.

Just before the Minister made his statement in the other place he was being cited as having said that he was having difficulty raising revenues. That was borne out in a report by the IMF to the Government dated September 9, 1997. It stated that VAT revenues continue to underperform. From the inception of the UNC administration we saw it in the first budget, wild estimates as to the VAT revenues with funny money, roundabout accounting and all sorts of things. We knew that administration did not know how to effectively manage the stream of income and to ensure that the revenues would stay where they were and they still do not know. The VAT revenues have fallen disastrously.

I say this out loud and crystal clear—and I do not hesitate to say it—I have been informed that there is a geographical bias in the collection of VAT revenues. That is what we have been told. What I know is that the VAT office literally falls out of bed along the East/West corridor and businesses are continually harassed and cannot get their VAT refunds unless they get a comprehensive VAT audit which is disruptive and slows down the whole process of doing business. But there are certain areas of the country where, either the administration has forgotten about, have no interest in or are too lazy to go to and do some serious work. It is not right at all!

The Minister says that he is going to propose an IRS and somehow, without articulating what the IRS is going to do that is different from the existing Board of Inland Revenue, he expects income tax revenues to increase. I submit that the economy is out of their control and the Minister has no control of it. He presented his budget in the other place and he must have known at the time that there was a foreign exchange crisis and yet in that statement he said absolutely nothing about foreign exchange.

2.25 p.m.

What we are facing today, immediately after that statement, is that the Central Bank is increasing the reserves that the banks are required to hold with the Central Bank and interest rates are going up. The cost of business is going up but the Minister of Finance has said absolutely nothing. He is making his budget statement and there is a foreign exchange crisis and he says nothing. Never mind, the PNM is still here.

Mr. President, tax revenues from oil companies have fallen from 1995, \$1.468 billion dollars to a projected \$955 million dollars next year, a fall of over \$500 million dollars. That is the fall in tax revenues from oil companies. I am sure we will get a statement from the Minister of Energy, but I would have thought that we would have had some indication from the Minister of Finance; after all he is the one presenting the budget. I would have thought that he would have given us and the whole country some explanation as to what is going on because—and this is a matter I will talk about on another occasion in more detail, I will just refer to it—we know that the contracts that are given to the expatriate companies for the use of natural gas are not always the same thing. Allow me to put it this way, not everybody necessarily gets the same price.

Maybe they all have the same price now, but the fact of the matter is the price that is used can be used as an incentive to certain industries to move their plants into certain locations that may not be all that attractive. What has happened, or what has to be investigated very seriously and will be investigated, is exactly how those revenues or contracts are being awarded, the prices that are being allocated and the cost to the Treasury and, therefore, to the people of the country. What is the ultimate cost of the contracts that are being awarded now? They will be held accountable but the Minister of Finance has been silent.

Mr. President, I would assume that the Minister of Finance is falling back on his IRS to make up the shortfall of \$500 million in lost revenues that I am sure my young friend over there has no idea where it has gone or why it has fallen. What about oil royalties? The budget estimates indicate that there is a slight increase in the royalties for next year, but I am advised that a rate of exchange was used in that calculation that is significantly different from the present rate of exchange. I would like to ask the hon. Minister what rate of exchange was used? Mr. President, with your leave, I would like to pause for a moment and allow the Minister to answer. *[Senator sat]* Mr. President, I gave him an opportunity to answer a simple question and he cannot answer. That is the discourtesy that we get in this place, Sir.

Exactly what is the Minister saying to us when he announces his plan to remove the export allowance? Only last year he introduced a measure whereby contractors would have the benefit of the export allowance. He did not really enunciate a policy to assist companies which are exporting. It is not his wont to enunciate anything all that clearly in terms of policy. We had to assume, and businessmen had to assume, that he was going to encourage export in this way. A scant 12 months later he announces he is going to remove the export allowance; another zigzag. How does a businessman plan his affairs when he has to invest hundreds of thousands, tens of thousands, or millions of dollars in equipment and machinery on policies that are not clearly defined and with measures that are zigzagging backwards and forwards? How does a businessman do it? It is because the hon. Minister does not know what he is doing, he has no plan or policy, the Government has no policy. It is a "make it up as you go along".

Mr. President, the Minister's budget statement was a nice package. Very simple and direct and if you are looking for the fiscal measures it is clear and understandable. But as somebody very wise described it, it is like cotton candy, nice to look at and full of fluff, but when you bring it down it is very, very small. No new taxes. Mr. President in the budget documents is an indication that the Government intends to raise \$543 million from the sale of assets. Which assets, Mr. President? \$543 million. Which assets? What is to be sold and to whom is it going to be sold, and what is the Government going to do to protect the interest of the average citizen who has no opportunity to invest in those assets? What is the Minister saying? Nothing. His budget statement is just vacuous rhetoric; there is nothing in it we do not know. We have to keep asking questions. What is this \$543 million? Where is it going to come from? These are legitimate concerns. The population has a right to know, we have a right to know. We can speculate about the sale of the First Citizens Bank, TCL and the privatization of gas stations and the post office and, maybe, even Petrotrin. But what and when and where? We get nothing.

In the meantime, the Minister says he is going to raise \$3.1 billion and most of it is going to come from foreign sources. I mentioned that earlier. Why is it that the foreign element is larger than the local element? Why is the foreign borrowing increasing by about \$700 million over last year's while the Minister is saying that his debt servicing ratio is going to fall from 17 per cent down to 10 per cent? I, for one, would very much like to see what the projected cash payments are over the next few years. I do not know. I see him about to borrow here \$3 billion so his

borrowing is increasing and somehow, miraculously, he is saying that his debt servicing is going to go down. If that is true we certainly do not know why and we have no explanations as to how. I do not think that anybody here running a business would run a business if your accountant came to you and said this is what is happening. I do not think anybody here would simply accept it. They would want to know why and what is happening. We are in that position and we have no explanations.

Mr. President, with regard to poverty, the hon. Minister of Finance enunciated a few measures. A minimum wage of \$7 an hour, an increase in the old age pension by \$100 to \$520, the interest-free loan device at the TTMF to be financed by the \$300 million bond issue, the \$12 million to FUNDAid and the \$25 million to assist the single mothers, a walk-in assessment centre for the homeless and something that he just mentioned for street children. These measures are not driving at the root of the problem. Much was made a few short months ago, maybe 12 or 18 months ago, of a report based on 1992 figures, a report on poverty which clearly indicated that one-third of the population is living below the poverty line.

Allow me to suggest that nothing the Minister has enunciated is going to touch the bulk of the people below that poverty line. It just is not there. It is not rocket science, we know of the link between crime and poverty, poverty and crime. That is the link. And that level of poverty has got to be dealt with. Where is the safety net for the young, the poor, the hopeless and unemployed? Where is the safety net for them? Is it \$7 an hour? If you get a job that merely means that the employer has to pay you that. It does not give you the opportunity for a job. It does not create the opportunity for you to earn \$7. It is merely a minimum. It is opportunity that creates hope, and it is hope that fuels the success of a country. Without that hope the young and the poor in the society will turn to drugs, they will turn to crime. The Minister of National Security has admitted that 60 per cent of all crimes are drug-related and we know that the infestation of drugs into the society is very largely a result of hopelessness and despair. People who are happy, have good jobs and a future to look forward to, do not turn to drugs; not very frequently. It is those who have no hope and feel that they have nothing to lose, they are the ones and that is one-third of the population that the Minister, in his budget statement, has totally ignored.

Mr. President, when you look at the pattern of spending of the Government you have to question that. In the budget last year the Minister talked about building an airport. Something I mentioned a while ago and I will mention it again

because nobody has said anything about it—I asked why is the Government spending \$860 million on an airport? I know that one of my colleagues on the Back Bench wants very much to have a new airport. But what type of airport is necessary for the country of Trinidad and Tobago? What is really needed? Has anybody made a case out as to why we should spend \$860 million? Or should it be \$360 million and save \$500 million and do something for the poor. We hear nothing, absolutely no alternatives. And yet, how does the Minister explain that when the contract is removed from the Airport Authority and put into the hands of NIPDEC they declare that they can save US \$25 million out of the same plan? While they are saying that—and they said that before the budget statement—I would have liked to have heard the Minister say, having saved US \$25 million, we are going to use this somehow directly for the poor, hopeless, desperate and unemployed. I heard nothing.

2.40 p.m.

How does the Minister explain the number and the cost of trips of the Prime Minister with a large entourage and, allegedly drinking out the entire plane? Yet, no relief for the poor. How does the Minister explain his colleague, the Minister of Housing and Settlements, building islands out in the Gulf of Paria and no relief for the poor?

Mr. President, last year in my budget statement, I commented on the fact—

Hon. Senator: In your budget statement?

Sen. D. Montano: I beg your pardon, in the Minister's budget statement. In my contribution, I noted that the Minister did not mention women and children and I picked him up on it. I am happy that at least this year he has taken my advice. But I did not enunciate what I would do or what we on this side would have proposed, so he has come up with an idea. But he has completely ignored the fact that the cost of running a single parent household is a much greater burden on a single mother than it is on a two-parent household, and he has ignored the fact that the income tax regime, as it is, does not recognize single or double income households and, therefore, he has made no effort to provide any kind of tax relief to single mothers. I put it squarely to him, Sir, if he is devoid of the idea, I put the idea directly to him, because I want it for those single mothers.

The Minister boasted about the country's economic health and used the word "gratifying" six times without regard to the fact that a full one-third of the society is living below the poverty line. How callous, thoughtless and selfish, Mr.

President! To whom is he speaking? He paints a picture of prosperity as if everybody is enjoying the prosperity about which he is talking.

Allow me to quote from the *Miami Herald* of December 7. The Prime Minister, Mr. Panday is quoted as saying in referring to the new prosperity:

“The moment the construction phase is over...”

He was talking about all the new plants that are being built—

“...you’ve got to stand up to the unemployment. So there is a boom of sorts, but it is not a trickle down boom. It is not trickling down to the population.”

Mr. President, the words of the Prime Minister.

What has the Minister said, or what measures does he propose to relieve this situation? If he would not articulate it, he can tell us on what page we can find it in all these documents if we want to look it up. The Minister boasts that inflation is under control. Is this really true? Mr. President, it depends on who you are.

I want to remind you, Sir, last year in my contribution I indicated that the same 1992 survey that I mentioned earlier, suggested that poor households spend as much as 41 per cent of their income on food. If the arithmetic of inflation is done from then until now, it works out that somebody below the poverty line will be spending 75 per cent of his budget on food. The increase in the price of food from November 1995 to September 1997 is 19.5 per cent and he says that inflation is under control.

Mr. President, allow me to read from an article in the *Daily Express* of December 12, 1997:

“Last year, Gangadaye and David, 63, had lavish plans to make their small two-bedroom modest concrete home at Perseverance Village, Chandernagore, in central Trinidad, a ‘little paradise, with nice things so we could see where the money was going.’

They thought the 1997 Budget would have enabled them to make at least one step forward in accomplishing that goal. To date nothing has been gained thus far.”

This is a quotation from one of the two.

“It did not get any better. Whole year we struggle. Foodstuff was more expensive. The grocery and market bills went up. I used to spend \$700 a month at the grocery.

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After the Budget my grocery bill grew by more than \$100...”

That is 14.3 per cent.

“The market stuff was more expensive. The price of chicken has gone up and baghi which was \$1 a bundle had gone to \$2 and \$2.50. Doh talk for tomatoes, that is Mr. Tomato now, \$6 and \$7 a pound.”

Mr. President, those are the facts. The real cost of living for persons below the poverty line is escalating sharply; the disparity between those who have and those who do not have is widening and it is now a virtual chasm between the two. What do they have to face in 1998? It is likely that the cost of water and electricity will increase, and those are the basics—food, water, electricity. What else? And the Minister has made no statement and no reference as to how the poor and disenfranchised are going to have relief in 1998.

The Minister himself cited the unemployment figures up to September 1997 and suggested it was seasonal because of school leaving and so forth. The CSO figures put it slightly differently and suggest that there were significant reductions in job opportunities in the wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotel sector. It did not say anything about school leavers, what it said was that there was a reduction in job opportunities. That is what it said, Sir.

What are the Minister's proposals for sustainable growth of permanent jobs? What are they? I would like to hear them. I would certainly like to hear them from the Minister of Works and Transport, who never pays any attention to what takes place in the Senate. Week after week after week, he has the discourtesy to sit there writing, reading and so on and doing absolutely nothing, making no contribution except when he is called upon. I would like to hear when he makes a contribution, what he is going to do for permanent job growth.

What the Minister did, Sir, and I say this unashamedly—[*Crosstalk*—is he took the opportunity in the other place to suck up to the public servants. We thank them for their loyal service which, of course, they give every government. It is right that they should do so and they do so. That is a fact. Then he announced interest free loans to public servants for the purchase of computers. Mr. President, I find that a peculiar statement and a peculiar move and if he is not sucking up to the public servants, I would really like to know what it is all about, because the Minister says he wants a computer in every household. Why does he not make a budgetary measure that affects the entire community, and not just the public service?

He could have and I will say it again so that he will know what he could do; he could remove duty, he could remove VAT, he could have done a number of things so that the wider community would have an opportunity. Why, Sir, has he only offered this to the public servants? I have no quarrel with that fact. I am delighted that he has offered this to the public servants. I am very happy about that, but I would very much like to know why it is he would single out one section of the community for special treatment and not the rest.

Mr. President, you would recall in my contribution last year I said the following:

“...a more sensible approach to sustained employment generation would be to allocate funds from the \$1.7 billion PSIP into programmes that tend to be self-sustaining such as the Small Business Development Company programme.”

That is what I said and history has shown me to be quite correct. They could not spend the \$1.7 billion.

Last week, they came here indicating that in one outrageous situation concerning a highway in San Fernando they had awarded a \$49 million contract to a contractor who did not have the equipment or the material to do the work, therefore, the project was going to be delayed by four months. Apart from the fact that that is an outrageous situation, that a contract would be awarded where the contractor does not have the materials or the manpower to do the job, the fact of the matter is, they could not spend \$1.7 billion.

Mr. President, having mentioned the Small Business Development Company last year, the Minister must have been paying some attention and following from that, he has instituted measures this year to increase the thresholds for loans under the Small Business Development Company programme. I am certainly supportive of that, but I would like to suggest that the measure falls far short of what it should be. I strongly recommend and I say it for his benefit, that a direct window of lending be opened so that either the Small Business Development Company or the commercial banks, operating under the auspices of the Small Business Development Company, would have direct government funding that they can lend to small businesses. That is what is required. He can create all kinds of tax incentives. He was very creative with that last year with the construction industry. Can he not do that here, Sir? Because this is the guts of Trinidad and Tobago; small business is the guts of our country; it needs more help than anybody else. Neal and Massy does not need that; it is the little businessmen who need the equity or capital financing; they are the ones who need it.

Mr. President, I keep returning to foreign exchange. The Minister has made his statement. He says it is not for him to talk about and I just disagree fundamentally. If he says that, he does not know his job. He does not know what his job is. If he cannot come to the Parliament and make comprehensive statements about foreign exchange, he has no business being where he is. [*Desk thumping*]

In his budget statement in the other place, he chastised the previous PNM regimes for the fall in per capita incomes which he boldly quoted in US dollars. US dollars, Sir? US dollars? It is simple arithmetic that if we were to revalue the TT dollar, automatically the per capita income number would change. Simple as that, simple arithmetic. The Minister makes no statement about what is his Government's policy *vis-à-vis* foreign exchange.

2.55 p.m.

Mr. President, I have indicated previously in this Senate that there is a growing bias to save in foreign currency as opposed to the Trinidad and Tobago dollar. As a result of that, we all know very well there was a foreign exchange crisis in the country last year. Not only because of that, but largely because of the time of the year when many merchants had to pay their bills. The fact that there is not a ready stock of capital available for businesses to be able to pay their creditors is an indication of the bias to save in hard currency as opposed to the Trinidad and Tobago dollar. At this time there is no other factor that affects the cost of the standard of living as significantly as does the rate of exchange.

If the currency were revalued—and I am not suggesting that this is what should happen—every person's purchasing power in the country would automatically change. It is simple arithmetic. The level of the poverty line automatically shifts sharply radically downwards. That is the effect of it and, therefore, the value of our currency is of absolute paramount importance to a government that is looking at the level of poverty in the country. What has the Government said? I just want to make a hypothetical example.

People are hoarding foreign exchange simply because they do not have the expectation that next week, next month, next year the rate will be lower than it is. If, however, the Government signals its real intention through force or, downward pressure on the exchange rate, what do you think would happen? If the hoarders of foreign exchange outside there, knowing that the rate of exchange today is \$6.30, felt that at this time next year the rate would be \$6.00, \$5.50 or \$5.00, what do you think they would do?

Mr. President: The speaking time of the hon. Senator has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Senator's speaking time be extended by 15 minutes. [Sen. N. Mohammed]

Question put and agreed to.

Sen. D. Montano: Mr. President, I thank my colleagues. What do you think would happen to those persons in the community who are holding foreign exchange, had the realistic expectation that the exchange rate next week, next year, next month would be less than it is now? Who in his right mind is going to hold on to his foreign exchange? Tell me? The question answers itself.

When you start now creating a demand for the Trinidad and Tobago dollar what happens? That is why a statement from the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism is absolutely critical. It is not sufficient alone to leave it to the machinations of the Governor of the Central Bank. It is not enough. I am not suggesting that the matter is as simple as I have outlined it. There are many implications which I well understand. But I have made the point that the Government has the responsibility to enunciate a clear policy *vis-à-vis* foreign exchange, yet, nothing from him. I know that the Minister agrees with me. How do I know that? Earlier this year, there was a horrible fiasco among First Citizens Bank, Petrotrin, National Petroleum and so forth; therefore, I know he knows that I am right.

Mr. President, I turn briefly to crime. I am not going to talk about the usual thing. The statistics have been read all over the country and it was certainly read in the other place. I am going to talk about something which has been in the media, and that is, the situation in the prisons.

The prisons that we have are just simply totally overcrowded. The level of it goes beyond description. The fact of the matter is the situation is not only explosive, it is grossly and hideously inhumane, and it makes the notorious "Devils Island" look like a picnic. What is happening in the prison today, is that it is virtually breeding criminals of the future. Relatively low level criminals are being incarcerated with hardened veterans, and what do you think happens? Do you think that there is any real hope in trying to rehabilitate a prisoner who has had to stand up in a cell with 13 others? You put him in there for three or five years and you really expect that you will get a decent citizen coming out of that? Whoever is thinking that has got to be dreaming.

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They do not see that the only thing that a prisoner comes out of the prisons with is either AIDS, or deep-seated anger and frustration, and that is what we are putting on the street. What is the Minister of National Security saying? He said we should consider early parole and heavier fines.

In other words, the Minister is speaking about letting the prisoners out earlier. He wants more of these prisoners out on the streets. He is not really solving the problem. He is dealing with the overcrowding. He is not solving the real issue. He has not even addressed it. I do not know if the Minister knows that back in the 18th Century in Britain the prisons were privately owned and all deportations into North America and to Australia were because the prisons then were overcrowded. More than that, if a prisoner were incarcerated, his family had to feed him. The state or the owner of the prisons did not feed the prisoner. Is the Government thinking along any of those lines? They want to privatize everything else. Has anybody given any thought—and I say it for the benefit of the Government because they really do not know—to having the private sector build and manage the prisons?

Mr. President, I do not want an angry, frustrated criminal coming out of the prisons. I would like to see these young men rehabilitated and given a second chance. But there must be a vision; there must be compassion. Vengeance is not necessarily the solution to crime. Frivolous statements like: “If you cannot do the time, do not do the crime.” That is a trite superficial slogan. It means absolutely nothing. It completely ignores and glosses over the harsh realities of what the state of affairs is really like. The harsh realities of poverty are helplessness and despair of that one-third of the population. It is a trite, silly statement.

Mr. President, I want to talk about two very small matters. About one month ago, six representatives from the Association of the Southern Finance Company Depositors came to see me. They came to ask if I would intercede on their behalf in trying to get an award for them similar to the Winsure Maritime bail out deal.

I am saving my comments on that matter for another occasion. I would like this honourable Senate to know that the position that I adopted when I met with them was a political one because, I intended to help them. I told them that it was the policy of my party when it was in Government not to do that. However, if it were the policy of this administration to help companies and individuals like them, then I would make every effort to assist in the execution of that policy, and it is on that basis I make note of it here.

3.05 p.m.

The fact is that \$7 million is needed to bail out these depositors, assuming 100 cents on the dollar. With the wave of a wand, the Minister of Finance increased the award for Maritime/Winsure by \$25 million, but these old pensioners who, to a large extent, have lost their life savings in this company, would accept being paid \$5 million, that is 50 cents on the dollar. I said that I would not have raised it in Parliament before they had written directly to the Prime Minister, because that approach was used in the Maritime/Winsure affair. A representative from the National Union of Government and Federated Workers (NUGFW) wrote the Prime Minister and that was started under the UNC Administration. I said to them that before I make a political statement which incurs the irony and anger of the UNC Administration, try the right way, send a letter and see if there would be any assistance.

I would have thought that if there were anything in this budget to help them, the Minister would have said he was there to rescue them. They have said absolutely nothing. Notwithstanding that, I ask him to find a mere \$5 million or \$6 million to help these individuals.

I bring one other matter to his attention. With all due respect to my colleagues on both sides, it is somewhat apolitical. I was lobbied about the employees' stock option plan and this is the situation. The Minister made reference to parent companies, whether registered here, or abroad and, employees of a subsidiary or foreign company. My colleagues and I are not sure, but it appears that this would exclude foreign companies which operate in a minority position such as the Bank of Nova Scotia, Phoenix Park, Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago, PowerGen and West Indian Tobacco Company Limited. I do not know if it is an oversight on the part of the Minister, but I appeal to him to address that issue. I do not think that any of these institutions should be penalized.

Mr. President, I wish you and your family, other Members of the Senate and their families and the wider population all the best for the season.

Thank you.

Sen. Prof. Julian Kenny: Mr. President, budgets are different things to different people. I have followed with interest the comments made this afternoon, as well as the commentaries in the media over the past few days. If one takes the full spectrum, this budget ranges from 'one of the most brilliant efforts' to 'one of the worst budgets'. Not being of an accounting mind, it is difficult for me to place

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myself in this spectrum. As a biologist, I tend to think in longer periods of time, not quite as long as geologists, but certainly longer than one term in politics.

I look at the budget presentation as one step along the way and in listening to the actual presentation, I was looking for new policy initiatives. This budget, the third of the present administration has given me more to talk about than I would normally. Everyone knows that I speak about the environment and the Environment Management Authority. I will speak about it later on. This has been an interesting exercise and I will make a few comments.

The first comment deals with the subject of state or national pensions. I am reminded last year of the hon. Minister's response when I pointed out that my wife, having made 720 contributions to her pension, was being paid less than an indigent. The Minister said his face was red about it. I see the response. It is not for my wife, but the many citizens of this country who have been paying national insurance for so many years, and then find that they are being paid less than someone who had not made any contributions.

That is not what interests me about the presentation, but the idea of moving away from pension systems which have not worked. Non-contributory pensions or old age pensions are actually a tax on future generations. I read this to be a move away from inefficient pension systems to contributory systems where everyone will contribute to look after their welfare in their later years. If we move away from the non-contributory, it would mean that we are not asking future generations to meet the responsibilities of the present generation.

With that in mind, I am very pleased to see the new initiative, but I would like to see longer-term plans. I would make one other comment related to pensions. I have seen privatized pension systems which have been operating very successfully in other parts of the world, such as Chile. I assume that on this one occasion when we hear the new initiative we would be looking towards the next budget presentation, when the actual directions would be spelt out.

It is rather fortuitous that the report on the state of the environment has been tabled today and on page 22 there is a section on socio economics. There is a very interesting little figure which tells us about the population's age/sex/structure and what has been happening in the country. It is a classical pyramid structure. What is interesting about it is what has happened during the past generation. We seem to have made some dent on the core problem in this society, which is excessive population growth being totally inconsistent with the resource base. Our present

population growth rate is about 1.1 or 1.2 depending on who is giving the figure. This had come down from the 3.5 per cent of 20 years ago. It is interesting to see the bulge in the middle of it which means that we are correcting the imbalance. Nevertheless, the population growth is still far too great. This will be the core problem. How can we make these people useful and productive citizens with large numbers coming into the population every year? I am sure others will talk about this when they refer to education and related subjects.

3.15 p.m.

I think that each administration must address a population policy. I know that it is unpalatable; I know that many sectors of the society will raise arms against any sort of regulation of the population, but this is the core issue: the numbers coming in each year, the demands of these people for the present and for the future.

Mr. President, I now turn to what is to be a major initiative—the Minister's statement about a no-smoking policy. How well this is carried out remains to be seen. I would not call it smoking, I would call it tobacco addiction. Call it what it is! I refer to a recent decision in the High Court in San Fernando, because there is a remarkable precedent in our society now concerning what happens when people suffer severe damage or death. It is related, and I will come back to tobacco and alcohol addiction.

The precedent is that the firm of Daltons brought a constitutional motion against the Attorney General. The actual action is called SA39 of 1996. It was heard by Justice Ramlogan on October 21, 1997 and was settled out of court with a consent order. An action was brought on behalf of persons who suffered from lead poisoning at Demarara Road. These are people who were squatting, but the fact is that in a family two children were permanently brain damaged and the action was brought under the Constitution, the argument being that the executive arm of the state did not protect the family against damage from lead poisoning. Now, a judge will assess damages.

Mr. President, I would be the first one to agree if the Government wishes to make an *ex gratia* payment for damages in these circumstances, but there is this precedent of an agreement in the High Court that the state was liable for damages because the executive arm was negligent.

I come back to tobacco advertising. We notice the big assault now that Craven A is on the scene, and at prime time the two are fighting it out, using the crudest of sexist promotions. Mr. President, one of these firms is actually getting around the

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warning put on tobacco packages, that 'smoking is dangerous to one's health', by promoting cigarette lighters in place of the cigarette. It is very, very clever. Advertising agencies know what they are doing.

My point is that if today someone dies of lung cancer, emphysema or cardiac arrest for that matter, because it is well known that if one takes a good strong whiff of nicotine, if one is prone to it, it can bring about cardiac arrest—can that person's representative bring an action against the state for its negligence in not warning of the dangers of products which are legally marketed? I mention this because controlling tobacco advertising is much more than putting a sentence on a package saying that 'the Minister of Health warns that smoking may be dangerous to one's health'. This does not mean anything at all. It could mean that a person may get bad breath or may become short of breath.

What I hope will emerge from this, first of all, is a very, very clear and simple statement on all packaging saying, "Smoking kills!". This is not the only course which might be followed. Right through the society—and tobacco companies know it all too well—they give money to promote their product indirectly. I had cause to take to task the principal of the University of the West Indies who publicly acknowledged a gift of \$1.3 million from WITCO to establish a language laboratory. This kind of thing in society should be a no, no. This ought to be recognized for what it is—poison.

I commend the Minister for taking the initiative, but I will make a point of coming back to it for his next budget presentation when everything would be in place and I would be able to say, well done.

Mr. President, I would like to turn briefly to a couple matters related to the Environmental Management Authority. Recently, I have seen myself referred to as an environmental watchdog. I do not mind the watching part of it, but perhaps you would permit me to be a bit dogged about continuing to refer to the Environmental Management Authority.

This Government took an initiative recently to change the board and I was very pleased to see the composition because it was a non-political, highly technical, competent board. [*Clapping*] This board has been doing extremely good work. I have been collaborating with them, but this is not the purpose of my comment, here. I am a little disturbed to see that we may still be locked into the position of doing what the World Bank says we do. We are making a national environmental policy, which is long overdue, and we will make a national

environmental action plan and a national environmental management plan. In a country of this size, I am sure that when we have a board of that kind, it should be able to do all that internally and give us all these plans within a reasonable time—no more than three months. I would suggest that perhaps the Minister of Planning and Development might exert some additional pressure on the new board, stating that we have waited far too long for the policy and that we should have it soon.

One of the things that has intrigued me about this document is the actual cost of accommodation for the Environmental Management Authority. It amounts to \$380,000 rental per year. I think Barbados Mutual is doing extremely well out of this. We see Government properties going up for sale each day. I agree that we should rationalize our holdings, but we have a superb building at the north end of the savannah called Killarney—that is the proper name for it—but it is popularly referred to as Stollmeyer's Castle.

This is owned by the state, giving the Citizens for Conservation some sort of responsibility for maintaining it. Look at it! They are doing a good job, but it is run down. Is there any good reason why the Government should not look at a property of this kind and decide to make this the home of the Environmental Management Authority?. They can rehabilitate the building with the \$380,000 per year; use all of upstairs, or for that matter, take the next five years' rental and get some bank to fund a proper home for the Environmental Management Authority.

Mr. President, my major concern continues to be our failure to effect some of the decisions which we have taken. The Environmental Management Authority is absolutely without power in the absence of the environmental commission.

3.25 p.m.

I looked through the estimates to see if I could find the line item for the establishment of the environmental commission in 1998. I see in the PSIP, that in fact, the Government intends to establish the environmental commission in 1998 but I cannot see the provision. Establishing an environmental commission is going to cost a fair amount of money in terms of capital to set up as well as the recurrent cost.

Similarly, Mr. President, we have before the Senate, a Bill proposing to amend the National Trust Act. This I welcome, however, I have a bit of concern because I have not been able to find anywhere in the budget where there is provision for the establishment of the Trust in 1998 and I emphasize that we have this continuous degradation of our built heritage. In fact, if one goes along the savannah to the

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west, near to the All Saints Church one would see that superb gingerbread house, the Boissierre House with its beautiful blue stone wall. Some mad person hit it and the wall is lying on its side in the property. This is an example of the sort of thing which is happening. The property is in private ownership, but there is no reason why, with the establishment of the National Trust that we could not at least ensure that it is listed and steps are taken to preserve it. I will not mention Nelson Island in the presence of Sen. Prof. Ramchand.

Mr. President, I turn now to what I consider to be a major concern and I was hoping—in fact many people were hoping—to see in the budget presentation, some statement on the national motor vehicle transport policy. Many persons seem to suggest that the Government wishes to make motor vehicle ownership easy. At the same time, we must note that the Government has taken a striking initiative with regard to the use of the roads, particularly with regard to the phasing out of leaded gasoline, the expansion of CNG outlets, and the control of vehicle emission. My understanding is that quite recently, the Ministry of Works and Transport, together with the Environmental Management Authority has launched a pilot scheme for measuring actual emissions and somewhere along the line, there is going to be some attempt at enforcement. I know that it is going to be very difficult. I cannot chide any Government in the circumstances in which we find ourselves because we have had a long history of total and complete indifference and the situation has gone completely out of hand. Now the Government is going to try to arrest it by changing fuel types, cutting down the amount of lead in leaded gasoline, establishing standards for diesel fuel and so forth and, of course, the critical thing, the maintenance of vehicles on public roads. Each week for the past several weeks we have seen the advertisements in the newspapers announcing this programme and my understanding is that sometime in 1998 pressure is going to be applied in selected areas.

This is going to be a very difficult task because people are not going to like it, but it is part of what is absolutely essential. If the Government can do something about tobacco and alcohol advertising and something about vehicle emissions, it is actually going to save human lives. [*Desk thumping*]

The other side of the story which I have always been arguing besides the control of the emission, the motor vehicle transport and the motor car, is the major cost, not of the motor car, but the cost of the infrastructure. Motor cars are new in this century and the first ones only appeared in Trinidad in the early part of the century and now we have a motor vehicle population of about one per six

individuals which compares with some of the highly developed countries of the world. When one looks at the roads and sees the state of the vehicles, one realizes, of course, that many of them would not be on the roads of any country which subscribes to public safety.

One of the things which struck me while going through the budget was infrastructure. It is seen in the document and in fact, Sen. Montano referred to it—wider roads, bigger roads, better quality roads and so forth—but is this really the answer? In other parts of the world, policies have shifted, right now in the United Kingdom the trend is away from building more and more roads. The same thing is applying now to many countries in Europe. People are becoming fed-up with the demands for space and on the national resources to build more and more roads and the trend is towards a range of options. One trend is more taxation, but the main trend, what one may call the "point trend" where everyone is headed, is firstly to road pricing and secondly, mass transit. I hope that in the coming budget that perhaps the Government or perhaps even in this debate, the Minister of Works and Transport might expound on the subject of the Government's policy with regard to how we handle moving large numbers of persons.

Just a couple weeks ago, there was a rather interesting article in the *Economist* in the week of December 6, 1997 dealing with the subject of the negative influence of personalized transport on the resources of the country, particularly in terms of the human cost of pollution, nuisance resources and, of course, the demands for more and more roads. One of the places singled out for attention was Singapore—and we hear all the time that we must adopt the Singapore model. I would go along with that, but what happens in the Singapore model is that there is a strictly limited number of new vehicles which go on the roads each year—a limit of 40,000 and that is the Government's policy. To get a new vehicle in Singapore, one has to obtain a permit and according to the *Economist*, it costs in US dollars from a low of US \$27,000 to a high of about US \$49,000. It is in the *Economist* and I accept what they say most of the time. Singapore has this approach where the number of vehicles has to be regulated and it is done by making personal transport far more expensive. This is not the only approach which is used in Singapore. It has also introduced road pricing using smart cards, one could prepay use of the road and there are roadside monitors which sense the vehicle as it goes by and it deducts from the smart card.

This is where road transport is headed—road pricing. It has happened in Scandinavia, Europe, and the Netherlands where modern technology is employed

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to make persons pay for the use of the road, not just simply tolls, the way the Americans do it, but to pay and then adjust the payment to suit the density of the traffic. If someone wants to drive down Frederick Street, if there were proper road pricing, as he entered Frederick Street, the monitor would pick him up saying that is going to cost \$25.00 or whatever and deducts it from the card. In Singapore, what is happening is that there are remote cameras which record persons who are cheating. This is one part of the new thrust away from the consumption of gasoline and fuel and this immense cost attendant on vehicles, that is the cost of building more and more roads.

Singapore is going one other step, it is going modern toward a mass transit system. It is actually going to subsidize the mass transit making it attractive for people to use. This is going to save on the capital costs of new roads and I question whether serious thought may be given sometime in the not too distant future to two mass transit systems, one, Arima to Port of Spain on the old railway bed which is now called the Priority Bus Route. It is a possibility. It would put many maxi taxi drivers out of work but that is something that Government has to weigh out. The other mass transit system which I think is worthy of consideration is hydrofoil service between Chaguaramas, Port of Spain, Point Lisas, San Fernando, Point Fortin, La Brea and so forth, because for 99.9 per cent of the time, the Gulf of Paria is calm near shore waters.

These things can happen, but a hydrofoil cannot be used between here and Tobago because of the weather. In international transport policy, things like this would be examined and I sincerely hope that the Minister of Works and Transport would join our debate and give us some idea of not necessarily, the short to mid-term, but the long-term development of the national transport policy that would make Trinidad and Tobago a cleaner and safer place.

Mr. President, I now turn to one of my major concerns and this is what we are doing to the natural environment. Anyone who has walked the northern range in the past and recent times would see what has been happening. One looks at the budget and sees the amount of money being spent on drainage and flood control. The cause of flooding is what is done up there and one looks to see how much is actually going to be spent on reforestation and it is difficult to find it in the document, but I noticed last year they talked in terms of reforesting perhaps 50—60 hectares or so and yet there is this constant pressure.

A friend telephoned me from New York to tell me that I ought to go to the Heights of Guanapo because somebody has got two bulldozers at the end of the

road and they are clearing a public trace which runs up to La Laja and someone has decided they wanted access and the bulldozer goes through. This is your property and my property, it is the property of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. There is total anarchy out there and one can see the logs coming out. When it is drawn to the attention of the ministry, or the Forestry Division, or Town and Country Planning Division, or the Environmental Management Authority as I had done, I am told that nothing can be done because it is private property. I maintain that is a cop out. I think that in fact, there is power or authority under the Town and Country Planning Act to put tree preservation orders on—I think the words are—tree, copse, woodland or crops. It is there, but it has never been invoked, and this Act goes back to 1968. Along the north coast they actually remove logs and ship them down the coast and they are pulled up at Marianne. They actually have portable saw mills. I mention this because I am becoming more and more concerned that if we do not put a stop to it, it may be too late for us.

3.40 p.m.

Indeed, I am in no position to project what the weather might be in the coming months, but in the light of what has happened with the long Petit Careme and the lower rainfall in the months of November and December, one prediction is that we may have a fierce dry season. Mr. President, it has already started, I have seen the first bush fire in the northern range.

Are we going to allow 1987 and 1995 to be repeated? What steps are in place to stop forest fires from spreading and destroying even larger areas? When these fires happen we would have to ask the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism for larger sums of money for dredging the Caroni River, for making larger flood embankments and for dredging all the rivers in Central where people's houses are flooded. We are destroying that which preserves the rainfall, slows it down and allows it to percolate through the system.

Mr. President, I ask the question because I think it is going to happen. No one thought it would happen in South East Asia, but it has happened recently and this all has to do with logging. In the Far East trees are cut and sold to North America just as we are cutting our teak trees and selling them via an English brokerage firm, to India. The Indians are very clever about this. I have seen nothing in place to stop the cutting of the teak trees. Surely, the Government must recognize what is a likelihood; that there is a certain high risk now that we are going to have a very bad dry season, in which case we may be like South East Asia; we may see smog almost obliterating the sun and we may see human fatalities, either by

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accident or by breathing fumes with which one cannot cope. Persons who already suffer from bronchitis may, in fact, succumb under those circumstances. I would like to be assured that steps are being taken by the competent ministries and state agencies to see that this matter does not get out of control. The fires are already there.

Finally, I have one little plea to the Minister of Finance. I know that one does not want to make the system too complicated. I know that this Government and the one before expressed concern for the aged in society. However, allowances are given for mortgages and so forth, Mr. President, anyone aged 65 years or over finds it impossible to get medical insurance in Trinidad and Tobago. The little insurance one can get from the Association of Retired Persons is really nothing, if one has a serious illness. I am sure that most of us here can cope with emergencies, even with catastrophic illnesses but there are people out there who are hurting. The problem is hospitalization and its costs, and for chronic illness, drugs.

When one gets to age 65 and one is facing—as I know some persons face—a drug bill of \$500 to \$600 per month to contain one's illness—actually I have a friend who spends about \$1,000 per month on drugs. Now, he happens to be in a position to meet this cost. Is it unreasonable, when we make allowances for persons who are building their homes, to think in terms of a medical allowance for persons with catastrophic conditions? I had a neighbour who actually died because he could not afford to go into Mount Hope Hospital.

Mr. President, perhaps the hon. Minister could consider this. I thank you.

The Minister of National Security (Sen. Brig. The Hon. Joseph Theodore): Mr. President, I wish to support the provisions of the 1998 budget as presented by the hon. Minister of Finance. It seems as though there is a feeling that crime was not addressed in this budget and I get the impression that since there was not a heading which said, "Crime" most people read through the budget and did not make the linkage between the funds allocated to the different ministries that would impact on crime in this country.

The budget has dealt with crime because more funds than last year have been allocated to the Ministry of Social Development, to the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs and the Ministry of Education. I feel that the increased activities of these ministries would go a long way towards having an impact on reducing the incidence of crime in our communities. The way we at the Ministry of National Security see it, is that the police and the law enforcement agencies virtually deal with the criminal elements at the time the crimes are about to be committed or

after they have been committed. However, one seems to have lost sight of the fact that there is a generation out there which is subject to the influences of the older persons who are involved in crime and they, themselves, may be walking the path to become criminals.

It is unfortunate that we have only now started addressing crime reduction. The Ministry of National Security has a very close relationship with the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs because we see the whole impact of crime being dealt with prior to young people getting involved in devious behaviour. The prison system—certainly the Youth Training Centre and the St. Michael's School for Boys, which are detention centres—is geared towards ensuring that these young persons, once they serve the period of incarceration, are able to rejoin the society.

One of the mistakes we seem to have been making was to assume that crime is strictly the business of the police. I beg to differ, Mr. President. Crime is not only the business of the police; dealing with the criminal element is the business of the police. However, let us look earlier to what happens in the society which leads these young persons to walk the pathway of crime.

It has been established, and it has been said by many speakers, that a number of the contributing factors to criminal activities or devious behaviour are unemployment, lack of education, lack of training opportunities, lack of parental and family support and lack of amenities in the various communities. Mr. President, recently somebody said to me that we no longer have trade fairs for young people to attend. Young people today have no outlet for their energies. There is no entertainment, or, maybe I should say, the entertainment seems to be confined to dub music and other sorts of raucous music one hears in the Queen's Park Savannah. I am not sure of the effect it has on the psyche of people, but I saw a programme recently where the music generates a certain amount of activity and wanton behaviour among young people.

3.50 p.m.

This was seen by the last administration when dealing with the issue of music in maxi taxis, and it was clearly established that, by the time these children got to school on mornings, they were certainly in no condition to pay attention to what went on in the classroom. It took them quite some time to settle down and become receptive. Again, one wonders how one deals with these young people. From a national security standpoint, we look at these young people who come to us at the

Youth Training Centre. Several programmes have been established at the Youth Training Centre which I am pleased to say are working extremely well—educational programmes, sporting programmes. When these young men leave the Youth Training Centre we put a trace on them, as they call it, so we can follow what becomes of them. We have found, in the main, that many of these young persons have a very fragile family background; either they have absentee parents or parents who do not pay much attention to them. You would appreciate these children end up at the Youth Training Centre at the age of 16. Many of them do not have much education.

Two weeks ago, I attended a function that was hosted by the Alpha Omega Prison Ministries. It was most enlightening to see that persons who ran these ministries are former convicts themselves, and they admitted that going to prison served them well. A number of them learned to read and write in prison, giving them a chance to adopt religion, giving them a chance for introspection—to look at themselves—and most of them come back out vowing to assist the country in stopping these youths from getting involved in devious behaviour.

The point I am driving at in dealing with the crime situation, is that we are not to confine ourselves to national security. I believe it has been said over and over again but, for some reason, whenever people talk about crime, they are not talking about investigation, apprehending criminals, giving evidence, having them convicted, they are saying that the fact that there is crime in the community, the police are to blame. The police have a role to play in prevention, and how we are going to deal with the prevention, is by putting more police on the road. We have developed the 999 system which was launched in North Trinidad in February of this year; in June, we launched a pilot project in South Trinidad. Just last month the system was introduced in Central and Eastern Trinidad. Only last Saturday, December 20, the system was introduced in Tobago.

The purpose of this 999 system is to have such a ready and rapid response that a person committing a crime would have limited time in which to make his escape. There are a number of reports that have reached us. Both the private and commercial sectors have been very complimentary of the manner in which these officers have responded and the speed with which they have addressed the reports which have come to them. All in all, I am quite satisfied that the police, in dealing with crime, are making efforts to limit the number of crimes which are committed in our communities.

On the other hand, there is the matter of the society and agencies such as the NGOs and other ministries. For example, the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs is running a Super 5 Programme that takes a number of these young persons off the streets: they organize games in five disciplines, and the police community service is virtually providing police on the beat. Police in the neighbourhoods are liaising with members of the community and linking up with these various activities that are carried out by the NGOs to ensure that we identify the measures in place which are impacting positively on the reduction of crime.

The ministry is not geared to deal with young persons except those who come to us through the Youth Training Centre, we are more concerned with encouraging the National Alcoholic and Drugs Prevention Programme and other agencies that deal with demand reduction, to assist us. The Ministry of Social Development also has several programmes which deal with demand reduction in alcohol and drugs. From the national security standpoint, in order to address the drug situation, we are ensuring that the Defence Force—which is now contributing a fair amount towards the war on crime; co-operating with the police; engaging in joint patrols; road blocks—get the equipment and the vehicles that they need. Right now they have several trucks on order. Only last week we got approval from Cabinet to order 12 jeeps which they can use on these confidence and joint patrols with the police.

From the Coast Guard's standpoint, there is the need for coastal protection, coastal surveillance, patrolling. It is common knowledge that several of the coast guard vessels were not functioning, certainly towards the end of last year and during the course of this year. These seven launches and one of the fast-patrol boats are undergoing repair. Contracts were awarded a few months ago. We are reliably informed that in January 1998, one of the larger launches would be ready and back in the water; in February two more would be ready; and in March, the remaining four would be operational. The patrol boat which is CG6, TTS Cascadura is also out of the water on dry dock and repairs are in progress.

We have since done a prequalifying exercise for a number of firms that have offered to supply the Government of Trinidad and Tobago with two fast-patrol boats. These are 40 to 50 metre craft which are designed to patrol not only our waters but also to carry out our search and rescue responsibilities up the islands. We anticipate that by the time the pre-qualification exercise has been completed in early 1998, tenders would be put out and firms would be invited to tender for the supply of these two vessels.

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Mr. President, I am glad to say that funds have been provided in the budget for, not only consultancy services, but visits to the shipyards by members of the evaluation committee, and the cost of the local quality team to be based at the shipyard.

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

4.00 p.m.

Under the 1998 Public Sector Improvement Programme, an allocation of \$12 million has been earmarked for refitting of Coast Guard vessels, consultancy service and other expenses involved in purchasing vessels for the Coast Guard. Both the Barracuda and Cascadura—TTS 5 and 6—will be repaired locally at an approximate cost of \$12 million which is 25 per cent of the cost we would have had to pay the firm in Sweden, had these two vessels been sent abroad for refitting. So we are not only saving money in repairing these vessels, it is being done locally to provide employment for our local craftsmen and is giving the Coast Guard an opportunity to gain experience here in Trinidad and Tobago on how these vessels are being refitted. We see definitely a major improvement in the Coast Guard's capability coming within the first quarter of next year.

Mr. Vice-President, more recently, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago accepted an offer from the Government of the United States for the supply of two aircraft which came about from the visit of President Clinton to Barbados in May of this year when he met with the heads of the various Governments. Aircraft will be donated to the Regional Security System, Bahamas and to Trinidad and Tobago.

I am pleased to say that four pilots from the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard and four technicians are presently in the United States undergoing training to fly these aircraft home sometime in January. Our pilots are doing conversion training in the operation and maintenance of these aircraft at Flight Safety International in San Antonio, Texas. The price for the training and use of the aircraft while there, comes up to less than \$1 million. This is a small price to pay when one considers that the price of an aircraft like that with twin engines, a turbo prop—a 19-seater—costs approximately \$25 million. It will certainly enhance the capability of the Coast Guard to do patrolling as one of the aircraft will be fitted with surveillance equipment which will assist us in detecting illegal vessels in our waters and will be tied in to the radar system that is virtually completely installed right now at a building in Port of Spain.

Generally, part of the thrust taking place now where the Defence Force is concerned, is to have the army properly equipped and mobile with adequate communications to assist the police. We shall be making sure that the Coast Guard vessels are functional and have the aircraft to overfly and do surveillance of our waters.

All these things are part of the strategy we are using to ensure that the drugs we pick up which are not produced here, will stop getting into Trinidad and Tobago. We are faced with the problem where in many of the drug seizures which have occurred in the country, it is pretty obvious to us all that these drugs are coming from outside. In fact, only last week the Coast Guard patrolling the south coast was able to intercept a vessel which was transporting a limited amount of cocaine. We do have a problem with limited resources but we are not sitting by and allowing it to overcome us. Measures are fully in place to make sure that by the end of the first quarter of next year the Coast Guard is not only fully equipped manpower-wise, but will have all the necessary equipment both airborne and seaborne to carry out its functions.

Mr. Vice-President, part of this exercise is the development of a communication facility on the northwestern peninsula in Chaguaramus. It is a hill called Morne Catherine where an \$886,000 facility is being developed to give the Coast Guard proper communication not only with the vessels and aircraft but the other law enforcement agencies in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, in relation to the Forensic Science Centre, one heard the talk about DNA and whether or not Trinidad and Tobago has reached that level of sophistication. I am pleased to announce that as part of the crime fighting that police are engaged in, the Forensic Science Centre plays a very critical role in detection and giving the police the sort of compelling evidence they need which they could use in court. In 1996, the centre acquired the necessary equipment to perform DNA analysis. This year, preliminary work involving DNA analysis was undertaken. However, the system would not be fully operational until mid-1998. Persons are now being trained abroad and one of our major drawbacks was getting the quality of people to carry out the duties required in such a very critical area. The centre has now acquired a syva machine which will facilitate the speedy detection of drugs of abuse, mainly marijuana and cocaine, and will be used to make sure that testing can be done very expeditiously. Again, this is another improvement in the Forensic Science Centre to assist the police.

Since 1996, the centre has been training police officers in what is called erased numbers and restoration techniques. This is to allow the police to do the first

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inspection of stolen vehicles and to give them an opportunity to identify these vehicles. One of the drawbacks we face is that when a stolen vehicle is recovered, until the matter goes to court that vehicle cannot be released to the person who claims to be the owner. This is something which has been raised with the Attorney General's office and we are hoping that legislation would be put in place which would allow the vehicle to be seen by the magistrate and released so that the person can get back his vehicle. The police are blamed because the vehicles are in the police station but the police are really not at fault. As long as the matter is pending the police cannot just give someone back a vehicle; they do not have the right to do so. We are trying to make sure that with speedier inspection, we can facilitate the expeditious hearing of these cases so that people can get their vehicles back intact. There is also a prevailing problem of the vehicles deteriorating, being parked in the sun and rain at various police stations throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Montano mentioned the prison service and he is quite correct. The prisons are severely overcrowded. I wish to pay compliments to the staff of the prison service because, perhaps, if they were differently disposed, situations could have been created which could have been explosive but the prison system is running quite well. While the new prison will even out the numbers, it will not make any serious contribution to reducing the overcrowding. It means to say that the number of prisoners who would be in the system would be about the amount that should be there so it would not take much to create further overcrowding.

There is in the pipeline, the matter of the alternatives to custody, which was discussed in great detail during the course of the year to have community service and plea bargaining. Only yesterday I heard the Attorney General make mention of these when launching the repairs to the court house at the corner of St. Vincent Street and Knox Street. These are all the mechanisms which we could use to reduce the number of people going into the system. Prisoner transport has been a great help. When the Senator mentioned privatizing the prison, he must have realized that one step has already been taken in that direction.

Sen. Montano: By the PNM.

Sen. Brig. The Hon. J. Theodore: Oh yes, I am not doubting it, by the PNM and which is being implemented by the present administration. Many people come up with great ideas, but it takes somebody with dedication and vision to implement these ideas and cause things to happen. So for what it is worth, the system is working extremely well.

I must take Sen. Montano to task because he spoke about a trite and silly statement. In fact, the Senator did make such a statement because he suggested that the statement was, "If you cannot do the time don't commit the crime." I am afraid that like many other things, the Senator got it back to front. The way it goes is, "If you do the crime you must do the time." It does not really convey the same meaning but again, like everything else, before committing the crime one has to make an assessment if one wants to face the law and the Judiciary. I guess everyone makes such a decision which comes back to the point I was making recently when I was in San Fernando. It is very difficult if someone makes a decision to commit a crime for the police, or anybody else, to tell him or convince him he cannot. Such people who are in doubt could probably call some crisis centre and be spoken to, but it seems as though we do not have much regard for violence or people's property or the lives of people. There seem to be a number of people in this country who have become extremely violent and one has to be concerned about why this is so.

Mr. Vice-President, I read an article just yesterday which is contained in the *Sunday Guardian* of December 21, 1997. It is a reaction by religious leaders to a statement made by the Minister of Health last Friday.

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

It says in part and I quote:

"While agreeing about the necessity of educating schoolchildren about AIDS, religious leaders said a moral reappraisal by society was more important...

We feel the time has come when the whole community should direct all its attention and use its resources to redefine and reestablish moral and spiritual values given by God."

Mr. President, I go on to quote:

"What is more important is a moral reappraisal of the society. We have to realise that family life is breaking down. We have to get back to certain basic values."

This statement was made by Rev. Sieunarine, a Presbyterian Minister, and it continues:

"What we should be teaching in the Primary Schools and up is a proper regard for the opposite sex."

Mr. President, I contend that all these things are contributing to the lowering of the morals and standards of behaviour of young people in our society. To a certain extent, this is not assisted by the behaviour of some of the older folks in society.

4.15 p.m.

Simply concentrating on arresting the criminals and, as Sen. Montano said, providing more jails is not the answer. We need less jails and less people to be incarcerated, but the prison system does have a rehabilitation programme, and what we are looking at in the Ministry of National Security is to ensure that when these prisoners are incarcerated—at Port of Spain, Carrera and Golden Grove—there is a programme for them. Workshops are being set up. Prisoners have a very good livestock programme. They rear cattle and plant fruit and produce, and they are quite actively engaged.

We are making arrangements for a number of religious organizations and NGOs to visit the prisons on a regular basis to reach these people and show them how to fit back into society when the time comes. Just recently, Mr. President, when I went to the Alpha Omega Prison Mission Meeting, I was told by one of the members that he learned to read and write in prison, but when he came out, he had nowhere to go so he slept in the savannah. Now, one has to be concerned about how they get back into the society if there is no family support because there is not this moral and spiritual upliftment to take these people through life.

Prison provides them with room and board. There is a structured programme. It is almost like boarding school. Everything is organized. The fact is, they do adopt a routine. There is a system. There is a time to awake, a time for meals, a time for exercise, a time for everything. This routine helps keep them going. The question is: what happens when they come out? That is one of the real problems we are facing.

I am glad that the Ministry of Social Development has got more funds and is addressing these areas of concern, because, as I have always said and will continue to say, it is not strictly a national security problem. I am not trying to avoid responsibility here, but I want to make the point that it is a responsibility in which we should all become involved.

Sen. Prof. Spence: Mr. President, I wonder if I could ask the hon. Minister two questions. When will the new prison be open? And has there been any sort of halfway houses to address the problem with the prisoners?

Sen. Brig. The Hon. J. Theodore: The answer to the second question is, yes. The Ministry of Social Development is providing halfway houses. I am hoping that before I leave here, or certainly, before long, I will be able to give some answer about the opening of the prison. As I said, we are the customer. We are not building a prison. A firm and the Ministry of Works are building the prison.

I have consulted with the Minister of Works and Transport there are two drawbacks. The prison has to have its infirmary outfitted, and the armoury. These may sound like minor things, because the prison itself is complete. All the testing of the equipment has been done and the prison officers have been trained, but one of the restrictions, as far as the prison goes, is that once prisoners start to use the facility, one cannot have people from outside working there. There is also a matter of the sewerage system being looked at. I am keeping my fingers crossed. I hesitate to give a date as I have given wrong dates in the past when people have given me their estimates. The Minister of Works and Transport has offered to find out and give us some idea of when the prison will be occupied.

Mr. President, the prison will be occupied in phases. One cannot put 2,100 people in there overnight, so it will be done block by block. There is a system which has been totally worked out, and the Prison Commissioner assures me that once the facility is handed over to him, he can have the prisoners transferred. Again, it is apparently going beyond what might have been an unrealistic deadline, and that is always a problem. When we set a deadline, we assume that everybody else is running late, but it may be that the deadline might have been too ambitious.

On the immigration issue, we are taking steps to give immigration more manpower because we realize that a number of people who have come to the notice of the police recently are foreigners who may have either come here and overstayed their time, or may have come here by other means. I signed some deportation orders just recently, where some nationals of Venezuela arrived here in a pirogue. They simply jumped off the pirogue and walked into town. It is frightening, but it is as easy as that. We have a lot of open coastline in our country, and the important thing is that we recognize this and understand the role of the coast guard in dealing with this.

What is good, Mr. President, is that the coast guard is not alone in this exercise. The customs received, during the course of last year, eight 'go fast' boats. They are really speed boats, also known as interceptors, and we have developed a co-operation between the coast guard and the customs, where the two agencies work together to assist in intercepting illegal vessels. We have a vessel in Tobago that is doing an extremely good job checking most of the visiting vessels that enter Tobago waters. The major problem is that not everybody who enters our waters goes to a port of entry. They go to a bay that suits them, and if they do report to a port of entry, it could be the day after or a few days after, and that is the dangerous period.

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We have been collecting intelligence and we are quite satisfied that we have a fair idea of where the trouble lies. The main aspect of the problem is the drugs that enter our country from the south. On the immigration side, we are looking at increasing the strength of the immigration department to deal more effectively with illegals. The Chief Immigration Officer advised me that he cannot go around checking everyone who enters the country, or following every visitor, but there are times when information reaching the department requires them to send people to investigate, and this is what we are trying to put in place.

Before leaving this matter of the prison service, I would like to give some figures concerning inmates who are incarcerated or who are at the Youth Training Centre. During the course of this year, nine inmates obtained their CXC examination passes, six obtained their National Examination Council passes in tailoring, 22 obtained full passes in the school leaving examination under YTEPP, and an average of 24 female inmates attended classes in dressmaking career enhancement.

So, one finds that there is a programme. It is not broad enough, but one of the points I want to make is that virtually 50 per cent of that population in excess of 4,000 persons who are at the prison are remand prisoners. These are people awaiting trials, and whose trials have been postponed. This is the problem. It came out recently that we should get a remand centre to separate these people. Again, I come back to the point Sen. Montano made. We do not mix them. Right now, they are kept separate as far as possible, but a remand centre is what Sen. Montano was talking about, where people who have been arrested and have to spend some time waiting—especially people charged with non-bailable offences—are put so they do not become like prisoners. They are not really prisoners. They are simply accused, people alleged to have done something.

We are looking to see how much we can treat them separately in the manner in which they should be treated, and deal with the prisoners—those who have been convicted—in a different way. This is another area of concern. I am afraid that our estimates on the completion of the prison did throw us off guard, because we thought it would have all been in place by now, but we have to re-think, re-organize, re-tool and do it better.

Even among the prison officers, we have had a large number of recruits. In fact, 196 of them received induction training this year; 69 officers received development training; and 117 attended refresher courses, 39 officers, excluding senior and middle managers, received specialist training. Even the training

programme has been revised. The prison officers are now taught a certain amount of psychology, and they do classes in sociology, and relevant classes, to understand how to deal with a problem prisoner without aggression, as it were; how to talk to this person, because being in prison today is not simply a matter of locking somebody away until the time is up, and letting him out at the end. While it is felt that this is how it is, we are certainly moving away from that. The prisoners are given the opportunity, by a number of these NGOs and religious organizations which try to assist them, to prepare themselves to come back into society.

Even in the Youth Training Centre, a number of social development, sport and physical development programmes were designed for the rehabilitation of these inmates. Ninety lads are attending the primary school programme, 18 did the CXC examination in mathematics and English, 42 did the adolescent development programme, and 130 did the physical education programme. I think members of this Senate are aware that one of the inmates of the YTC is a member of the Trinidad and Tobago rugby team, and he has toured with the team, and is an excellent example. We are checking his records.

The point made earlier that one cannot let some of these people out before time because one is going to be flooding the community with bad people, I took that with a grain of salt. I do not exactly feel that everybody who goes into prison is so bad that some consideration cannot be given to maybe an early release. That is far too rigid. The prison system is a humane system, and we have to look for rehabilitation, and not to make persons feel more guilty and more embarrassed and further move themselves away from the society. The prison system is not what many people thought it to be when they were growing up. It is very different. Of course, I am not offering any invitations to anyone to visit, but one should take my word for it. Visit with me, not on your own!

4.30 p.m.

Mr. President, even in the fire services we have found, as part of the protective services—when I talk of protective services, I deal with the police, fire and prison services—I am not one to leave one out. I want to point out that in our effort to develop this climate of public safety and security that the efforts of the fire service are being recognized. Again, they got a lot of equipment this year and some people feel that buying equipment is all we think is necessary to improve the fire service. Now equipment is important, but in addition to the equipment there is quite a comprehensive training programme for these officers to become more competent and efficient in their jobs.

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For instance, the new fleet of fire service vehicles is made up of three crash tenders, two trailer pumps, eight water tenders, one large airport fire fighting vehicle, nine water tankers, one Hazmat chemical unit—this is the one for Point Lisas, an emergency tender with a lift crane. Many of these officers have been taught to operate these newly acquired state-of-the-art vehicles and they are being sent to the manufacturers of these vehicles to understand how the vehicles operate and to learn to maintain them. This is a point I will be coming to later on, Mr. President, this whole thrust of the Ministry is for maintenance of our plant and equipment.

Too many of the vehicles and the buildings are falling apart and there did not seem to be any programme for maintaining the accommodation and the vehicles. This is a point I will develop because we feel it is important. Simply buying new vehicles and leaving them to be run down, damaged, misused and neglected is not the way to go. It is going to cost us far too much.

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, the speaking time of the hon. Senator has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Senator's speaking time be extended by 15 minutes. [*Hon. W. Mark*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. President: We will break for tea now and the hon. Minister will resume his contribution at 5.05 p.m.

4.33 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.07 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Sen. Brig. The Hon. J. Theodore: I should like to deal with the police service: what they have done this year and what plans we have for next year to improve the performance of the police as our major law enforcement agency. What we were able to do this year, when we realized the effect of wear and tear on police vehicles and the lack of maintenance, was to institute a maintenance programme for the vehicles of the police fleet. Perhaps, I ought to explain that these vehicles come in two types. Some are leased, like the cars and jeeps we acquired last year, for three years through Nipdec. These vehicles have a built-in maintenance programme and are covered by full comprehensive insurance. There are other vehicles that have been owned by the police over the years and that is where we have our problem. That is where we have a large number of unserviceable vehicles.

What we have discovered is that while the garage at the St. James barracks can service the minor repairs, it is quite an imposition on them to do major repairs. So the vehicles that are laid up remain that way for a very long time. What we have been able to introduce, with the help of Nipdec and the Ministry, was the evaluation of a number of private garages and 33 such garages have been prequalified to tender for the repair of police vehicles. By outsourcing these repairs we will take a lot of pressure off the police garage and have them do inspections, identify probable or likely problems and maybe minor repairs—change a tire or a battery and put in a hose or something. But we feel that it will be more economical and more time-saving; there will be less down time on these vehicles if we outsource them. By this arrangement it is anticipated that 89 such vehicles will be repaired in 1998 using these prequalified garages.

Now, there is a way of control here because several of the garages will be invited to tender. Of course, there will be the normal selection process, so it does not mean that one or two people would just get all the work: there is a temptation. But the thing is, this is to keep it fairly open and we are using Nipdec to make sure that the procedure is followed. When the vehicles are repaired it saves us invoicing for the spare parts, it avoids the problem of the mechanics not doing the repairs as they should be done, and it saves us down time. By taking this preventative action with these inspections, the police themselves will ensure that when a vehicle needs repairs it is identified and goes to the appropriate place for repairs. So the inspections are now part and parcel of the police requirement for their vehicles. I am talking about monthly inspections. Every month, as far as possible, all these vehicles must be inspected to see whether any damages occurred, who is responsible and maybe what repairs need to be conducted.

Mr. President, we are also doing a similar exercise for police buildings. There have been many complaints over the last two years about the lack of security for these buildings, the weakness of the buildings. Several repairs took place this year, a number of police stations have been rebuilt, and we are going to expand this maintenance programme into next year to make sure that ongoing repairs take place to police accommodation.

As far as the vehicles go, you can see from the budget that the large number of vehicles we had to acquire means that in 1998 we will simply be getting two 25-seater buses for the police, three long-wheel based land rovers and three motor cycles. The intention is to keep what we have working, and to maintain the integrity of the fleet, so there will always be police vehicles on the road by calling

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in the ones that are in need of repair as we go along. I want to pass on to the Members of this honourable Senate the way in which the Ministry is approaching its various divisions and that is, one of strict maintenance.

As can be seen from the details of recurrent expenditure, in every division we have upkeep of vehicles for the Ministry. For instance, the administration, \$100,000 up by \$33,000; upkeep of vehicles for the fire service, \$1,650,000, up by \$510,000. This repeats itself throughout the budget that we have emphasized the maintenance of the plant and machinery that have been purchased for these divisions to get on with their work.

5.15 p.m.

I turn now to the matter of computerization. Mr. President, the police service is not being left behind; as a matter of fact, they seem to be ahead of a number of other departments in computerization. Their computerization which was commissioned in April 1997 has a basic network established between north, south and central Trinidad. All divisional headquarters, branches and police stations have direct access to the system. Information available includes criminal records, warrants, traffic data, personnel and firearms data. By early next year it is expected that all divisional headquarters would be linked on one network, and that branches and police stations would be added to this network later in the year.

To facilitate this, a number of training courses have been conducted. In fact, in April 1997, a computer literacy programme was launched for all members of the police service. To date, executive officers and divisional commanders have received such training which will continue until all members of the service are exposed to the programme.

In addition to the ongoing computer training for the police, specific groups of officers have been receiving relevant training with a view to providing them with the skills essential to the control and suppression of crime in our society, as well as upgrading their level of professionalism.

For example, some of the training programmes these police officers have been engaged in, which will continue into the new year, deal with the Performance Appraisal Management System, fingerprint identification, administrative management of road traffic regulations, firearms refresher training, anti-drug investigation and enforcement, security intelligence and anti-terrorist counter measures. Within recent times we have been dealing with the manpower of the police service. From 1996, 236 police trainees graduated in December of the same year; in July of this year, 245 trainees graduated, and in February of next year

another 247 recruits will graduate. We intend to maintain this momentum by bringing in 250 police trainees every six months until the desired level of police strength is achieved. The wastage rate seems to have dropped, and it will take us to next year to bring the police service up to its authorized strength.

Some of the construction and improvement works involved the commissioning of three police posts in 1997. More recently, we commissioned the Sangre Grande and San Fernando divisional headquarters. The other new police stations opened this year were Maraval, Four Roads, Erin, Ste. Madeleine and Princes Town. One police post and a number of stations started will be completed during the course of next year. For instance, the Mon Repos and Freeport stations will be finished in February 1998; Rio Claro in June; Cunupia, El Socorro/Barataria and Gran Couva stations in February; St. Mary's/Moruga which is a police post, in January.

I am sorry that Sen. Mohammed is not here because I have to thank her for getting the El Socorro/Barataria station started. It was she who brought it to my attention that the plans and decisions were languishing in the Ministry for a number of years. Mr. President, if I may, I would repeat my statement. I express my thanks to Sen. Nafeesa Mohammed for bringing it to my attention that the plans for the El Socorro/Barataria Police Station were being allowed to sit there and no action was taken. I am pleased to say that the police post is well on its way. *[Interruption]* I am glad to see that the Senator recognizes that since the PNM left the plans there, it took the UNC Government of national unity to get these plans up and running and to take some action. I am looking forward to the hon. Senator joining me on February 15, for the commissioning of the station. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. President: Just a reminder that you have four minutes more.

Hon. Senator: You should not have repeated that. *[Laughter]*

Sen. Brig. The Hon. J. Theodore: The hon. Senator took some of my time.

Some of the other construction generally that will take place next year would be on what is known as the Mirror Building at the corner of Richmond and Park Streets which has already started. We will be reconstructing the Roxborough, Gasparillo, Matelot, Oropouche, Carenage, Mayaro, Besson Street and Tunapuna Police Stations—the legacy of neglect which we are now correcting. Police garages would also be upgraded to do the jobs we want them to do and refurbishment work was completed this year on the Santa Cruz, San Juan and West End Police Stations. Ongoing refurbishment works are proceeding at the San

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Fernando Police Station, not the divisional headquarters, the Couva and Moriah Police Stations.

All in all, the point I leave with this honourable Senate is that maintenance is the watchword, certainly in my Ministry, for next year so that many of these expensive buildings and vehicles would not be allowed to fall into disuse and ruin. We will be paying attention to maintaining the integrity of the equipment which is put at our disposal, and ensuring that our personnel is well-equipped and properly trained, and that the manpower requirements are there to do the job of keeping this country a secure and safe place for our people.

Thank you.

Sen. Nirupa Oudit: Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to speak in the debate.

My contribution would be brief. I will talk about three main issues, the first being the Government's policy with respect to divestment of state assets and the impact on employment. The second issue is domestic savings, and the third would be very brief comments on cigarettes, computers and quality.

Having said that, I would begin by commending the Minister for his style of budget presentation which I found very refreshing and new. He did say, "no new taxes" but what occurred to me when I listened to his presentation was that there was no unnecessary vocabulary. [*Laughter*] It was clean and clear, a very crisp style of delivery in presentation representing, hopefully, a very clean, clear and crisp vision for the year. When one hears a little bit of talk then one expects to see more action. Therefore, let us hope that, because the talk has been brief, the action would be very powerful and extensive.

I would like to address the issues which I hope the Government would recognize and internalize as part of the implementation of the budget. The first one is what is commonly referred to by the Government as "levelling the playing field".

When I looked at the budget and the macroeconomic plan, it was very clear that the Government was continuing its policy of diminishing state control of the economy and showing a preference for competition in the marketplace. I think the proposal to make the Unit Trust Corporation a limited liability company supports this philosophy. I also think that our state enterprises could be confident that this is a good path to follow. When we look at what the manufacturers of Trinidad and Tobago have done in the last few years with respect to facing competition and being in an open market, if they can do it, the rest of the country can.

My concern though, is that the state assets of most problematic significance have not yet been addressed. I am referring particularly to companies such as the National Petroleum Company, Petrotrin, Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission (T&TEC) and so forth. The fact that the Minister spoke specifically about the Unit Trust Corporation led one to believe that more details would be given about the other companies. I imagine it is quite possible that individual Ministers may address these companies in their contributions.

What I do urge very strongly—and I would like to see as a citizen—is that the Government seizes the opportunity to be transparent in its deliberations and discussions with respect to what is happening in divestment. I think that there are still too many questions on deals that we have already made, both in the time of the previous administration and the current administration. This Government has a very good opportunity, in properly handling the divestment of state assets, to build credibility with this country's population. The way divestment is handled is crucial to continued growth of the economy.

Sen. Kuei Tung spoke about a comprehensive investment code to be published in the first quarter of 1998, which will set the stage for transparent negotiations and agreements with foreign investors. This is fine. I think it is very important that we should take note of comments on the budget that came from organizations such as the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association (TTMA), that this investment code must include, among other things, provisions where negotiations with foreign investors will seek to add as much value as possible to the local economy through the use of local goods and services.

5.25 p.m.

I think it is also extremely important that we look very strongly at job creation investment. Projects that will bring jobs to the country and not just dollars; it is extremely important. I would say that the Government has, right now, a very good opportunity. Developments in the international economy are working in our favour. The problems that are facing the Far East countries are causing the major investors of the world to focus on our area, Latin America and the Caribbean, as the area with the most potential in the world.

A United Nations ECLAC report that was published just this week showed that the Latin American economies posted one of their best performances in more than 25 years despite the world financial turmoil that has been going on. We are sitting in a very good part of the world and we have many opportunities and advantages

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to be able to negotiate balanced and, I would say, economically and socially just agreements for the country. I have even been told by international partners that our corruption index is lower than other countries.

Whereas in principle and, indeed, in practice we would hope not to have to address the issue of corruption here, when we talk to investors we are told that Trinidad and Tobago's corruption index is lower, as compared with other countries in this part of the world which, for various reasons I cannot name publicly. Therefore, we are a very attractive country sitting in the world economy, in the right place at the right time. Let us make the most of it, let us take good advantage.

I have not seen any projects that are going to be employing many people and it is a matter of personal concern to me as a citizen. I was sharing some statistics with my colleague, Sen. Marshall, in which a population council report published in 1995 lists that there are 20,000 people being eligible to join the workforce every year, between 1995 and the year 2,000. How are we going to employ those 20,000 people? I think that is extremely important and should permeate the thinking and discussions that would occur.

The second aspect of the budget that I would like to address is the aspect of domestic savings incentive. Mr. President, I think it is widely known that the current investment that has come to the country which would be about US \$3 billion in total, which we are seeing now mainly in energy and construction projects, is largely financed by foreign savings since domestic savings at this time, I think just about 17 per cent, are fairly low. I understand that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has stated a target of 25 per cent. I have heard in economic circles that a level of 30 per cent is attractive, and the Finance Minister has introduced a number of very laudable initiatives to address the domestic savings problem: the Employee Stock Ownership Plan, attractiveness enhancement plan, the profit sharing plans, foreign owned companies, increase in tax benefits and so forth.

All these initiatives, however, are aimed at transformation of savings behaviour. If you are looking at projects to transform people's behaviour, that takes a long time. They may be laudable, but I think if you consider implementing these initiatives in the culture of Trinidad and Tobago, we also need to recognize that there are very simple things that we can do to bring more people to invest locally. In other words, instead of transformation, what about pushing the open door? One of the quickest and most effective ways, I would say, of increasing domestic savings is to remove that 10 per cent tax on interest income from savings

deposits. If you work out the dollar value in terms of additional revenue to the country of losing that tax and compare it against savings currently lost as a result of money heading overseas, I think it may be a very easy sum to say that the money that you are losing as money actually going overseas, we are not getting it by having this taxation in place. That is something that is very easy to do. It is something that you can give us as a Christmas present. That addresses pushing an open door before you go into transformation to bring local people who have a culture of savings in a way.

The original people who came to Trinidad and Tobago would save in their mattresses and banks so it is not as if we do not have a culture of savings; we do. People are getting smarter about their money and I would say that taking that 10 per cent tax away is going to encourage many more people who are moving money abroad now—and I am not only talking about large companies, I am talking about people who have US \$5,000, or the equivalent of US \$5,000, who are interested in sending their money abroad when they could be keeping it here. I am sure the Minister is aware that there are a lot of offshore investments representatives now setting up in Trinidad who are willing to take US \$5,000 to US \$10,000 as an investment portfolio. When you add up, you have maybe 500 people with that amount of money, you are talking about a fair amount of money. That is something I would really like to see addressed. I think it addresses the culture of the country in an effective way. It recognizes that yes, people want to save and the Government recognizes that.

The very last part of the presentation—I want to say that I was very happy about the computer incentive. I think it is a step in the right direction: it is great for the country. Starting with public servants, yes, that is the first step. I am quite sure that the private sector is going to follow that initiative. I have heard commentators saying that the Government should have gone a little bit further and given incentives to businesses in order to have computer training and so forth. It is quite true, we need to look not only at computer acquisition, but also at computer literacy. The Government cannot do everything. What I would suggest that the Government can do with respect to computer literacy is get the private computer companies, which are going to earn a lot of money and profits as a result of selling computers locally, to get involved in some kind of computer literacy programme so that there is actual use of computers by public servants and by homeowners; get them together. I am sure that these companies would be quite willing to plough back some of those profits from the sale of computers and software into training.

The tariff on cigarettes, Mr. President, if we are looking at an effective commitment to a no smoking policy, would we not want to do a measurement to see if we are implementing a 19 per cent increase that is going to be effective or not? The day after the budget came out I think the tobacco companies went on record as saying they are not going to increase the price, which means that the profit that they make by selling cigarettes is, of course, obviously higher than that. Why was it 19 per cent? Why not 119 per cent or 219 per cent? If you work out the cost of maintaining one patient with lung cancer or emphysema at Mount Hope, that 19 per cent is probably going to pay for one person. I have nothing against any business but the point is, if we are implementing a measure, are we seeking to be cosmetic or effective? If we want to be effective let us do our homework, understand what will really make a difference and implement a measure that will make a difference. This way it appears to be, at this point in time, largely a cosmetic measure which does not have any real effect. If we are doing it, go the whole hog or do not do it.

The last issue that I would like to raise concerns quality which permeated the budget in terms of the presentation and also permeates a lot of national discussion and national issues. The term “quality” is so loosely bandied about now, I think it will soon lose its actual meaning or verbal characteristics. Quality is not a catch-all, hold-all, warm, fuzzy concept. It means conforming to certain established standards. If we want to be a total quality nation it means we have to conform to certain established high standards. That is the challenge to the Government, to set these standards and to encourage conformance. I am not seeing that message coming through in all the discussions happening. When we talk quality it gives people a warm feeling, but if it is not addressed in the right way it does not have an effect.

With these very brief comments I would like to say thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity and wish everybody, if I am not violating any parliamentary procedure, a happy Christmas. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Elizabeth Mannelle: Mr. President, people are flattering the Minister of Finance, but I would like to say genuine congratulations to Sen. Montano for a very comprehensive and insightful contribution. Good overview of the budget. I would like to perhaps take a different route, instead of an overview I would go into some depth in one or two areas.

On the first page of the budget there is a statement that the budget will also be a telling reminder of how much the Panday Administration has accomplished to

date. I would like to use that very phrase and look at one particular ministry to see what is the telling reminder with respect to what the Panday Administration has accomplished to date. Last week, when we were debating the second Variation of Appropriation Bill, I used the opportunity to question the Minister of Finance regarding certain reductions of the allocations for the Ministry of Health. I had hoped that the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Health would have used the budget to respond to some of the concerns other Senators and I had raised and indeed, some of the concerns that are being articulated in the national community. Unfortunately there was no mention of health in the budget statement except the no smoking policy we just heard about and the increased duty on cigarettes; I will refer to both of those later.

It is, indeed, revealing that while the Panday Administration claim to be focussing on human development, they have neglected to put health in the proper context. It is as though they cannot make the connection between human development and a healthy population. This failure is not new because last year they came with this 'toward a total quality nation' slogan. Sen. Oudit just made some reference to that, and I would say there was no statement or direction in the budget with respect to how they intended to attain that goal of a total quality nation. Moreover, their failures, delays and lack of competence in the health sector indicate that they have no clue as to how to achieve that status because a total quality nation requires healthy and productive citizens and a well functioning health system. The Government keeps saying that we were a 'coulda, woulda, shoulda' government because we kept saying that we had the plans and they are just implementing our plans. But unfortunately, in the health sector, we had a very good plan but they have not implemented it, so we cannot make that statement in this regard.

Last year in the budget debate the Minister of Health had nothing to say. Imagine that, after one year in Government, in December 1996, the Minister of Health was apparently dumb. This year after the Leader of the Opposition in the other place raised some concerns about the health sector, the Minister of Health made a response. In large part he was responding to questions raised. He did not come and give a review or an overview of the performance of his Ministry under the Panday Administration. Yet, they say the budget will be a telling reminder of what the Panday Administration has accomplished to date. Well, clearly they did not relate that goal to the Minister of Health.

5.40 p.m.

Mr. President, it is important to establish one fundamental in any discussion of the health sector, and that is, we were not unaware of the problems of the health sector and, in the previous administration there was a programme derived after much consultation and discussion and, indeed, legislation came to this Senate—some Members may have been here at the time when the first phase of the Health Sector Reform Programme was proposed, which was the decentralization of the services—and there was a lot of opposition from the—what party were they then? I do not know. The UNC, or Club 88, or whatever? They have no history, so you cannot really connect them with any one party in the past. There was a lot of opposition at the time, but in 1995 they came into Government and early in 1996, they adopted the PNM's health plan, because it was a good, well-thought-out plan.

As in other areas, we were a government, which did not only initiate and put things in place; we planned and had things in train; we thought ahead, unlike this Government. It cannot think beyond a certain point in time. So that, clearly, when we get into government—because they would be a one-term government—we would have no plans and no policies to put into place. But we have dealt with that situation before.

Sen. Mark: Liz, you have hope.

Sen. E. Mannette: Mr. President, it is the season of goodwill. The overall health sector plan, as was mentioned in the other place, entailed an Inter-American Development Bank loan of US \$134 million and a government contribution of US \$58 million. So we are looking at a total package of over US \$192 million; that is over TT \$1 billion at the current exchange rate. We were told about the conditions to the loan that were not met as of this date, but I have a question about that.

The first point I want to make about this loan package for the health sector, and I want to address this directly to the Minister of Finance, who signed a loan in July, 1996; we have not accessed the funds from this loan and we have to pay a charge. As I read in the loan documents, we are incurring a charge of .75 per cent since July of 1996 and .75 per cent of US \$134 million is a lot of money. In fact, it is more than TT \$6 million annually.

Now, if I am incorrect, I am subject to correction, but here we can see a direct cost to the incompetence and mismanagement by the Minister of Health. Usually, one cannot quantify incompetence, it is difficult to quantify the loss; but here we are paying a charge to the Inter-American Development Bank of TT \$6 million annually and if it is a year and a half since we signed for that loan, that

would make it about TT \$10 million because of the incompetence, the failures and the delay caused by the present administration. That is a telling reminder of how much the Panday Administration has accomplished to date. [*Desk thumping*]

What I would like the Minister of Finance to tell us please is why they signed an agreement in July 1996 when they knew they were not ready to implement the terms of the agreement? Also, why are they throwing TT \$10 million down the drain to the Inter-American Development Bank?

With respect to the conditions that have to be met for this loan programme, I am a bit confused and I would like some clarification, if the Minister can provide any clarification. In August of 1997, there was a Variation of Appropriation Bill and in that bill, the allocations to health were reduced by a certain amount, to about \$25 million. Then in December, a couple weeks ago, we were debating a second Variation of Appropriation Bill for 1997 and we were told that they were reducing the variation by an additional amount because the conditions were not met. Now, this was December 9, I believe, and the conditions were not met then so we reduced the allocations. But then in the *Public Sector Investment Programme* document, I am reading that the conditions were all fully satisfied in October 1997. So I am a bit confused and I think I have good reason for my confusion.

On December 9, in the variation bill, because the conditions were not met in 1997, we could reduce the allocations to the health sector, but in the document, it says the conditions were met in October as the Minister had told us in August. So if in August they were going to spend this amount of money but the conditions were met in October, why was the money not spent? Or why did they not access the loan before the end of the year? Or why did they not do the pre-investment type of activity they were permitted to do under the loan agreement? There is clearly some sort of inaccuracy or misleading statement, and I would appreciate if the Minister of Finance would address this when he is winding up.

This question was raised in the other place, but the Minister of Health had nothing to say on this matter. That really causes us to question everything that is proposed for the health sector in 1998 because they claim one thing and they dispute it in the same document, so we are beginning to wonder if anything would be done and whether we can trust anything they say. I want the Minister of Finance to please tell us: When do they intend to start drawing down on the Inter-American Development Bank loan to fund the improvements in the health sector? I think that is a clear and direct question and I do not think he can zigzag around that one.

Sen. Kuei Tung: You would be surprised.

Sen. Montano: I hope *Hansard* has that.

Sen. E. Mannette: Well, yes, as the Minister said, I will be surprised. Do not worry, I will quote the *Hansard* for him when he comes with another variation of appropriation bill to cut the allocations to the health sector again.

With respect to the infrastructure upgrades, the Minister of Health has to apologize to the national community. Here is why. In his budget contribution in January, 1996, the first budget presentation of this Panday Administration, the Minister of Health stated with respect to Point Lisas and Couva, that the construction of the Couva District Hospital was to begin in 1996.

Now, clearly Ministers make statements and even the Minister of National Security said that he has been found to be in error in the past, but this Minister of Health said, "I assure this House and the residents of Central Trinidad that this is not a false promise. It will be done." As I said, the Minister did not report at the end of 1996 and here it is, we are at the end of 1997 and no progress has been made on any of these health centres. That was clearly a false promise and the Minister of Health had the gall to talk about citizens' concerns being turned into frustrations and cynicism. I do not know if he was being prophetic or something, but I am sure the citizens' concerns in Central Trinidad have been turned to frustration and cynicism because of that false promise.

When we look at the details with respect to construction, we note that in 1998, they plan to start the first phase of construction of the district hospitals in Couva, Princes Town, Point Fortin and St. James. Given what they said last year and what they did not do, we urge the Government, the Cabinet, or whomever, to put some fire under the Minister of Health to ensure that the programme is advanced and not to be satisfied with any excuses about delays in hiring and recruitment. I do not think those are satisfactory responses for the delays when one considers the consequences to the population.

My colleague, Sen. Montano, explained his situation and that is something that is happening throughout the country—people have been having medical emergencies and because the whole health sector programme was not pushed with the momentum that it deserved, the situation remained the same.

One of the issues that I think should occupy the Minister of Finance is the amount of money that is being put into the health sector outside of the development programme. I am talking about recurrent expenditure. I do not know

if the Minister has any idea of what returns we are getting on the money invested in this sector.

It has been expressed to me that there seems to be no formula for allocating money to the different Regional Health Authorities and to the sector in general, and the question was: Is it a per capita allocation, or do they consider health utilization information, or historical data? What do they consider? If the Minister could have shared the idea with us of how money is allocated, we could better appreciate whether or not we are getting good value for the dollars being spent, because we want to ensure that each dollar being spent is well spent. Moreover, we have this large expenditure and if we look at the income potential for the health sector, it raises some questions.

Generally, one would not consider hospitals and health facilities to be income-generating facilities primarily, but, I think there are certain areas where income can be generated and I am not talking about user charges, as the Minister of Health and the Chairman of one of the Regional Health Authorities have been pushing, but I am looking at non-public sources of revenue, because it has come to my attention that money is slipping through the cracks at public hospitals from two main sources.

The first is that apparently many non-citizens go to the public facilities and obtain medical services, the cost of which may run into millions of dollars and I have been informed by medical practitioners that this is, in fact, a subsidization of the health sectors of these other countries. *[Interruption]* I identified the problem and I am getting to the solution because I know that left to them, nothing will be done. They cannot think of the solution at the same time, so I will give them the solution. *[Interruption]* No, no. One does not have to be a medic. When it is considered that if a citizen needs medical treatment abroad or one has to go to Miami, or New York, or Canada, or Europe or wherever, we have to pay for services. I know for certain in North America, we have to pay for medical services. Indeed, many people wipe out their lifetime savings on medical treatment. So we should look at how much money is falling through the cracks with respect to services rendered to non-citizens. Again, I state it was articulated to me by medical practitioners who are very concerned about it and I am sure it is not unjustified.

The second area where I have been advised funds are slipping through the health system occurs when there are insured patients visiting public hospitals. Clearly, if one has health insurance coverage, one should bill one's insurance company, or the hospital should bill the insurance company. My information is that

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either patients do not take the forms so nobody knows they are covered, or if they do provide the hospitals with forms, the doctors cannot be bothered to spend the time to fill them out. In fact, someone estimated that insurance companies may owe the Government close to fifty or sixty million dollars and that is a lot of money. *[Interruption]*

I assume that he would make his comments in his winding up. But nonetheless, I think I am giving the country and the Minister of Finance some help in helping to identify where money can be raised in the health sector, as opposed to only pouring money in; so we could look forward to seeing our hospitals generating some sort of income.

Now it appears that the Minister's close association with some insurance companies is prejudicing his appreciation of this point. *[Desk thumping]* I would hope that he is objective, and that he would take his job as Minister of Finance seriously, evaluate all the proposals, look at the pros and cons, and do the right thing. I have identified, I think \$10 million to the Inter-American Development Bank down the drain, fifty to sixty million dollars to the insurance companies and some other costs from non-citizens. We are looking at about \$70 million that could have been spent on some other social service in the health sector or outside.

Single mothers could have been given more money; the old aged pensioners could have been given a higher pension; or Tobago could have been given more, as I am hearing in the background. But, certainly if there is money to be raised, it should not be treated in a frivolous manner.

5.55 p.m.

Both of the above would require you to know what is being serviced to these public institutions. In fact, that was part of the health sector programme as well. I ask the Government and the Minister of Health—and I hope this is forwarded to him—what about the Population Registration System that was in train when the former administration left government? The system would have provided basic data for all citizens of the country and each citizen would have had a special number that could be accessed from computers in hospitals and so forth. It seems as though nothing has happened to this Population Registration System since November, 1995. I do know that there was a task force looking into it, but we have not heard anything of it for quite some time.

I looked at the allocations in the Public Sector Investment Policy and noted that last year only \$300,000 was assigned to this project and I note that \$5 million

has been assigned to the project in 1998. So, I can only speculate that there is a plan for this to come on stream for 1998. That would be appreciated, although I am also informed that what started out as a health population registration system has been expanded to all different sorts of government activities including tax returns and voting. If that is so, then that may be beneficial.

I must underscore the urgency for this registration system with respect to the health sector. One of my colleagues mentioned earlier the fact that the elderly cannot obtain health insurance. Part of the health sector reform programme included a National Health Insurance System and the Minister of Health said in May, 1997 that the National Health Insurance System was coming soon. I do not know what 'soon' means. But I would appreciate if some statement could be made by the Minister of Health with respect to the reasons for the delays in getting this insurance programme on stream.

One of the initiatives of the Government in the Public Sector Investment Policy is to institute a National Ambulance Service. This is certainly needed, but I am disappointed that the inadequate amount of \$5 million was assigned to this programme. One fully equipped ambulance with up-to-date equipment can cost close to US \$100,000. If you allocate \$5 million that really does not give one a lot of room to actually build a national ambulance service. I was also told that Trinidad and Tobago really needs about 10 well-equipped ambulances for it to have an effective National Ambulance Service.

When one considers the fact that there is need for a communication system and a communication centre and there is need to train paramedics, \$5 million is really not enough. It raises the question: Is the Government serious about this National Ambulance Service or is it another cosmetic measure?

I would like to add since the hon. Minister of National Security was making a contribution earlier, I hope that when this ambulance service is set up they do not buy a vehicle to fit a radio but rather they buy vehicles and the radio fits the vehicle and not the other way around.

As I recall the Minister of National Security said they bought the Cherokee jeeps because they were compatible with the motorola radio system. When one hears things that blow one's mind, one really cannot understand them. It is understandable when one cannot repeat it correctly because it makes no sense whatsoever.

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Two other areas I would like to address. Firstly, the dengue situation. As has been stated, the maintenance of clean and healthy surroundings is what really prevents a suitable breeding ground for the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito—some people are very familiar with what is in the balisier. I wondered why. Nonetheless, I have been informed and, if one looks at the statistics as to where the deaths of dengue disease are prevalent, one would realize that the Ministry of Local Government has to bear that responsibility. They are responsible for clearing the drains and ensuring we do not have stagnant water, and most, if not all of these deaths have occurred in areas of PNM non-controlled local government bodies. Clearly, the UNC-controlled local government bodies are too busy doing other things than taking care of their functions. That is what the statistics prove. When there are deaths occurring in PNM-controlled areas then you can make some comment in response.

Comments were made by previous Senators with respect to a no smoking policy by the Government and the increased duty on cigarettes. While certainly we need to address the increase in lifestyle diseases and to put deterrents in place to prevent a further increase, I find this provision is really quite inadequate. First of all, it deals with the risk of lung cancer but the Minister in his statement claims that lung cancer has become one of the leading causes of death in the country. I believe that is inaccurate.

I have looked at the National Cancer Registry report and lung cancer is not one of the leading causes of death in the country. In fact, prostate cancer is the killer which must be focussed on with respect to men and breast and cervical cancer is the killer which must be focussed on with respect to women, and breast and cervical cancers are the killers that must be focussed on for women. These numbers are based on the report of the National Cancer Registry for 1995. These cancers I just mentioned: prostate, breast and cervical cancers are all cancers of the reproductive system and can be treated if detected early. What is needed is not a cosmetic no smoking policy or an increase in the excise duty on cigarettes, but some sort of early detection system or screening programme that could be applied nationally, because the number of men whose productive lives are shortened by prostate cancer is a cause for national concern.

Moreover, one is dealing with one addictive drug, tobacco, but what about alcohol? That was my initial reaction. This is good but one could go further. There is need for more to be done because the increase of alcoholism and the attendant

burden on the medical services as well as the effect on families and domestic violence in the home situation really merits our attention. I would like to know what plans the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism has to deal with the alcohol problem in our society. He has no plans, and that is probably true.

Mr. President, nobody really expects a miracle to occur overnight. One does not expect the health sector to suddenly blossom after one year, but one is looking for some sort of light at the end of the tunnel, and there is none. It has been two years and nothing has been done. The Government cannot get up and tell me anything has been done in the health sector. I think that is a shame and disgrace.

Mr. President, I will make a few comments on the statements in the budget with respect to culture and the entertainment centre. I am not going to repeat what I said in the last budget debate because, clearly, the Government is intent on doing what they want and will not listen to good sense. I must express my disappointment and the disappointment of members of the music industry regarding the Government's attempt to get involved in this sector. I am referring specifically to the recording studio which will be established as part of the institute of carnival. I said something about the institute last year. I will leave that for one of my able colleagues. I do not understand why the Government sees it fit to establish a new recording studio. There are between 20—25 recording studios in the country. In a country of 1.3 million people that is a very high proportion. There are recording studios which range from state of the art equipment, to those with only basic equipment, so there is really no need for an additional recording studio.

6.05 p.m.

If this institute of carnival that is proposed to be set up requires recording facilities, surely, the Government can enter into some arrangement with one of the existing studios. There is a recording industry association of Trinidad and Tobago which I am sure would facilitate any government's attempt to assist members of the music industry in recording. Moreover, I noticed that a sum of \$100,000 was allocated to the institute of carnival. Clearly, a recording studio cannot be built with \$100,000. I do not know how the Government intends to juggle those figures. Perhaps, Government would be well advised to focus on some other activities and leave recording studios alone.

I suggest that the Minister of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs liaise with different groups to get their input. I have not heard one person from the entertainment sector accept this proposal as being sound or well thought

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out. In fact, some people said that the Minister must have been poorly advised. They do not think it was a malicious attempt to interfere with that sector. They simply thought that she was not well advised. I relay these points to the Minister with the hope that they would be given consideration at the appropriate time.

Mr. President, I complete my contribution at this point by thanking you for the opportunity to speak in this Senate. It has been a pleasure. I wish you and all the other Members a Merry Christmas.

Thank you.

Sen. Selwyn John: Mr. President, I rise in support of the proposals for the 1998 budget as presented by Sen. The Hon. Brian Kuei Tung, the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism. It is inappropriate to begin commenting on the 1998 budgetary measures without first assessing the effects of the 1997 budget. This is so because the 1997 budget was geared towards continuing economic stabilization which would then set the stage for fundamental transformation of the economy and the society.

As the Senator recommended by the National Trade Union Centre (NATUC) to serve on the Government Bench, I must record my sincerest appreciation for the several achievements of 1997 that benefited workers. Mr. President, in the case of the NUGFW, my own union, you would have noted that the Minister alluded to the fact that 5,000 daily-paid workers were permanently appointed. This has been one benefit which took more than three years to be derived. We had an agreement with the previous administration and this matter should have been settled since February, 1994. We had to await a change in administration and a new government before a settlement could have been reached and implemented.

Yesterday, the last division of the Ministry of Local Government signed a permanent establishment with the National Union of Government and Federated Workers. This agreement had been held in abeyance for almost three years. I am not blaming anybody, but I think my colleague, Sen. Jagmohan must be the happiest of all the Opposition Senators, because he was involved when his party was in government and they failed to recognize an agreement it had reached with a union. [*Desk thumping*] I am happy to say that in 1997, more than 5,000 workers have benefited from the Government's thrust to satisfy the working force and bring about peace in the industry as well as among government public employees.

As a result of this settlement and benefit, workers have been motivated. More particularly, I associate with the remarks made in the other place by Sen. Baksh,

the Minister of Works and Transport. The daily paid working force in the ministry has been transformed into a brigade of workers, whose productivity is very high and we are proud of their efficiency. As a result, I think that the Ministry of Works and Transport must be better now under the astute leadership of the Minister. The measures include the settlement of job security for workers.

In the budget presentation, the Minister mentioned the introduction of a pension plan for the daily-paid government workers. This matter has been on hold since 1966. On the visit of the Queen of England, in addressing the Legislative Council, she mentioned in the Throne Speech that her government was about to introduce pensions for daily-paid workers. Thirty years later, after a change of two administrations, and moreso, the recent PNM administration, under the then Prime Minister, Mr. Patrick Manning—I think that is one of the reasons he is the Leader of the Opposition. I am happy that the Government has recently signed a pension agreement with the bargaining unit for the daily-paid government workers. I hope that within the next few months these pension arrangements would be in place.

During 1997, all the unions in the public sector reached agreement on their collective bargaining. The Public Services Association and the unions representing the protective services in the monthly paid bargaining units have signed the collective agreement. Hopefully, in the next couple days, the three unions representing daily-paid workers in the public sector would wind up negotiations. This would clear all the outstanding negotiations from the year 1990. I am proud to say that within the last year the Government has brought about certain measures which the trade unions accepted for settlement of these issues. This has created much satisfaction for public employees.

I can talk personally for the 44,000 government workers whom I represent. They are happy with the job security arrangements which are now settled and the pension arrangements which are about to be introduced. We have signed an agreement on it and are now proceeding to other issues of importance to workers that could bring about a more motivated working force.

We have transformed a whole labour force in the Ministry of Works and Transport, the largest employing ministry in the government service. Today, we can pass on trading skills which have remained in the ministry. Hopefully, as a trade union, government and a people, we would maintain and retain this for some time for young people coming out of the trade schools and those in need of those specific trades.

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Persons like carpenters were not able to roof homes because shingles and slate were being used. These skills will continue as we now have people who will be able to pass on those skills.

Mr. President, as a result of all these collective bargaining agreements being settled, the increased spending power, the contained rate of inflation and the reduction in the cost of a number of food items have brought about certain assistance to workers at these times. I think that the Government has moved in the right direction and has brought about redress and assistance.

6.15 p.m.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Public Administration and Information (Sen The Hon. Wade Mark): Mr. President, under Standing Order No. 9(8), I beg to move that the Senate continues to sit until the completion of Sen. John's contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

APPROPRIATION BILL (BUDGET)

Sen. S. John: Mr. President, finally the Law Reform (Pension) Act was passed giving rights to workers in the public sector. We have heard commendations from other Senators about it. There is the question of portable pension arrangements; the question of the public service being able to attract skilled people who may not have wanted to serve because they may not be able to have their pensions transferred. Government has secured these conditions for workers. This is one of the provisions which the trade union movement has sought for years. Finally we have it and it is retroactive to 1989.

We have also looked at the fact that our spending power, despite what one may say, has improved as workers. Our imports cover, as a country, has now passed the international benchmark. There is more than three months of reserves. The gross domestic product continues to grow. The increased employment opportunities have served to increase the employment rate. The debt/service ratio has dropped from 33 per cent in 1993 to 17 per cent in 1997, and it is expected to fall to 10 per cent in 1998.

These economic indicators look rather encouraging when one considers the fact that the 1997 budget was designed to stabilize the economy and rescue the country from going over the precipice. From the point of view of a trade unionist, these key economic indicators augur well for the future. Moreover, it is

appropriate that I interject here that economic growth must redound to the benefit of all our citizens.

Now that there are signs of economic recovery, the workers and the population at large expect that measures be put in place to ensure a decent standard of living. I note, to some extent, that the economic growth for 1997 provided 183,000 job opportunities in the Unemployment Relief Programme. I congratulate the hon. Sadiq Baksh for his masterful handling of the Unemployment Relief Programme which has brought about a change in how this programme was administered in the past.

We have also had 76,500 school meals served during 1997. We have had the completion of repairs to 72 kilometres of roadway, seven bridges reconstructed, maintenance and upgrading of 150 schools, 31 health centres and five hospitals. I also note that in 1997 attention was focussed on the disadvantaged in our society by way of a disability assistance grant, a walk-in assistance centre for the homeless and even a drop-in centre for street children in Port of Spain.

However, Mr. President, the achievements of 1997 must be matched, if not surpassed by a budget for 1998 that will address the rights of unprotected workers. For unorganized workers, including those in the energy sector, there were increases of between 7 and 10 per cent on wages. Thousands of workers who are unorganized must be protected by national policy, if not by statute.

In this regard, I now immediately focus on the actual budget measures for 1998. The minimum wage of \$7.00 an hour across the board must no longer be a proposal. This must be implemented. We hear of objections coming from all sorts of business people—that they would go out of business. However, \$7.00 an hour can only be \$56.00 a day. If there are objections to the payment of a meagre \$56.00 a day to workers in this country, then heaven help us.

Sen. Mark: The PNM is against that, you know. Mr. Manning is against that.

Sen. S. John: However, any Member of Parliament who objects to the payment of \$7.00 an hour as a basic minimum pay must really have his head examined.

I have served my trade union for 47 years and I have seen what it is to have workers scratching the surface for subsistence living. I have also seen, as a member of the Minimum Wages Board, employers come in to fix minimum standards and I have heard people in the security industry talk about \$5.00 an hour being too high

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because when they bid for contracts they sometimes bid below \$5.00 an hour. We are looking at responsible citizens of working age and they are talking about \$5.00 an hour, which means \$40.00 per day. The trade union movement would like to go on record as congratulating this Government for agreeing to a minimum standard of wages of \$7.00 per hour to be paid to workers.

6.25 p.m.

Mr. President, we may have to go beyond that. There are proposals to introduce a minimum standard of maternity leave for female workers, because there are many workers who do not enjoy sick leave as of right. There are some who are injured on the job and do not receive payment during the time they are ill. I say so because not all the workers in Trinidad and Tobago belong to a trade union, and not all have the benefit of having a trade union to negotiate for them. In fact, the record may show that only about 33 per cent of the labour force is organized, and even those who are in trade unions, it is not surprising to see that when one negotiates with an employer, before an agreement could be reached, the employer closes the business in order to avoid giving consideration to basic standards for workers whom he has employed. It is incumbent on a government to ensure that workers who do not have protection, there must be minimum standards provided so that people who employ workers can adapt.

Of course, in order that these minimum standards are met by employers, I hope that we would proceed to ensure that the inspection unit of the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives is beefed up and there are inspection and examination of payrolls so that these things are fulfilled. There are on that same Minimum Wages Board, inspectors who could be called in to give evidence. They sometimes find two sets of books which employers record. There is one for inspection and the other one to show their profits and so forth. We have to be a little more attentive to these things to ensure that workers are not exploited, nor taken advantage of by the employers in these circumstances. The Trade Union Movement would continue to support the Government. If we cannot have workers benefit from trade union representations, then standards should be fixed by legislation to have them protected.

Mr. President, I want to congratulate the Government on that long exercise of producing an Occupational Health and Safety Bill. In this country, workers are injured, they go through a lot of expenses in order to have treatment and so forth and, at the end, legal action has to be taken to have the employers meet the requirements of the law—the Workmen's Compensation Act. We are looking

forward to the implementation of the Occupational Health and Safety Bill so that workers would be afforded more protection and more recognition in time of need. We continue to give support to the Government to have this particular piece of legislation implemented so that workers in this country could benefit from such provisions.

On the question of the amendments to the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act which was deemed by the Privy Council as being faulty, as a consequence, thousands of workers who were out of employment through retrenchment were not able to be compensated. Since the order of the Privy Council, NATUC had been pressing the Government for quick action to replace this Act and since the change of Government and the Panday Administration has taken over, quite a lot of work has been done on this piece of legislation. Hopefully, it could be brought to Parliament. The last threat we made was for workers who are owed as much as \$336 million in compensation for retrenchment and redundancy in this country. There were tripartite discussions—Government, the employer and the trade unions met and discussed this issue and we had hoped it would have been settled by now. We had difficulty with the employers who felt that workers should contribute to severance pay so they are requiring us to contribute to pay ourselves when we are retrenched. The whole matter depends on what a government is to do in circumstances like these and I am sure that this Government would take a decision that would have this matter settled once and for all.

Mr. President, what has to be done, and what must continue to be done is that the Government must have a balance. Whereas in the past, the trade union and the labour movement were always on the receiving end, and the employer would take advantage of a situation because everything was in his favour, I appreciate what I have seen since this Government has come into office and the benefits which workers have already received and would continue to receive. I hope that the employers through the ECA and the Chamber of Commerce, would at least pay some regard to the recommendations of the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

We are part of a world order and are told we are in a global society and economy, and workers have to abide by these things but, hopefully, the employers would fall in line and do their part to uplift and upgrade the benefits of the citizens of this country. The labour movement alone must not make the sacrifices. If we have to do things to better the life of the citizens of the country, all parties must sacrifice. We have been sacrificing and we have continued to sacrifice and we hope

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that the employers and the business people would acknowledge it and they too would do their part.

Mr. President, about the subvention to NATUC, this is the first time that a government—and in this case, the UNC/NAR Government—has made a contribution to the institutional strengthening of the labour centre. This is a matter which had been discussed and the labour movement had proposed to several administrations. It is something which is done in several countries. Even in Great Britain, the British Government makes a contribution to the British TUC for the education and research programme and for assisting workers in all educational matters. The labour movement would like to go on record as thanking the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for making a grant to NATUC which could assist the labour centre in its education and research programme. [*Desk thumping*]

The programmes about which we are talking are issues like world trade and labour standards, organizing for the health and wellness of workers and their families, gender issues in collective bargaining—I see Sen. Mahabir-Wyatt is smiling—co-operative development, investment of redundancy pay, provision of support for research and planning resource persons. We want to be able to take part in any forum and on any matter in which we would be able to have our people well briefed on issues with which we have to deal.

Recently, I had the opportunity of meeting with the Inter-American Development Bank on the loan agreement for the highways programme in Trinidad and Tobago, an agreement in which it was proposed to retrench the entire workforce of the Highways Division of the Ministry of Works and Transport and the Works Division of the Tobago House of Assembly. My union may be a little fortunate that it has good research capability and good advice and assistance in dealing with issues—which we need—so that when we go into fora like these we could deal with them. We were able to impress the multi-lateral lending agency, the Inter-American Development Bank, and we were able to forestall any plans to retrench and implement that proposal in the conditionality of that agreement. This is what is intended for use of the grant that is made by the Government to the National Trade Union Centre.

Mr. President, I also congratulate the Government on the changes which have been made to the Unemployment Relief Programme. My union, the National Union of Government and Federated Workers, has been involved in the programmes that assist and employ persons and we go right back from the days of the Best Village programmes, DEWD and so forth. We go back to the recommendations made for

the introduction of the unemployment levy which was a proposal from the trade unions so that the employed persons could assist the unemployed by making a contribution to ensure that some sort of assistance may be given. The reform of the Unemployment Relief Programme has become necessary and we want to go on record as giving support to any measure to improve the running of the Unemployment Relief Programme and, fortunately for my union, we are the recognized bargaining body in the local government institutions and all the councils. We represent the daily-paid bargaining unit so that whatever is necessary in the form of assisting, advising or helping, the trade union is prepared to give that assistance. What we must do as parliamentarians, is continue to find ways and means of giving tangible assistance to unemployed persons to get some form of employment. It is a pity that the Government has abolished the unemployment levy, but it was a means by which those of us who are employed could make a contribution to the less fortunate persons in the society and maybe—*[Interruption]*

I understand it is still on, and we may have to ask for contributions whether voluntary or compulsory to find funding to reduce the unemployment rate in this country. What would happen, too, in the local government bodies is that councillors of the various bodies would have a big say in how the programme ought to be done. We feel that decentralizing it would make it more efficient, but what we have to cut out is that corruption which formed part of it from the beginning. If we could get rid of the corruption and the waste and laziness that maligned it, maybe we would be doing something.

6.40 p.m.

Mr. President, the intention of that programme was to train persons to become employable but it went on to become a permanent structure in which, at one time, people were looking to have permanent employment. Year after year the same people would come for employment and no opportunity was left for new persons to join the workforce to get some training to become employable. We must ensure, and this Government would ensure, that whatever happens the programme would continue in a way that people are trained so that they would become employable and not dependent on handouts. They should not feel that working a ten-days is the best thing that could happen to them.

It is commendable that the Minister spoke of a national pension programme and the fact that the daily-paid pension plan would be patterned after it. We have just studied the Chile experience and it seems to me that is the way to go, it looks good. We, as a union, never felt happy with a non-contributory pension plan and

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had always proposed that pensions should be in the form where workers and employers contribute. Unfortunately for us the last administration threw away our proposal for a contributory fund and wrote us, in 1994, saying that they were introducing a non-contributory pension plan for daily-paid workers. When the proposal came to us I told my chief negotiator not to argue, agree at once. We agreed to it, Mr. President, only to be told later that it could not be implemented.

Therefore, if Minister Kuei Tung in his budget proposed the introduction of a contributory pension plan for government daily-paid workers, we have already accepted it even though we do not have the details. We are not arguing, we want it introduced and whatever happens we would build on it. Mr. President, government daily-paid workers are people too and while government monthly paid officers receive a non-contributory pension—which they have been getting for years—there are daily-paid workers who would not get a pension when they retire. I, therefore, express my thanks and appreciation for the proposals of the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism and inform him that anywhere he goes, daily-paid workers would be complimenting him on this.

We also congratulate the Minister of Finance for the 25 per cent increase in old age pension. Last week Wednesday I was involved in handing out hampers to persons in the St. Ann's East constituency where I live and many old persons came out to congratulate me for the increase in old age pension. I had to tell them that it was not really me it was Minister Kuei Tung but that I would take the congratulations. So, Mr. President, Minister Kuei Tung has the support of thousands of old age pensioners who would be benefiting from the increase. [*Desk thumping*]

I think the criticism on the NIB insurance is well taken. As a matter of fact, the board of the NIB has already made recommendations for increased pensions. Representatives of labour, at a board meeting held last week, endorsed the recommendations in the actuarial report which has just been made. This report was done with the help of the International Labour Organization and this should pave the way for the improvement of the benefits at the National Insurance Board.

Some of proposals in that report are to increase the classes. With the changes which have been made over the years, the maximum class is just about \$1,000, and with persons receiving salaries as much as \$10,000 to \$12,000 there is need to improve the classes so that higher contributions would be made. However, Mr. President, it is really not good equity that persons who do not contribute to a plan should get a higher pension than persons who make contributions to it. I qualified

last year to get a pension from NIB and I hope that by the time I retire in the next couple weeks that I would apply and get the increased benefit.

At a meeting with the National Trade Union Centre mention was made of the Minister's announcement about the anomaly that exists where taxation is taken from the death benefit lumpsum of persons who are in the pension plan. We appreciate that, Mr. Minister, because we have been making requests with respect to that for a very long time.

We talked, too, of the introduction of the national community college. This was always put on the back burner and this is one of the proposals for which the labour movement has been pressing. As a matter of fact, with the limited basic qualifications to enter university we have always looked forward to having institutions to accommodate workers in further education, and except for the Cipriani Labour College, it is very limited. We therefore appreciate the fact that some action is being taken on this. Hopefully with the establishment of the national community college, we would have centres throughout the country so that workers would have the opportunity to benefit by pursuing higher education.

In conclusion, Mr. President—you would notice that this is one of my shorter contributions in the Senate. *[Laughter]* As a spokesman for labour in the Senate, I cannot deny that the budget has touched on the many issues which have been crying out for attention for some time now. I also cannot deny that this budget did not meet all the proposals submitted by the National Trade Union Centre. However, I most certainly agree that the measures of which I have spoken have not only brought about relief to workers, but they have also spelt out that the time is right to discuss—as the hon. Minister puts it—“Our way to job creation is through the tripartite approach.” This is important to us. *[Interruption]* Yes, the tripartite is not PNM, UNC and others, it is the labour movement, the employers and the Government. *[Laughter]*

6.50 p.m.

Mr. President, through you, I say to the Minister of Finance that we support the budget in full and we look forward to doing our part to ensure that the country would be a better place by the time we debate the budget for 1999.

On this note, let me convey to you and your family, a very Holy and Happy Christmas and all the best to my colleagues and Senators. Let me thank the Members of the Senate for their good wishes conveyed to me during my period of

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illness and to those Senators who have visited me. I am feeling much better now and I hope that I would be able to continue in good health.

I thank you.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Public Administration and Information (Sen. The Hon. Wade Mark): Mr. President, I beg to move that this honourable Senate do now adjourn to Monday, December 29, at 10.00 a.m. I just want to inform my fellow senatorial colleagues that we would meet on Monday from 10.00 a. m. to 10.00 p.m. Dinner would be provided and also accommodation for those who are living far away. On Tuesday, December 30, 1997 we would meet from 10.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m.

FELICITATIONS

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before putting the question, having regard to the time of year, I wish to take the opportunity to convey to all Members and their respective families, best wishes for a very happy, holy and peaceful Christmas. To the very dedicated members of staff, particularly, the Hansard section and the clerks at the Table who are sometimes overworked; to the protective services who have provided us with security during the course of the year; to the media who have been here on every occasion of a sitting and who give the deliberations of the Senate, ample media exposure, and to all those connected with the effective and efficient functioning of this House, I would like to extend Season's Greetings to all and their respective families. I also wish to do the same to hon. Members and their families of the other place.

I have received a letter from His Excellency, the President of the Republic which I should like to read:

“The President’s House
Trinidad and Tobago,
December 12, 1997

Sen. The Hon. Ganace Ramdial
President of the Senate
Red House
St. Vincent Street
Port of Spain

Dear Mr. President,

On behalf of my wife and myself, I wish you and the other Members of

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the Senate and your respective families good health, peace and happiness during the Christmas holidays and throughout the New Year.

Yours sincerely

Hon. A.N.R. Robinson
President of the Republic
of Trinidad and Tobago.”

May I mention to hon. Senators that I have taken the liberty to respond to His Excellency’s letter, conveying to him and his family, on your behalf, felicitations and Season’s Greetings.

Before I put the question, I think hon. Senators would like to extend some greetings.

The Minister of Public Administration and Information (Sen. The Hon. Wade Mark): Mr. President, we, on this side, would like to join with you in wishing His Excellency and his family warmest Season’s Greetings and hope that he continues to enjoy health, strength and happiness in the coming year. We would also like to extend to you and your family the same in terms of greetings and the best of health and happiness for 1998.

We take this opportunity, as well, to convey to our fellow Senators, similar greetings at this very holy period and, like your goodself, to also express similar sentiments to the Clerk of the Senate and staff, the *Hansard* Editor and staff, the couriers and Sergeant-at-Arms; also, the men in uniform who have been protecting us throughout this period and their respective families. We also take this opportunity to extend warmest Season’s Greetings to the media and their respective families; the media have covered the sessions of Parliament so faithfully in this particular parliamentary Chamber.

On behalf of the Government and its Senators, we would like to extend Season’s Greetings and a very happy, productive and rewarding 1998.

Sen. Nafeesa Mohammed: Mr. President, we, on this side, would like to join with our colleague in extending greetings to the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and indeed, to his entire family and to pray for his good health in 1998. This is one occasion that, certainly, requires tripartite understanding and we would like to extend greetings as well, to yourself and your

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family and, indeed, to all our senatorial colleagues on all sides and their respective families. I pray and hope that they would have a happy and holy Christmas. We would also like to join with you and indeed Sen. Wade Mark, in extending greetings to the hardworking staff of the Parliament; to the security forces and, indeed, to the media and all other persons who have been serving us well in the Parliament.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish the entire Muslim community, a very blessed and Holy Month of Ramadan which is expected to start next week.

I thank you.

Sen. Prof. John Spence: Mr. President, may I associate myself with the remarks of my colleagues on behalf of the Independent Senators, and convey as you have done to their Excellencies, President A.N.R. Robinson and Mrs. Robinson, best wishes for the season. To yourself, Sir, and Mrs. Ramdial similarly, and to all the other persons associated in different ways in the smooth running of this Chamber, may I extend greetings to them all and wish them a Happy Christmas season and a healthy New Year.

Thank you.

Mr. President: I thank the hon. Senators for the kind sentiments expressed to my family and me.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.58 p.m.