

SENATE

Monday, June 15, 2020

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox. Hon. Senators, with your leave the swearing in of the temporary Senator would be taken later in the proceedings.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
(ESTABLISHMENT OF)**

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

“Dear President of the Senate,

Re: Establishment of Joint Select Committee

At a sitting held on Friday, June 12, 2020 the House of Representatives agree to the following resolution:

Resolved: That in accordance with Standing Order 64(1)C the Fisheries Management Bill, 2020 be referred to a Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by August 31, 2020.

I request that the Senate be informed of this decision at the earliest convenience please. Thank you.

Respectfully

The Hon. Bridgid Mary Annisette-George MP
Speaker of the House of Representatives”

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**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION)
(FINANCIAL YEAR 2020) BILL, 2020**

Bill to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2020) Act, 2019 (Act No. 21 of 2019), brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Annual Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards for the year ended September 30, 2017. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)*]
2. Annual Administrative Report of the National Schools Dietary Services Limited for the fiscal year 2016/2017. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat)*]
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs to the Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on the Current Provisions for the Education of Children who require Special Education Programmes and Services in Public Primary and Secondary Schools. (*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*)
4. Immigration (Amendment) Regulations, 2020. (*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*)

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS

(Presentation)

Finance and Legal Affairs

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Negotiating/Creating Trade Opportunities Outside of Caricom

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in the name of Sen. Sophia Chote SC:

Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs, Fifth Session (2019/2020), Eleventh Parliament, on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom.

Human Rights Equality and Diversity**Male Academic Performance in Public Primary and Secondary Schools**

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): Thank you Madam President. I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

Sixteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity, Fifth Session (2019/2020), Eleventh Parliament, on an Inquiry into Male Academic Performance in Public Primary and Secondary Schools.

Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities**Regulating the Operations and Practice of Pharmacy**

Sen. Nigel De Freitas: Thank you, Madam President. I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA), Fifth Session (2019/2020), Eleventh Parliament, on an Inquiry into the Current Systems and Procedures for Regulating the Operations of Pharmacies and the Practice of Pharmacy in Trinidad and Tobago.

URGENT QUESTION**Protest Action by Health Care Workers
(Non-Payment of Gratuities and Increments)**

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. To the hon. Minister of Health: In light of recent protest action taken by health care workers attached to the NCRHA over the non-payment of gratuities and increments, can the Minister advise as to when will said workers receive these outstanding payments?

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, there have been ongoing meetings with the representatives of these workers of the North Central Regional Health Authority. The Government and the Ministry of Health are committed to settling these arrears. By the end of June 2020, 25 per cent of the arrears would be paid and the remainder would be paid thereafter. I thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, through you, can I ask the hon. Minister why has it taken so long for these matters to be amicably settled between the NCRHA and these health care workers? Can you share with the Senate what has been the reason or reasons for this long delay?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I would not allow that question. Next question please.

Sen. Mark: Through you, Madam President, how many health care workers are involved in the non-payment of gratuity as well as increments?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, 2,440 health care professionals are involved in this matter.

WRITTEN ANSWER TO QUESTION**State Issued Housing Bonds****UNREVISED**

(Details of)

150. Sen. Taharqa Obika asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

As regard the housing bonds with a 1.5 per cent interest rate to be issued by the State, can the Minister indicate the following:

- (i) the terms and conditions of the bonds, including but not limited to the duration, tranches, denomination of currency, fixed/floating, secondary market treatment;
- (ii) the targeted potential bondholders;
- (iii) the likely impact of issuing these bonds on debt to GDP; and
- (iv) the repayment mechanisms to be established?

Vide end of sitting for written answer.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, there are four questions for response today and the Government would be answering all four.

Foreign Direct Investment**(Details of)**

110. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

In light of the increase in this country's foreign debt obligation, can the Minister indicate what new sources of foreign direct investment are being attracted by the Government to assist in financing this country's external debt commitment?

Madam President: Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Madam President. Madam

President, over the period 2016 to 2019 non-energy foreign direct investments totalled \$2.788 billion. The sectors which benefited from these investments were: maritime, retail, creative industries, manufacturing, services, clean technology, construction, and agribusiness. Planned investment projects in the non-energy sector for the period 2020 to 2024 is expected to yield an estimated \$7.2 billion in FDI. Over the period 2016 to 2019 energy FDI by the upstream, midstream and downstream operators totalled US \$8.091 billion. For the period 2020 to 2022 the estimated FDI by these companies totalled \$7.331 billion.

The energy sector FDI over the last four years includes a significant number of exploration drilling programmes by BHP, BP and EOG. In terms of production, a joint venture arrangement between BPTT and EOG Resources in the Syrian Field yielded the first output of natural gas in 2017. In the same year BPTT achieved first class from two major projects, Juniper and the Trinidad Onshore Compression project. In 2018, Shell's infill drilling programme in the East Coast Marine Area achieved first class from the Starfish field in May 2018, while the company's Dolphin extension project also in the ECMA produced first class in August 2018. BPTT further boosted natural gas production by the coming on stream of the Angeline field in February 2019. In March 2019 Shell drilled the final infill well under its Dolphin extension campaign three. EOG resources also added to the output of natural gas from its Osprey development which came online later in the year.

Four development wells will be drilled between the quarter two 2020 and quarter two 2021. Following this, two exploration wells would be drilled between quarter two 2021, and quarter four 2021; following, another exploration well will be drilled in quarter two 2022. Based on the success of the exploration wells, further development wells will be drilled.

BHP will be drilling the Broadside one exploration well in deep water block TTDA3 in 2020 at an expected cost of US \$93.21 million. BHP will also be conducting drilling operations in the Ruby and Delaware field in 2021 as part of the Ruby and Delaware field developments in block 3A. Capital expenditure for this project is estimated at US \$510 million. This project would provide BHP with an opportunity to deliver value by producing 138 million cubic feet of resources in the Ruby and Delaware reservoirs by increasing production by 10,000 barrels of oil per day in 2022. Gas production from this project is expected to be 220 million standard cubic feet per day.

For the year 2020 EOG has drilled the Mento 9 well at an estimated spend of US \$15.76 million. Another well in the SECC block is currently being drilled at an estimated spend of US \$25.93 million. Additionally, EOG would be drilling another two wells in the SECC block at an estimated spend of US \$18.41 million. The Espree east development project is also expected to be underway from January 2021 to 2022.

In 2019, Angeline was initiated with reserves of 644 billion cubic feet, an expected production of 350 million standard cubic feet per day in 2020. In 2022 the Savannah Matapal project with reserves of 542 BCF and production of 276 MMSCFD is expected to come on stream. The Ginger field is expected to start in 2023 with reserves of 664 BCF and production of 135 MMSCFD, and in 2024 the Jasmine project is expected to commence with reserves of 927 BCF—

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West:—with a production of 150—Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President: Yes. Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, through you, can I ask the hon. Minister how these

various investment projects have contributed in assisting our country Trinidad and Tobago in financing our external debt commitments?

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Madam President, I trust I heard the question. Madam President, these projects are mainly projects which are expected to generate foreign exchange earnings, and in that way will assist us in keeping our foreign reserves up and settling our foreign debt.

Madam President: Yes. Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can I also ask the hon. Minister whether this COVID-19 pandemic will play any negative role in these particular energy projects and the commitment thereon for the periods 2020 to 2023? Can you share with us whether there is any—or is there going to be any impact given the global pandemic, and how it has been affecting the operations of some of these very companies that are scheduled to invest?

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Madam President, as we are all aware the energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago has always been, during the course of the pandemic, categorized as an essential service and therefore they were allowed to continue operating so the investment activity continued. Also, Madam President, in discussions with the various companies we have had commitment from them that although they are cutting back in other areas of the world, Trinidad and Tobago will continue to enjoy the benefits of the proposed investment.

Madam President: Next question, Sen. Mark.

Pneumonia and Other Respiratory Illnesses

(January 01 to April 30, 2020 Deaths)

134. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Can the Minister indicate how many people died from pneumonia and other respiratory illnesses for the period January 01, 2020 to April 30, 2020?

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, before I provide these numbers, I just want to clarify on the Urgent Question I referred to “2,440 workers”. The reference is to “2,440 employees of the North Central RHA”. I described them as health care professionals but they are all employees which include some health care professionals.

Madam President, for the period 2015 to 2020 the number of persons who died from pneumonia or other respiratory illnesses are as follows: 2015, 325; 2016, 333; 2017, 279; 2018, 298; 2019, 370, and to date up to April 2020, 152 persons. Thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Yeah. I just want to get that information so that I can go on, Madam President. I can go on to the next question.

COVID-19 Continuous Testing

(March 01 to April 30, 2020 Period)

135. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Having regard to the World Health Organization’s guidelines with respect to continuous testing for the COVID-19 virus, can the Minister advise as to how many persons have been tested over the period March 01, 2020 to April 30, 2020?

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, during the period March 01, 2020, to April 30, 2020, the number of persons tested for COVID-19 was 1,452. Thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can I ask the hon. Minister whether the Ministry of Health intends to take further measures to encourage citizens as well as to make— well I should ask one question. Can I ask the hon. Minister whether the Ministry intends to take measures to inspire and encourage citizens to come forward to carry out these tests which are crucial in the decision making process?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, I would say two things in relation to the supplemental question. The first is that a few weeks ago the Minister of Health articulated the policy in relation to testing. There was some discussion in the country about expanding testing, and the Minister articulated that testing would be done at health facilities across the country. It would be based on persons who demonstrate possible symptoms of COVID-19 who show up to these medical facilities for attention, and it would be based on random testing of those persons who show up. So a policy has been outlined, and on that basis at every press conference the Minister gives the statistics and the press releases. I think it is above 3,000 now. This question relates to a period up to April. And that is the policy in relation to testing. There is right now no policy that has been articulated to expand that testing.

And the second thing I would say is that any changes in those policies would be articulated at the press conferences and via the press releases which follow. Thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, in light of the experiences of many countries as it relates to mass testing of citizens, can the Minister indicate whether the Government is considering through WHO interventions to extend their testing to persons who are not, or who are asymptomatic?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, the Government's position

articulated in about mid-April 2020 is that it would be guided by science, and it would be guided by the professional advice of the Chief Medical Officer. Whatever the Government does in relation to testing would not be on account of what is being done globally, but it would be done based on the advice of the CMO on what is appropriate for Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President: Sen Mark.

Salary Relief/Rental Assistance Grant

(Mechanisms to expedite Delivery)

137. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

Can the Minister indicate what mechanisms are being employed to expedite the delivery of the Salary Relief Grant, Rental Assistance Grant and the food support benefit for an estimated 100,000 applicants?

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, pursuant to Government's commitment to alleviate the financial impact of COVID-19 pandemic on affected citizens due to stay at home and social distancing protocols, several measures have been implemented. The three grants mentioned in the question have been introduced to bring financial relief to persons who are citizens or permanent residents of Trinidad and Tobago, and were retrenched, terminated, or experienced reduced income suspension or loss of income as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. The salary grant is under the purview of the Ministry of Finance and is administered via the National Insurance Board. The food support and rental assistance grants are under the purview of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Madam President, to facilitate the timely processing of the applications and relief to those affected, a screening effort managed by NIB has been established for the administration of the salary relief grant. This unit is staffed by 35 persons who screen and determine the eligibility of applications, which are then submitted to a paying agent which handles mass payments. Its focus is solely on the salary relief grant and the processing model used is designed on specialization to expedite delivery. This specialization of the processing of the grant promotes greater efficiency and effectiveness to delivery to qualifying applicants. Madam President, 50 per cent of the applications qualifying for the salary relief grant can now expect payment within seven working days assuming no workflow or technological glitches.

In terms of the mechanisms put in place, Madam President, I will quickly list six or seven of those mechanisms in relation to the grant. First is a private company was recruited to process the applications and provide data entry services. Secondly, there were some challenges with downloading the application from the website but that has been sorted out. Thirdly, additional processing and data entry are being done by the Ministry itself based on applications received through the regional offices. Fourth, staff from other Ministries are also assisting in this regard and some private sector agencies are providing support through printing services. Five, the process has been mapped and the IT systems have been streamlined to automate the relevant processes to expedite delivery. Six, project managers have been engaged to oversee the various aspects of the project to ensure that the weekly targets are met.

Madam President, in relation to Tobago specifically, our staff at one of the Ministries was assigned specifically for Tobago online applications. And secondly, arrangements have been made with the Division of Health Wellness and

Family Development for the special delivery of the hard copies to the Ministry's head office over weekends to enable speedy processing.

Madam President, in relation to the rental assistance programme, in keeping with the needs for accountability and to ensure the most judicious use of the State resources, a mechanism was implemented to ensure that only valid payments are entertained. And some of the issues with the validity of the applications were discussed at a May 2nd press conference by the hon. Minister.

And finally, Madam President, there is a verification process in relation to the rental assistance. Our officers make field visits to ensure the accuracy of the information. In addition to that, a team of officers from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, as well as the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management are involved in conducting field exercises.

Madam President, to date, 25,000 existing beneficiaries under the food support programme have received additional funding, 50,000 individuals who have been retrenched or have had their income reduced have become additional beneficiaries under the food support programme. Twenty thousand households have become beneficiaries under the food support programme as a result of their inability to access meals through the school feeding programme. Forty-two thousand current beneficiaries of the public assistance and disability grant have had income support increased. Forty-seven thousand individuals who have lost their jobs or had their income reduced have received salary relief or income support grants. Almost 3,000 citizens who have not yet received their senior citizens pension are receiving \$1,500 in food support. Five hundred individuals who have not received their disability grants are receiving \$1,000 in food support, 1,400 families in direct need have been provided with hampers during stay at home period. Thirty thousand families in direct need are receiving food vouchers, and up

to 10,000 families are receiving or will receive the rental assistance. I thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, could I ask the hon. Minister, out of the \$400 million allocated for salary relief grants, and the 50,000 workers who have been retrenched and received some—well received salary relief grant, can the Minister indicate, Madam President, what is the value associated with that sum of workers, or number of workers?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, I would not be able to provide the figure now. I would provide it in writing by next Monday, the 22nd of June. But I would say, Madam President, to clarify, I never mentioned 50,000 persons being retrenched. What I said, fifty thousand individuals who have been retrenched or who have had their incomes reduced have become additional beneficiaries under the food support programme. Thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Hon. Minister, how many workers who have suffered retrenchment or reduction in income have benefited from the salary relief grant?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, I would provide that information in writing. I do not have that information simply because this is Monday. We would have had processing taking place last week. The Minister would have given some information and updates last week. So to ensure that my friend Sen. Mark gets the up to date and accurate information I will provide it in writing. Thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, the hon. Minister mentioned a private company being recruited to help in the processing of applications, I guess to speed up to process. Can the hon. Minister indicate the name of this private company?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, I do not have that information before me.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Wade Mark: May I ask the hon. Minister to supply that information next Monday? And as he is doing that, Madam President, may I ask—

Madam President: You just had one more question. So that is—

Sen. Mark: I would like to ask the hon. Minister—

Madam President: No. Sen. Mark, you have used up your questions—yes.

Sen. Mark: I apologize.

Madam President: No, that is all right. Hon. Senators, with your leave we will revert to the earlier item on the Order Paper. [*Crosstalk*]

SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

Madam President:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Her Excellency PAULA-MAE WEEKES, O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: MR. HARVEY BORRIS

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Donna Cox is incapable of performing her duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(a)

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of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, HARVEY BORRIS to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 15th June, 2020 and continuing during the absence of Senator the Honourable Donna Cox by reason of illness.

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 15th day of June, 2020."

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Harvey Borris took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

10.30 a.m.

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, notwithstanding the resolution of this Senate on Friday, May 01, 2020, in relation to speaking time during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, I beg to move that for today's debate on the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2020) Bill, 2020, only, the speaking time be as follows:

- Forty-five minutes for the mover of the motion and for her reply;
- Forty minutes for the first speakers on the Opposition and Independent Benches; and
- Thirty minutes, Madam President, for all other speakers.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam President: Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR
2020) BILL, 2020**

The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I beg to move:

That a Bill to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2020) Act, 2019 (Act No. 21 of 2019), be now read a second time.

Madam President, I rise to present the 2020 supplementary appropriation and mid-year budget review. I am presenting this review in the context of the extraordinary circumstances brought about by the novel coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic. We have been witnessing the devastating human and economic toll, which the toll which the coronavirus is leaving in its wake as it spreads around the world. With over 7.5 million infections and tragically a high mortality rate now in the region of 423,000, this virus is very different to previous pandemics. This is a worldwide health crisis. The world has changed beyond recognition. To protect citizens, the global economy has been put on hold. Businesses have been shuttered and freedom of movement has been severely curtailed. The health crisis is now entwined with an economic crisis.

Madam President, the outlook for the global economy is now estimated at negative 3 per cent for 2020. The International Monetary Fund is projecting a global recession in 2020, worse than what occurred during the 2009 global financial crisis. However, economic recovery is expected in 2021.

To get there, the IMF is pointing to the critical need for countries to prioritize containment and strengthen health systems, supporting the extraordinary

fiscal actions already undertaken by many countries. In a baseline scenario which assumes that the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020 and containment efforts can be gradually unwound, the global economy is expected to grow by 5.8 per cent in 2021 as economic activity normalizes, helped by policy support.

However, there is extreme uncertainty about the global growth forecast. The economic fallout is affected by factors which interact in ways which are hard to predict, such as the spread of the virus, the intensity and the efficacy of containment efforts, the extent of supply disruptions, the repercussion of the dramatic tightening of global financial market conditions, shift in spending patterns, behavioural changes such as people avoiding shopping malls and public transportation, social distancing and confidence effects.

Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago has not escaped the healthy economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, which came on the heels of a 40 per cent decline in natural gas prices since September 2019 and a collapse in oil prices which saw WTI prices going into negative figures in March 2020 for the first time ever.

Fortunately, Brent has since rallied to over US \$40 per barrel mainly as a result of compliance by oil producers to the commitments they made in March to cut production. However, further projected price increases will depend increasingly on the course of the virus and the associated production and demand conditions.

Madam President, even before the declaration by the World Health Organization of the coronavirus as a pandemic, this PNM administration, under the astute leadership of the Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley recognized that COVID-19 could have a significant and deleterious impact on Trinidad and Tobago if not controlled.

The health and safety of our citizens thus became the centerpiece of our public policy. We also understood that the economy would be affected by the effects of the virus. All available resources and expertise were therefore mobilized to design and implement a comprehensive response to overcome the potential health and economic crisis. Accordingly, since the arrival to our shores of the virus in March of 2020, we have been able to contain community spread through effective and carefully thought-through public health regulations and protocols, border controls, stay-at-home orders, self-distancing procedures and good hygiene practices.

Since March and up to yesterday, we had recorded only 117 cases, most of which were imported and the vast majority of whom we nursed back to health. We continue to pray for the families of the eight persons who lost their fight with COVID. Unfortunately, just yesterday, the number of persons who tested positive has increased by six, all imported cases and the testing of persons who have recently arrived in Trinidad and Tobago continues.

I trust that those persons who have been calling on the Government to reduce the restrictions quicker and further and allow for freer flow of nationals who wish to return to Trinidad now fully understand the basis of the Government's careful and deliberate approach to this issue. The shutting down of all but essential services was obviously expected to have a significant economic impact on a country that expected positive growth for the first time in years. However, our first priority was and continues to be to protect the lives of our citizens.

Despite the loud and persistent cries of our detractors, this Government refuses to be reckless with the lives of our citizens. So while we have started the reopening of the economy after approximately two months of significantly reduced

activity, we continue to move with caution and to make decisions based on the best available scientific and medical advice.

In supporting this approach, the Government ensured that it gave the health sector whatever it needed for this battle and we continue to do so. Substantial budgetary resources have been directed to the health sector and this has been aided by external financial support. Additional medical personnel have been hired, medical equipment and personal protective equipment have been sourced, hospitals and medical facilities have been and are being upgraded and commissioned where necessary, and specific sites are dedicated to treating infected people. Step down convalescing facilities are in place. We have created a health system parallel to the traditional health facilities to respond specifically to the pandemic, which has been and continues to be an extremely effective approach.

Madam President, at this time, I would like to express our sympathy to all families and communities which have been affected by this pandemic. I would also like to commend our devoted and hard-working health care personnel, medical practitioners, and essential workers for their collective responsibility for ensuring the containment of this pandemic. They are all doing a tremendous job and they deserve our eternal gratitude.

With the full effects and duration of the virus—while the full effects and duration of the virus are still uncertain, our strategic initiatives have been swift and decisive as we stop the spread of the disease and minimize the economic consequences, and we did all this in the context of erosion of our oil and gas tax revenue base. Our fiscal and monetary response has provided a bridge to support businesses and individuals to help to ensure that the recovery will be as robust and as swift as possible.

Madam President, early on, as we sought to mitigate the health impact of the pandemic on our citizens, we recognized that economic activity will be curtailed and that particular economic sectors will be seriously affected, including tourism, hospitality, manufacturing, trade, distribution, construction, personal and professional services, arts, entertainment and recreation. We thus responded quickly and decisively with a broad set of policy measures aimed at assisting the poor and vulnerable, protecting businesses, jobs and incomes, maintaining financial resilience and sustaining economic activity.

Accordingly, a targeted and sizeable financial support programme is providing a safety net for the most vulnerable households and businesses: 25,000 holders of food cards have received additional funding; 50,000 individuals have become additional beneficiaries under the Food Support Programme; 20,000 households, whose occupants have been beneficiaries of the School Feeding Programme, are now receiving support under the food card system; 42,000 current beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grant programmes have had their income support increased; 47,000 individuals who lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced, have received salary relief or income support grants.

Almost 3,000 citizens who have not yet received the Senior Citizens' Pension are receiving \$1,500 in food support. Almost 500 individuals who have not yet received their Disability Assistance Grants are receiving a \$1,000 in food support; 1,400 families in direct need are—have been provided with hampers during the stay-at-home period; 30,000 families in direct need are receiving food vouchers and up to 10,000 families are receiving or will receive rental assistance.

Madam President, in this creative social agenda, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is currently processing applications for income

support grants of up to \$1,500 per month per household, for persons from the informal economy who have lost their jobs or incomes as result of COVID-19 measures; 25,000 such grants have been paid so far. Rent relief grants of up to \$2,400 per month are also available. These and other social support measures will cost up to \$400 million for the period up to July 2020.

The Government has expanded the reach of its food support programmes by enlisting the assistance of our churches and religious bodies. Grants totaling \$10 million for three months, May, June and July, have been made available to these religious bodies on the basis of the size of their congregations to allow them to distribute food to the poor and the needy.

The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is distributing \$30 million of food support within the 14 municipal corporations in Trinidad. This programme began in May 2020 and at the moment is carded to end in July 2020.

10.45 a.m.

The Ministry of Work and Transport is providing a one-time fuel relief grant in the amount of \$2,000 to 5,000 active maxi-taxi owners in Trinidad and Tobago and \$750 is to be made available to approximately 15,000 registered owners of active taxis at the cost of over \$21 million.

The Ministry of Finance is now at an advanced stage of processing payments of salary relief grants, designed for persons who are registered for national insurance, and whose employment has been terminated or suspended without pay as a result of the Public Health Regulations. These grants are up to \$1,500 per month for up to three months. So far, over 22,000 persons have received these salary relief grants, representing 70 per cent of the eligible applicants at a cost of \$32 million.

Madam President, I wish to point out that social relief is provided only to persons registered under the social security under tax systems, that is, members of the formal economy. This is what traditionally happens. While we regard with concern the fact that only 68 per cent of our labour force of 620,000 people are registered for national insurance, with 200,000 individuals being outside of the formal economy, unlike countries such as the US and Canada, Trinidad and Tobago is helping both persons within and outside of the formal economy. Getting those persons into the formal economy is an issue for another time.

Madam President, we are also providing cash flow and financial support to businesses in the hope that this can keep them afloat in these challenging times and allow them to keep their staff employed. Among the measures introduced to achieve this is accelerating VAT refunds. Starting in March, we had paid out VAT refunds to businesses with outstanding amounts due of up to \$500,000, a total payment of refunds in this category of \$460 million. The remaining VAT arrears are being settled through the issuance of interest bearing bonds. These fully tradable bonds bear interest at the rate of 3.3 per cent over three years, and are already being purchased by financial institutions from bondholders at par, that is, 100 cents on the dollar. At last count, we had issued almost \$900 million in VAT bonds in just two weeks.

Madam President, we are also expediting income tax refunds to individuals. To date, \$240 million in income tax refunds has been paid to 25,000 individuals, thus clearing off all outstanding individual tax refunds in respect of which there are no questions outstanding. In just over two months, therefore, we have made accelerated tax refund payments in cash or bonds, totalling \$1.6 billion, all designed to inject money into the economy to keep people in jobs during this

difficult period. Accelerated payments of corporation tax refunds are currently being considered.

Madam President, we have provided the credit union sector with \$100 million to provide soft loans to their members at a rate of .5 per cent per month on the reducing balance and with a suitable moratorium. Another \$100 million would be made available to the credit union movement in due course, specifically for loans to SMEs.

We have also finalized a government guaranteed soft loan programme for small and medium enterprises in the amount of \$300 million to be administered by First Citizens Bank Limited. These businesses represent an integral part of our economy and make a valuable contribution to employment creation. The programme targets SMEs with annual gross revenues of between \$1 million and \$20 million and the funds being advanced are intended for salary payments, working capital and purchase of raw materials. These loans will also come with a moratorium.

For businesses with less than \$1 million in annual revenues, the National Enterprise Development Company Limited (NEDCO) will be given the mandate to manage a grant facility which will be sourced with an allocation of \$30 million. We have also made available to Eximbank US \$25 million per month for three months to fund established importers to bring in food, pharmaceuticals, sanitary products, PPE and other essential supplies during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This special forex window ensures that there are no shortages of these essential items.

Madam President, we have also assisted our UWI students at Mona, Jamaica and Cave Hill, Barbados with grants for the purchase of food to see them through

their exams. These students are now either back in Trinidad and Tobago or on their way, having been granted permission by the Minister of National Security to do so with special arrangements put in place to accommodate this.

Madam President, the Central Bank is working closely with us to help the economy navigate through these difficult circumstances. The repo rate was reduced from 5 per cent to 3.5 per cent. As a result, commercial banks have reduced their prime lending rates from an average of 9.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent. This reduced cost of borrowing is also intended to assist our businesses. Reserved requirements for the commercial banks have been reduced by the Central Bank from 17 per cent to 14 per cent, freeing up \$2.6 billion previously held in reserves. This increased liquidity which is now at a record level of \$10 billion in the banking sector is facilitating the reduction in lending rates. The banks are also providing a moratorium on mortgages and instalment loan payments. Penalties are being waived on overdraft facilities on a month by month basis. Credit cards now have reduced rates and increased credit limits. Banks are being encouraged to reduce mortgage interest rates and discussions continue between the banks and the Ministry of Finance on this issue and interest rates, generally.

Moneylenders have reduced interest rates and deferred payments. Credit unions are being encouraged to exercise forbearance. The Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Limited and the Home Mortgage Bank are deferring mortgage payments up to three months in the first instance. The Housing Development Corporation is deferring mortgage payments of up to two months which will be reviewed as appropriate. Import duty on VAT is being waived or remitted on certain medical and emergency supplies being imported to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam President, let me turn to Tobago. We have provided the THA with \$50 million to fund the Tobago Regional Health Authority with its COVID-19 related expenses. We are providing \$5 million for channelling to the enterprise development programme to assist small businesses and we are making available a special fund at \$50 million to provide grants to Tobago hoteliers for hotel upgrades and financial support based on a plan developed by the Tobago House of Assembly.

To finance all of this, we will, among other initiatives, tap the domestic capital market for such resources that are necessary. This will be facilitated by the recent amendment to the Development Loans Act which created substantial headroom for funding mechanisms. To that end, we have to date utilized just \$1 billion of the \$10 billion available under the Development Loans Act. We have not borrowed \$20 billion as touted by the Opposition.

Moreover, we have approached multilateral institutions and development banks to ensure that appropriate external financing is also available to meet the requirements of the expended fiscal deficit in 2020 and 2021. In the interim, we had taken steps to allow for emergency drawdowns from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund not exceeding US \$1.5 billion or TT \$10 billion in any given financial year for budgetary support in exceptional circumstances such as the current pandemic.

As a country, we have long recognized the importance of building up a foreign exchange buffer through our HSF which has a net asset value of close to \$6 billion as of June 12, 2020, US \$400 million more than the value of the fund when we assumed office in September 2015, despite withdrawals totalling US \$1.1 billion since 2015 and the recent volatility in the US Stock Market. On May 15,

2020, the Government withdrew US \$400 million from the HSF for budgetary support, not \$10 billion as touted by the Opposition.

Madam President, there is no question that fiscal 2020 will be exceptionally difficult, although the pandemic is expected to fade in the second half of the year allowing for the gradual lifting of the containment measures and the reopening of the economy. Our focus over the past few months has been to keep the economy moving, stimulate economic activity, provide financial assistance to individuals and businesses, and keep as many people employed as possible, including all workers in the public sector. Madam President, we consider policy and delivery execution to be an essential requirement to ensure that all citizens are able to steer through this crisis and come out of it more resilient.

On April 16, 2020, the hon. Prime Minister established the 23-person committee chaired by the Prime Minister and comprising Ministers and his team representatives from the business community, labour, senior public servants, academia and non-governmental organizations to develop and design a road map for Trinidad and Tobago post-COVID. Madam President, this committee's work was divided into two phases. Phase one, to address the issue of combating the pandemic and restarting the economy. That phase has been completed and the report of the committee is expected to be released shortly, that is, the actual final report, not the version that was leaked and circulated recently.

Phase two of the report, which is still a work in progress and expected to be completed by the end of this month, is focusing on remodelling our society and economy to create a more resilient, robust economically viable economy post-COVID-19. So to all of those commentators who are judging us by the early unofficial draft of phase one, saying that we have missed the boat, I say to you, to

defer your judgment. We have a hard-working and dedicated committee and with the help of the more than 1,000 citizens who have taken the time to submit proposals, all of which are being carefully considered, we anticipate that the report will be robust and will be a tool on which Trinidad and Tobago can build, grow and strive.

Now I turn to the fiscal outturn, projected fiscal performance for 2020. When all the priority areas are included and adjustments made in other areas, total expenditure for fiscal 2020 has been revised to \$53.107 billion, almost the same as the original budgeted expenditure of a \$53.036 billion. Total revenue was originally projected at \$47.749 billion, predicated on an average oil price of US \$60 per barrel and natural gas price of US \$3 per MMBtu. The original fiscal deficit was estimated at \$5.208 billion or 3.1 per cent of GDP. Madam President, the adjustments included in the Supplementary Appropriation Bill, together with curtailment of expenditure within most Heads of Expenditure, as well as an anticipated decrease in total revenue of approximately \$9.2 billion will result in a revised overall deficit of \$14.533 billion or 8.8 per cent of GDP.

The Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives met on Wednesday, June 10, 2020 and agreed to a supplementary appropriation of \$2.686 billion for the financial year 2020 in order to fund urgent and critical recurrent and capital needs to September 30, 2020. This supplementary appropriation is being sought by way of a Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2020) Bill, 2020. The details of the proposed changes were circulated to all Members and discussed at the meeting of Standing Finance Committee on Wednesday. At this juncture, let me advise this honourable House of the supplementary appropriation for fiscal 2020. Of \$2.6 billion, it affects 15 Heads of Expenditure

and comprises recurrent expenditure of \$2.5 billion and development programme expenditure of \$167 million. Funds for the supplementary appropriation would be sourced from overall savings in expenditure across all Ministries and Departments and from borrowings. The supplementary appropriation of 2.6 billion affects the following Heads of Expenditure.

The Judiciary requires an additional \$99,648,000 to facilitate the payment of monthly rental for accommodation of 19 locations to the end of fiscal 2020, to pay salaries to contract officers for August and September 2020 and to facilitate critical vacant contract—to fill, sorry, critical vacant contract positions within the Family Court, Criminal Division and District Criminal and Traffic Courts. Funding is also needed by the Judiciary to meet outstanding payments for various miscellaneous expenses and to pay the National Maintenance Training and Security Company for the provision of janitorial and security services.

With respect to the Service Commissions Department, the sum of \$2.142 million was required to meet the payment of rental cost for several properties to September 2020.

The Elections and Boundaries Commission requires the sum of \$43 million to pay overtime to staff who are expected to work beyond normal working hours in preparation for the general election in 2020 and also, to pay officers employed on a short-term basis to carry out field work in communities prior to the election. Funding is also required by the EBC to meet the cost incurred as a result of recently filed petitions in relation to the 2015 parliamentary election and other expenditures associated with the impending general election of 2020, such as the payment of travelling and subsistence to field officers, the purchase of materials and supplies, and cost for postage, printing and advertising, training allowance to

temporary officers working on election day, and rental accommodation for returning officers.

Madam President, the Office of the Prime Minister requires the sum of \$47.22 million in order to enable the National Security Council to meet operational expenditure to September 2020 and to facilitate the disbursement of \$30 million in funds to the major religious organizations to provide food support to citizens and permanent residents who have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The OPM is also being given additional funding to meet their debt service payments.

The sum of \$105 million is required by the Tobago House of Assembly. The sum of \$50,000 is required to enable the Tobago Regional Health Authority to meet expenditure associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including training of health care workers and educating the public; establishing a primary health care facility to meet the needs of persons in quarantine, in self-isolation and manage patients who test positive for the COVID-19 virus; maintenance of a distinct COVID-19 pandemic response service to prevent disruptions in the primary and secondary care service; and for the acquisition of PPP and other equipment, as well as the hiring of additional staff.

Under the Public Sector Investment Programme, the sum 50 million is also required to enable the THA to administer the Tobago tourism accommodation relief programme to give financial support to hotels and guest houses in Tobago, and another 5 million to provide relief to entrepreneurs whose businesses have been impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ministry of Finance requires the sum of \$880 million. The sum of \$180 million of that is required to meet payments to banks for various COVID-19 social

support services such as food cards, provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. The sum of \$400 million is required to enable the administration of a salary relief grant to persons within the NIS system to mitigate the financial challenges experienced by persons suffering loss of earnings as a result of the pandemic. The sum of \$200 million is required to enable the credit union facility programme as a strategic response to the pandemic. Under the Public Sector Investment Programme, the sum of \$100 million is required to facilitate the award of contracts and the payment of project management fees to NEDCO for the construction of the new terminal and associated works at the ANR Robinson International Airport, Tobago.

The sum of \$177 million is required by the Ministry of National Security to effect payments of increments, overtime and allowances to officers of the prison service, for the upgrade and maintenance of the coastal radar system, to meet expenditure for the Counter-Trafficking Unit and the Witness Protection Programme as well as the rental of vehicles for covert operations. Additional funding is also required to enable the Strategic Services Agency to make payments associated primarily with its CCTV project and other works and projects. The sum of \$5 million is required to enable the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management to meet the cost of preparation for the 2020 hurricane season, including expenditure on personal protective equipment, stores, vehicles and the implementation of the National Alert State system.

Madam President, the sum of \$76 million is required by the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs to meet the payment of salaries for additional contracts, to pay outstanding fees to local and foreign attorneys for the provision of services, to enable the Legal Aid and Advisory Council to pay external counsel

fees, to meet expenditure for the newly established Public Defenders Department, and to effect the payment of arrears to permanent staff and contract officers on the approval of terms and conditions of employment.

Madam President, with respect to the Ministry of Health, the sum of \$224,582,000 is required to supplement the 2020 funding to facilitate payment to 11 new intensive care nurses from Cuba, 20 doctors attached to the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 hotline and other staff in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the overall sum, \$184.669 million is required to supplement the allocation to the four regional health authorities to enable the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The funds are to meet the cost of consumables, infrastructure and equipment, and the procurement of additional human resource services. The sum of 36 million is required to facilitate the payment in interest on a number of loan facilities for pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies; the redevelopment of the Central Block, Port of Spain General Hospital; and the completion of the Arima Hospital. Madam President, the sum of 21.4 million is required to supplement the funding for the On-the-Job Training Programme as a result of the 10 per cent increase in stipends in 2020.

With regard to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, the sum of 116.7 million is required to cater for the 15 per cent increase in wages to workers and fees to contractors with the Community Environment and Enhancement Programme announced in the 2020 budget presentation. The sum of 20 million is required to supplement funding for emergency food support to needy households in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the sum of 14 million is required to enable the Rural Development Company Limited to continue the National Reforestation and Watershed Rehabilitation Programme recently

transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Madam President, the sum of 244 million is required by the Ministry of Works and Transport for the fuel relief grant to 5,000 registered and/or active maxi-taxi owners and 50,000 registered and/or active taxi owners in the context of the adverse effect of the pandemic, for payments on a bond that was secured for the implementation of the Programme for Upgrading Roads Efficiency, to enable the National Helicopter Services to meet its debts obligations in 2020 and for various expenses associated with the provision of the inter-island ferry service and the coastal water taxi service in 2020.

The sum of 35.3 million is required by the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs for arrears of payments and current payments associated with the United Nations Peacekeeping operations and the United Nations regular budget and working capital fund.

The sum of \$30 million is required by the Ministry of Communications to pay increments and acting allowances due to monthly paid officers, to meet additional expenditure associated with the televising and information sharing sessions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, provision of other services works and supplies for that Ministry as well as to pay outstanding bills and expenses for goods and services provided to the Government Printery, the National Archives and library services. Under the Public Sector Investment Programme, the sum of \$12 billion is required to pay outstanding allowance for the upgrade of the equipment at the Trinidad and Tobago Television Limited.

Madam President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services requires \$581.794 million to enable the recruitment of additional staff to fill vacant positions within the Ministries, to provide additional financial support to non-

governmental organizations, to enable meals to be provided to the homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic, to supplement the 2020 Senior Citizens' Grant allocation, to cater for existing beneficiaries and to meet new expenditure associated with the increase in the number of senior citizens accessing the grant, to supplement the 2020 social assistance programmes allocation, to provide additional support to existing beneficiaries and to assist with income support to families which experienced loss of income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, to provide rental assistance to families and to supplement the 2020 Disability Grant allocation, to assist existing beneficiaries through a top-up and to cater for new beneficiaries among other things.

Madam President, the 2020 budget projected an overall fiscal deficit of \$5.287 billion or 3.15 per cent of GDP for the year. For the purposes of this, the administration of the budget, an overall deficit of 5.8 billion was projected for the period October 01 to March 31, 2020, which would have been reduced later on as revenue came in. However, based on the actual revenue received and expenditure incurred, the Government realized a deficit of \$5.3 billion up to March for the first six months of the fiscal year, approximately 498.6 billion less than the projected outcome. This was as a result of lower than projected revenue collections on lower expenditure.

Given our more recent challenges, when all priority areas are included and adjustments made in other areas, total expenditure has been revised to 53.107 billion, a small increase of approximately 70.6 million over the original budgeted expenditure. Further, with the adjustments included in Supplementary Appropriation Bill together with the curtailment of expenditure within most Heads of Expenditure, as well as the estimated decrease in total revenue in 2020 of \$9.2

billion mainly due to much lower than projected oil and gas prices now estimated at US \$25 per barrel for oil and US 1.8 per MMBtu for gas, the 2020 fiscal deficit is now estimated at \$14.533 billion.

Madam President, hon. Members are asked to be cognizant of the fact that the majority of the supplementary appropriation for fiscal 2020 is in respect of Current Transfers and Subsidies. This is due largely to the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unavoidable related expenditure which ensued as a consequence. I wish at this time to assure this honourable House that this administration will continue in 2020 to manage this country's financial resources in a prudent manner. Madam President, we have been proactive and taken immediate measures to protect the population and prevent irreversible damage to the economy as a result of the pandemic.

After the initial shock of 2020, we project a moderate rebound over the next 12 months aided by the measures we are putting and will continue to put in place. Once the necessary stimulus has helped stabilize the economy, we plan to bring our debt levels back on their earlier trajectory by the year 2023. We will do this at a pace that balances the goal of avoiding a contractionary consolidation while minimizing financial risks. However, the combined shocks of the collapsing gas and oil and—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Madam President—and the disruption in economic activity, both here and overseas, have provoked major changes in our economic forecast. Accordingly, we have revised our baseline scenario for macroeconomic projections based on new energy prices assumptions of US \$45 for oil and US 2.9 for MMBtu for gas in 2021 in order to assess the actual impact of

our economy, public finance and external situation. Based on our fiscal stimulus programme, we now project a decline in GDP in 2020 of 2.4 per cent, rebounding to growth of 4.7 per cent in 2021 with a continuing inflation rate of 1 per cent or less, consistent with our policy of easing the burden of price adjustments on the population.

11.15 a.m.

It is noteworthy that there are abundant resources to face gross funding needs over the next several years under the stressful conditions created by the pandemic and there is ample financing available to cover the primary deficit and debt service. Indeed, at this time, Trinidad and Tobago is unique among countries in the region in that there is no liquidity crunch given the variety of funding sources available in spite of the dislocation of global market, including over \$20 billion in potential funding from the multilateral agencies, such as IADB, CAF, World Bank, international and local banks, bilateral partners such as China, and the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. And on top of all of this, we also have access to almost \$4 billion in low-cost funding, rapid financing instruments from the IMF, if at all necessary.

In order to maintain economic momentum, we expect a temporary increase in our debt-to-GDP ratio to just over 70 per cent but when we return to Government within the next few months, having weathered the economic storm created by the pandemic, decisive and prudent action will allow us to bring back our public debt to GDP to its pre-crisis level of 63 per cent by 2023, owing to our medium-term fiscal responsibility approach and the recovery of the economy under the next PNM Government. The HSF remains healthy, and as I indicated earlier, close to \$6 billion. Our foreign reserves remain healthy at \$7 billion or eight

months of import cover. This is why, after a gruelling round of evaluations over the last month in the midst of the pandemic by four international credit rating agencies, we had maintained good credit ratings.

This has reflected itself in the good performance of the trades on the New York Stock Exchange of our 2016 US \$1 billion international bond which continues to strengthen and improve in value, trading at strong yields. It is because of this excellent economic performance that Trinidad and Tobago continues to be rated by the prestigious economic magazine as fifteenth in the world amongst 66 emerging economies, in terms of our ability to withstand the adverse economic effects of COVID-19, scoring well in all four categories namely: public health, foreign debt, cost of borrowing and reserve cover. Indeed, in terms of foreign reserves cover, we have been deemed to be among the strongest emerging economies in the world. And to be clear, that is not the PNM saying so, it is the economists at the Oxford University determining how well we have done.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed the most serious threat ever to our social and economic well-being. However, this administration has acted and will continue to act forcefully, aggressively and proactively, utilizing all tools at its disposal to provide critical support to the economy during this challenging time, to create the conditions for its recovery and diversification and growth. As a result, Trinidad and Tobago has been ranked by the prestigious Oxford University as number one in the world in terms of its management of COVID-19 and its ability to exit the lockdown without undue risk to the population and the economy. Madam President, I end by saying that I am firm in my view that no other Government could have managed this crisis created by COVID-19 in the way that we have. Our robust, sensible, proactive, efficient and comprehensive response to

the virus has received worldwide acclamation and endorsement. I am proud to be part of this Government that has been ranked as number one in the world in dealing with the diverse demands of health, social and economic challenges caused by COVID-19. I thank you, Madam President, and I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam President: Sen. Mark. [*Desk thumping*] Sen. Mark, I remind you, you have 40 minutes.

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I am very happy to speak on this Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2020) Bill, where through this measure the Government is seeking to authorize the issuance of some \$2.68 billion from the Consolidated Fund to address a number of issues that have been outlined in the Bill currently before us. After some five years almost of negative economic growth, the Trinidad and Tobago economy is in extreme and grave trouble under this outgoing Rowley-led administration. The lives and livelihoods of the people and the economy are literally at the crossroads. This country is heading for a virtual meltdown under this inept and incompetent administration. [*Desk thumping*] No amount of deception of reality, manipulation of the numbers and figures, and disinformation of the true nature of the state of the economy will absolve this outgoing regime from total responsibility for some five years of total mismanagement, waste, misappropriation, misallocation and corruption.

The measures contained in the Bill before us, Madam President, and the false and confusing narrative outlined by the outgoing Minister clearly does not square off with the absolutely disturbing reality facing our twin-island republican state. Whether it is in the fields of under-budgeting in order to hide the real deficit,

whether it is the mounting debt explosion facing our nation, whether it is the overdrawing of the Exchequer Account, whether it is the shameless effort to waive procurement procedures for the acquisition of goods and services, including consultancy under the recent CAF, \$200 million loan or TT \$1.4 billion, or whether it is the fake news narrative of this Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic, which another prestigious and reputable magazine known as *Forbes* did a survey of some 200 countries, and that has debunked this narrative that Trinidad and Tobago has done exceptionally well. Out of 200 countries, I will show where Trinidad and Tobago has been placed at 168.

Madam President, the emerging picture remains the same, the economy is in trouble and the future livelihoods of the key actors in our economy is in grave danger. Madam President, there is no doubt that the mid-year review is linked inextricably to the shocks of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Trinidad and Tobago is currently trapped in a deceptive PNM political time warp, absent of the reality of the present and loaded with deception and misinformation with a harrowing precipitous future given the economic realities in the context of lives and livelihoods. The world is struggling with the health and economic effects of a profound new crisis caused by COVID-19. Many economies have entered the crisis with increasing higher public debt, mass unemployment, greater and growing inequality and poverty, with a possible domino effect on both capital and commodity markets which are essential for global economic growth.

Madam President, the International Monetary Fund has projected global growth for Latin America and the Caribbean at minus 5.3 per cent, whilst our excessively and blindly over-optimistic Minister of Finance is projecting a decline of a mere 2.4 per cent, which is even contrary to the Roadmap Committee which is

predicting a decline of over 10 per cent. And further, our Minister of Finance and the hon. Minister in the Ministry of Finance has just made a startling revelation that growth is expected to be increased by 4.7 per cent some time in 2021; this is what is called PNM fantasy economics. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, Government has not gotten it right on any of its growth forecasts as it relates to the last five years.

Madam President, I will show you where for the last five years the Government has gotten it wrong. Madam President, in 2016, the Government predicted a growth rate of close to 2 per cent. What was the reality? It turned out to be minus 6.3 per cent. Madam President, when we come to 2017, they also predicted—the Government predicted that things will grow, economy will grow, there will be a turnaround in the energy sector. What did we have? We have at the end of fiscal 2017, a contraction of this economy by 2.3 per cent or thereabouts. Then when we come to 2018, Madam President, they predicted growth, we ended up with 0.2 per cent minus growth and similarly in 2019, we had a further contraction of close to minus 0.2 per cent. And in 2020, the Minister is projecting a contraction of 2.4 per cent when the world International Monetary Fund is proposing and projecting something like about 5.3 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean; T&T's road recovery team is predicting, as I said, 10 per cent and above. Where is the Minister getting his data from, Madam President, is anybody's guess. Madam President, the International Monetary Fund has warned that whilst Government is being led by science and data in the public health battle against COVID 2019, there appears to be little evidence of a similar approach being applied to decision-making of our economy.

Madam President, in the absence of data-driven decisions on the labour

market and business activity, the risk of destabilizing the very fragile balance between saving lives and livelihoods becomes even more challenging. Madam President, it is not only us in the UNC that is concerned with these fantasies coming from the lips of the Minister of Finance, the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce, in an article dated June 13th in the *Trinidad Express*, indicated that the Finance Minister's projection for the performance of this economy in 2020 does not appear to be aligned to current realities. That is what is being stated, Madam President. And just yesterday in the *Business Guardian* of Sunday the 14th of June, economists are predicting a contraction overall in 2018 possibly of 18 per cent. Madam President, if this turns out to be true this would be a monumental mismanagement of our country by this clueless, hopeless and directionless PNM administration. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister is hoping to return this country's debt to GDP ratio to the level of what you call the pre-crisis level of 63 per cent by 2023, Madam President. When we look at the *Economic Bulletin* of the Central Bank for 2020, our public sector debt is some \$122.7 billion or 74.7 per cent of GDP at the end of 2019. When we combined that with the fiscal deficit, which we understand is estimated at \$14.5 billion and the higher public debt that we are experiencing, Madam President, what can we expect in the future but higher taxes for the citizens of this country? Madam President, we need to refer to the Auditor General's Report which is giving us a picture that is very shocking, because we are not getting this information from the Government and from the Minister of Finance. Madam President, I refer you to page 16 of the Auditor General's Report, and this is dealing with the debt, the public debt of our country. Madam President, we are being told that central government debt at the end of September 2019, stood at

\$75.2 billion. This is according to the Auditor General's Report, \$75 billion in central government debt made up of domestic debt, external debt and BOLT projects.

Madam President, when we look at contingency liabilities which is off-the-books financing, we get another \$124 billion. When we add up the both, we are getting something like about close to \$200 billion. The Government must clear the air on these figure, because here it is we have the Comptroller of Accounts making the following statement on page 16, so somebody is not squaring off with the population of this country. Hear what the Comptroller of Accounts is advising this Government, and I quote, Madam President:

“The issue of the public debt and debt sustainability has long been a concern for policy makers of both fiscal and monetary authority. The Central Government Debt and Contingency Liability must be examined and analyzed in its...”—entirety—“to ensure present and future debt sustainability.”

So we are now talking about debt sustainability. Madam President, the Comptroller of Accounts goes on to say:

“It is important for the overall macro-economic policy to manage debt and it needs to be coordinated closely with fiscal, monetary and other macro-economic and financial policies. For this reason, debt managers and fiscal and monetary authorities should share an understanding of the objectives of debt, fiscal and monetary policies, given the independence among the policy instruments.”

And the last sentence, Madam President, in ending this quotation reads:

“Close coordination is needed to choose an appropriate mix of financing and

policy adjustment to facilitate economic recovery while preventing the build-up of an unsustainable debt burden.”

This is a statement coming from the Comptroller of Accounts on page 16 of the Report of the Auditor General dated April 29, 2020. These are matters that the Government must clear, what is going on? We are being told that the debt is \$122 billion in the Central Bank *Economic Bulletin* of January 2020. Here it is we are getting two sets of figures for debts—public debt: central government, \$75 billion and contingency liability \$124 billion. Madam President, that is not all that we are faced with. On page 117 of this report, you have a situation where the Government, according to the Auditor General, has overdrawn the Exchequer and Audit Accounts by some \$41 billion. This was increased by \$1.3 billion or 2.82 per cent when compared to the previous year’s figure of \$40 billion. So the Government has overdrawn on the Exchequer Account which is the account of the Consolidated Fund. So what we have taking place, Madam President, is an independent report coming from the Auditor General painting a completely different picture to what we have been told.

Madam President, I would like you to also join me in looking at the document called the Senate document, which deals with the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) Bill and which outlines the different Heads of Expenditure. Madam President, when you look at the different Heads of Expenditure, what do we see? This is alarming; it is disturbing; it is concerning. Madam President, the Government comes in the Supplementary Appropriation Bill to deal with the following matters: one, the Office of the Prime Minister, Head 13. Madam President, there is a loan, a mysterious loan, I have to call it, of some \$500million at a rate of 4.5 per cent fixed interest and the Government had to pay

\$11.2 million in interest payment. Madam President, we do not know in this document what this \$500 million is for that is located under the Office of the Prime Minister. We do not know why this loan came under the Office of the Prime Minister in the first instance and not under the Ministry of Finance. We would like the hon. Minister in the Ministry of Finance to explain to this Parliament what this \$500 million was all about.

Madam President, we go to Head 28, the Ministry of Health. Would you believe in the supplementary appropriation, not in the Appropriation Bill for 2019/2020, which was read in the Parliament in October of 2019, what we are seeing here are the following: loans and interest payments to the following institutions. The Eastern Regional Health Authority has a loan of \$500 million over an 11-year period from ANSA Merchant Bank. Madam President, you know what happened? We only discovered—the Minister mysteriously only discovered that he had to pay \$13.9 million in interest payments in this supplementary appropriation that we are dealing with it. Madam President, NIPDEC, what do we see? NIPDEC has borrowed \$671.3 million on a seven-year fixed rate loan from the RBC merchant bank requiring, Madam President, is payment of close to \$14 million in interest payment. You want to tell this Parliament that the Minister of Finance did not forecast that, he could not see that, Madam President? Then we see UDeCOTT in Arima, on the Arima Hospital, borrowing US \$16.9 million over a 10-year period from RBC Royal Bank and the Minister only discovered in the supplementary that he had to pay \$2.837million in interest.

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

You go on to UDeCOTT, Central Block in Port of Spain, \$101.9 million over an 11-year period from the FCB. The Minister of Finance only discovered,

Mr. Vice-President, that we had to pay \$2.46 million in interest. Then we go back to UDeCOTT, Central Block in Port of Spain General Hospital, a loan of \$70.3 million from CIBC First Caribbean International Bank. They only discovered in this period here that they had to service an interest of 1.7 or \$1.671 million. And, Mr. Vice-President, again, on the Central Block of the Port of Spain General Hospital, the Government has borrowed US \$12.4 million over an eight-year fixed rate loan from the First Caribbean International Bank and they only now discovered that they had to pay interest of \$1.954.

Mr. Vice-President, it becomes “curiouser” and “curiouser” as if we are *Alice in Wonderland*. You have a situation where the Ministry of Works and Transport is making a repayment on a loan which is a fixed rate bond for PURE, that is the PURE programme where they borrowed \$1.5 billion.

There is no financial institution identified as to who raised that money, all we have here is interest payment of \$27 million. Mr. Vice-President, these are not new loans, all were contracted a while aback. How come the meticulous and astute Minister of Finance is only now realizing that servicing of interest of these loans is now due? What are the reasons for this oversight? Is it pure and sheer incompetence or is it a complete mismanagement of the country’s debt portfolio, or was it deliberately designed and executed at this time in order, Mr. Vice-President, to make the budget deficit smaller, or is it that the Minister simply does not know the real loans outstanding for which he has responsibility?

11.15 a.m.

Mr. Vice-President, this is mayhem as it means that this country is sitting on a virtual mountain debt bomb, which in the future could explode and bring major destruction to our nation. We want answers. We want to know why the UDeCOTT

loan is located in the Office of the Prime Minister. We want to know what was that loan for. We want to know whether the Government did not know about this loan. We want to know why the secret in this matter.

Mr. Vice-President, as I am on loans, let me just bring to your attention and this honourable Senate's attention a discovery that I made recently on behalf of the UNC. Trinidad and Tobago—it was tabled in the Parliament last time we met. It is a document involving US \$200 million or \$1.4 billion, from the Corporación Andina de Fomento, better known as CAF. This loan of US \$200 million or \$1.4 billion is to finance what is called the Sector-Wide Approach Programme, SWAP, for the development of air and sea transport and tourism infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago.

What I found amazing, disconcerting, and I need answers on this matter, Mr. Vice-President, under Article, what is called 30, hear what it says—let me just get that Article clear. No, it is Article 21.6 on page 9 of this loan agreement that I have before me. Hear what it says, Mr. Vice-President, it says—and I should read it from the loan agreement directly for this honourable Senate:

The parties agree to waive Article 30 of the general conditions entitled Procurement of Goods and Consulting Services as well as subclauses 33.1, 33.2 and 33.4 of the general conditions entitled Reports for this Loan.

Mr. Vice-President, when you go to Article 30 of this particular document, what does Article 30 tell us? It tells us that the borrower, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, signed by the Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, on behalf of the people, hear what is being said—it is being said that the borrower and/or the executing agency as applicable shall carry out international tender for the acquisition of goods, contracted works and selection and hiring consultants in the framework of

the programme or projects, except one, when it comes to the acquisition of goods for amounts superior to \$1.5 million, they will do it; hiring of works for amounts higher than US \$6 million, they will advertise; and the hiring of consultants for amount over US \$750,000, they will tender.

Under 30.2, the call to an international public tender should be carried out with widespread publicity of the tender notices, avoiding restrictions particularly regarding the origin of goods or other that prevent or hinder a transparent and competitive tender.

When you go to reports under 33.1, and as I said 33.4 and 33.5— 33.1, and 33.2 and 33.4, the Government has agreed with the CAF to waive any tendering of procurement of goods and services, including consultancy services. It is the first time we are seeing a clause such as this. How this can pass a board of governors is beyond us. Mr. Vice-President, that would not happen under the CDB or the IDB or elsewhere.

Waiving international tendering can mean the following: the Government will drawdown and receive funds quickly. Whether it is put out to the intending use is of little consequence. We are in an election year. Mr. Vice-President, or is there an already identified supplier? Without tendering, the supplier will simply receive the loan amount regardless of cost to his firm, getting a handsome profit which can, of course, be shared with persons unknown.

Mr. Vice-President, we want to recommend today that we call on the Government to immediately withdraw the removal of the waiver not to engage in procurement services by international tendering and let us get the Government to remove this highly irregular clause that is unknown to us. This is the basis of corruption and the Government has to answer on this matter.

Mr. Vice-President, let me go immediately to another very critical matter that I am sure you would want to have some clarification on, and this honourable Senate. We have been told over and over by this Government that they have done extremely well with COVID, and they have been quoting the Oxford University report that they are number one. I also want to bring to the attention of this honourable Senate a *Forbes* magazine or journal report entitled “COVID-19 Regional Safety Assessment, Big Data Analysis of 200 Countries and Regions, COVID-19 Safety Ranking and Risk Assessment”, by a group known as “Deep Knowledge”. It was published recently in the prestigious and reputable *Forbes* magazine.

Mr. Vice-President, utilizing “COVID-19 Regional Safety Assessment Analytical Framework” comprising of the following measurement, one, “Quarantine Efficiency”, six subcategories; “Government Efficiency of Risk Management”, six subcategories; “Monitoring and Detection”— of COVID, six categories under that; “Healthcare Readiness”; “Regional Resiliency” and “Emergency Preparedness”. Out of a total of some 200 countries involved in this survey, including Trinidad and Tobago, the Regional Safety Assessment and Analytical Framework placed Trinidad and Tobago, out of 200 countries, at 168. It means that under the categories: “Quarantine Efficiency”; “Government Efficiency...”; “Monitoring and Detection”, Healthcare Readiness”; “Regional Resiliency” ;and “Emergency Preparedness”, this Government has failed. That is what this report is showing.

So they went to the region of Central America, and out of 27 countries Trinidad and Tobago placed 24th. The only countries that they beat is Guatemala, French St. Martin and Haiti. That is their ranking. So we want to put to an end

this false narrative that this Government has done exceptionally well and they have managed COVID. This is a *Forbes* magazine publication, reputable and prestigious, just published. So I want the Government to take note of that, Mr. Vice-President.

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

Sen. W. Mark: Five more?

Mr. Vice-President: Yes.

Sen. W. Mark: Thank you. Mr. Vice-President, it is clear that without the Panday administration and without the visionary leadership of Brian Kuei Tung, former Minister of Finance, we would have already been in the jaws of the International Monetary Fund, under this incompetent and clueless Rowley-led administration. It was the foresight of the Panday administration, under the former Minister of Finance, that we were able to establish the Interim Revenue Authority or Interim Revenue Fund, permitting this Government the fiscal space in the face of the pandemic crisis. They have not put one red cent since they came in 2015 into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. [*Desk thumping*] Every cent that has been gained, has been gained as a result of prudent investment on the stock exchange. The Government has done nothing to boost that particular instrument.

More importantly, the much needed quarantine and medical facilities, again, during the pandemic, have come as a result of the visionary leadership of the incoming Prime Minister, the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. [*Desk thumping*] It was under her leadership in the last PP Government that we were able to establish children's hospital in Couva, and we were able to establish the UWI Debe campus, which are both being used as centres for quarantine in the pandemic. Our visionary leader has a master plan to fast forward

Trinidad and Tobago into the future, anchored on a platform of prosperity, equal opportunity, national unity and social justice for all, founded on the basis of the following five pillars: people-centred development, getting the people back to work; two, pro-business, allowing the private sector to drive growth and development; three, resilience, deep economic reforms but with a human face; four, local content, giving people a sense of ownership and independence. And, Mr. Vice-President, the fifth pillar is sustainability, promoting environmental sustainability.

Mr. Vice-President, if there is one fundamental lesson that we must draw from this experience, it is that COVID-19 taught us how to social distance to preserve our lives and to preserve our livelihoods. We are calling on the people of Trinidad and Tobago to take that lesson very seriously because we believe for their safety, security and well-being in the future, they must begin to practise political, social distancing from the People's National Movement as we get nearer and nearer to the general election. [*Desk thumping*] Just as how we are practising social distancing to save our lives from COVID and the virus, we must exercise political distancing in order to save our country from this albatross that is weighing heavily around our necks called the PNM.

The PNM seems to be trapped in a political deception time warp. We urge the Prime Minister to do the proper thing. Do not continue to hold in your back pocket the date for the general election. We call on him to call the general election and to call the general election now. In closing, may I remind you that Maya Angelou said, people may forget what was said, what was done. People will forget what was said to them, but people will never ever forget how you made them feel. The PNM will get the real feeling of the people when those elections are held.

Mr. Vice-President, I thank you very much for the opportunity to speak.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine, I remind you that you have 40 minutes.

Sen. Amrita Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2020) Bill, 2020, a Bill which is a direct reflection of the midterm budget review. The Bill before us is seeking an appropriation of \$2.7 billion, in light of the \$9.2 billion loss in revenue. This is primarily as a result of the negative effects, as a result of COVID pandemic.

The IMF, together with other international agencies, have already said that the upcoming revised projections paints an even grimmer picture as there is profound uncertainty of recovery. Since 2015, the Trinidad and Tobago economy has undergone turbulent times. A wave of belt-tightening initiatives and just when we thought we could start back on our feet, in came this pandemic.

This administration, I have to say, really has experienced dealing with some economic adversities and it has really tested their economic management capabilities. It is in times like this that we remember the role of the State. We ought to remember that there no such thing as perfect macro-economic conditions when an emergency like this hits us. We are forced to manage the crisis. We have to hit the ground running and just respond.

So in light of this, I would like to take the opportunity to recognize the Government and the dedicated public servants for the swift response in the response to the public health crisis. We are one of the very few countries in the Caribbean region and even the world that was so swift in adopting the World Health Organization recommendations for public health care measures, and we

have seen the results thus far.

The financing strategy to finance the gap from the resulting shortfall of the \$14.5 billion was sourced from a good combination of cheap credit from multilateral lending agencies and savings from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. This is acceptable in terms of the existing debt situation pre-pandemic.

We as a Republic need to understand that it is a complicated situation. No country really got it right. There was not much time to stop and think and reflect about how to respond. You just had to respond and correct by trial and error as we progressed.

There were few countries that are categorized as exceptions, these are New Zealand and Canada, but we have to bear in mind that these countries have strong public financial management systems and strong ICT systems.

There are four principles that govern the response of the crisis around the world. These principles revolve around reducing the potential for higher costs, due to the partial close down or total close down in some instances; supporting banks, so that they could continue to function; assisting firms, so that they keep workers on their payroll and escape liquidation; and compensate households that lose income, especially the poor and vulnerable. To varying degrees, Trinidad and Tobago adopted these principles.

The genesis of the economic response has to be focused on and should be guided by implementing temporary and targeted measures, and ensuring that we keep the receipts from implementing those measures.

As expected, governments all over the world were sent back to their books to recalibrate their budgets in response to the pandemic. The hon. Minister is keeping the expenditure around the same level as originally budgeted, despite the

\$9.2 billion loss in revenue. They have supplemented this gap by borrowings from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and I heard that the Minister did indicate that she got some additional funding from savings. I am not too sure whether she was referring to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, or savings from reallocation in the budget, the various Heads in the budget. However, I leave that for clarification because I believe that if there were virements between various Heads, it would have been reflected in the appropriation Bill before us today.

But what I notice, Madam President, was that the appropriation Bill before us, the Minister is actually seeking \$1.4 billion in supplementary expenditure. However, this accounts for around 55 per cent of the total appropriation. Interestingly, 45 per cent of the appropriation is for additional funds on various Heads unrelated to COVID.

These are with respect to loan interest payments, \$81.8 million; responding to the financing measures outlined in fiscal 2020 package, that is with respect to the OJT training, the 15 per cent wage increase for CEPEP. There is also for an increase for the Senior Citizens' Grant and also Disability Grant. There is also outstanding payments to several service providers, including under the Judiciary, Service Commission, Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

But my contribution today, Madam President, I primarily want to focus on the finances allocated towards the response of the COVID pandemic and this financing really come under of Heads of Ministry of Finance, which was allocated \$880 million; Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, \$581.8 million; Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development.

Firstly, the budget is based on an oil and gas price of US \$45 per barrel and \$2.90 per MMBtu for natural gas. It also forecasts an economic contraction in

GDP of around 2.4 per cent in 2020. I would like to seek some clarity on these figures because given the global climate, and without facts on the expected performance of the energy sector, I did not hear the Minister indicate to us what production levels are expected to be going forward. I am not convinced that the contraction would actually be so small.

We have actually not recorded positive growth since 2015. As a matter of fact, in 2016 and 2017, we recorded a contraction of minus 6.3 per cent and minus 2.3 per cent respectively. Back then, in 2016 and 2017, we were not even dealing with a pandemic of this magnitude, we were just dealing with an energy shock. So I have some concerns there and some reservations.

While the Government's public policies in response to the pandemic are quite comprehensive, the targeting of these programmes and the timeliness of the implementation of these programmes could result in problems, and also, we have the depth of the global recession that we also need to take into consideration. It is worsening in some countries. Madam President, there is also so much uncertainty with all the forecasts all over the world. The IMF has actually revised that 3 per cent economic growth contraction in the world down to 5.2 per cent, down to 4.2 per cent in April, and at the end of this year, they are actually going to revise their projections downward again.

Our estimates are based on the IMF's baseline scenario and in their baseline scenario they actually estimated, yes, certainly a recovery in the second half of the year, but they also estimated that the average price of a barrel of oil would be \$35.60 in 2020 and \$37.90 for 2021.

So over the weekend—and I mentioned that the pandemic is actually worsening all over the world, and that is primarily because we have pockets of

second waves that are popping up everywhere. Just over the weekend, Beijing authorities actually had to shut down another seafood market due to an outbreak. We have also in the US, Arizona, California, Florida, they are also experiencing a second wave. This would continue to happen all over the world until a vaccine exists.

I am raising this concern because how integrated our economic stability and viability is with the rest of the world, how interconnected we are with the rest of the world. And anything that happens to China again would send ripple effects throughout the rest of the world and including us. So if the hon. Minister of Finance could give us some clarity on the assumptions of this 2.4 per cent contraction and the subsequent 4.7 per cent in economic growth in 2021, it would much be appreciated. It would really help us to understand.

Secondly, Madam President, the hon. Minister did mention the monetary policy response which was accommodated by the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. It actually resulted in an injection of approximately \$2.6 billion in liquidity in the system, bringing total liquidity to around \$10 billion in the system. This extra liquidity, coupled with the subsidized loan facility programmes, such as the credit union facility programmes valued at \$200 million, the NEDCO programme at \$30 million, that grant for small and medium enterprises, and the First Citizens Bank \$300million two-year interest—[*Device goes off*]

Madam President: Would the Senator whose device just started speaking, can leave the Chamber for five minutes and return in five minutes. Continue, Sen. Deonarine.

Sen. A. Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President.

The First Citizens Bank \$300 million two-year interest rate moratorium loan,

in combination with the monetary response from the Central Bank, would really try to improve the cash flow position of individuals and also, the businesses in the country. However, we have to bear in mind that the economic climate before this crisis was not entirely one that was bursting with consumer confidence. It was actually on the lower end.

Now, I understand the economic logic in providing incentives for the medium-sized enterprises with sales revenue between \$1 million and \$20 million. It is reasonable. These enterprises have greater employment-generating capacity and investment capacity ability to make investment, because of their high level of resilience and ability to withstand the crisis. However, rather than giving grants to these medium enterprises, maybe stronger consideration should have been given to considering a higher amount being allocated to the micro and smaller enterprises that make an annual sales revenue of less than \$1 million. These are the ones with a lower level of resilience. These are the ones that are most susceptible to being completely wiped out of existence because of the crisis.

So, Madam President, the success of these policies, especially the loan-based initiatives, are highly dependent on what we economists refer to as the monetary transmission mechanism, in light of significant, unpredictable behaviour change patterns that would emerge out of this crisis.

As a result, many people may actually hold more cash and invest less due to the high level of uncertainty. In the short term it is more about survival, and survival, Madam President, encourages risk aversion and thriftiness.

12.15 p.m.

So, Madam President, what I am saying is that the transmission mechanism that would develop from these policies can—yes, we can rely on them to sustain

the level of consumption and maybe help to recover some demand in the economy, keep it at some level to try and counteract the level of negative impact that it would have on contracting the GDP levels of the country. However, the extent to which it translates to a boost in economic activity is actually a hit or miss at this point, because of the high levels of uncertainty.

However, as economic activity resumes, let us say that in 2021, we record this growth that the Minister is projecting, this growth would be accompanied by a growth in import. Right now the current account performance may not be favourable due to a dip in energy earnings and the sudden stop in trade around the world. But as economies open, when imports begin to resume, should exports not recover as quickly, Madam President, we will have the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago intervening again to provide foreign reserves. Now let me clarify, because I know the Minister did indicate that the official foreign reserves is actually at eight months import cover and we actually did record an increase over the past couple of months in our gross official reserves. The official reserves have not recorded a drastic decline because, as we borrow to finance the gap, what happens is that, and as we withdraw money from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and we receive moneys from multilateral lending agencies for budget support and to finance a gap, what happens is that that US currency is actually reflected in the official reserves of the country, hence the reason we are actually seeing a favourable position right now with the official reserves.

But, Madam President, most of these moneys actually have to be converted in order to be spent in Trinidad and Tobago to finance the deficit, most of it as a matter of fact. So, over time, should we record this growth that the Minister is projecting, this would continue to be a concern. The Central Bank will continue to

have to intervene in the foreign exchange market, and as a result we will have to take into consideration—stronger consideration—our revenue-earning potential of our exports.

Another thing, Madam President, is that based on the initiatives outlined in this Bill before us, and as the Minister mentioned during the piloting of the Bill, almost over 100,000 persons are in receipt of food support. Over 50,000 persons have already received salary relief grants. But, Madam President, when you go to the groceries, you quickly realize that the purchasing power is quickly withered away. And I am sure everyone here has experienced the hike in food prices since the onset of this crisis. Despite efforts from the Minister in the Ministry of trade, we have still been experiencing a high level of food prices, inflated food prices, not only as a result of the pandemic, but however prior to the pandemic. But what happens is that, when we look at the data to see what really is happening with inflation in the country, we see that as of February, the Central Bank website actually reported that year-on-year headline inflation was around 0.5 per cent. This is almost no inflation. This is like almost no increase in any prices.

And I am raising this issue, Madam President, because we are all experiencing higher prices in the groceries, and I wonder how much value for money these beneficiaries of these different grants are receiving. Perhaps it is maybe the barest of the minimum, and they may not be able to afford much with the grants that they are receiving. Something is clearly wrong with this inflation rate. Minister, you need to speak with the Central Statistical Office, the Minister who is responsible for the Central Statistical Office. I do not believe that our current consumption patterns are reflected in the basket of goods used to calculate this inflation rate.

What usually happens, Madam President, is that the basket of goods that is used to calculate the inflation rate has highest weight in the consumption of food and the consumption of utilities. Those account for the highest weight, and as a result of the pandemic, those are the two areas for which we will experience an increase in consumption. And, therefore, we should experience an increase in inflation, which might very well be more than the 1 per cent that the Minister is actually assuming for the rest of the year that she is using as a basis of her macroeconomic assumptions. So it is in this context that I raise this issue, Madam President.

The other thing, Madam President, has to do with, also again the policy stance. And the ultimate aim and objective of this policy stance that the Government has is to avoid any drastic reduction in the unemployment rate, and also to reduce the extent of poverty that may occur as a result of this crisis. The Minister did mention that 47,000 persons received salary relief grants and also those persons who are in receipt of this salary relief grant were persons who would have either lost their jobs or suffered a reduction in income. However, the Minister did not separate for us how many persons have lost their jobs, and this is critical information, Madam President, because the unemployment rate that we are working with right now is as of September of 2018, which is recorded at 4.6 per cent, according to the Central Bank. And the poverty rate, I believe, is around 11 per cent, based on the 2014 SLC, SLC as in the survey of living conditions.

Now, Madam President, because I needed to find some sort of evidence to support my argument, I did some research and I found that the Inter-American Development Bank, on May 11, 2020, actually published a blog called “What Effects Will COVID-19 have on Employment in Latin America and the

Caribbean”. And interestingly what they saw was that, based on the estimates, they saw that job losses in Trinidad and Tobago can, as a result of the pandemic, be categorized into three categories. One, should we have a fast recovery, unemployment rate would increase by 3.9 per cent; should we have a long recovery, unemployment would increase by 7 per cent; and should we have a deep recession, unemployment would increase by 10.5 per cent. This means that in the most favourable situation, with a fast recovery, unemployment can increase to 8.5 per cent.

Now Madam President, I had to resort to these anecdotal evidence of the unemployment rate because I really expected the Minister to come here today with some preliminary evidence of what the unemployment rate was, at least as of December 2019. This is critical information to use as a baseline to help inform policy decisions, to ensure that the taxpayers’ money is being spent and is reaching the most vulnerable people in the country, the people who most need it. This information, coupled with information received by the eligible applicants of the salary grant would help you identify the extent of unemployment.

Now, let me explain why we need to identify the extent of unemployment. You see, Madam President, as with any shock you have temporary and permanent unemployment that tends to emerge. But what happens is that your policy response would vary in each case. If majority of the unemployment that occurs as a result of the pandemic, or any crisis, or any significant shock, is temporary in nature, then fine. Your temporary measures will work. However, if the unemployment rate is permanent, example as a result of permanent bankruptcies, permanent loss of jobs, permanent closure of businesses, then we really need to be crafting a different policy response; a policy response that is focused on reskilling,

retooling and increasing capacity of those who have been unemployed or suffered this unemployment, this permanent unemployment.

What we are trying to avoid, Madam President, and what I am trying to tell the Minister, through you, Madam President, is that we are trying to avoid an excessive dependence on the social safety net. The Minister may very well know that the social protection programme prior to COVID-19 was already ranked higher than regional standards at around 4 per cent of GDP. Now, let me be clear, I am not against social protection. It is necessary at this point in time to protect the welfare of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. What I am saying is that recovery from this crisis requires accurate data to facilitate identification of problems to allow us to craft succinct policy related to generating productive capacity and productive employment.

Revenue-generating capacity of the country is threatened until the waves of this pandemic subsides. Further, I really expected to see the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development receiving an allocation way greater than \$21 million to supplement not only the increase in the OJT stipend but also to help enhance the capacity to implement capacity-enhancing initiatives to unemployed individuals, creating productive ways to get them back into employment, creating resilience such that their skills become transferable and adaptable should another crisis hit. Because that is key. That is what we need. We need persons with skills that can be transferred and adapted to various and several instances and several situations. This is actually particularly applicable to the tourism sector more for Tobago than Trinidad because the tourism sector is actually going to experience one of the hardest hits. And it would take maybe a very long time to recover; more than two years, perhaps, somewhere in the vicinity of two to five years.

Madam President, I want to mention the fiscal deficit and ensuring fiscal and debt sustainability going forward. Now, I would not go into too much depth on debt. However, I want to mention that before the crisis, we needed a fiscal adjustment of around 2.5 per cent of GDP to stabilize debt at 63 per cent of debt to GDP. Now, I know the hon. Minister in her leadership recognizes this and is forecasting a decline in the deficit of around 8 per cent of GDP to 3.2 per cent of GDP in 2023. This is what economists refer to as a front-loaded adjustment. It eases financing constraints and gain credibility. I actually commend the Minister for giving us a sense of foresight on the issue. But I warn, Madam President, we should not overestimate our ability to cut expenditure to that extent because what this means, this contraction in the deficit over the next couple of years, what this means is that we are going to reduce the deficit by around \$8 billion and this can happen in one of two ways. And given uncertainty, we could actually have, one, the forecasted boom actually realizing over the 2021 to 2023 period. But the boom that we would request, we would need for this to happen, is actually massive, massive growth; growth that this country has not seen for quite a number of years; growth that requires not only a boom in the energy sector but requires massive, massive turnaround in the manufacturing sector and services sector. Should that growth not materialize, Madam President, debt dynamics indicate that this would mean that there would be a cut in expenditure that forthcoming. And cut in expenditure would not have to happen in 2023. It would have to happen from 2021 in order to maintain debt to GDP levels at its existing level, which is over 70 per cent of debt to GDP as the Minister indicated.

So, I would like to take this opportunity to give the hon. Minister some advice on the matter in identifying areas to cut expenditure, if that is even under

consideration. And I draw reference to the Bill which makes provision for quite a bit of expenditure that is allocated towards the payment of interest rates on loans for several state-owned enterprises, UDeCOTT, Nipdec. UDeCOTT actually appeared a couple of times, and the total interest payment that is being appropriated in this Bill, Madam President, for this purpose of interest payment that should have been taken care of in our original estimates is amounting to almost \$1 billion. And as a result this crisis, it is expected that there would be growth in state-owned enterprises liabilities. The growth in their liabilities will be matched by growing fiscal pressure on governments as tax revenue falls and government spending balloons. Even prior to COVID-19, they continued to represent a significant fiscal drain on the economy. Contingent liabilities at present stand at a record \$30 billion. Governments will need to reduce state-owned enterprises losses, increase their profitability and better manage their liabilities.

The second thing I would point out to the hon. Minister is that we know that tax administration is a problem in the country and we are working towards trying to solve that problem. But in the absence of a revenue authority, we need to speed up the process and start to adopt some measures to clean up the tax administration in the country. I would also recommend that the Minister take into consideration having a tax expenditure review done in the country.

Another thing, we could also look at the recommendations from the public expenditure review by the World Bank to revise any duplications, and inefficiencies in public expenditure. They already identified recommendations for the Ministry of Education via the GATE programme; the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, which I understand has quite a bit of

duplications of programmes, meaning programmes that are—more than one programme that exists that is serving the same purpose; and the Ministry of Health. But most critical, Madam President, going forward, for the importance of debt and fiscal sustainability going forward is that ensuring that we have a medium-term fiscal framework and a debt management strategy. And this would allow you to identify the fiscal risks and plan for how you would mitigate those risks. Madam President, it would help us to accumulate further debt with care. It will help to use debt efficiently. It will help us to maintain a resilient debt composition. It will help us prepare for external shocks.

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

Sen. A. Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President. And it will also help us to restructure debt in state-owned enterprises where may be necessary.

And I remind the Minister again, please do not overestimate your ability to cut expenditure. It is more difficult than it may seem. But with a medium-term fiscal framework and a debt management strategy, Madam President, a key requirement is what we call public support; public support on the need to do these things. We need data. We need transparency. But more importantly, what we need is, in order to attain transparency, we need to have a comprehensive fiscal framework being published for the entire public to look at, to scrutinize. These things would be available to credit rating agencies, international bodies and it would help our credit ratings going forward, Madam President.

Now, as I draw to an end, Madam President, the general policy narrative for the medium term is subjected to ongoing changes. When the health challenges subside, then we may very well discover that some industries that have existed before are no longer valid. Industries such as the tourism industry may be very

well redefined, as the world progresses into the realm of how things are done virtually.

As a result, labour market dynamics can change significantly in the medium term hence the reason for building resilient and adaptable skill sets in persons. More importantly, for these persons to be effective, there must be a strong institutional structure. And I ask: How were the public sector workers able to adapt to this shock? How many of them were able and equipped with resources to work from home? Without a doubt, Madam President, our public financial management system that forms the backbone for the delivery of all of these policies are handicapped, hence the reason we are in June and still there are so many payments and grants that are still being processed when the onset of this crisis started in March.

Madam President, finally, we have to recognize that in choosing transparency in the midst of any kind of crisis or serious problems, it requires preparing for the worse before the better. We need to be in a position where we are ready to take the risks associated with speaking frankly about the current problems that we are facing. Without this, progress will be illusionary at best. With absent data on what is not working, it is impossible to know what to fix and how to fix it. Madam President, no data, no progress. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*].

The Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development (Sen. The Hon. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus): Thank you very much, Madam President, and thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on such an important piece of legislation, the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2020) Bill, 2020.

Madam President, the world is confronting a crisis like no other. We are facing a totally unprecedented situation that can be classified as one of the most dangerous crisis humanity has faced in a very, very long time. It is one of the greatest adversaries that threatens mankind, and that is the coronavirus disease, also called COVID-19. This virus has caused tragic loss of lives and still continues to decimate lives across the world. It has disrupted the social and economic world order, virtually grounding the global economy to a halt. What was considered normal only a few months ago is no longer applicable and we are witnessing the emergence of what is being popularly called “the new normal”. Trinidad and Tobago has not been immune to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Fortunately, to address this humanitarian challenge, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago acted with alacrity and a package of measures were instituted to protect our people from the potential health and economic fallout of this pandemic. We acted, as a Government, decisively and in a coordinated and transparent manner to protect lives and livelihood.

Madam President, with the threat of COVID-19 literally at our doorsteps, we as a people were able to harness our greatest strength, the power of humanity. We worked and continue to work relentlessly to share, devise and implement effective measures to reduce and negate the impact of COVID-19.

And Madam President, if you would permit me, I would like to seize this opportunity to extend my personal commendation and congratulations to not only the team led by the hon. Prime Minister and included the hon. Minister of Health and the hon. Minister of National Security, but in particular Dr. Parasram, the Chief Medical Officer and his team of efficient, tireless public officers who guided this process. I know, like everyone else in this Chamber and in this country, I

speak from the position of their agreement that Dr. Parasram did a phenomenal job. At the personal level, I am indeed very, very proud of him. So I seize that opportunity at this point in time. And, Madam President, not forgetting all of our frontline workers. I will not identify them, everyone knows them, but they have contributed in a very invaluable manner to all of us being kept safe.

Madam President, the actions by this Government required significant resource mobilization, which the hon. Minister of Finance and his team of highly efficient public officers worked tirelessly to make available.

Madam President, this morning I wish to specifically offer my contribution on the supplementary appropriation of financing for the On-the-Job Training programme. Madam President, permit me to remind this honourable House and the population at large that one of the principal reasons for the introduction of the On-the-Job Training programme had to do with the problem generally encountered by young citizens who lack the experience criteria, and therefore could not respond positively to advertisements to fill numerous positions. And we have heard it all the while, all along the years, Madam President, even up to now. A young person goes for an interview and the fundamental question that is asked is the question pertaining to experience.

The programme was therefore established as a pre-employment initiative which offers young people between the ages of 16 years and 35 years an opportunity for introduction into the world of decent work, focusing their attention on intelligent acquisition of practical occupational skills and experiences within both the public and private sector organization.

Madam President, this programme that is popularly called the OJT programme provides for placement of trainees for a maximum of 24 months at five

clearly-defined qualification levels. Madam President, I would share the information concerning those levels, what is required at those levels, and the stipend paid a little later on in my contribution.

But Madam President, the Minister of Finance in his presentation of the Government's fiscal package on October 07, 2019, identified where the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, also known MoLSED, was allocated for its On-the-Job Training programme, a total of \$274million. At that time, the programme facilitated 5,601 trainees. But currently the programme has a placement target of 400 trainees per month, and I can proudly state that this target has been met on most occasions pre-COVID. Madam President, as a result of the level of training providers participation in both the private and public sector, this programme continues to provide for the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I am pleased to remind, Madam President, that the Cabinet, acting upon the advice of the hon. Minister of Finance, increased the stipends of OJTs at all levels by 10 per cent with effect from the 1st of December, 2019. Cabinet also approved the increase in the number of trainees from 6,000 to 8,000 trainees. Madam President, as a consequence the stipends paid to the trainees were increased as follows: at level 1, which caters for those students who have craft certification or CXC subjects, that is known as level 1. We have 2,011 trainees in that category. The old rate of stipend was \$2,750. The new rate is \$3,025. Level 2, which caters for those students at CAPE and who are in possession of diplomas, we have 893 such trainees. The old rate of stipend was \$3,960. The new rate is \$4,356. And I must say, Madam President, at level 1, where you have those young persons with CXC and craft, because the stipend is not as high as the others, we place those young people very close to their home, so that that stipend will not be eaten up by

paying transportation.

At level 3, one can find those young persons with associate degrees. We have approximately 210 trainees in that category. The old rate was \$4,950. The new rate is \$5,445. And then we have level 4, Madam President, which is the first degree level. We have approximately 2,263 trainees in that category. The old rate was \$6,875. The new rate is \$7,562.50. And then we have level 5, Madam President. This is the Master's degree or Post Graduate degree. And we have 224 trainees in that category. The old rate was \$7,920. The new rate is \$8,712.

Madam President, these increases resulted in a direct increase in expenditure for the programme of approximately \$3 million per month. As at March 01, 2020, the OJT programme had listed 5,259 active trainees. Assigned for the month of March 2020 was a total of 411 candidates, who were prepared to undergo the prerequisite orientation and assume training effective 23 March, 2020. Therefore, projected active trainees as at March 31st, stood at 5,670.

However, Madam President, in the month of March the programme was suspended due to the effects of COVID-19 pandemic stay at home order implemented by the Government. It should be noted, however, that the trainees assigned to essential service organizations were allowed to provide much needed administrative and operational support during the stay at home order.

I am happy to state, Madam President, that this Government, in an effort to ensure that trainees were not adversely affected took the decision to continue to pay all stipends to trainees for the period of the stay at home order. So that any "ole talk" that being bantered about that the Government has not paid OJTs is absolutely incorrect. This Government is a Government with heart.

I am happy to state, Madam President, that as at 30th of May, 2020, the

number of trainees however were reduced to 5,013 as a consequence of exits of trainees from the programme. Because you see, Madam President, the programme is a revolving programme. Trainees have different dates of coming onto the programme, and at the completion of the two years, trainees must exit the programme. So every day the number of trainees will fluctuate; those coming off the programme, and trainees coming on to the programme.

Madam President, the Cabinet took the decision to allocate an additional \$21,405,000 to facilitate payment of OJT trainees stipends and training providers reimbursement for June to September 2020. This is a show of confidence that the Cabinet acknowledges the contribution of the OJT programme and its positive impact on the efforts towards the growth and development thrust of the Government.

And, Madam President, I think at this point in time I would like to take the opportunity to disabuse the minds of members of the public who may have been tempted to digest certain incorrect information which was published in yesterday's newspapers. I do not remember which one of the newspapers; certain statements made by a Member of Parliament, Fazal Karim, on the OJT programme. And I would just like to state it is so unfortunate and so sad sometimes, but it has—I have identified that it is a habit of that particular MP to burden the population at large with maliciously contrive misinformation regarding this Government's highly-applauded On-the-Job Training programme. I mean—*[Interruption]*

Sen. S. Hosein: On a point of order, please, Madam President, 46(6), please.

Madam President: Yes Minister, I have to agree with the Standing Order that is invoked. You are speaking about a Member of Parliament.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you for the guidance, Madam

President. Madam President, I do believe that there is a degree of envy with regard to the success of this programme by some persons. And it is being recorded in the embellishment and the expansion of this programme. And there are those who are desperate enough to seek any bandwagon to condemn this Government and this programme without a shred of supporting data.

But Madam President, this programme will continue to grow and to strive. This programme was established in the year 2002, Madam President. And over the years the programme was never assessed. In collaboration with the International Labour Organization the team, MoLSED team, headed by myself, along with the Permanent Secretary, engaged in a collaboration with the International Labour Organization and assessed this programme, and the feedback that we have received has been very encouraging, Madam President, and the recommendations offered by the ILO, we are in the process of implementing those recommendations, which will undoubtedly strengthen this programme for the benefit of all the young persons in Trinidad and Tobago who so apply to be part of this programme.

Madam President, while the OJT programme was identified to play a central role within the establishment of a national apprenticeship system, in preparation and development of the nation's human resource capital, the programme has evolved tenfold. This Government in its wisdom decided to reposition the programme from under the purview of the National Training Agency to the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development with effect from the 31st of May, 2017, having recognized the programme, while not being perfect, has and continues to fill a major employment gap for young persons in the labour market of Trinidad and Tobago, whilst building our human resource capacity.

Madam President, the placement and training afforded to trainees is not only

done along the academic level, but is a major area for the development of employable skills, which enables them for full employment. The OJT division continues to revisit its vision and mission statements to ensure that the programme continues to remain strongly aligned to that of the MoLSED, which is decent work, industrial peace, opportunity for all.

And Madam President, the essence of this programme revolves around the concept that there are employers out there who may need certain skill sets in their organization and therefore, they apply to the OJT programme to become providers. Those employers go through a process, a process whereby to ensure that the environment within which the on-the-job trainee is being placed is one that is conducive for the full development of that trainee at that particular work site. And what is required, Madam President, is at the end of the period, the provider submits an invoice to the OJT to be reimbursed. The provider pays 40 per cent and the Government pays 60 per cent. And therefore, it is a good partnership.

Madam President, what we do at the level of the OJT is place those young persons within their career path. So for example, if someone is trained in agriculture, we place them within the agricultural sector. If they are in administrative, they are placed there. If they are medical officers, they are placed in hospitals. If they are nursing personnel, they are placed. We always place these young persons consistent with their career paths and their career dreams.

I dare say, Madam President, and I would want to quote at this point in time, GERALYN McCLURE FRANKLIN of Stephen F. Austin State University said, and I quote:

“Employers want a new kind of employee with a broad set of skills, or at least a strong foundation in the basics, in order to facilitate learning on the job.”

Some of which has been identified as efficient communication, quality work ethic and professionalism, pride in work, creativity, and initiative, stress management, decision making and time management, and critical thinking and emotional intelligence.

With this in mind, the programme director and her team is currently reviewing the programme's model of orientation, training, monitoring and evaluation of the trainees over the 24 months. This is intended to develop an assessment and appraisal system that will ensure a higher standard of training delivery and employment readiness to enter the world of work. But, of course, Madam President, as you know, this Coronavirus, known as COVID-19, has really disrupted so many facets of life and has introduced us to an environment that we who exist at this point in time, we have not had the experience with. And, therefore, what we are identifying emerging are requirements for new sets of skill sets of workers. But Madam President, that is for an entire debate on its own.

But Madam President, what we at the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, what we are attempting to do is to position this programme. In giving effect to Cabinet's decision to increase the number of trainees to 8,000, we had intended to place at least 400 trainees per month. But that meant—normally the training takes place at Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies in their auditorium. But, of course, with this new normal and the fact that we cannot congregate in any vast numbers, that has certainly impacted on our ability to place 400 trainees a month. The director and her team is in the process of working out a new schematic how we can approach the training of these trainees, the orientation, before the placement of the trainees at the work site. How we can best accommodate that within the new normal that not more than 10

persons can congregate at any point in time.

Madam President, I turn to projects and initiatives of the OJT programme. In keeping with Government's National Development Strategy 2016/2030, which is popularly known as *Vision 2030*, that, and I quote:

“Our public institutions must become more accountable and responsible for performance and service delivery; and we must simplify and modernise processes, structures and tools, while separating key institutional functions and consolidating others, to improve service delivery.”

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you, Madam President. I think I will finish within that five minutes. The division continues to assess its target audience and is currently working on several projects geared towards improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the operations of the programme to ensure value for taxpayers' money. And some of these, Madam President, include the following:

1. a review of its policies and procedure and process flows to develop its standard operating procedures;
2. data entry for OJTs to be paid using the Government's Integrated Human Resource Information System also known as IHRIS pay system;
3. development of a national tracer study to be implemented soon;
4. development of a communication app in collaboration with the International Labour Organization;
5. collaboration with iGovTT resulting in the online registration for the OJT programme to be launched soon via a modern app;
6. engagement of iGovTT to develop its information system; and

7. collaboration with the National Insurance Board and the Board of Inland Revenue to improve the ease of doing business for these trainees.

Madam President, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the director of the programme and those members of staff of the OJT programme for their continued commitment and dedication to not only getting the job done but to the 5,000-plus trainees facilitated in the programme. And Madam President, sometimes these staff members operate under some trying circumstances, and I really would like to publicly thank them.

In closing, Madam President, it will be remiss of me if before I close I do not bring to the attention of this House that we understand that the allocation may seem enormous but the impact and benefit value to both the trainees and the labour market cannot be quantified. Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Sen. Anita Haynes: Thank you Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, as we as a Parliament meet to discuss the supplementation of appropriation in the sum that has been approved by the House of Representatives.

Madam President, I intend to spend my 30 minutes allocated here today to speak directly to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, to the many thousands of persons who have been reaching out and finding ways to send messages to us as a group, as policymakers, as an entity that has put ourselves forward to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

To those who have been calling us and asking for relief to help them keep their heads above water, to those who still to this day are still waiting for help.

Madam President, those persons would have listened to the Minister of Finance on Friday and the Minister of Finance today, tell us that we are in a good place. Madam President, *The Good Place* is a sitcom on TV and the premise is very simple. Four persons who have died wake up to find themselves in what is called “the good place”. They are subjected to numerous bits of torture. They are told and reminded constantly that despite all of the evidence to the contrary, that they are in a good place, Madam President People in Trinidad and Tobago, and the Minister used the right words, to tell us we are in a good place, that despite all of the evidence to the contrary, all of the thousands of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who would have been left asking: ”But who is this ‘we’ the Minister of Finance was talking about? Who is this ‘we’ that is in a good place?” You see, it cannot be the people who are unemployed right now, Madam President, and still waiting on a salary relief grant. It cannot be the people. It cannot be the university graduates, and I will address thoroughly, Madam President, the contribution of the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development who spoke of the OJT programme, and I will address that a little later on in my contribution. Because I know it is not these university graduates who would have done everything right in the hopes of being able to make a career for themselves, in the hope of looking for opportunities for the future to create a future filled with hope, Madam President, with opportunity, with aspirations greater than a two-year contract. It cannot be these people that they are saying are in a good place.

I listened as the Minister of Finance spoke about keeping people in jobs. If, Madam President, we were all to be honest in our contributions, there is no room for any Member of this administration to speak about keeping people in jobs; not after having presided over the retrenchment of thousands of workers in their

tenure. This administration cannot speak about keeping people in jobs. Madam President, every day when I check my Facebook messages, my WhatsApp messages, I am inundated with messages about persons who would have lost their jobs over the last five years.

This particular supplement of appropriation, mid-year review of 2020, gives us a chance to assess the performance of this Government. It gives us a chance as a nation to critically assess whether or not we are in fact better off today, whether we have access to more opportunities, whether we feel confident to invest in ourselves. Do we have hope for the future, or are we just all here trying to survive? You see, I wish to say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we ought not to be satisfied when a government sets a very low bar for themselves, barely achieves it and then pats themselves on the back.

I have listened to Minister after Minister, Members of this Cabinet, come before this country and say: “We have done a great job. We have managed and everything is going well.” But then I listen to the people of Trinidad and Tobago who cannot find it in their heart to agree. You see, in five years, Madam President, five years have been littered with broken promises and excuses. And only has to take a look at the budgets that have been presented to see what the pattern and the track record was, and you can see now, Madam President, that with or without COVID-19, we would have been right here today discussing some of these very same programmes in the supplementation Bill presented before us today.

The first budget presented by this administration, we were told that they were going to restore confidence and rebuild trust, Madam President. We were told in this rebuilding of trust that there would be an adherence to accountability and transparency. In 2020, we are still asking for that accountability and

transparency.

We were told the following year that they were going to shape a brighter future, that there will be a blue print for transformation and growth. And now we as a nation must ask ourselves as this Government reaches the end of its tenure: Do you see that brighter future? Have you seen that transformation? Have you seen the growth that they have been talking about?

In September 2017, I was given the opportunity to join the Senate Bench. I listened as the Minister of Finance told us about a change in the paradigm, that we were going to see a monumental shift in the way things were done and the way that governance was run in this country. But what we saw in years to follow would have been the same spending, the same blame game, the same excuses and all came down, nothing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, 2018 was the year of the turnaround. It was, Madam President, the gas light budget. the year we were told that all was well and the sun has come out on the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The following year we were told that we will get stability, strength and growth.

Now, Madam President, in this mid-year review, we are told again that we are in a good place and despite the fact that you, citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, has spent four years with limited opportunities, in the last few months because of the COVID 19 pandemic—and we acknowledge and we are aware that they were unusual circumstances, unprecedented circumstances, and that they created a scenario that would have exacerbated problems—but Madam President, it would be disingenuous, it would be illogical, it would be irresponsible, to suggest that those problems started in January 2020.

1.15 p.m.

I look at the Schedule before us, Madam President, and the allocations that are before us, very few of them have anything to do with changes relating to the last few months and to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government must tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago that what is before us, what has come before the people of Trinidad and Tobago if COVID-19 never existed.

You see, Madam President, this allocation that the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development spoke about to the OJT programme was made in the budget debate last year. Madam President, and I had to make the point then and will make the point again now, that as the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development came before us and spoke about the changes to the programme, and spoke about the fact that they were able to keep young people employed and go through the merits of the programme, I say to the Minister, again, what added benefit in the last four years? What has been added to the OJT programme to make it more sustainable, to allow for young people to find ways build careers, Madam President?

The Minister spoke clearly stating that there was a placement that—she spoke about the idea that you need experience to get jobs. And absolutely you need experience to get jobs, absolutely you need to be in the world of work to be able to be employable, but what really happens in the OJT programme? You could ask anybody who has been part of the programme what actually happens there. You put in your paperwork, you sign up and you are placed somewhere. Is your placement syncing necessarily about your career path, your education path? No. That is what we are told, Madam President, but I am in the age bracket of a number of persons who participate in the OJT programme. What happens in the real world, Madam President, is that you go into a programme for two years, and you come

out of the programme and you still cannot find a job, and our employment statistics will bear that out, Madam President, people are not making these things up. They are not making up the fact that you can in Trinidad and Tobago spend four years pursuing your degree, three years in Trinidad—four years where I went to school in the States—pursuing your degree, and you can come out of it and have no prospects for employment, and then you go into the OJT programme and you come out of it and you still have no *[Interruption]* prospects for employment.

Madam President: Minister, the Senator is allowed to make her contribution, please.

Sen. A. Haynes: Thank you, Madam President. It is not my fault that the truth disturbs. You see, the thing is, Madam President, our role as policymakers should be to keep people at the centre of our policies. It is not sufficient to come here and put more money towards a programme that if your assessment was accurate, if you looked at it, you would realize that it has not benefited the people of Trinidad and Tobago in the way that you said. Yes it is all well and good to have two years of employment, and we are grateful for it, but if you do an accurate assessment of the programme, you would realize that careers do not come out of the OJT programme, and there are simple fixes. Madam President, if you assess the problem honestly, if you looked at it and then you made deliberate policy decisions to fix the problems as you see it, instead of pretending that they do not exist, then we would not be in this same situation years later.

Madam President, the OJT programme, I think, the allocation has been in 2019, in the mid-year review the Ministry was allocated an additional \$39 million for the OJT programme. They were given more money in the appropriation for fiscal 2020, and yet again now in the supplementation as we are discussing here

today, Madam President.

We are told that, and it is not surprising, I think, in an election year or in the year prior to an election year that all of a sudden you remember that young people are unemployed and agitated in this country, and then all of a sudden you throw some money at the problem and you say, we are going to increase the number of OJTs, we are going to increase your stipend by 10 per cent, but give us no plan to increase their employment opportunity prospects after those two years, nothing is ever said about that, and that is a disservice, Madam President, to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is a disservice to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago to have a Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development come before us time and time again and say all that you deserve is two years to maybe, hopefully find a way to make it in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President.

You see, when the Minister raised the points on the OJT programme there was no correlation to our youth unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago. You see, if this administration wanted to work with progress and development in mind, the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development would have told us by now, five years later that there was some conversation between the Ministry of Education and the OJT programme, that there was some conversation to align our developmental goals to the OJT programme, that there was an actual focus on youth employment and that this was not simply a way to mamaguy young people who are now entering the voting pool.

If you are telling the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President, that what you are doing as a Government is meant to be progressive, it is meant to be sustainable and it is meant to give them hope for the future, you will not come here and say that you have simply injected a further—what was it?—\$21

million into a programme that if you looked at the net benefit, there was no benefit to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

You see again, the problem with this administration is that they have failed to put in place any plans or policies for job creation. They have failed to put in place in their developmental plans ways to create sustainable employment for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and in particular the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. They have failed to do that, Madam President, because jobs, employment, job creation was not at the heart of their policymaking because they focused instead on five full years of excuses, Madam President, to come in the last year of their administration and tell young people, “Look two years”, good luck with that.

You see, people in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President, are asking for an opportunity to earn a decent wage. They are asking for a government that will create opportunities for advancement in Trinidad and Tobago. They are asking for a proposal, a policy, Madam President, that is detailed, that shows us how we are going to position ourselves in Trinidad and Tobago by using our most precious resource, our human resources and create in Trinidad and Tobago a space where you are not talking about OJT anymore, you are talking about harnessing the potential of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and using that to the development of Trinidad and Tobago, and that, Madam President, is how you have progressive policy discussion in the post COVID-19 world.

When we started speaking about the creation of jobs, of 50,000 jobs in five years, Madam President, it was scoffed at, not possible they said. Not possible for them perhaps, but very possible for a UNC government. You see, Madam President, all you had to do was put people at the centre of your policies and then work in consultation with your communities to create for Trinidad and Tobago a

developmental plan that was detailed, workable and had people at the centre of it all.

I will go through some of our plans shortly, Madam President, but I want to also touch on the fact that the Ministry of Communications was allocated \$30 million here. The Minister of Communications is not present to give us the details of this allocation, and that is unfortunate, Madam President, but accountability and transparency in government affairs are critical for people to have confidence in what the Government says that they are doing with the money.

I want to also note that there was no additional money, Madam President, for the Ministry of Education, and I am also just bringing this up very briefly because over the past week some of my colleagues and I have been visiting some schools to assist in the sanitation of schools to prepare for the upcoming examinations CSEC and CAPE in the secondary schools, and then eventually the SEA. Students are expected to come into these buildings, Madam President, and we were told that teachers, principals were called in and told that they will be assisted with the sanitization of their schools. And you know what they were given, Madam President? They were given toilet paper and hand soap, and they were told that they could come back in a few days to get some disinfectant, and everybody had to figure themselves out with that.

So while the Ministry of Communications gets an additional \$30 million, Madam President, our children, the next generation of Trinidadians and Tobagonians are expected to go out there and write their examinations, and the teachers, the school administrators must make do with disinfectant, with some disinfectant, the toilet paper and hand soap, but we, Madam President, we are told as a nation that we must be comfortable and comforted with that, that we are in a

good place.

The Minister of Finance told us today that we need to just hang on for a little bit. The road map committee is working assiduously doing a good job, that just like the light bulbs and the Wi-Fi across the nation and the free masks, Madam President, that all these things that they are still working on, that are still promised time and time again, that just like that, the work of the Roadmap committee, just hang on for a little bit, we will get there eventually. And while, you know, Madam President, it would have been laughable if we were not talking about the future of our nation, that in 2015 we said that this Government did not have a plan. We did not know how true it would have been, but after five years, Madam President, that in the last few months of the administration, that they would still be grappling and pushing the deadline for a plan in the last few months is amazing.

With that being said, Madam President, in October of 2019, after years of consultation, significant stakeholder group meetings, the United National Congress was able via our political leader Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar to present our “National Economic Transformation Plan”. We did that, at that time, Madam President, because it was important to us as a political party, as persons seeking to govern the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we deliver a message, that work is being done for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. In the context of COVID-19 we had to work quickly, Madam President, to revise the plan, to consider a post COVID-19 world and ensure that our plans would have still been viable and sustainable. It was important, Madam President, that somebody in this country thought about happens next.

Madam President, the United National Congress COVID-19 plan for turning around our economy and restoring growth and restarting the transformation

process away from a dominant energy sector is the kind of conversation the people of Trinidad and Tobago are hoping for. It is the kind of conversation that all political entities ought to be engaged in. While we talk about spending now, what we need to say is whether or not the spending that is proposed in this Bill that the Government speaks to us on a daily basis sometimes on, that the things that they are talking about will be investments in the future, a future for the people of Trinidad and Tobago where there is hope, where we can be aspirational, and where we are not just simply trying to survive and told that that is good enough.

In the context, Madam President, of job creation and keeping people in jobs, the United National Congress has spoken about a pro-business approach with a human face. So it is not simply to say, that we are going to keep people in jobs and then, again, despite all of the evidence to the contrary that there are many people who are without jobs right now, they did not tell us how they intended to do that, what were the stimulus packages that would have been put forward by the Government to keep people in jobs. So, Madam President, we have said that we would focus on restarting and supporting small and medium-sized businesses affected by the pandemic.

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

Sen. A. Haynes: Thank you, Madam President. We have said, Madam President, that we would focus on food security and we have given the details, the details are available to all the people of Trinidad and Tobago via our website to look at the plan to jump start food security because these are important conversations for the development of our nation, Madam President.

We have proposed economic booster shots for the economic recovery by the creation of three innovative funds to mobilize financial resources, Madam

President, because we are aware that public financing will remain tight for the foreseeable future. We are aware that public debt is rising to dangerous levels. Madam President, we are aware that any incoming government needs to be forward-thinking, needs to not take five years and some months to come up with a plan for the country, but to be able to mobilize financial resources to create a space for economic advancement in Trinidad and Tobago.

Our funds that we are looking to create are the national food security fund, the national infrastructure fund, and the national climate trust fund, and these funds will not raise our public debt. Again, these are all available for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to take a look at via our website, Madam President, because we believe that the time is now and the time has come for us to move away from petty political rhetoric, from excuses, from blame, and to move into detailed plans on how we intend to take Trinidad and Tobago forward.

Madam President, as I close my contribution here today, as I began I will end, that I am speaking to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I am asking the people of Trinidad and Tobago that after five years of this administration and the spending of over \$265billion, are you better off today? Madam President, to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, before the COVID-19 crisis hit Trinidad and Tobago, did you feel confident enough to invest in businesses or to invest in yourself? To the entrepreneurs in Trinidad and Tobago, do you feel that you can make it under the current system? Madam President, to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, you have to decide now, whether or not you can place your confidence in an administration that will give you promises and set a low bar and tell us that we are in a better place despite all of the evidence to the contrary. Thank you very much, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Seepersad.

Sen. Charrise Seepersad: Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill, the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2020), Bill, 2020. The Bill seeks to authorize the Government to access 2.68 billion from the Consolidated Fund to fund urgent and critical recurrent and capital expenditure, the main reason being that insufficient or no allocation was provided for the 15 Heads of Expenditure detailed in the Bill. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic is partly responsible for the shortfall in funding.

The significant decline in energy prices in the first half of 2020, also impacted on the availability of funds. It is also safe to say that coming into the 2020 fiscal period, the economy and financial position of Trinidad and Tobago was not robust.

The supplemental appropriation of 2.68 billion comprises recurrent expenditure of 2.518 billion, and PSIP expenditure of 167.6 million. Madam President, from the statistics provided, I estimate that out of 2.686 billion, approximately 1.4 billion or 52 per cent is related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the remaining 48 per cent is allocated to the following: salaries, rent for buildings, rent for vehicles, janitorial and security services, loan repayments, inter-island ferry service, coastal water taxi service, coastal radar system, and the ODPM for the 2020 hurricane expenditure.

Madam President, I fail to understand why all these expenditures are additional or unforeseen and could not be included in the initial budget for 2020. COVID-19 together with reduced consumption has wreaked havoc throughout the world and has significantly impacted and disrupted business activity as has never been seen before. To a lesser extent, Trinidad and Tobago is not immune to these economic challenges and the Government has mitigated the incidents of infection

and deaths while providing some relief to those most severely affected by the closure of non-essential businesses for almost three months. However, we are yet to see the final effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Trinidad and Tobago and the consequent impact on the economy, unemployment, business activity and taxation, that is, the ability of businesses to pay taxes.

However, on the positive side we have had limited exposure to COVID-19, access to the financial buffer of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and the availability of credit. Of course, debt financing will be an increasing burden on the available funds and dipping into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund has its own consequences and risks.

Given these prevailing economic factors, the Government has revised the 2020 budget as follows; total revenue decreased by 9.2 billion from 47.75 billion to 38.5 billion. Total expenditure marginally increased by \$711,000 from 53.03 billion, to 53.11 billion. The budget deficit has therefore increased by 9.2 billion, from 5.28 billion to 14.53 billion. The decline in GDP is projected to be 2.4 per cent. The budget deficit as a percentage of GDP is expected to increase from 3.1 per cent to 8.8 per cent.

Madam President, the trend in Trinidad and Tobago's real economic growth from 2016 to 2019 was negative and it is not expected to be any different in 2020. In 2016, negative 6.3 per cent; 2017, negative 2.3 per cent; 2018, negative 0.2 per cent; and in 2019, the estimate is negative 0.4 per cent.

In my view, the projected decline in GDP of 2.4 per cent in 2020, with growth rebounding to 4.7 per cent in 2021, assumes a significant turnaround in manufacturing services and the petrochemical sectors. This seems to be quite a stretch and not really realistic. Globally the picture is bleak with a recovery

horizon of two to three years. I support an optimistic outlook, but we cannot ignore the data and the reality before us. Currently, we have historically low worldwide economic growth rates, depressed energy prices, sluggish global demand coupled with containment measures that may have to stay in place until a vaccine is developed.

Further, it is expected that new waves of the pandemic could once again halt economic activity as currently being experienced in Beijing, Texas, Florida and California. It will be prudent planning for the Government to factor this variable into the mix and include these costs in the budget.

Given the collapse of prices for natural gas, ammonia and methanol, the reduction of the original budgeted gas price of US \$3 per MMBtu to US 1.80 per MMBtu in 2020, and US 2.9 per MMBtu in 2021, does not appear to be realistic given the significant of natural gas revenue to Trinidad and Tobago's economy.

While natural gas production over the first six months of 2020 was slightly lower in the same period in 2019, market prices were considerably lower with the obvious result of lower revenue while cost remained unchanged.

Another factor affecting the energy sector is the closure and idling of several methanol plants on the Point Lisas Industrial Estate including Proman, temporarily closed, Methanex's Titan Methanol plant idling indefinitely, Nutrien, temporarily suspended operations.

The prices enjoyed by methanol, ammonia and natural gas were in decline by about 40 to 50 per cent before the pandemic. The pandemic has further depressed and has further exacerbated the depressed petrochemical prices together with significant financial losses since March 2020. This can only have a further negative effect on GDP.

Madam President, when will crucial decisions concerning the natural gas value chain be made so that the country can have long-term confidence in all points along the chain. Further, I am hoping that the road map recovery committee includes in its recommendations not only measures to reduce the fiscal deficit and rising debt, but also implementation of legislative fiscal rules such as, one, debt rules which limit the level of public debt as a percentage of GDP. Two, budget balance rules target for the overall budget surplus or deficit.

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

VAT refunds: The Government has made progress in paying the VAT owed to businesses; this is commendable. However, the Government should endeavour to pay all bills when due so as not to stymie business activity.

Revenue authority: We cannot continue to have only 68 per cent of the workforce registered in the BIR and NIS systems, while 32 per cent are outside of the formal economic system and not contributing to the country's tax revenue. The Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority must become a reality in shortest possible time.

National Insurance: I would like to suggest that the Minister of Finance consider an amnesty for the payment of national insurance contributions. Mr. Vice-President, the National Insurance Fund is seriously underfunded vis-à-vis projected pension payments. There are numerous organizations in arrears with their national insurance contributions for various reasons or have failed to register their businesses in the specified time. The penalties to become compliant are prohibitive. An amnesty may lead to an increase in the contributory base which will have a positive impact on the fund's deficit.

Agriculture, food independence: \$500 million is allocated in the

supplemental appropriation Bill to agriculture to make Trinidad and Tobago more food secure.

Mr. Vice-President, if we are to substantially reduce the country's reliance on foreign food imports, increase employment, improve the health and nutrition of citizens, boost productive capacity and opportunities in agriculture, the Government must give agriculture the necessary attention, focus, resources and legislative protection including substantially strengthening praedial larceny laws. Most of the imports are not fruit, vegetable and root crops, but rather protein and related products, therefore, there must be a plan to increase the local production of protein and related products to meet the significant amount of demand.

1.45 p.m.

In any event, eating what we plant and planting what we eat may sound appealing, but the agricultural sector is not seen as viable especially by the younger generation. Cultural and technological retraining is critical for success. Agriculture is still hard work even with the latest technologies in hydroponics, and so on.

Procurement legislation: in the current economic climate it is critical that we spend money prudently. Therefore, we need to have the necessary framework in place to allow for transparency and accountability in all Government spending. The public procurement regulations must be finalized as a matter of priority and approved by Parliament so the Act can be fully proclaimed and implemented.

Diversifying the economy: Mr. Vice-President, diversification of the economy is crucial to our medium and long-term economic survival and growth. This mantra has been echoed over the decades with little to show. Some areas of diversification include tourism. Over the decades, the tourism Ministry has

morphed several times with successive changes in administration, personnel, directive and direction, and so on. Yet the industry is still to contribute in any meaningful way to the economy. The financial input continues to be immense while the returns are yet to show promise. In this time of COVID-19, countries are endeavouring to resurrect the tourist arrivals in the new normal of social behaviour. There will be much scepticism by visitors until a proven vaccine is available.

Digital economy: the impact of the global digital economy is a serious threat to Trinidad and Tobago's economic activity. Amazon, Netflix, Google, Twitter, Facebook, for example, are taking away media market share from businesses while having no local economic footprint. This activity has provided the platform owners with massive amount of personal data on consumers and with data mining, produced profiles for marketers. These digital platforms are designed to exploit world consumers via the Internet. In Trinidad and Tobago, economic activity is about consumption and not about local wealth generation. The Government should be concerned about how to get some of this wealth-generating activity from the digital economy by creating a global value chain which includes building platforms, devising a system to get taxes from these platforms locally, modernization and amendment of the legislative framework as it pertains to e-commerce.

Renewable energy: Mr. Vice-President, switching to renewable energy generation in the medium to long term will reduce Trinidad and Tobago's reliance on imported fuel and demand for US dollars. Fuel imports in 2018 was US \$1.76 billion, or 21 per cent greater than the total amount of non-energy exports for that year. Continuing to rely on a declining petrochemical revenue base while cost of constant or increasing, is a disastrous business plan. The solution of increasing

taxes is myopic and counter-productive. Continuously increasing the debt burden is also foolhardy since the country's future, for generations to come, will be mortgaged. I truly want to say that Trinidad and Tobago is an economic good place. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to join the debate on this Bill for an Act to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorized by the Appropriation Act, 2019, (Act No. 21 of 2019).

Mr. Vice-President, permit me right away to set the context of the particular Bill because so far, I have heard a lot things about—a lot of things about a lot of things, and I want to address the Bill frontally. But before I do that, Mr. Vice-President, I followed the contribution of Sen. Mark very closely and from his perspective, Sen. Mark's perspective, there would have been three high points. Two for sure, from his perspective. One would have been the references to the Report of the Auditor General, the most recent report laid in April. The other would have been the *Forbes* survey of 200 countries. And then the third would be the usual references to Government failing to adhere to any form of procurement practices and transparency, and so on.

But, Mr. Vice-President, the reference to the *Forbes* survey really struck me, as I keep saying, every time you try to diminish the work that is being done in this country in relation to COVID-19, every time you try to diminish that work, you are really beating down on the Chief Medical Officer, the medical professionals, the doctors, the nurses, the paraprofessionals, and the bulk of this country that has

worked to ensure that we have had a relatively safe progress through this pandemic. It is not perfect, we have had eight deaths, and we continue to express our condolences to those families who have had loss of life as a result of COVID-19.

But, Mr. Vice-President, Sen. Mark has gone to great depths and produced—he did not give a date, he just said recent, as there are at least two *Forbes* publications in relation to this survey. But, Mr. Vice-President, if you go to the *Forbes* publication, the very first thing you would see is this update dated June 13th, and it is very important that we understand this June 13th update to the publication, and it reads, Mr. Vice-President:

“Update June 13: a number of people have questioned why Caribbean nations and Vietnam did not score well in Deep Knowledge Group’s report, despite low infection and death rates. I’ve updated this story with their response...”

And this is the journalist saying that—John Koetsier—he reported on the report. And down at the bottom of the article, Mr. Vice-President, we then see what Mr. Koetsier is saying, and what he wrote in that *Forbes* article. And he is saying:

“As mentioned at the top of this story, I’ve received comments from people in multiple Caribbean nations and from people in Vietnam, wondering why their countries did not rank higher. In addition, some people are concerned that racisms or bias might be reflected in the rankings.

I’ve asked Deep Knowledge Group for an explanation”—and this is what—Dmitry Kaminskiy, General Partner of Deep Knowledge Group, provided:”

And I quote:

“Our current ranking of course is not ideal yet, and in case of some

particular countries we have issues to get reliable data, however with each iteration over the last three months the analytics framework [is] becoming more robust and comprehensive, and subsequently corresponding rankings are becoming more accurate and precise.”

And he goes on to say—and this is Deep Knowledge, the producers of that survey—they go on to say:

“As in regard to the Caribbean islands, most of the countries there have apparently underdeveloped healthcare infrastructure, lack of efficient anti-crisis government management and zero experience to neutralize biohazard threats. Yes indeed, currently as they are geographically separate islands it creates temporarily perception [of] safety, but as most of them are directly dependent on tourism, once the tourists will start to arrive in the next weeks and months, those locations might quite quickly become problematic zones.”

So, Mr. Vice-President, the point is that this survey—the producers of this survey have not come to Trinidad and Tobago or to any of these islands they have reported on. They have made an assumption and this assumption is reflected in the response. They have made an assumption that we have, apparently, underdeveloped health care infrastructure. Well, Mr. Vice-President, when you look at what is happening in the United States, for example, when you look at what is happening, firstly, Russia sent medical equipment to assist the United States, and then the United States sent equipment to help—when you look at what is happening in these developed countries and you look at what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago, and as the Minister of Health and the CMO and other persons have been saying, it demonstrates that, notwithstanding how we feel sometimes as individuals in relation to the health care system, it demonstrates that

Trinidad and Tobago had the physical capacity in terms of the beds and the infrastructure.

We had the technical capacity in terms of the health care workers from the lowest round in the health care system right up to the experts, who we have seen on television, many of them educated at the University of the West Indies, and many of them educated and working in this region. There is nothing to suggest that our health care infrastructure was lacking or underdeveloped in anyway. And Sen. Mark refers to a survey, stands behind the name, *Forbes*, and the assumption that nobody would go behind the name to read what is actually in the survey, and to read the reports on the survey, and he cites information without sharing with this House that that information has since been updated, and even the producers of the survey have, in a sense, distanced themselves from some of the findings of the survey. And to rely on such a weak survey, and such a deficient report on a weak survey, in the face of the Oxford report and other reports—and you do not really need an academic report. You just need to be living and being alive in this country to be able to say that the health care professionals and those who support the health care professionals, law enforcement, and the citizens of this country, have done an exemplary job in dealing with COVID-19. [*Desk thumping*]

I would get back to Sen. Mark's other statement, Mr. Vice-President, but I want to say that there is not much to argue about in the mid-year review like this. This is a customary exercise. I listened to Sen. Haynes and I forgive her for some of the errors she had made, but she had made some assumptions that really—you have been around one or two mid-year reviews and a few supplementary appropriations, and you understand how it works. It is something— it is customary. That is the first thing I would say. The second this is that, twice for

the year, we engage in an exercise which is basically the settling of accounts and when you get into the details—which do not appear in the Bill—when you get into the details you will see that through the process of virements, the way the Government operates from the opening of the fiscal year, you start spending money, and in some cases, you are spending money in respect of things for which there were no allocations. And to do that, you have to move money from an account that has an allocation towards an expenditure from which there is no allocation.

And we have two opportunities to reconcile those accounts, just as the banks reconcile the accounts, and just as in our own homes we reconcile accounts. We have the mid-year review where we account for the movement of funds and we have at the end of the financial life—around November, we also bring a Bill into the Parliament to close the accounts. And in that Bill, we account for all the final movement of moneys, taking into consideration that when the budget statement is presented, sometimes early in October, we would not have taken into account all the transactions which take place up until midnight on September 30th, the final day of the financial year. So it is essentially a settling of accounts to take into account, in particular, virement of account of moneys for things that had not been provided for, or unexpected things. It does not affect projected expenditure. For example, you would see in none of the—in no mid-year review and no closing of accounts have we seen every single Head being addressed. What is addressed in a mid-year review are those Heads that require some supplementation on account of what I have just explained.

So, for example, Sen. Haynes used the example of getting schools ready. There is nothing that has pointed to the inability of the Ministry of Education to

fund the cleaning and the sanitizing of schools, in particular, in preparation for SEA. In fact, the Prime Minister appointed a very small team of Ministers to meet with TTUTA's executive on this matter of SEA. I happen to be on that team, alongside Minister Imbert, Minister Robinson-Regis, Minister Gadsby-Dolly, and Minister Garcia. And one of the matters which was discussed was the issue of getting the schools ready and having the classrooms and the toilets, and so on sanitized in time for the writing of the exams. And with the Minister of Finance present, with TTUTA present, and with the Minister of Education present, there was absolutely no suggestion that the funding—that the allocation was unavailable to get the schools ready.

And when you look at what we have provided for, which are COVID related items in this, if there was an issue with the funding or with the allocation, then there would be a supplementation. There are many Ministries and many Heads in this supplementation that are not listed simply because in their existing allocations, what was provided for and projected at the start of the financial year, there is room for expenditure to take place in accordance with what was set out in the budget statement. I just want to—in saying that, I just want to correct Sen. Seepersad. While I am very happy as Minister that the Minister of Finance projects the availability of \$500 million, mainly towards capital expenditure in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, it does not form part of this Appropriation Bill. It is an expenditure that he has projected.

So, Mr. Vice-President, this Bill deals \$2.686 billion and the expenditure is in respect of two broad areas. The bulk of it is under the recurrent part of the expenditure and that is 2.5 billion. And under the PSIP, the projection is for expenditure of \$162,626,000. Mr. Vice-President, absolutely nothing in what is

projected here really— as I said this is customary— and nothing that I have seen here really points to anything that would raise an eyebrow.

For example, in the Judiciary, we have an allocation for rent, vacant position, payments to MTS, \$60 million in payments MTS. This is what you would see in a mid-year review and in a supplementation. But Sen. Mark made a lot of noise about these interest payments that are projected or the provisions are in respect of interest payments, and without being specific or without making any allegations, he is suggesting that something is strange, or wrong, or improper, or something like that. I did not—for once, he did not descend into the bacchanal but his references, to me, carried a tone in which he was suggesting maybe that something was wrong.

But, Mr. Vice-President, nothing is unusual with the projections in respect of interest payments. When you go to—for example, the Ministry of Health, I think he read out some of the details in respect of the Ministry of Health. Yes, there are two things that would cause us to have to now make provisions—three things that would cause a government and the Minister of Finance to have to deal with interest payments in a mid-year review. In one case, you may have situations where the interest payment was not factored in at the start of the fiscal year. You may have omitted, and there is one case in which an interest payment to be made in respect of a UDeCOTT borrowing has to be factored in now because it was not factored in at the start to the fiscal year. That is one scenario. That is the provision under the OPM for the UDeCOTT loan when no provision was made at the start of the fiscal year. You would have situations— and you see that in the Ministry of Health— where you have bridging financing, you have a time delay in closing a loan facility, or if it is funded through bonds. Closing off of a bond facility, you may

have a time lag and you would have to do short-term borrowing in order to fill the gap until you have the funds generated from the loan or bond. And if you take out a short-term loan, you would incur interest payments, so that would be reflected. That is the second scenario in which it would be reflected. And the third scenario in which interest payments would be reflected in a mid-year review is where you have a new borrowing, and you have cases here where because the project has reached a point where it needs to be financed, you would then enter into new borrowings, and it is just again a timing issue.

So, to suggest that interest payments or things relating to loans is something strange in a mid-year review and the Government—and to even suggest that it has anything to do with election and all of that, I would consider it to be improper. But not only just improper, something extremely unbecoming of a person like Sen. Mark with his experience and having sat in the government, and so on. So that all these payments, in the respect of interest and in respect of these borrowings, are things that are, as I say, customary. And those are the things you would see in a mid-year review when we are accounting for spending, and when we are making sure that the spending of the Government is backed by the appropriate authority.

Mr. Vice-President, the third area Sen. Mark went into was this area of procurement and I thought that my response to his recent Motion on the procurement legislation would have really been sufficient to put things in context for Sen. Mark. On that occasion, I pointed out that he is uniquely positioned, having been chairman of one committee and members of the other—the State Enterprises Committee and the PAAC, and all those things. I thought that we had closed off argument, and then I saw the argument resurfaced today in terms of his discourse on this issue of waiving international tendering. And you know, every

time my colleagues—I do not like to dwell too much on my colleagues and their past performances. I know it is something that they would like us to forget and they feel very, very uncomfortable when we talk about it. But you know, I cannot help, in relation to the national interest and to respond to this discourse on waiving of international tendering, particularly, in relation to his reference to CAF, to come back to that Point Fortin highway project, and the financing of that project—because I was not in the Partnership Cabinet and I did not speak to the Minister myself.

But I am very clear in my mind that the discussion on the decision of the Partnership to fund the Point Fortin highway out of recurrent expenditure—and I have said this in this House before—it is highly unusual. In fact, it is inexplicable for anybody, any government to want to fund a major capital project to the tune of \$7 billion out of recurrent expenditure, out of their revenues without seeking— and during that time, very low interest rates were available for capital projects, that the Partnership could have taken. But my recollection of the events, at the time, was that within the Partnership Government there was a—I do not know if it was a scramble or a battle, or whatever. I do not know the dynamics too well but I know, from my understanding, is there was an issue with who would eventually get the opportunity to fund the project, and who were the contractors to be selected. And by borrowing, particularly, on the international market, the Government would have been exposed to the requirements to do tendering in a particular manner.

And the decision to fund out of recurrent and not enter into a long-term borrowing, under the glare of international agencies, was determined based on the need to hire particular contractors into the projects. And as it turns out, those people who hold that view are not entirely wrong when we see the collapse of not

only the project, but the contractor OAS.

So, for Sen. Mark to come and give us a discourse on waiving on international tendering and on procurement, and so on, I really do not have any time for that today, and I “doh” even want to go into the award to SNC-Lavalin in respect of the Penal health facility, at a time when SNC-Lavalin then and now are still battling, not only within Canada but outside of Canada, with international lenders; battling this issue of corruption in Africa and in other parts of the world. And on account of public pressure, that SNC-Lavalin contract with the Penal facility had to be discarded. I could tell you, I have listened to Sen. Mark’s comment again on the borrowing and the financing and the interest rates in respect of health facilities, and I keep reminding everybody, as we get back into this debate about who built, and who started, and who turned the sod, and all of that, when I came in as a Minister and when I sat in the Cabinet for the first time, the issue of the failure of the Partnership Government, the UNC Government, the failure to put in place appropriate funding arrangements for Point Fortin was a very live issue. And I recall the Attorney General having to settle those documents so that we could access the facility that was offered by the Austrian Government.

And in the interim, to get that Point Fortin project started, this Government had to enter into short-term borrowing to get that project going. As a matter of fact, for a significant part of that project, while we worked on the Austrian documents and the negotiations of the loan, and putting together the documents and the facility itself, a significant part of the project was funded by short-term borrowings. In relation to Arima, the position was the same, a billion-dollar project conceived and something of a sod turning as far as I recall was done, but absolutely—and you see, you cannot dispute what I am saying. You cannot

dispute what I am saying because I sat in the Cabinet, and I was there when the financing arrangements for Arima had to be put in place because it was not done. And I could go to HDC and the single page letter given to a contract to build a 1,000 houses or something like that, a billion-dollar project without a source of funds, without any loan, without any facility in place. So that you cannot—fair enough, you want to hide from your past, that is fair, I cannot tell you how to behave, but do not hide from the past and still want to emerge under the cover of darkness and pelt stones at a Government like us. We are trying our best now only to clean up a lot of the mess that you have created but also, govern the country in very, very difficult circumstances.

And if you feel navigating the difficult financial waters of more than 60 per cent of our revenues disappearing on account of low energy prices, if you feel that that is difficult, and if you feel having to wake up every Monday morning as a Minister and see claims dropping on your desk unsupported by contracts and unsupported by proof of work and so on, if you feel that those are difficult waters to navigate, add COVID-19 to that, and understand why the performance of the hon. Prime Minister and the Government, and the country, has been exemplary in this difficult COVID period. Mr. Vice-President—

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

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Thank you very much. Mr. Vice-President, as you also go through the Bill, you see other allocations which are made. In respect of rural development company, you would see the allocation being made to settle the 15 per cent increase granted to CEPEP workers will cost \$56.7 million. You would see a \$20 million allocation. The Government announced that through the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, relief will be provided in

some communities, and you would see a \$20 million allocation.

2.15 p.m.

And you would also see, Mr. Vice-President, every year for at least the last 10 years as the cost of this National Reforestation Programme has increased, as the cost has increased, you would see that the programme has been funded in two tranches. When the budget is presented you would see an allocation made out of the URP fund, you would see an allocation made to cover at least 60 per cent of the programme and you would generally see in the mid-year review a further allocation made or in the closing of the accounts a provision made to cover the remaining 40 per cent. And in this case a provision is made for \$40million.

The reference, my colleague the Minister in the Ministry of Finance talked about the Attorney General, you would see \$50 million being allocated to the payment of legal fees. You asked about the 180-something million in—or something more than that in the Ministry of National Security. It is 177 million and when you go into the details you would see that 63 million of that goes towards prison officers on account of the recruitment of 500 new prison officers in this fiscal year. And then long outstanding work on the radar system and some other recurrent expenditure within the Ministry of National Security, it is an additional 159 million.

And ultimately, Mr. Vice-President, you see there are significant sums being allocated in response of the direct cost of COVID to Trinidad and Tobago and those costs are in two areas, it is the direct health care cost. You would see under the Ministry of Health the four allocations to the four RHAs and it is the RHAs that have been driving the response, 184 million for the four RHAs. You would see a significant part of that 224 million to the Ministry of Health in respect of

pharmaceuticals. I have said over and over, our health care costs—a significant component of what is driving up the health care cost is our over-reliance on pharmaceuticals as a country. And there is in that 224 provision for a new loan, the new loan undertaken by NIPDEC to fund pharmaceuticals, the \$671 million loan taken by NIPDEC to fund our pharmaceutical costs in this fiscal or at least part of the cost is underwritten by a seven year loan which carries a \$14 million interest payment. So in that 224 million we are paying the interest payment in respect of pharmaceuticals.

So in the health care, if you go to Tobago you would also see under the THA the allocation is in respect, primarily for COVID. Health care workers, 4.2 million; facilities, 16 million; direct COVID relief, 5.9 million; and very importantly for Tobago, PPE, personal protective equipment, 23.2 million. And on the other side of it the relief, earlier in the sitting I answered the question in respect of the rental assistance, the salary relief grant and the other things, the food cards and so on and you would see the cost of it, 180 million in respect of food cards, salary relief grant, 400 million under the Ministry of Finance and the provision of support to the credit unions in order to carry them through this difficult period where their membership would have problems servicing loans and so on, \$200 million.

And that is what this Bill is all about, Mr. Vice-President. It is a traditional way of, in the mid-year, of reconciling accounts as we head into the end of the fiscal year and prepare ourselves for the budget. It recognizes how governments work in relation to the movement of funds by having to supplement now, it does not mean that those Ministries which are not listed are bankrupt and unable to spend. What you are doing here is that they have their original allocations unless

you see a decrease in a Head somewhere which points to the reduction in an original allocation. This supplementation is to add to the original allocation on account of things that were not foreseen, not provided for, but a significant part arises out of our COVID-19 response. I thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President.

[Desk thumping]

Sen. Sean Sobers: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for recognizing me this afternoon to lend my voice on this:

“An Act to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2020) Act, 2019...”

Now, Mr. Vice-President, generally—and I will because it is part of my contribution here this afternoon, I will lend my support and lend my voice to congratulating two Ministers, in particular, for some of the extraordinary work that they have done in lieu of the rest of this administration picking up the mantle to assist this country during the COVID-19 pandemic. But before I arrive at that part of my contribution, Sen. Rambharat, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, who is one of those very same Ministers that I will applaud later on—

Sen. Ameen: What!

Sen. S. Sobers:—permit me to respond to one or two things that have been said in terms of his contribution. Now, the hon. Minister indicated that some of the actions in the past may very well haunt some of us, Members of the Opposition, and we should definitely live within the present, live in the now. And it is living in the now that would have allowed Sen. Haynes in her contribution to indicate certain things. It is living in the now, in the present that would allow me to respond in a particular way to things that were said especially when it comes to the Ministry of Education and their services being meted out to hundreds of students,

thousands of students throughout this country, or as a matter of fact, the lack of service meted out to those students.

It is living in the now that would allow both Sen. Haynes and myself who as recently as Saturday were at one of these institutions, one out of three or four institutions as a matter of fact, that we would have gotten together to lend assistance to those institutions, because the Government, and by extension, the Ministry of Education, failed in their duty, in their mandate to provide relief to those students who attend those institutions. That when we speak about institutions, schools in this country who were left wanting with respect to new guidelines that are being proposed, with respect to sanitization efforts, with respect to preparing these students and preparing the classrooms and the schools to receive these kids for their various examinations, we know what we are speaking about. We know that calls were made for instruments to be collected at the Ministry and those instruments are simply just a little bottle of sanitizer and some toilet paper. We know what we are speaking about. That no effort whatsoever, no call whatsoever was made by the Ministry officials to any of those schools indicating that they would send teams to sanitize the schools before those kids come to the schools.

And that is why we as a responsible Opposition took it upon our shoulders to get that job done. That there is a call for some schools, all schools within the country to have certain measures put in place, a sink built outside so persons could wash their hands and whatever and whatever. Are those materials going to be given to the schools or are the schools going to have to find the money on their own to put these things in place? That is the question that has to be asked and the answer to be given on the floor of this Senate. Because there are many parents

now wondering what is the position with those instruments to those schools. But like we have done in the past and now living in the present where the Government continues to fail with those things the Opposition will step in and ensure that those schools are properly well protected [*Desk thumping*] and instruments are given to them accordingly. So that is living in the present, hon. Minister.

And whilst addressing that particular issue and I know that we are dealing with this Bill and we are dealing with the virements that would have taken place especially during this COVID-19 situation which is an extremely novel situation, I have always held myself out especially in my contributions in this place to be as fair and objective as possible. And that is why I indicated categorically at the beginning that, yes, Sen. Rambharat, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and even Sen. Kazim Hosein, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, they would have done works. I would have seen some of the works that would have been done by them, especially lending to persons within our society who would have been affected by COVID-19.

And if not for some of those hampers prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, if not for those seeds given out by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries I do not know what anyone else could sharply say about this administration doing anything else to help the people within this country. That the rest of the Government would have abdicated their responsibility to the people of this country and let it be upon these two shoulders of these two gentlemen here. That is how objectively I speak about it, because that is what I saw, I was on the ground. And as a Member of our Opposition indicates, I have the insurance to prove it, the pictures are there, the assistance was there.

So when we talk about living in the present let us remember so many

persons within this country who within this present day are still being affected by this pandemic. And as we look at the virements proposed here we will see figures being bandied about, moneys being shifted and we wonder whether or not persons are really in receipt of some of this assistance. When I looked at some of the expenditure and the virements here especially with respect to the Judiciary and I see the figures as it relates to facilitating monthly rental accommodations and what not, I am still a bit bothered because we still have certain issues when COVID-19 is over that will be affecting the Judiciary in terms of accommodation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic I wondered especially when it pertained to the Judiciary, what were the accommodation facilities for persons who would still have to line up outside our courts, because there were still matters being heard. The hon. Attorney General gave a figure as to how many of those matters that were heard. And up to recently, as recent as last week I passed the San Fernando High Court where some of those matters were being heard and there were a number of persons lining up outside in the hot sun with no tent facilities being provided to them. Should that have been placed there as well too, money being spent to protect our citizens when they have to venture out or to go to court. It was not present, it still is not, that when we look at some of the moneys that were also being shifted and we see it here, with respect to social development and family services and the figures being quoted here as well too, we wonder whether or not those figures translated into actual relief for citizens within our country. That you have virements being made under the Heading, “Urgent Temporary Assistance and Social Assistance”, and under the Ministry of Finance you have the salary relief grant.

And, Mr. Vice-President, my involvement again is living in the present, is

very real. I remember when it was announced by this administration that they would undertake these steps to bring about relief to members of the public and we are seeing it now being totally borne out in black and white, the type of expenditure that was allocated and is now going to be facilitated. And I remember being at my office, it was a Monday morning, and receiving a call from one citizen within San Fernando, in proper distress and alarm as to his recent visit to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, that he with many other persons lined up outside the Ministry hoping to get this form to fill out for these different forms of social assistance. And he was met with a shut door and a security officer simply giving him a slip of paper. And on that slip of paper there was an email address and a website name, information. And they were asked, all persons who were in the line, if you were interested in this same social assistance, the same urgent temporary assistance, salary relief grant, that you had to log on to the website, download the form, print the form out, fill the form out, scan the form and then email it back to that address that was given to you. And the very first thing the gentleman told me on the phone, he said, “Sean, I doh even have a computer to begin with”. “ I do not even have a computer to begin with.” That even if there was a consideration that persons may visit some cybercafé or something like that, cybercafés were not made essential services, they would have been closed. And this is the level of disconnect.

So when we speak and we talk about the Government doing well with COVID, objectively we could speak about that, but there are other aspects that persons have been left wanting, social responsibility has fell totally through the cracks. That level of disconnect did not allow the Government to understand that this system should have been rolled out better, that you went as far as telling these

people that they had all these things to do, all these requirements to fulfil and the first basic one of having a computer they did not even have. So imagine asking them if they have a printer and scanner. That is the level of disconnect. And in the forms themselves upon sober reflection, no pun intended, when you read the form, the form in some instances asked for persons to produce bank account information. I mean, it sounds nice, it is all well and good, but many persons in this country who form the most vulnerable part of society do not even have bank accounts because they are paid in cash.

So some of them would have filled out the form and sent it in without the bank account information, only to be responded a couple of weeks thereafter indicating that they left that part out. And after going through such a long tethering process for quite some time, then the Government woke up from their slumber and recognized how vulnerable persons are, how vulnerable persons were, and changed the form and made the form available at police stations for collection and to fill out. And then we have this document telling us that 50million for urgent temporary assistance. This sum is required to provide additional funds for rental assistance to families. I know thousands of families who have not gotten this rental assistance but we are talking about 50 million.

We are talking about social assistance, 171 million, the sum is required to supplement the 2020 allocation under the social assistance programmes, to provide additional support to existing beneficiaries and assist with income support to families which experience loss of income. And when I read that, when I was going through this I said, yes, it sounds nice, because that bracket of vulnerable persons within our society widened greatly during this period, that many persons whose children used to get school feeding, initially they were not part of the most

vulnerable. Some kids, some parents who could have provided food for their kids they were not on that list for school feeding. But guess what, because at that juncture they had a job, but after COVID-19 hit, some of them were let go and they were left jobless and they became part of the most vulnerable in society.

So it is a wonder as to whether or not all of this really is tangible that it trickles down to these most vulnerable people. Why did the Government get it wrong for so long? That is the level of disconnect. And this is what upset me so. Because we were on the ground and we saw the hardships and we were going from house to house assisting people along with some Members of the Government as well too, and that is why I singled them out because I saw the work that they did. But what of the rest of persons, what part or piece of the puzzle did you fit into. And then we have these figures being bandied about. He who feels it, knows it, and many people in this country are still reeling from the effects of this COVID-19, that whenever this assistance comes, if it ever comes it may be a day too late.

I looked also at some of the expenditure, the virement for the Ministry of National Security and I am seeing \$23 million for coastal radar system. But yet for quite some time now, even during COVID, during this pandemic, guns and drugs are still flooding our country. And these are the questions we are asking. We really want to know, \$23 million for coastal radar system, the Counter Trafficking Unit, no problem. These units do a lot of work, they partner with many different arms throughout this country, with SAUTT, the Commissioner, doing good work, but we want to see the tangible effects, the changes. And then we have \$86 million, the sum is required to facilitate the payments associated with the CCTV project.

And since I have been coming into this Chamber, into this august Chamber, I have been saying it time and time again, as recently as last week Saturday I was in a police station in San Fernando and still the TV screen above the charge room where it is supposed to have all the CCTV cameras within that district, before the last time I was there, you had half of those cameras not working. Now the TV is totally off because it has no CCTV footage in the district, no cameras working. But we are talking about \$86 million. These are the things that upset me, these are the things that require some more attention to be paid and it is insufficient to bandy these figure about without accompanying some level of statistics to indicate the work that is being done.

And lastly for me, I looked at some of the appropriation, the virement here for the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. We have a conversation taking place for quite some time with people asking about locals abroad that could not come in because the borders were shut. We understand why that step was adopted. I mean, for some it augured well. Our numbers remained low. We did not have any community spread, the majority if not all of the cases were imported cases so it made sense to shut the borders. That is what took place with many other countries throughout the world. But most of those countries throughout the world supported their nationals abroad. That there were funds that were sent for them, that there was assistance meted out to them and we see a figure here of \$35million for the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, at page 16. And not one dollar, not one subvention made to any of those locals stranded abroad, nothing.

As lawyers we received emails and correspondences from several different families asking for assistance to petition the Ministry of National Security. That in the alternative if the person was not allowed to come back, whether or not there

was something set up through the missions in those countries to assist them, and the answer to that was, no. And we see why, we are not seeing it here. How do we show that we care about these citizens? Yes we understand the decision that was taken, but not a single cent to those persons, no form of assistance for months that they were outside. Is that getting it done PNM-style?

Mr. Vice-President, I am—I have been for quite some time really, really, upset with the way in which this administration handled some aspects, I will go on record as saying that, some aspects of this COVID-19 pandemic. And I stayed quiet for quite some time because I believe at a most appropriate juncture a forensic audit would be done, an autopsy would be had and we would all be given an opportunity to indicate where we went wrong. And there are several things that went wrong, that form part of the past and continue unfortunately to form part of the present. More needs to be done by all persons within the Government and do not just leave it up to Uncle Clarence, Sen. the Hon., and Uncle Kazim, Sen. the Hon., come on, do more, please. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh: [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me to take part in this debate. And I must say, Sir, that when I listened to the contributions here I saw again a little blame game from one side to the other side, you know, discussing, you know, the whole efforts that were made before, the savings, the economy, the contracts and I see that playing. But the guy who has a family who—a guy who is on the breadline who has his family actually, you know, not knowing where their next meal is coming from, he may not care too much about the ping pong politics of who is to blame, which contracts before were over paid, if this Government paid too much for this road, and whatever. Really speaking, it is a time where we have to see how we can help persons, how we can

actually mobilize our community spirit, our spirit between the other citizens out there who are more fortunate, to get certain things in place where we can actually be able to serve the persons who are suffering more.

Mr. Vice-President, both the Government and the Opposition had different reports they read. I heard the Minister of Finance did mention the fact that there was the Oxford Report which in a sense gave a positive light, but then I heard negative reports coming from Sen. Wade Mark. And again, if you looked at the reports before, even Moody's had given us a bad grade, a down grade, and there are situations just before the COVID we were already seeing hard times, people were already questioning, are we in any sort of recovery phase? The Government has tried to say well, we were in a recovery, we were now picking up the pieces, balancing the books, but really speaking the day to day life is what we have to look at to see if the persons really are getting that benefit that was supposed to hand out to them.

2.45 p.m.

And there were other reports, Mr. Vice-President, that I must say—I remember ECLAC had a report where they looked at our situation in the Caribbean, not just Trinidad and Tobago, and in that report they actually stated that we were in for some hard times. So that ECLAC report, it was a report before the COVID, and it stated it was just a global debt increase; trade weakened; energy exports and imports dropped; investments declined; GDP per capita dropped 4 per cent, from 2.14 to 2.19; and there were problems with sustainable jobs for the young people. So that overview in 2019 was grim—so it was like we were in a hole—and that was for the region. We were in a hole but now COVID came and it dug that hole a little deeper, so we have to try to figure out how we can help,

somehow climb out of that hole. So that COVID came like a sudden step. It came there and we were now caught in a situation where what should we do.

Now, I listened to Minister Imbert's discussion in the Lower House, his presentation, and I also looked at the editorials that we had in some newspapers, and the *Guardian* newspaper, Mr. Vice-President, if you allow me to read, Saturday, June the 13th, that editorial said that "Imbert's optimism is premature". And even the Central Bank in May 2020, the Central Bank Monitoring Report, section 4, when we were looking at the pace and the extent of recovery, they looked at 2021 where we may—they say even at that period it is still uncertain. So while we had that optimism—and there was an article also in the *Guardian* newspaper published on June 10th, page 15 of *Guardian*, the article's headline, "Make sure none is left behind", and they actually looked at the input of various persons, economist Dr Vaalmikki Arjoon, Dr. Ronald Ramkissoon, Dr. Marlene Attzs, and they all thought that the Minister's projection was too optimistic. Dr. Marlene Attzs actually—in the article it claimed that she chuckled when the Minister said there would a swift and decisive action because she knew what that means and she went on to elaborate "I expect that would be some bitter medicine should the Government return to office".

So therefore, I heard Sen. West presentation and she said, "Well, you know the optimism is there that we will be there soon. We will come into office." So if they come into office, or even if the Opposition comes in to office, any side will have to prepare our population for the bitter medicine because there will be bitter medicine. And so, this whole idea I am trying to get at is if we do not prepare the population for what may come, probably more job losses, what may be there in the future to take our—you know we have to look at how we could save, how we

could make money, how we could utilize, and also a mindset how we can downsize in our mind the lifestyle that we had before cannot be there for a while. So people have to readjust their mindset. If you are accustomed going shopping, having a lot of presents, going out in the malls, you have to readjust, and this is the something that both sides would have to give that level of talk, that level of communication to the population.

And even recently ECLAC had another report where it stated that the pandemic hits the most vulnerable groups in society and they were worried about the level of poverty, and this is where we have to look at persons going beyond the poverty line how are we going to help them. To just maintain them there, this is a challenge. The ECLAC report that was there recently also showed that there are vulnerable groups and they mentioned women, because as a fact is now women already have problems in terms of their inequalities in their job market. They mentioned women, so we have to ensure that whatever transpires out there we can protect the vulnerable, the women. We can look at those homes that are in a sense on the breadline. We have to ensure at least there is one working member there, or some sort of grant given to those homes. So we cannot afford for our population to have that level where they go beyond the poverty line and suffering occurs. It is our duty in this Parliament, and as a duty to citizens to see if we can help pull persons out of that hole.

So when I look at that, we have to decide how we are going to guard against this gender imbalance. So should we have really like a targeted intervention for certain homes with single mothers? So we have to look at that because some people may come about and say well targeted intervention, you may discriminate against others. And this is why any sort of policies, any sort of grants should be in

the public scrutiny where people could not come out and say, “Well I got it because of this race, or this party I belong to, or I get jobs because my family is a member of this party”. We need that transparency because at the end of the day I would feel hurt if my son does not get a job and someone else in another party would be able to get a job who supports a different party. So this is the level of inequality and stipulations that all Government, and even the Opposition, must come to together and say we are going to put processes in place so no one could point a finger and say I did not get it.

I mean, when I am in clinic it is amazing. You have some people in clinic, in the end I will come and say it because it is an African Government; an African guy would come and say, “They only helping their own people”. So you have everybody feels displaced, everybody feels that they are discriminated against, but we need to put mechanisms place that if persons have any sort of complaints they can go public with it. Public with it that people could now judge, is this person really displaced? And, Mr. Vice-President, I must say that when you look at this recovery of our country, I see that, you know we have certain things that would keep us down, and certain things is really three things I looked at. I looked at the fact that there is crime, there is corruption, and there is the COVID—three things. So therefore, when I mentioned corruption before I am thinking we have to have mechanisms in place to prevent that, mechanisms in place to prevent people pointing fingers because we would be hearing the old talk here and there. It is political season, guava season, so we maybe hear the old talk outside but you know unless we put some things in place we would not be able to get that dialogue out of our system. So we need to put that in place.

So, Mr. Vice-President, what I am saying is if you look at governments,

most of them, we have a problem in now getting the new work ethic. People have to realize you know there is something good with COVID. If I know I am going to lose my job, this is the time we can have a paradigm shift to change the work ethic of people because our main problem is, our culture of work we have there it is deplorable. You will find that—even recently—I do not know if it was works or CEPEP—somebody was cleaning my street and they worked for two hours, and they probably just cleaned about 200 yards and they went on their way. We cannot tolerate that again because if we do not have money for basic items we have to ensure that the people doing their jobs do it properly. But two things I noticed, besides monitoring the people so they will be more productive, we also have to look at giving them also the correct tools, because I saw those guys there—usually if they wanted to use a toilet, my washroom, I would have opened my gate usually for them. No longer with this COVID; I do not want anybody in my yard. But then I did not see anything for those guys to use a toilet facility or to wash their hands. How hard would it be for a van to be there with a portable toilet in the area, and even a portable wash basin? I would have given them my hose, you all wash yourself out.

So we have to think outside how we are going to protect our workers, and then how are we going to make them more productive, and this is a challenge for all Members of Parliament, all people who would eventually be in office; how are they going to do that? So when I looked at the jobs we have to say that—so corruption I am looking at again. So how are we going to get our money's worth that people would not come out now and say that there are contracts given to this one, that one? So we need to have a level of accountability, some sort external audit, and also any sort of a delivery service that the Government has to give

should be under some sort of performance audit.

In the Tony Blair's Government in the United Kingdom, Michael Barber, he had Tony Blair set up a Performance Management and Delivery Unit in the PM's Office and they actually looked at all projects. Any project they have, be it a bridge be it an overpass, a road being built, a highway, they would now give that performance how it is being done, if there are any delays, why there are delays. So the taxpayers will see there is that level of accountability, work is being done with our moneys that is worth it. So we may have to create a system like that. We may have to create—as I say, COVID could create a paradigm shift where we have reporting on projects public, you know. Right now you know we have to drive that accountability and this—Michael Barber actually did a paper on deliverology, where he said delivering of the state projects this has to be more transparent and has to be with timelines, and if we are going to get our Government to get things done on time, get productivity back in society, I am thinking that would be a good idea.

Jamaica has an external audit where they have an Economic Policy Oversight Committee (EPOC) and I am thinking even a parliamentary committee to look at these oversights. So therefore, I am thinking we need something like that to monitor.

Mr. Vice-President, as I mentioned crime, if you have a country where crime is out of hand—a lot of things we did to try to get things in place—why would I want to invest; why would I want to open my office late; why would a doubles vendor want to stay out in the street and might get rob? So therefore, we have to attack crime to get that local micro economy going. We have to do it, and I mean we are giving Ministry of National Security more money and I am thinking the

Commissioner of Police is there but we are still seeing murders, we are still seeing crime, we are still seeing things happening there that I think that we need to get a little action together before we could have any sort of recovery because foreign investor may think twice wanting to come in with this crime.

So crime, corruption, COVID—so COVID has now turned the world upside down. COVID has now give us the opportunity though to change, and as I mentioned before, persons found that the Minister Imbert was too optimistic, but I like positive thinking. I rather you have something positive. You are telling the nation we are going to get better because you have to give us a positive mindset, but you also have to give us ways that you are now going to clip off the persons who are going to cause any sort of a delay in your system, clip off the persons who are going to call any lag in terms of productivity, and this is what I am saying. So it may take some doing for us to get that work ethic back to the level where we can actually help our country.

I must say also, Mr. Vice-President, just before the COVID came we looked at the region. Barbados was coming out of the recession, they had hard times there. Barbados was a country where there was a lot of corruption, but a new Government came into power, they took hard decisions, public servants you know some had to go, but they were coming out. So you had some successes. Guyana was or is predicted to actually be on the forefront. So those are countries there—but what is going on in the political climate in Guyana we are not too sure what is happening there now. So therefore, I am thinking that even when we look at the other Caribbean countries we cannot do it alone. Caricom was there, and with Caricom there we have to adjust as with the region.

I think you know most of us we grow up with the idea the story when our

first Prime Minister said “one from 10 leaves zero”, and the Federation was destroyed. But I am thinking if there were more patience and diplomacy then, the Federation could have morphed into an entity where Caricom is trying to do where we would have had that sort of integration. Belize; Guyana, they could be like the food basket; Barbados, they have a pharmaceutical industry. So you have within that region—you know if we had that free movement of trade, of capital, I could go and invest in a different country. Young doctors who are not getting jobs could go across to other countries to fill that gap. So what I am trying to say is that we have to try to see somehow if we can look at the Caricom market or integration to help us as a region out of this.

So COVID I am saying again, Mr. Vice-President, gives us the idea that we have to have safe jobs. We have to retrain persons. We have to look at how those individuals go out there and this takes a while to get at because we have seen in the past—I mean, when I came here—and I am not even seeing some people wearing masks again and I am saying if we had new cases coming in with the cruise ship we have to be very careful that persons go out there and start to spread this, and I have made an appeal before that we should legislate that you have to wear masks because if I am coming and I have to wear clothes, I have to put on my seatbelts, if I am going in the public I should be able to wear a mask. And I am thinking you come out there you wear your mask, if you are home you could do what you want, if you are in your car you could do what you want, but if you are there and you could risk my family getting some sort of illness I think we may have to think about seriously legislating again for this, retraining too.

When I looked at the different aspects here that we needed to look at in terms of the money's worth, I looked at the Judiciary, Service Commissions

needing more funds. I am saying I have no problem with that, but the Judiciary in the past remember there were conferences, I think it was in Tobago, I think implicit bias, and even fingers were pointed at certain members flying and what not. So even those institutions, they are independent, but we may have to get some sort of accountability with them. The EBC asking for more money, we are due for election, we definitely have to get somehow the EBC up to mark, because you see we know that the importance of this especially since the whole of the Caribbean is now embarrassed of what is happening in Guyana. We have shades of—Forbes Burnham was there as a leader before. There were allegations made about him in terms of election. So I am seeing if there are shades of “Burnhamism” coming in again, we have to look at what is happening in Guyana and make sure that our EBC is well funded, our EBC makes sure we have external persons coming in to look at our election, and ensure that there is nothing embarrassing to occur because we may have to fund the EBC better to get their act going.

I looked at the situation that the Ministry of Labour and Small Business Enterprises was asking for some money, and the Minister of Labour and Small Business Enterprise did go into a lot of talk, went into the system where we have the OJT. Mr. Vice-President, youth unemployment is a problem. I heard also Sen. Haynes also spoke at lengths about the OJT. The OJT for me is something that we need expanded, and I am thinking if you take out the moneys from other places like Ministry of Communications—I do not see why we need the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Caricom and Foreign Affairs. I am thinking we need to hire more young people. You see the OJT—I mean there were studies done where even ECLAC looked at the labour force and they looked at the young persons, and they looked at 15- to 24-year-old and they were giving the percentage

of youth unemployment. I do not know why it started at 15, because I think people 15 to 18 should be in school or learning a trade if they do not have the academic ability. But I am looking at—they labelled it as 8.713 in 2016.

Mr. Vice-President, I am seeing youth who are depressed who are not getting jobs, who have an education, so I am saying the OJT should be expanded. I think it was a mistake when the OJT stipend was increased because I am thinking instead of increasing it they could have kept that and hired people with the OJT for a little extra time, because right now I have two persons who have now finished their OJT requirement but they are out of jobs. Can we not have a stage two in the OJT for those people? Let them go a stage further. So when you have finished for two years, you add on a next two years to give them that added employment.

We have persons who have finished their OJT, but their age, they have gone beyond their age. Those persons have to be factored in I am thinking. So we may have to expand the OJT age limit as well as those who have missed their two years to give our young people a chance to get jobs because the normal jobs in the normal job markets may not be there. But you see, if you have a job you at least will be able to help your home, you are able to enable yourself to come out, you feel useful that your education has not gone to waste. So I am thinking we have to look at this aspect of it, and I am thinking that having someone employed in a house, be it a young person or not, would definitely help us.

As I look at the issue, Mr. Vice-President, I have to say reopening the borders and the business was really a situation that may have given the CMOH Dr. Parasram, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Security some headaches, sleepless nights, because obviously you now will be letting in people who may have the virus, but the question is—we had to somehow stimulate the

economy. Because you see on one hand, we were scared that a new wave would come, we were now flattening the curve as it was—what would happen if we did that too quickly? So Government was cautious. They started opening, but we now saw what happened with some new positive cases so we definitely have a situation where we all have to be vigilant. We all have to look at what is happening. We all have to look at the fact that opening the—you know we are opening the borders, business is opened, so we are stimulating the economic life, but it could be at the detriment of the life of persons if they get COVID.

So we heard about curves and fattening curves, but we heard about recovery plans and, Mr. Vice-President, the recovery plans, people would hope there is a V shape recovery plan, you go down and you come up very quickly; or some people say we may have not the V shape but the U shape where you come and you have a period where you have to catch yourself and then you get back up, but a lot of these economists predict we have an L shape sort of a recovery plan. So they have hit rock bottom and it takes a while to go up. So the country really has to be prepared for this long recovery period, how we are going to help one another, how we are not going let persons slip through the crack and go down into this level of poverty that we fear that may be there.

As I look at the fact that tourism, Mr. Vice-President, we can market that because we are one of the countries in the world, who really speaking, has put a plug on this COVID. So therefore, persons in the winter wanting to come to the West Indies, we could sell Trinidad, well Tobago, as a country where you have the sun, the surf, and COVID free, and we can actually market the tourism in such a way, allow private jobs to come in. If you have a service, an airline service that you can charter people in and allow them to go straight from the airport to certain

villas, straight on the beach where you have the social distancing, you have them locked in that hotel, they are being served by people, you can have the tourism industry still moving on. And I am thinking it is just to market it properly, save tourism, and we have that effective, because remember if the tourist industry kicks off the multiplier effect will definitely help Tobago.

Speaking about Tobago, I saw Tobago now had asked for—the THA also asked for the increase in their grant, but, Mr. Vice-President, we have to look at accountability in Tobago because I remember they are a little bit efficient in providing up to date accounting of what they spent before. So we definitely will have to make sure if we are giving Tobago money they will have to audit it for us. It is our taxpayers' money. We do not want thing wasted and people claim corruption. This is something we do not want. We want open transparent.

So looking at the other demands, the Ministry of National Security I am hoping if he gets it we can really lock down the borders because we saw birds came in recently. So it is birds, it is guns, it is people, and definitely we need to put somehow a cap on that sort of, you know, persons coming in because for too long we have seen this happening. For too long we are being plagued with our borders, and it is detrimental now that if COVID comes in via that route, all that we have put in place would come to naught.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I look at the Ministry of Health now. The Ministry of Health, as we say, the parallel system was in place and I think it was good. The nurses need hazard allowance, the nurses need to be—is my time up? Okay. Nurses need that hazard allowances. We cannot forget the frontline workers. We have to look at the young doctors. Twenty were actually brought into the market force to answers phones; we need to hire those persons. We know telemarketing is

the new way out. We also need to actually look at the expenditures for drugs. Remember there was a criticism about the plasma that was ordered by the Ministry of Health, but Ministry of Health has to understand that if the plasma is not used we have to resell it or give it to another country. I have seen expensive drugs expired. There is a drug called Sustanon injection cost thousands of dollars and it was left in C40 to expire, pneumococcal vaccine, the history is there. So we definitely have to ensure that if you have that plasma in stock it is good to have it but we must make sure that it is used because from my knowledge I do not think— When I speak to some doctors they said the plasma was not really used so far, but we have to ensure that it is there.

So as I look, Mr. Vice-President, we have to look at CAL, the industry. Could we afford to keep CAL going. The Virgin Group of Companies in UK they are going under. They are asking for a bail out; Delta, United. We had the issue with BWIA before, now CAL again. We have to see if we want our airlines, but is it really, really feasible. So all these are things we would have to look at, how could we—do we have to go forward without this airline industry?

Mr. Vice-President, as I close, I want to say that we really have to protect the underprivileged. We have to make sure people are not pushed under the poverty line due to no fault of theirs. We have to look to trouble to find the families and the homes that need the jobs and need their grants.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

We have to realized that if more citizens come out to help, both the Opposition, the Government, all join united together, if we get our people to work—discipline, tolerance, productivity that were the watch words of Dr. Eric Williams—then I am thinking that you know, coming together we can all come out better when this

pandemic is finished. Thank you, Madam President.

3.15 p.m.

Sen. Deeroop Teemal: Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution to the Bill that is currently under debate in this House. From the presentation of the Minister of Finance, we see a high level of positive economic growth predicted and I must say laced with a high level of hope and optimism for a post-COVID economy.

Madam President, in light of this positivity, I would like to reflect on some pre-COVID aspects of the economy because I think it is very essential to do so.

1. In the last four fiscal years, we have spent approximately \$202 billion whilst racking up accumulative deficit of \$31 billion. Taking 2020 into account, the overall deficit for the past five fiscal years is likely to be around \$45 billion based on the Ministry of Finance's estimated deficit for 2020. In other words, we have been unable to effect any savings for the last five fiscal years.
2. Despite our substantial spending, we are still seeing four to five years of consecutive economic decline with over 8 per cent for the period 2015 to 2019, with a major chunk of spending dedicated to meet wages and salaries in the public service sector and debt financing.
3. Our economy is still heavily dependent on oil and gas, despite the numerous debates about diversification of the economy and this has resulted in a continued underdeveloped non-energy sector, including tourism and agriculture.
4. Persistent high levels of crime, in particular, drug and gang-related crime.

5. About 20 per cent of the population, Madam President, still living below the poverty line in our country.
6. Incomplete and struggling efforts to providing an enabling and attractive environment for private sector and international investments.
7. The continuing issue of low productivity, particularly in the public sector, and the lack of any constructive measures to address this issue.
8. The exceedingly high level of job losses and the inability of the job market to reabsorb laid-off workers.
9. A drop in our credit ratings from an investment grade country since the year 2000 to a current rating of Ba1, indicating that the global community sees us as having considerable credit risk with regard to our ability to repay our local and international debt.
10. Declining public spending on consumption due to the heavy job losses and the resulting drop in purchasing power of many households in our country.
11. Slow implementation of sustainable and effective measures to deal with certain infrastructural concerns such as the continuing debilitating effects of flooding, traffic congestion and the growing susceptibility of our water supply security situation.
12. Madam President, continuing decline in the ready availability of forex to businesses and steadily decreasing in the quantum of our foreign reserves.

Madam President, against these factors that I have outlined and which is not by any means intended to be an exhaustive list, we are presented with a post-

COVID projection of positive growth and stabilization of the economy by the year 2021. This is also bearing in mind that we are not merely in a state of economic decline, Madam President, but rather one of economic depression.

Madam President, the presented economic outlook begs several questions in my mind. Is it that the systemic and chronic issues affecting the economy pre-COVID could be and will be resolved within such a short period of time, that is to the end of the year 2021? When we need to bear in mind that national elections are due soon and when post-election considerations for the proper settling down of a newly elected or re-elected government are taken into account, we may well be exposed to an administrative time loss of up, to least, probably four to five months. Thus the effective time available up to the end of 2021 to bring about this economic transformation could effectively be curtailed by probably up to four to five months.

And it also begs the question, Madam President: Will public spending and revenue regeneration by business and Government increase to such an extent necessary to halt the economic decline within the time given? All of this, bearing in mind that the job market would have to reabsorb most of the workers who have lost their jobs and the businesses, in particular, the small and medium enterprises, or the SMEs as we refer to them, who will be struggling to survive post-COVID, despite the good intentions and the extensive relief packages announced by the Government.

Madam President, at this point, I would really like to highlight the plight of small and medium enterprises, including and not forgetting our farmers and small agricultural enterprises. Despite the favourable relief measures announced by the Government and the notices put out by the commercial banks, the question is: How

many of the SMEs are really in a position to avail themselves of these reliefs? How many SMEs have actually been able to benefit from these intended reliefs and, in particular, how many have been able to secure enhanced financial benefits from the commercial banks?

We need to bear in mind, Madam President, that some SMEs would have had to use their VAT refunds to service outstanding debts incurred due to unavailability of those VAT refunds at the time that they were supposed to be given. Lowering of interest rates may also not have the intended effect of SMEs being able to secure loan facilities from the commercial banks since these banks would seek to ensure that adequate and at most times, full collateral, is posted by the SMEs. And as such, most SMEs would not be able to provide this collateral, particularly now that the SMEs would most likely be considered as high risk by the commercial banks, post-COVID.

Madam President, prior to COVID-19, the private sector experienced declining revenues if we are to gauge from the fall in taxes on income and profit of about 24 per cent in the first six months of fiscal October 2019 to March 2019, relative to the similar period of the previous year. Madam President, we also need to bear in mind that the SMEs, collectively, is the largest employer in the country and it is indeed questionable that they will be well-patronized by the buying public and services industry who will be cautious about their spending due to loss of jobs and reduced household incomes. The resulting low sales revenue can place many SMEs in an unprofitable state beyond 2021, thus affecting any significant levels of re-employment and expansion. Madam President, the servicing of loans and meeting operational expenses can prove to be beyond some SMEs, thus leading to further layoffs and negative economic growth.

Madam President, the presented economic outlook also begs the following questions: Whether the high level of forex necessary would be readily available within such a short period of time, despite the almost collapse of the global energy industry which is the bulwark of our foreign exchange earnings. It begs the questions also whether the reality of a sustained period of post-COVID relief, both in the social and business sector by the Government, has been envisaged probably extending even beyond 2021.

The question whether the high level of funding needed for capital projects in the housing and construction sectors, in addition to projects in the infrastructure sector to address sustainable and comprehensive flood control and alleviation, traffic congestion relief and water supply and distribution improvements, whether this funding would be readily available within this short period of time, particularly when our debt to GDP ratio would be at high of the projected 70 per cent. Madam President, the question whether partner countries, such as China and others, would still be in a position to offer funding development works and may well be looking for us to ensure timely debt servicing without the possibility of debt restructuring for outstanding loans.

Madam President, the question whether increased funding would have to be raised to counteract possible spikes in crime due to a worsening job market and a depressed economy. In possible measures to meet the answers to these questions, I respectfully submit that the Government of the day, at that time, would inevitably have to resort to more borrowing and dipping into the reducing Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, thus probably crippling the projected economic growth.

Madam President, at this point, I would like to focus on one aspect of the COVID-19 measures that remain largely outstanding and critical and this is the

issue of the return of our nationals to Trinidad and Tobago. Whilst this has been happening to some extent, Madam President, it is imperative now, it is time now that a clear policy and a strategy be presented to get our nationals back home within the shortest time possible, with full consideration, of course, for health protocols and guidelines to be followed regarding COVID-19. Madam President, with about roughly say 1,000 quarantine spaces available and a quarantine period of 14 days, a compulsory quarantine period of 14 days, a simple projection would tell us that if there are over 10,000 nationals seeking to return home, then some may not be able to return even within the next four to five months to their homeland.

And when we consider that our borders were shut on March 22, 2020, these nationals would be subjected to an extraordinarily long period of time and a long period of, if I may say, exile from their homeland during which they would be subjected to financial, mental and emotional hardships, Madam President. Many of them would also be faced with expired visas and the situation would worsen when countries begin to lift their border restrictions, and they would have no valid reason for extending their stay in those countries. So, Madam President, a clear policy, a definitive policy, a definitive strategy to increase the return of nationals or the pace at which nationals are being allowed to return to home would need to be given consideration and certain needs would have to be addressed.

Madam President, the need for some form of rapid COVID-19 testing, an increased level of testing that would allow a larger number of nationals to return home. Madam President, additional quarantine facilities, increased mobilization of the police and even possibly the human resource of the Defence Force to facilitate a system of self or house quarantine; a concerted and more proactive effort by our

diplomatic missions abroad to coordinate and facilitate all necessary measures to expedite the return of our nationals, and of course, Madam President, consideration for increased funding to facilitate all of the considerations that I have just mentioned.

Madam President, in closing, I would just like to highlight one more aspect of the COVID-19 battle that, in my opinion, is not being highlighted enough and raising this is not meant in any way to trivialize the efforts of the Government and to trivialize the tremendous work done by our frontline medical and essential services workers. I am referring to the NGOs, the non-profits, the faith-based organizations, the churches, the mosques, the temples, the village councils and the groups that provide service to our nation on the basis of volunteerism, based on compassion, based on empathy and love for fellow citizens. We need to salute the efforts of these groups whose selfless service have contributed meaningfully to maintain the economy in no mean way in this challenging time.

Madam President, I refer to the tens of thousands of food hampers, facial masks, counselling and assistance in the filing of grant relief forms and other forms of service provided by these groups, from their existing resources and the new funding raised by themselves, in addition, the scale of the voluntary efforts in managing and distributing state relief programmes of the State, it cannot be discounted in the COVID-19 relief efforts and I salute these groups.

Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): Thank you very much, Madam President. It is indeed my pleasure to participate in this discussion as we debate the supplementation of

appropriation Bill, 2020. I want to begin by saying I am proud to be part of this Government, a Government that is truly devoted to serving the people through good governance, transparency and quality performance, despite challenges such as sharpest declines to oil prices and the current COVID-19 pandemic. We at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government are pleased to receive supplemental funding in the amount of \$116,700,000 as you all are aware, following our appearance at the Standing Finance Committee last week. This funding would be efficiently utilized for the following initiatives.

The emergency food support. We received \$20 million. We got an additional \$30 million that we allocated from within the Ministry. That came up to \$30 million and before, we got \$10 million from unspent balances and this was allocated to the 14 corporations. Out of the \$20 million allocation, this will be used to provide the funding necessary for emergency food support to needy households across the 14 municipal corporations. The remaining \$10 million was identified, as I said, within the allocation of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government under the personal savings expenditure and was approved by the Ministry of Finance. Total allocation, \$30 million. When you divide that by the 14 corporations, each corporation will get \$2.142 million which will assist 20,000 families per corporation.

How do we intend to distribute these funds across the 14 corporations? Our proposal is to have the councils prepare a listing of persons in their respective electoral district deserving of emergency food support and submit to the mayors and chairmen of the municipal corporations, and particularly, the elected representatives. After which, this list is submitted to the CEO of the corporation and then from there, it will be submitted to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry

of Rural Development and Local Government. After this is done, we will send it to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services where a means test will be conducted.

Following that, we will have supermarket vouchers in the amount of \$300 per person and this will be assigned to each family, and a listing with the necessary information will be sent to the respective supermarkets for persons to walk in and utilized essential grocery supplies. We also have NAMDEVCO vouchers in the amount of \$200 for access to local market produce from NAMDEVCO. These vouchers will be sent to the respective councillors for distribution to their burgesses. A form will be implemented to ensure that these vouchers are received by the designated persons approved by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

The selection of supermarkets: A list was provided by the 14 municipal corporations based on supermarkets that they were actually using over the last four years. Payment process: supermarket suppliers will be asked to submit invoices directly to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government for payment.

The next item we go on to received \$56,700,000 for the Community-based Environment Protection and Enhancement Programme, commonly known as CEPEP. This allocation will be used to meet the shortfall of the 15 per cent increase in wages to daily-paid workers and fees to contractors within CEPEP which came into effect on December 01, 2020. The 15 per cent increase is as follows:

- Contractors before used to get \$20,000 a month, now they will be getting \$23,000 a month.
- Labourers used to get \$90 a day, which is \$15 an hour and now they will

be getting \$105 a day, which is \$17.50 an hour.

- Operators, their daily wage was \$126.50, an hourly rate of \$21.08; now they will be getting a daily rate of \$145.47 and an hourly rate of \$24.24.
- Foremen, a daily rate of \$143.75, which is \$23.96 an hour and now they will be getting \$165.31, an hourly rate of \$27.55.

The reason for contractors' increase: in order to enter the CEPEP programme, the cost incurred by a contractor is approximately \$40,000, which is equivalent to what they earn with an average of three teams. Three teams are 10 persons in a team and it will come up to 30 people on a team together.

NIS claims: currently CEPEP pays all contractors and it is the responsibility of the contractors to pay the respective NIS. However, CEPEP is in the process of implementing a new system. They will pay the NIS directly. At CEPEP, there is an internal staff of 127 filled positions; external contractors/workers, 8,970 workers, they benefited from the 15 per cent increase. There are 297 operators, foremen and labourers. The total employed at CEPEP is 9,097 employees and their hours of work is six hours.

Lastly, we got a subvention at the Rural Development Company of \$40 million. This allocation will be used to enable the continuation of the National Reforestation and Watershed Rehabilitation Programme, which was transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to the Rural Development Company, RDC. Based on the budget of \$44 million, we will have a shortfall of \$4 million, which will come from the Rural Development Company. They will forego their project management fee. The RDC, since receiving the programme from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the programme was advertised, tendered, evaluated and contractors engaged. The RDC also liaised

with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries who facilitated the handing over of the programme in a timely and efficient manner.

People asked why the programme was transferred to RDC. The RDC is a project management company which expedites projects. In light of this, it was agreed that this programme would be best suited under the purview of Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government due to its similar mandate of CEPEP, to develop, implement and manage programmes that protect, enhance and beautify the environment in service areas known as environmental work areas.

The amount of staff at this programme. Previously, the programme had 29 members of staff. However, based on the revised structure, the RDC has since reduced this number to 17 persons for a more efficient and timely run entity. The organizational structure has been amended by leveraging on the existing competencies with the organization. This will be added for greater efficiency and management of our affairs. The RDC will evaluate the effectiveness of this structure within the next three months. The total staff internal, as I said, is 22 persons and they have 10 vacancies and they have advertised and they are shortlisting right now to ensure that all these vacancies are filled.

Madam President, these are the moneys that we received, \$116,700,000 and they were allocated to CEPEP, the Ministry for food concerning the COVID-19 and also at the programme now from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to the RDC, which is the forestry programme. So, Madam President, with these few words, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to account why the moneys received, where it is going and I want to assure you and the country that this money will be accounted for to the public of Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Saddam Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam President, for the opportunity to rise in this august Chamber to contribute to an Act to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2020) Act, 2019, which is Act No. 21 of 2019. I listened to the Minister of Agriculture talk about that this particular exercise that this Senate is engaging in is something traditional. It is a mid-year review. It is for the Government to reconcile its book and therefore, that is what we are doing. But it seems as though that there is a disconnect with the message that the Government is sending because on one end, Madam President, we are hearing that some Members are saying that we are living in an extraordinary time and we need more money and then we are hearing that the Minister of Agriculture is saying, “Well, we are doing nothing different.”

So it sends a very inconsistent message to the population of what really is this COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the economy.

3.45 p.m.

Now, I listened to the piloting of this particular Bill by the junior Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Sen. the Hon. Allyson West, and Madam President, I must say her piloting of this Bill lacked inspiration, it gave no hope to a population crying out for help, Madam President. It was very painful to sit here and listen to the Minister just read the speech of the Minister of Finance. It was painful. It is simply plagiarism, you fudged. You made no new points, you came here in this Senate and reread the entire speech of the Minister of Finance. And that is the hope that you expect to give to a population that is crying out for proper representation and leadership in Trinidad and Tobago. Well, Madam President, I will like to tell you that we on this side, the new incoming Government of the

Republic of Trinidad and Tobago will give the people that hope, [*Desk thumping*] will give them that inspiration, and will give them that leadership that they have been crying out for so long under this Rowley-led Government.

Madam President, this particular budget was based on a false premise and there are faulty projections that are contained in it. This however, will happen to be the last and final budget of this Rowley-led PNM Government. Now, they are asking us to come to this Parliament to approve an additional expenditure of \$2.6 billion, \$2.6 billion under the guise of COVID-19, but Madam President, I will go on to show that this \$2.6 billion is not any COVID relief. This is pure election engineering [*Desk thumping*] and electioneering, and gimmickry, Madam President. That is what this particular Bill is about. This is not about helping the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This Bill is attempting to help them, a failing Government, to come back into government, but we will stop that, Madam President, because when we go to the polls this Opposition will now be the next Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

And I told you, Madam President, that this mid-year review presented by the Minister of Finance was based on some faulty projections, and I will give you the first one. I will talk about the growth rate, Madam President, because I went back to look at the historical figures because we have to examine where we came from to understand where we are going. So in 2016, there was no pandemic, but the growth was negative 6.3 per cent. In 2017, there was no pandemic, the growth was minus 2.3 per cent. In 2018, no pandemic, it was minus 0.2 per cent and you are coming to tell us that we are facing a pandemic, we have falling oil and gas prices and you project a contraction of only minus 2.4 per cent, Madam President.

Madam President, I was born in the morning, but not this morning. You

cannot come and fool people like that in this country. There is one economist even projecting that the growth rate will go to minus 18 per cent, Madam President. How could this Government come on the eve of an election to tell the country, that what?—the growth rate is only going to be minus 2.4 per cent. That is absolute nonsense, absolute.

Now, Madam President, another very important issue we have to look at because only this year we were able to understand what happened with the accounts of 2019, for fiscal 2019. When I read the Auditor General's Report, Madam President, I was astonished, and I say I was astonished because when this Government came into power in 2015, they inherited a public debt figure of about \$50 billion in 2015. Madam President, today that figure is now at over \$70 billion, \$70 billion in public debt that this Government has racked up, Madam President, and what do they have to show for it, absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing. They can probably show you one overpass that they built down in Curepe, but that did not cost the taxpayers of this country \$20 billion, Madam President, it did not, it did not.

Now, the Minister also went on to boast about the deficit. I remember last year when the budget was read for fiscal 2020 which we are dealing with in this part of the year, they boasted that yes they were able to bring down the deficit to about \$5.2 billion, okay, but today the revised deficit is now \$14.5 billion, and the explanation we got for that is that, this is because of the extra \$2.7 billion that they are going to allocate through the supplementation Bill. There is also curtailment of Heads of Expenditure through savings from other Ministries. And there is a decrease in revenue of about \$9.2 billion. So that is why the deficit moved from \$5.2 billion to now \$14.5 billion.

Madam President, again, you had the economists, you had some of the Chambers coming out to say that again this is a false projection. When the budget was pegged on an oil price of \$60 per barrel and now you bring it down to \$45 per barrel, the projection is still too high, Madam President. When it comes back you will see that the deficit will even be larger than what is being said here. And again, this is going to be used as an election point to come and tell the population that “we brought down the deficit but COVID caused it to raise”. That is the message that they are going to give to the population. Now, Madam President, there is a false premise, they are not being truthful with the deficit. They have actually increased expenditure now and we are also considering the fall in oil and gas prices. But at the end of the day when you look at what this Government is doing, is that the world is facing a pandemic of a virus, but in Trinidad and Tobago we are facing a pandemic of deception and untruths by this PNM Government. That is what we are facing here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President: Sen. Hosein, I have to caution you at this stage to dial back a little bit on your language, okay?

Sen. S. Hosein: And, Madam President, the supplementation—the fiscal 2020 budget, Madam President, that we had approved that for this financial year that the Government was going to spend \$53 billion on Goods and Services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Now, they are requiring the \$2.7 billion extra which is going to affect 15 Heads of Expenditure as outlined in the Senate document that was provided to us. So that will now take us up for fiscal 2020, a total expenditure of \$55.7 billion.

So, I read, and I listened to the junior Minister and also the Minister of Finance—

Madam President: Sen. Hosein, you keep saying “junior Minister”, there is nothing like that. The proper portfolio as you will hear me when I call on the Minister, “Minister in the Ministry of Finance”.

Sen. S. Hosein: Yeah, so, the Minister, Sen. the Hon. Allyson West, Minister in the Ministry of Finance, read from the speech of the Minister of Finance and indicated that the \$2.7 billion—because we have to find this money somewhere, where is it going to come from? And we understood that the money is going to come from savings, one, and two, borrowings.

Now, since I have been a Senator in this particular Parliament, whenever a mid-year review comes and there is something called “savings” you will have something called “a variation and supplementation Bill”, because when you have a savings from other Ministries you will take the expenditure, you will take the moneys that were not expended and transfer it to another Ministry, another Head. So, for the Minister to come to this Parliament without a variation Bill and indicate to us that there is some savings, I have some questions to ask. Where is this savings coming from? Which particular Ministry did not use up its appropriated moneys? Where is the savings coming from? Which Head are we going to move expenditure to? Because this clearly cannot be a matter of savings because you are only in this particular Bill adding moneys to the fiscal 2020 appropriation.

Now, the Minister also indicated that the Ministry of Finance raised \$1 billion through the development loans regime, and also there was a withdrawal of US \$400 million which amounts to about, let us say about TT \$2.7 billion from the HSF. So they dipped into the HSF, they went in and this is the second time, it is probably the third time they are going into the HSF. So I want to be absolutely clear, they already took \$1 billion from the loan regime, US \$400 million from the

HSF and you are coming for an additional \$2.7 billion now. Is this 2.7—and I am asking through you to the Minister, Madam President, is it that this \$2.7 billion that we are going to be adding to this fiscal 2020, is it part of the money you already took from the HSF? Or is it in addition to? Because if it is in addition to, it meant that this Government would have engaged in spending of close to \$6.5 billion, \$6.5 billion for this COVID period alone.

So we have to get these answers clear because it was unclear by the Minister in the Ministry of Finance whether or not this \$2.7 billion is an addition to those figures. Because you cannot come to the population and tell them that you are spending \$6.5 billion on COVID response at a time when we had only 116 cases in Trinidad and Tobago. So we as a small developing country had 116 cases of COVID when this budget measure was going to be passed and we spent \$6.5 billion.

Had this Government engaged in proper fiscal management of the economy since 2015 to present, our economy would have been robust enough to absorb the effects of this pandemic, Madam President. What we are seeing here is fiscal incompetence, economic mismanagement, Madam President. That is what we are seeing, because when you also look at the Auditor General's Report on what is happening with the income side of the economy, you would see that the overdraft currently, through the Exchequer Account is super-maxed. I want to ask the Government whether or not they would have taken any dividends out of the NGC to finance any of this additional expenditure, Madam President?

These are the questions that the population wants answers to. Because they will come with their false narrative to talk about the People's Partnership Government going into NGC, but Madam President, every single dollar that was

taken out of NGC, you could see the projects. Today that this Government benefited from the projects that were built under the People's Partnership Government in response to COVID. You had the Couva children's hospital which acted as the primary health care facility in order to treat and manage COVID-19 patients, [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, a brainchild of the hon. Leader of the Opposition Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, Madam President. You had the tennis centre where you had persons quarantined. You had the Debe campus, Madam President, you had the HSF that we deposited money into that you can use today, [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, not one red cent this PNM Government placed in the HSF, but they are dipping, and dipping, and dipping, and taking out money out of the HSF, Madam President, and recently passed a particular piece of law in this Parliament so that they can go in easier. That is what we have to deal with, but soon come the day, Madam President, that all this nonsense will stop, and that the people of Trinidad and Tobago will benefit from what they own and what they deserve, Madam President. They will get a UNC Government, Madam President, very soon.

Now, I want to look also, Madam President, at where this money is going. Where is this \$2.7 billion going? You have \$2.7 billion going into 15 Ministries, 1-5, but I want to tell the population today and I want make it absolutely clear, when you look to see where this money is going, only about \$600 million is directly associated with expenditure with regard to COVID-19, only \$600 million. So it means that in this appropriation \$2 billion has nothing to do with COVID response, has absolutely nothing to do with COVID response. But yet they are going to use financing out of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for non-COVID expenditure. So that is what we have to let the population know, Madam

President, \$2 billion out of the \$2.6 billion has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with COVID.

You have this Government spending \$50 million on hotel repairs, nothing to do with COVID. You have airport upgrade coming, nothing to do with COVID. We have EBC expenditure, nothing to do with COVID. Madam President, this Government should have known since last year when this budget was being passed that there will be two elections this year, a local government election and a general election so they had to put the required appropriation in the budget in the first place. Again, this is the economic mismanagement we have been speaking about on this side, Madam President. But then they sprinkle a few goodies. They throw out some crumbs to the population. After they starve them for four years, they give them CEPEP increase, they give OJTs increase but, Madam President, I saw a CEPEP worker over the weekend. I spoke to him, he showed me his pay slip. When you look at the increase that this Government is boasting about, it is only \$90 extra they get, you know, \$90. And this is the contempt that this Government treats the people of Trinidad and Tobago with. This money does not belong to the PNM, this money belongs to the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, let them benefit from it.

And, Madam President, you would realize that this Government has engaged in a lot of borrowing, a lot, a lot of borrowing, and while this population was locked up inside, Madam President, they were awarding loans. There is one particular loan that was awarded on the 16th of March to NCB Global Finance where they closed a \$1.5 billion bond with the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for a period of 20 years, by Cabinet Note 872, dated the 21st of May, 2020. Cabinet approved a loan to WASA from NCB Global Finance in

the sum of \$125 million at an interest rate of 6 per cent per annum for eight years, the total interest to be paid is approximately \$60 million. This is during COVID, Madam President, the 21st of May, 2020. And we all know, it is a matter of public record that there are people in this Government that are closely affiliated with NCB Global Finance.

Madam President: Sen. Hosein, could I ask you to relate what you are saying, is that related to the matter at hand? And please do not as well impute improper motives to any Member of Parliament, okay?

Sen. S. Hosein: Madam President, I have no such intentions to impute any improper motive to any Member of Parliament—

Madam President: No need to—

Sen. S. Hosein:—and I would say—

Madam President: No need to—Sen. Hosein, just continue with your contribution please.

Sen. S. Hosein: Thank you. And I would say, Madam President, that it must have a level of accountability when one particular company in this country can get awards of contracts where the profits will amount to over half a billion dollars. There must be accountability and transparency in those transactions. That is what there must be. Because we cannot stand on this side and allow this to happen.

Now, Madam President, you would see in this particular appropriation the supplemental appropriation that unemployment is featured because you have certain structures or programmes, or reliefs put in place to deal with persons who may have lost jobs, who may have lost salaries during that period. But I heard the Prime Minister, Madam President, I heard the Prime Minister saying that we have lost jobs because of COVID. Well, somebody on that side needs to wake up the

Prime Minister, Madam President, because persons have been losing their jobs even before COVID-19. There were over 63,000 jobs lost before COVID, Madam President.

I hear that the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development is sighing, but she clearly does not know, Madam President. And Madam President, I can give you the figures, 31,000 jobs were lost in mid-2017, add that to 26,802 persons whose jobs were lost, and when we examine the NIB data between 2017 and 2018, add that to 5,000 Petrotrin employees; 631 TSTT employees; 200 UTT workers lost their jobs, Madam President. A whopping total of 63,633 persons have lost their jobs before COVID-19. So do not come and say that COVID-19 caused people to lose their jobs.

You have engaged, Madam President, this Government in particular, has engaged in union busting, they have engaged, Madam President, they have presided over the highest unemployment rate in Trinidad and Tobago. This is what this Government has engaged in and then you come to give the people something called a “salary relief grant”. Persons out there when we go and we meet the people on the ground, they tell us that they applied for this grant but they cannot get it. Over three months have gone and they have not gotten the grant. People started to get the grant now, one or two persons when the economy reopened. Now, this is a real tactic, Madam President, because once the economy reopens and you are re-hired in a particular job you are no longer eligible to receive a salary relief grant, because one of the conditions is that you must have been unemployed for that period. So if the economy reopens, therefore you are no longer entitled to that salary relief grant.

Now, Madam President, I want to deal with a very, very important matter.

And that matter has to do with the appropriation to the Ministry of Health in particular. And in that Ministry of Health appropriation we have seen out of the \$2.7 billion, the Ministry of Health will be getting \$224,582,640. Now, we have seen, Madam President, that this Government has engaged in some irresponsible spending for this COVID period. You would have seen the pictures, you would have heard the cry of certain individuals who were in the step down facility in Sangre Grande that was being rented by this Government for a total of \$105,000 per month for three months, they had a three-month contract. The Minister of Health indicated that the Attorney General will give an opinion on that. Well, we have yet to hear whether or not—what is the outcome of that particular matter. They used the facility, Madam President, for probably one month, one month and they have paid \$315,000. Now, I am not going to say whether or not the person who owns that particular facility knows anyone in the Government. I cannot say that for sure, Madam President. But that is what town is saying, people are saying that.

Now, Madam President, I have some other documents that I would like to bring to your attention. And there is one document in particular that I found, it is called a purchase order from the North Central Regional Health Authority, and it is dated the 3rd of March, 2020. And in this particular document, this was before there was a confirmed case of COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago. The NCRHA was paying \$75 for one N95 mask, one N95 mask, \$75. They bought, Madam President, a total of 120 masks by 10 boxes at \$90,000. So one mask is costing this Government \$75.

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

Sen. S. Hosein: Thank you very much. Now, I have another purchase requisition

here, Madam President, one 40 x 40 tent, we heard about the tent, half a million dollars it was quoted. I have another purchase requisition here Madam President, one tent, \$68,000, for one 40 x 40 tent for rental. Then Madam President, this is where this money is going, eh, this \$224 million.

There was a proposal that they were going to replace 40 defibrillators throughout the NCRHA at a cost of \$814,000, 4-0, 40. Then subsequently, I have an internal memo, Madam President, which reduced the amount of defibrillators from 40 to 60 at the same \$814,000. ECG machines, 40 ECG machines at \$505,000 estimated cost and then a document indicating the authority to purchase 12 ECG machines. So it went down from 40 to 12 at the same price.

Madam President, there are so many other documents. One particular funeral home in particular, October 24, 2019, there are about 69 invoices here totalling to \$231,000 that the NCRHA is paying one particular funeral home, Madam President. Then, in response this Government likes to talk about how responsive they were to COVID and that they were preparing, Madam President. Well, let me tell you what they were preparing. Right in Mount Hope there is a rooftop restaurant that they were preparing, they were spending moneys there, Madam President, \$41,000 on blinds, window blinds. They were preparing a restaurant when people in that hospital had to stay in the corridors. When there were no hospital beds you were preparing a restaurant at the Mount Hope facility. That is the priority of this Government. You are preparing a restaurant when people do not even have food in their homes. When people did not have a bed, when there was no medication in the hospital at times, Madam President. There is one particular doctor who indicated that there is one tablet that costs about five cents for when somebody is getting a heart attack and there is a shortage of that at

the hospital. When there are contractors to provide goods and services to the NCRHA on a daily basis and they are not being paid, where they are being owed hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But there is one more issue I want to raise, Madam President, with regard to the Ministry of Health, and this hurt my heart because again, I have another internal memo here, Madam President, and the subject of it, it is dated the 19th of February, 2020, “Catering for meals for patients to be warded at the Couva Hospital”. Madam President, in this document it shows that this Government has not been up-keeping their oath and keeping truth to the people of Trinidad and Tobago by keeping that Couva Hospital closed. This is what was said in this document. They were looking and they were examining what is the equipment that is present at the Couva Hospital, and they were saying, Madam President, as was suggested by the Manager of OSHA, the equipment, the large equipment at the kitchen of the hospital was not in operation for that period of time, and the warranty had elapsed. So that is what happened. Most of the equipment at the Couva Hospital because you did not open the hospital, you did not use the equipment because of spite, Madam President, all of the warranties in that equipment have elapsed, all.

Now, Madam President, you have doctors who are risking their lives on a daily basis. Where is the stipend for those doctors? Where are the stipends for the police officers and every other person who falls under the category of frontline workers? But every day we will see the Minister of Communications coming on to the television to tell us that all is well together with the Minister of Health. Now, I know that the Minister of Communications is not here with us because I wanted to ask her about the \$7 million that they used for advertising during the COVID

period, but I understand Sen. Borris is with us and the Minister was at her press conference this morning. So I do not know, I wish her all the best with respect to her health, Madam President.

Now, the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development indicated, Madam President, that this Government acted decisively with respect to COVID. This Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development had one job, which was to deal with pandemic leave.

Madam President: Sen. Hosein, your time has expired.

Sen. S. Hosein: Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Dillon-Remy.

4.15 p.m.

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to join this debate on an Act to supplement the appropriation of the sum, the issue of which was authorized by the Appropriation Financial Year 2020, Act 2019.

Madam President, I sit here and I listen in this august Chamber to this debate, and I cannot help but say to myself that Trinidad and Tobago will not go forward post COVID in this manner as we are going on here today. I have said it before, and I am saying it again. I am tired of sitting and hearing the Government blame the Opposition for everything, and the Opposition blame the Government for everything. And they never the two shall meet. Well actually that is not true, I have seen them meeting on essential—in many areas, as Bills have been debated. But Madam President, what Trinidad and Tobago is facing, and a part of what the world is facing is something that is so significant that in order to go forward, we must do things differently. We must do things differently.

The Opposition talks about whatever the Government does, as though there was no problem with the prices of oil and gas when this Government came into office. Significant decrease in the price of oil and natural gas, and the Opposition talks about what they did in Government, when they had a significantly higher cost of oil and natural gas—prices for oil and natural gas. In other words, they have a significantly more income. And it is as though it does not make sense. And I am saying that people listening to this kind of debate, they are tired of it. I am tired of it. And I am just appealing to us as a people, going forward we must do things differently.

I hope that COVID would wake us up, to let us know that as a people in Trinidad and Tobago, who must go forward from this, the results of this pandemic that has affected and will continue to affect us for a while in a significant way, both in terms of the economy, in terms of our education, in every area, it is going to affect us. And because it is happening in all of the world at the same time, the effect is going to be even more severe. And therefore, we have to do things differently.

Madam President, my comments are going to be confined mainly to the areas of health and the allocation to Tobago. I would first like to commend the Government for its handling of this COVID-19 crisis. [*Desk thumping*] I have worked in the health sector for 30 plus years. And I was genuinely concerned about the possible impact of COVID-19 cases if they came in the numbers that we were seeing in the places like China and Europe, if those numbers were seen in Trinidad and Tobago, having worked in the health sector, I was genuinely concerned.

Our first case was diagnosed on March the 12th and I still remember the afternoon of March the 21st when the Minister of Health announced that there were 40 cases positive from the cruise ship—the persons who came from the cruise ship and were quarantined in Balandra, I had an instant headache, because I envisaged what could possibly happen if this thing gets out in our nation.

It is now history. We have gone from March the 12th the first case, we are now on June, today is June the 15th. In other words, in three months, we have gone from a situation where we have had definite COVID cases coming in, and we have been able to harness our resources in a manner that I consider commendable. And I am saying that because our health sector has been known to have problems. And if we had had—I mean, it has taken quite a lot of coordination to have the response ably led by the Government, guided by the health care professionals, also getting buy in from the majority of the population. We have done well so far in managing the COVID-19 epidemic.

Madam President, I am sorry to say that some of the utterances coming from the Opposition have been less than complimentary to the effort that has been made by the Government and by public servants. They could only point out the mistakes and missteps that the Government has made.

When I heard one Member of Parliament talking about things like cockroaches in facilities, when I know that in this country, within a three-month period, let us say, let us even say January to February, March, let us, let us say four months, the Government had been able to organize so many facilities, to be able to accept patients, it is has been, and continues to be a tremendous effort. [*Desk thumping*] And I congratulate them all.

The leadership, the Prime Minister, Minister of Health, Minister of National Security, the Chief Medical Officer, and the staff of the regional health authorities, also the other frontline workers, the Defence Force, the Police Service, the Emergency Health Services, and all other frontline workers must be commended. Madam President, it is my prayer that this type of work ethic going forward will continue, because it is what we would need for the rest of the COVID epidemic and beyond, post COVID. We will not be able to do it unless this type of attitude and approach is continued.

The recurrent expenditure of \$224,582,640 is what is required, what has been asked for, for the Ministry of Health and the cost of things like personal protective equipment, PPEs, ventilators, we know that it is a significant. Not only that, but to rent spaces to have people quarantined in, it is a significant cost that the Government has taken up. But as I said, the policy decision that they have taken in order to keep at bay the COVID from coming into the country and spreading among the population has been costly, and there has to be an expenditure for that.

I also note there is an allocation in addition to the 224 million here, there is another 50 million allocated at the Tobago Regional Health Authority specifically related to the health response in Tobago. And I am saying that the response in Tobago is in need of the injection of funds, because we are not yet—it is not yet ready to take any large numbers of patients without significant impact on the other areas of the health care delivery.

Madam President, at a presentation I would have made I think it was last year, when I remember saying that we would need to be doing more testing for COVID to identify what is happening in the population, and I am happy to say that this is one of the things that is happening right now. We have not had the numbers

that they were expecting because of the decreased number of persons with acute viral infections. However, we do have influenza season coming up, starting in September, and at that time, there will be the need for increased laboratory testing for Influenza like illnesses. And I am—from what the Minister has projected there would be many more sites being able to test for COVID at that point in time and I do—I am happy that that is so.

Madam President, I would like to say that going forward after this number of persons who are—our nationals are coming back in and we are dealing with so many numbers in terms of quarantine, I would like to ask the Minister of Health, Minister of National Security and the other members of that COVID task force to consider seriously the role of partnership with the population going forward, so that persons will within the communities will take up the responsibility for policing themselves.

We cannot continue for the long haul like from central managing that policing of persons who may be COVID positive, not necessarily requiring hospitalization. And I am saying that because COVID will be with us for a while, and what is happening now, and the amount of coordination that is needed, I am asking them to consider decentralizing that and having it at the level of the County Medical Officers of Health, with their district health visitors, taking responsibility for their communities.

The Minister may even consider the—whatever those, the bracelets that were the—ID electronic, yes, they may consider that as one of the possibilities for being able to target and identify where persons are, but I am saying that for people who are going to be considered responsible enough, that can be done, where you allow them to be quarantined in their area so that we do not—the Government does

not have to continue taking up this responsibility because COVID will be with us for a long time and we cannot continue it, I do not think.

In addition, to which we must have a robust active surveillance system going forward. I am saying, during the flu season, influenza like illness come in September, we will be needing to be doing many more swabs, and once a person has a flu like illness COVID is one of the possibilities. Everybody cannot be quarantined in a facility, and we will be needing to be doing testing and being able to monitor them outside.

Madam President, the moneys released to Tobago for the grant for the tourism sector of 50 million required to enable the improvement of the facilities in Tobago, I think it is well—the people in Tobago are very happy about it. But I am saying that this money is just a start for the tourism sector because for the sector to grow, much more will be needed than that as an investment.

4.30 p.m.

We would also need to have significant involvement of the population in terms of education and to further develop the product. We are very much aware, we do not know how the world is going to be travelling post-COVID within the next couple months. We would never necessarily—we do not know whether we will get the numbers of tourists that we did not have. Even the small number that we had over the last three or four years, we do not know that we will be getting them again, and we may have to be doing things differently. I know that the Tobago Tourism Agency has a plan and that plan has been considered and I know they are now revising that plan, because we are not sure exactly what we will be going forward with, and that plan has to be worked intimately—reworked—with the involvement of the people on the ground, in addition to finding new means of

financing.

Madam President, there also was another 5 million here that was given for the Enterprise Assistance Grant Programme and the enterprise development. Again, a small amount, but something that is considered by the persons who need it, again, making sure that what is given to persons for investment is appropriately monitored so that the return on investment is realized.

I noted recently, it was on the news that the new Chief Secretary in Tobago was making a tour of many agricultural holdings in Tobago, and looking at it I did not realize that there were so many areas in Tobago that were trying to get its agriculture back up and running, and that is integrally related to the tourism sector, because if you have appropriate food production, then you will be able to feed the tourists that are coming into your island rather than importing food, as we do right now. [*Desk thumping*] I am saying that the need for the integral workings of the tourism sector, the agriculture sector in Tobago post COVID-19 is vital.

Madam President, there was also a \$100,000 under the Public Sector Investment Programme—a \$100 million, sorry, for the construction of the terminal at the ANR Robinson International Airport. We have spoken about that in the past. I did mention that when I made my contribution to the budget debate last year and I would ask the Minister: Is there the appropriate moneys allocated for land acquisition for the persons who are resident outside of the airport and whose land needed to be acquired for the airport project? And I am saying that because, clearly the airport project is going to be going on and Tobagonians are wanting it, the people who live around the airport are also wanting it, but as far as I know we have not yet agreed as to what is happening, unless I am told otherwise, Madam Minister, that that whole matter is settled now that the airport is going to be

continuing post-COVID and the question I ask is, do we have an agreement for the persons whose land is to be acquired? I know areas have been assigned and areas are being cleared and land is being developed, but has there been a settlement? Because you cannot take somebody who is living in a place right now, give them some money and then tell them, "Go and wait and build a place." What do you do in the interim? I am just asking.

Madam President, our nation has a significant challenge facing it. Many of the speakers before have spoken about the decline in the economy and COVID coming upon us now, literally hitting us as a double whammy. In order to go forward, I am suggesting that we need a whole change of attitude in our people going forward [*Desk thumping*] if we are to recover in a manner that is appropriate and in a manner that we can do as Trinbagonians to harness what we have in us as a people going forward to get out of this COVID, post-COVID, whatever things are happening in the economy. In order to do that, we would need a change of attitude. I am suggesting, Madam President, our values have to change. We need a values transformation in Trinidad and Tobago. What do we value as a nation? What is important to us? Is our work ethic that we see happening very well during the COVID-19 epidemic, is that something that is for post-COVID too? Is that a value that we have?

Madam President, we know that many of our people have got away with a lot, because our leaders have allowed them to get away with a lot. We quarrel about people in terms of how they work and their work ethic, when we have sat over it and presided over it and they have been paid. They know they come to work, they do not work. Well, we know that it is not everybody, but the ones who do, they get paid. They go home at the end of the month. No water off their backs,

so they continue to do it. We, going forward, post-COVID have to have a set of values that will take us through it. We, as a people, have to think about it, agree on those values. Those values have to cut across political, religious, ethnic, all those divides, otherwise, we will not get it. Madam President, do you think I am too optimistic? I do not think so. I know we can do it. We cannot go forward doing the same things, as I said before. We cannot be sitting on one side opposing the other side and then when you get in government, continue to talk about the other. We have had enough of that.

Going forward, post-COVID, we need the integrated, important values as a people which I know that we can have and we can make ourselves grow from this epidemic in a manner better than we were before. It is my prayer, it is my hope. Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, before I start, it has always been my view that the Independents bring sanity to this Parliament. [*Desk thumping*] Today, the contribution of Sen. Dillon-Remy is a glaring example of that. [*Desk thumping*] I want to thank her for her balanced contribution and her vision for a post-COVID society in Trinidad and Tobago, a vision which I personally share and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago also shares. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, it is my honour and pleasure to contribute to this debate, variation of appropriation Bill, 2020. Even though the Ministry of Finance has no variation in the Bill, you cannot have a discussion on the economy without a discussion on energy. Energy is so pivotal to the fortunes or misfortunes of Trinidad and Tobago that, in a sense, I guess as Minister of Energy and Energy

Industries, I am always relevant.

But, Madam President, the Minister of Finance in his presentation in the other place indicated that despite the challenges of COVID, based on our macroeconomic fundamentals, based on our ability to go down into our savings, based on our ability to secure fairly low interest loans and to be funded and to be rated by the rating agencies in a positive way, despite the COVID pandemic, we were relatively in a relatively good place. Who tell him to say that? Everybody come down on him. So when you telegraph, despite of the negatives around the economy, there are some positives, you are being lambasted. One, Mr. Kevin Ramnarine says it is a bell bottom idea. Mariano Browne saying he should start to write fiction. But, Madam President, we at the level of the Government have continued to manage the economy with prudence, with fiscal discipline and in the context of the health crisis, we have also managed that very, very well. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, in the 2020 budget, the Minister of Finance, based on reputable industry information, set the budgeted oil price at \$60 per barrel and the budgeted gas price at \$3. In the context of the then global environment, this was quite reasonable. OPEC and other oil producers had committed to production cuts, and there was improvement in the trade relations, at that time, between the United States and China. More so, that in early 2020, the oil price was predicted by the international agencies to exceed \$70 per barrel. However, the advent of the COVID pandemic impacted on the world economy and also impacted on the demand for energy. This was compounded by the disagreement between the two largest oil producers, Russia and Saudi Arabia.

In early March 2020, bilateral talks between the global oil producers ended

in an agreement on April 13th, with promises of production cuts. However, the combination of excess inventories in the system and low demand to the downward spiralling of the world economy led to significant decreases in the price of WTI in the Benchmark Crude out of United States. So much so, that for the first time in history, on April 20th, WTI traded in the realm of negative. It had to perceive oil is being sold at negative. It means you have to pay somebody to take your oil. But, Madam President, that is the global economy, that is the global demand. The Government did nothing wrong so that oil price fell. We cannot take blame for that. These are matters we have no control of.

As a matter of fact, for the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, since OPEC was formed in 1974, Trinidad and Tobago was invited to an OPEC and non-OPEC meeting. I had the honour of attending. I had the honour of meeting, virtually, His Royal Highness Abdulaziz Al Saud bin Salman, a good colleague of mine through the gas exporting country; His Excellency Alexander Novak, the Energy Minister of Russia. These are serious men, you know, Madam President. These are global trendsetters, you know. For want of another word, they are heavyweights. And, you know, when I attended the meetings—two meetings I have attended so far—you know, there is a saying in Trinidad, “Cockroach eh have no place in fowl business”, but we were among the fowls. Even though we did not have a direct impact on production cuts, because our production is so small, we were now privy, for the first time, to the thinking of the key players. So we now have strategic information in the hands of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and by extension the Cabinet that we know of certain things that even the world energy market does not even know, and that is the advantage of being privy to some of these information. OPEC, OPEC+ plans to

meet once per month over this period here. Brent prices also recorded, at first, tumbling to below \$20 per barrel. Since then, as you have seen, because OPEC has maintained its cut, oil prices have gingerly started to move forward. It averages around just under \$40 over the last week or two.

Natural gas prices fell below \$3 in 2019. Henry Hub gas prices registered approximately 2.57 per MMBtu at the end of December 2019. That declined to \$1.80 per mmbtu in June this month, June 2020. There are a lot of things happening in the global gas market. The Chinese economy was down. They are the largest importer of LNG in the world. The Japanese, which is the second largest importer, they also got a heavy hit. South Korea, the whole Asian market has collapsed. We did not do anything for that, but we will suffer the consequences, and that is the scenario in which the Government of Trinidad and Tobago through the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries is trying to manoeuvre its way through very, very choppy waters. It has nothing to do with Sen. Mark talking about the Prime Minister went to Houston and he negotiated gas price and all kinds of foolishness. This is serious international trade issues, and we are fortunate enough that we are party to some of these discussions.

We know what is the dynamic playing. We are going to meet every month to determine where this gas price go, how we can chart a course out of this. The oil prices will go nowhere if the world economy does not pick back up. So OPEC could do what they want. If there is not a demand for your product, your prices will fall. So fundamental to all these discussions is the fact that we have to see global economic activity picking up, and that is where we have to balance the health in the economy.

The issue of the supply of natural gas to down streamers, the NGC has

settled on supply contracts. I have said that many times over here. I want to deal with a point, because every time I come to this Senate, Sen. Mark speaks about the Prime Minister went to Houston and he negotiated a price and because he negotiated that price, plants in Point Lisas shutting down. Plants in Point Lisas are not shutting down for that. Plants in Point Lisas are shutting down. They are not only shutting down in Point Lisas, you know. They are shutting down in Chile, they are shutting down in Russia and they are shutting down in Indonesia, because the demand for ammonia and methanol has disappeared, in particular, methanol.

Methanol is today trading at under US \$200 per metric tonne. When the UNC was in Government in 2013, you know what was the price of methanol? Madam President, \$800 per metric tonne. That is the difference between them and us. We “ent” crying. We are still managing, and this country as performed creditably despite all these issues that affect our revenue streams, and I think the Government through the Prime Minister and his Cabinet should be complimented for doing these innovative ideas.

Another thing I want to bring to the attention of this Parliament about the gas price, is the gas price is not a fixed price. It is pegged to what you call the price curve of the commodity. So let us say, for example, methanol, there is a price cure for methanol. If methanol is \$400 per metric tonne, there is an equivalent gas price you pay. If it goes to 600, you pay a higher gas price, because everybody has to benefit from the chain.

So if your commodity prices are high everybody lives happily thereafter you know, the upstreamers, the mid-streamers and the downstreamers. The challenge, Madam President, is what you call the floor price, and when the floor price hits rock bottom which is \$200 and under, who takes the hit? And that is where the

negotiations are now taking place that everybody has to take a hit, everybody has to take a haircut when your base, your floor price is so low that it is difficult to have significant profits either upstream, midstream or downstream. Hopefully, the price cycle, in the cyclicity of prices in the global market will alleviate that in hopefully the short to medium term.

So in recognition of this new normal, if we should say so, there was a time in Trinidad and Tobago cheap gas was available. The NGC was formed—buy gas cheap, sell it at X plus to the downstreamers and everybody was happy. The downstreamers was making money, the NGC was making money and the downstreamers were making money. That scenario has changed. There is now something called the gas value chain, and as I always say, a chain is as strong as its weakest link, because if there is no Point Lisas, what is the sense of drilling wells offshore? And if there is not enough gas coming from offshore, what do you do with Point Lisas? And if the NGC is not there to aggregate and to provide transportation through its pipeline network, you have no business and then there is also what is significant in this modern era, is the traders. Because we only realize recently that the real value comes out of trading as we learnt the hard way through the transfer pricing out of LNG. So these are the dynamics the Government is now looking at. We have taken on a company called Gas Strategies Limited, out of the United Kingdom, to advise us and as I speak, we are meeting with all the people in the gas value chain. There is a meeting carded for Wednesday. There was one week Tuesday, and everybody is supposed to lay there their facts to gas strategy. They will do an analysis and then we will come up with an optimum position as to how this thing goes forward.

On the revenue side, let me go back again. I say this and I would say it any

amount of time I get the podium here. The Spotlight on Energy was kept in 2018. The Government brought to the attention of the population that the State was receiving an unsatisfactory share of the economic rent from the energy sector. Based on those discussions, we went ahead and implemented certain things. The first and foremost was the Minister of Finance implemented a 12½ per cent royalty on natural gas.

Madam President, before that the royalty on natural gas was 1.7 TT cents per mcf. In 2018 alone, the Government collected \$938 million in royalties. No, no, sorry. In 2018, the Government collected one \$2.2 billion in royalties and that increased in 2019 to a staggering \$4 billion in royalties. That is revenue we would not have had in this country.

Coming out of the Spotlight on Energy, we went to the leaders of these companies. The Prime Minister—I used to call it a world tour—he visited Melbourne Australia to get into a one and one personal contact with the head of BHP. He went to The Hague to have a one and one personal contract with the head of Shell. He went to London to have a one and one personal contact with the head of BP, and it is in those discussions that all the ideas gelled where the companies were told, in no uncertain terms, that while you have shareholders, the Prime Minister said I have shareholders too and the shareholders of my company are the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. So today I can say these discussions have progressed amicably and the Government has received over the period in excess of \$4 billion in revenue that we would not have otherwise had.

Although Sen. Dillon-Remy said, you know, stop blaming the Opposition for certain things, but if blame has to be cast, blame has to be cast. One of the weaknesses of the energy sector taxation system was the generous allowances

received by upstream company under the last administration. In other words, allowances and relief were frontloaded such that Government would only benefit after major claims were expended. In other words, with effect from January 01, 2020, the Government introduced an amendment to the Income Tax Act which provided write offs of exploration and development course in a straight line over five years instead of three years, 50, 30, 20, as previously obtained from January 01, 2014. Amendment was also made to the Income Tax Act to limit carry forward losses to 75 per cent of the chargeable income in any financial year.

So we were having a situation where BP, in particular, who has what you call an Exploration and Production Licence, and Exploration and Production Licence, their only taxation regime is what you call petroleum profits tax which is tax on profits. So if they have such significant write-offs the profit becomes very small and sometime non-existent. So the tax liability is almost zero. What the royalty did is cream off 12½ per cent at the top of gross revenue so that the State gets a secure and steady income stream irrespective of what capital write-off you may have later down the chain.

And finally, Madam President, I want to go to investments in the energy sector over the coming years. If you look at the news, well there is a report circulating out of the *Financial Times*. BP has taken a US \$17.4 billion cut in their assets. Shell, two months ago, announced for the first time that they were not paying dividends at all. For the first time in 30 years. These companies have been hit very hard. BP also announced it is going to cut its international staff by a whopping 10,000. Shell is on a similar pathway. They have not disclosed numbers as yet. BHP, I guess, has to do the same. These companies do not sit back and wait for things to happen, you know. They are proactive. They have

shareholders to account to, they have their annual general meeting. And when your bottom line is not showing any progress, people invested money in your company and what they invest in your company for? Dividends. So when you reach a stage where you see I cannot pay you no dividends, what you are keeping my money for? That is the simple mechanics of investment. I will look and put it somewhere else. Put it in an IT company, put it in a biotech company, put it in a burger flipping company, put it in anything, put it in the food and put it in agriculture. So you have to have your shareholders happy.

So, Madam President, here we are in Trinidad and today I almost say this boastfully but guardedly, that Trinidad is probably the only destination of these companies foreign direct investment that has not been cut. BHP, Shell and BP over the next two years will continue with their investment profile pre-COVID. BHP, for example, in their deep water exploration programme, they have spent so far, US \$1 billion. “They eh get a cent for it yet, you know. They eh sure if they have commercial gas as yet.” That is the nature of high capital investment that goes into exploration.

The Invictus Drill Ship is coming back to Trinidad in two weeks’ time to drill a well call Broadside. Madam President, you know what is the depth of Broadside? Madam President, 19,000 feet. It is being drilled in 6,600 feet of water depth. So the full depth of the well is 19 plus 6, which is 25,000 feet, making it the deepest well ever to be drilled in Trinidad and Tobago; 25,000 feet is four and a half miles.

5.00 p.m.

Just envisage 4½ miles of pipe going down into the earth looking for gas. That is the nature of this business, it is serious business. It is high capital cost, and

when you come here as an Opposition and bad mouth companies and bad mouth Governments in a sensitive area like that, you are doing no justice to your country. It is irresponsible, it is reckless to say the least, and I would say unpatriotic too, because these are things that you have to watch, analyze and make mature comments when it is required. Shell has a rig that came in last month. Shell is going to drill the Barracuda field and a field called Colibri off the North Coast. Shell is also going to drill some exploration wells at the back end of that programme. BHP, after it drills its deep well, it is bringing in another rig to drill what is called the Ruby and Delaware project. Ruby is a significant oil find off the East Coast. By the end of 2021 that field will be producing in excess of 10,000 barrels per day, taking us back to 70,000 and 75,000 barrels of their production. So these investments are there. They have—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:—commitments from headquarters, things can still change, but we would keep our fingers crossed that these investments can take place.

Finally, Madam President, I want to spend the next couple of minutes in what I call energy diplomacy and international agreement. In October 15, 2019, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago got the Venezuelan Government to cancel the unitization agreement for the Loran-Manatee field and authorized Trinidad to develop the Manatee side of the field on its own, because the Government was aware that it would take them—Venezuela—it would take them decades before they reach in a position to develop the field. That was major energy diplomacy; that has nothing do with Maduro; that has nothing to do with Dr. Rowley; that has to do with common sense and good technical advice. Trinidad and Tobago's

proved reserves is 13 trillion cubic feet of gas. The Loran-Manatee field is 10 trillion cubic feet of gas, you know. Trinidad's share is 27 per cent of that, which is 2.7 trillion cubic feet. That field is now being worked on by Shell and they expect first production in 2024. Madam President, this is a major resource which would provide to this country 400 million standard cubic of gas per day for the next 15 to 18 years. That is the future.

We have signed a unitization agreement with Barbados because we are finding gas close to the Barbadian border. We have signed a memorandum of understanding with Guyana to help capitalize on the energy boom, so to speak, in Guyana. We have signed agreements with the Ghanaian Government to go into some joint venture projects with them. And one final thing that I want to mention is there is something called the Law of the Sea Convention. You have your boundary, 12 mile, 24 mile—that is how far a cannon used to shoot long ago—now you have the 200-mile exclusive economic zone. Beyond the 200-mile exclusive economic zone is open seas; it is international waters, you cannot exploit mineral resources beyond the 200-mile economic zone. But the Law of the Sea Convention caters for if your continental shelf, which is the shelf leading out of your shoreline, is broad enough that it goes beyond the 200-mile limit, the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention can give you permission to explore beyond that.

We will be presenting our case later this year to the UN Law of the Sea Convention. If we succeed, significant new acreage would now be available to Trinidad. Trinidad area, so to speak, could double in size. It take us almost to the border of the Guyanese oil field. These are very long-term strategic issues and when you are in the energy sector, you do not think today for tomorrow, you know. And it calls for a Government with vision, it calls for a Government of maturity, a

Government who knows what knobs to push, what knobs not to push, what types of relationships to build, and we do all that in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, the variation of appropriation Bill has been well-thought-out by the Minister of Finance and I will ask this Parliament to support it in its entirety. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Obika.

Sen. Taharqa Obika: Thank you, Madam President. I want to begin by saying, there is one statement that I agree with by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries that Trinidad and Tobago requires a Government of vision, foresight and maturity. However, this Government is not the one. I want to begin in this contribution by saluting all health care workers, doctors, nurses, orderlies, members of staff at all the different district health facilities, general hospitals, clinics, paramedics, ambulance, drivers. I want to also salute members of the protective services for providing guidance to citizens in proper social practice during this time of the pandemic. I want to also salute all the emergency workers, whether they be cashiers or cleaners at the neighbourhood supermarket, pharmacy, or whether they be the taxi drivers that carry persons and risk their lives, maxi drivers, as well as persons involved in cleaning and sanitizing public spaces. I also want to also salute teachers, because throughout this pandemic teachers were at home working beyond the call of duty, providing education support to children despite the fact that this Government callously took away laptops from secondary school children and denied the progression of continuity in Government to provide devices, such as tablets to primary school pupils.

This Government should have began and concluded their contribution to this mid-year review in light of the pandemic by thanking resoundingly the efforts of

Kamla Persad-Bissessar to ensure that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund grew by \$17.8 billion during her time as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago; US \$2.6 billion; TT \$17.8 billion. It is because of that commitment to growing the savings of our country that we could have come to this Parliament during the pandemic to approve \$10 billion in withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, recognizing that under Kamla Persad-Bissessar \$17.8 billion was a size of the growth of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So when the Members of the Government, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries began by stating that Sen. Maria Dillon-Remy provided sanity, but against Sen. Remy's own prescriptions and recommendations for this debate, the Minister proceeded to lambaste the Opposition throughout his entire contribution.

My duty to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago is to provide clarity regarding what are the tools that are available to us as an economy, as a society to protect the livelihoods, because post-pandemic, what is the concern? The concern is to protect and advance the livelihoods, the ability of families to put a bread on the table. The ability of families to take care of their education, health care, transportation needs and recreational desires of their families, their households. So if this Government spends so much time blaming and saying, "Spending happened prior", they should recognize that savings under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government has been the saving grace of this Government's fight in the pandemic because they could have relied heavily and almost singularly on the savings in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Now, the presentation by the Minister in the Ministry of Finance and the Minister of Finance in the other place basically amounted to an overstating of T&T's revenue. It also underplayed the size, true size of the deficit, and what we will realize in the future is that massive borrowing

would make up the shortfall.

Now, this Government has made no attempts, in their five years in Government, to diversify or transform the economic base. What that simply means, to find other ways to make money, because if you listened to the contribution of the Leader of this House, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, it would be clear to every right-thinking citizen that this Government has zero plans to diversify the economic base of Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, they are predicating the survival of our economy solely on the fortunes of the energy sector. Now, it should come as no surprise then that the Minister of Finance, after the public flashing, not from the Opposition but from commentators across the board of the lacklustre report of this post-pandemic recovery committee, the Minister of Finance reduced the report of the committee to a mere footnote in piloting this same debate in the another place, where he relegated to simply a draft report. In essence, this Government has had no plans in their five years to transform the economic base of Trinidad and Tobago and post-pandemic, they have zero plans to answer the economic challenges.

In fact, we got it clearly from the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the Leader of the Senate from the Government that their only plan is to rely more heavily on oil and gas. Post-COVID, the battle is with livelihoods and this Government has only sought to preserve the livelihoods of the wealthy. How else would we explain, in the height of the pandemic, the Government seeking to award a security policing contract to a known alleged financier of this Government? The Minister of Finance made it very clear that, by virtue of these increases, the expenditure will remain same, \$53.07 billion, a mere \$10 million increase, so they are going to spend the same amount of money for this fiscal year. When you look

at the measures detailed here, this Government came for \$20 billion in COVID-19-related support for budgetary expenses and one would have assumed, one would have expected that after coming for such a mammoth amount, that the people, the masses of this country would not have to be going hungry. But I myself, having to go and distribute hampers in Point Fortin constituency, saw first-hand that there are many families that are suffering, and I have heard similar reports across the nation.

So why is it that only \$400 million was appropriated to make sure families survive if in fact you came for \$20 billion? Two per cent of the funds that you came for was directly targeting families for income support. Even when we broaden it to other social measures, it does not cross 5 per cent of the funds that this Government came for. So what was the purpose of the platitudes, the accolades that the Government accorded itself when we debated increasing the developmental loans borrowing and the \$10billion from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund? They patted themselves heavily on the back, “We have done a wonderful job”, they say, but there are families suffering. And this Bill, when you scrutinize the elements of expenditure, not even 5 per cent, not even—they could not find 10 per cent of this \$20 billion to make sure that families can survive, but during the pandemic, they can come up clandestinely with a contract for policing for a financier. Now that alone is criminal.

So there is no plan. The masses do not feel safer. Post-COVID crimes are rising. The Government has led, in their five years, an onslaught against the education of the masses and during this pandemic, we have seen where the “haves” have continued to have their education accessed and the “have nots”, those in the government schools and the government-assisted schools have nothing, not a

laptop, not an access to a website. Their education has been forsaken by this Government. It is impossible for me to stand here today and not state that. I have also been engaged in teaching privately, at no cost where I can, persons in Point Fortin. I have reverted to trying to teach some maths because this Government has forsaken the children. You have children going to schools where they have financial means and the teachers have continued their classrooms uninterrupted, virtually.

What is the faith, what is the lot of the majority of students that this Government supposed to protect? Again, when a Government can take away, can debar preschoolers even from going to preschool, taking away the \$400 a month financial support that preschoolers, three-year-olds and four-year-olds got from the government under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, when this Government can do that to mere babes, we know that they really do not care about the future of any single child in this country.

It came to a head during this pandemic, it would be impossible of me stand here and not say this. This is clarity that we must provide because to provide an economic base, we have to provide a strong human resource platform. Now, before the pandemic, over 65,000 jobs were already lost. Post-pandemic, what is the plan? When you turn to the Monetary Policy Report of the Central Bank, it raises significant and alarming questions. The Government provided 100— but now it is \$200 million in liquidity support to credit unions which, by the way, it is only 2 per cent of the asset base of the credit union movement. I myself having been a cooperative development officer for some years recognized that this is insignificant to the support that is really required. When you compare it to the support given to the rest of the financial services sector, for instance, the banking

sector, a decline in the repo rate by 150 basis points means that it impacts every single banking client positively. So therefore, the measure for the credit unions and their members is not in fact equitable.

So the masses again are suffering, and I say this not against the bank because I myself am a banker, but I understand that we should help persons in the credit union movement. When you turn to page 12 of the May 2020, Monetary Policy Report, which I am sure would have informed this Government in preparation of this debate, it states, and I quote:

“One of the major domestic risks associated with the pandemic is a potential falloff in credit conditions and a downturn.”

Now, what are the major risks? A credit falloff. The Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development spoke in this debate and paid no focus, whatsoever, in any shape or material form, to the needs of the small and medium enterprises in this country. NEDCO falls under the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, not a single line of material focus was given. So we have support that could have been given, via NEDCO, so that small and medium enterprises could have gotten some support, but then again, if under this Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development 65,000 jobs were lost and there were no measures to correct for that, one cannot expect reasonably such a Minister to do anything for small and medium enterprises.

When we turn to the outlook of the Central Bank it states on page 18, I quote:

“The impact of the pandemic could last longer than expected if the virus proves especially persistent and large-scale reinfections emerge in countries which contained its spread initially.”

And I continue on another part:

“In the second half of 2020, fiscal, structural and monetary policies will need to be closely coordinated and alert to deal with a very dynamic domestic economic environment, complicated by tremendous uncertainties on the global geopolitical and trading fronts.”

What the Central Bank Governor is saying here is that in the absence of a strongly detailed, expertly prepared and relevant economic transformation plan, post-COVID, our economy is not going to fare well. The last point I want to quote on this same page is:

“The adjustments in the labor market that have already taken place, including layoffs and reductions in working hours, could persist for some time depending on the strength of aggregate demand.”

So, what the Central Bank Governor is warning? What is he warning? What is the salient warning of the Central Bank Governor here? It is that in fact the mass job losses have already happened and will continue to happen if this Government does not repurpose the labour force. Once more, all that was said of this post-COVID plan by the Minister in the Ministry of Finance is that there is a draft plan somewhere around; nothing to put our minds to, to focus our economic agenda. Fifty thousand jobs is what Trinidad and Tobago needs at this point in time. In Point Fortin, persons have been excited by my statements that we would create 1,000 of those in Point Fortin directly, sustainable jobs, and 100 new strategic businesses would be formed and focused on training.

I have dedicated even in my constituency training entrepreneurs at my own time and a lot of them really simply need just the guidance and the coaching of an experienced hand in business modelling and development. This should be

replicated across the country, but with a Government and a Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development in charge of small and medium enterprises development in this country, who could not even spare a thought in an entire 30-minute contribution for the small and medium enterprises under her watch, they are doomed for a Government with no plan. The areas of the national economic transformation agenda post-COVID, very important, getting people back to work; pro-business, allowing the private sector to drive the growth and development and deepen economic reforms with a human face, and local content would be very important going forward. Businesses can look forward to a United National Congress Government with a lower taxation regime on corporation tax so that they can reorganize their finances to grow their capital base, strengthen jobs and provide more for this economy that we so love.

Now, when we turn our focus and our attention to what has been this Government's track record for delivering for the masses, when the question has been asked of this Government regarding the housing bonds that they touted as the key selling point, apart from LED bulbs, as the key selling point in their budget presentation for this entire fiscal year, we come to a mid-year review and not a single thing is mentioned about these housing bonds. What in fact we see is that the Government has effectively shelved the entire idea at all of any housing bond of any shape or form, so there are no housing bonds, none whatsoever. And of course, I am standing firmly on a response from the Government to a question posed regarding that. So there is no plan for housing bonds and if you look at the housing of the Government, there is no plan to increase the new housing sites. There are no new greenfield sites in this country.

Madam President: Sen. Obika, while I have given all speakers a lot of latitude in

their contributions, you are going way off from the Bill that is before us. So I would ask you to use your remaining minutes to become a little more focused on the Bill.

Sen. T. Obika: May I ask what time am I to finish?

Madam President: You finish at 5.35.

Sen. T. Obika: Thank you very much.

So we have before us, supplementary appropriation. We are in the midst of a debate where the Government has touted that they have been battered and bruised by COVID-19, “Don’t blame us, blame COVID-19 for everything”, but we are saying that most of the problems of this economy have absolutely nothing to do with COVID-19, what they are to do with is the inaction and incompetence of this Government and all its Ministers when it comes to meeting the needs of the people in concert, because that is how Cabinet functions. Cabinet is not a grouping of individuals on their own. Now, regarding the way forward, the Prime Minister stated, when asked about the Roadmap to Recovery that:

“Throwing billions of dollars into unproductive subsidies, increased social welfares...is an unsustainable approach which will further wreck the economy and damage any chance we have of balancing the national budget in the foreseeable future.”

5.30 p.m.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this Government has seen it unfit to put more than 5 per cent of the COVID-19 response from this \$20 billion that they have gotten approval for from this Senate unanimously, and from the Lower House. They have seen it unfit to provide more than even 5 per cent of that money to the families that need to survive.

So what are considered unproductive subsidies by this Government? What are they? They are the Baby Grant, unproductive for them; laptops for school children, unproductive for them; tablets for primary school children, unproductive for them; GATE funding at the hotel school. Despite saying that hospitality and tourism is the gateway out of this economic malaise and dependency on the energy sector, they have shut down funding for tuition expenses for students studying hospitality and tourism at TTHTI.

Madam President: Sen. Obika, you have five more minutes. May I ask you in that five minutes please, to be a little more relevant to the Bill at hand?

Sen. T. Obika: Thank you, Madam President. The Prime Minister in going on—because of course the Prime Minister's statements cover the Government's thinking and rationale behind every single line Item in this Senate document; as I have been showing you, their neglect for the needs of the citizenry—he stated in particular any suggestions that we should increase existing welfare which already costs us around \$4 billion a year, and that we increase contributory pensions when the NIS is already in deficit and heading for insolvency, seriously limit the use of these options if the goal is not only survival but sustainability as well. Now, this Government missed a wonderful opportunity to widen national insurance contributions. They have failed in that regard, despite the murmurings of the Prime Minister. The closure of the refinery has also been another bad move.

Now, this Government is nothing short of an elitist government. Millions for connected individuals, and peanuts for the citizenry. This document is the best description of such.

Trinidad and Tobago needs to get working again. When you look around Trinidad and Tobago, citizens are recognizing that now is the time. Time has truly

run out on this Rowley regime. On foreign relations they have bungled the issue and threatened the ability of the banking sector to even do business with the United States, through which almost every single currency transaction happens, whether it be purchasing your Netflix subscription or buying that textbook for your education. The business community knows that now is the time to get T&T working again.

In Tobago the closure of the sea bridge, borne that out. The track record of listening and working alongside the people is clear at the level of the United National Congress. I commit to that goal that we have of creating these 50,000 jobs. After five years of blaming the UNC, this Government has now sought to blame COVID-19 for every single failure. The PNM talks, but after five years people want work, they want Trinidad and Tobago to work.

This Government has an opportunity to reposition this economy, but this response to COVID-19 has fallen flat. One can assume that the departure of the co-Chair of the COVID-19 committee, former Minister Le Hunte, could be one reason why there is insufficient grey matter on the level of the committee to get the job done.

Madam President, I want to conclude by saying that we will be a government that transforms this economy. We will work for the people, by the people and in a manner that gets their self-interest to be paramount on government's agenda. This Government has proven to be a government of talk, and the people are ready to get working again. Now is the time. I thank you.

Sen. Anthony Vieira: Thank you, Madam President. Sen. Dillon-Remy spoke about doing things differently. I think I would like to make that the thrust of my contribution.

Two years ago while walking my dogs in the nearby hills on the 21st of

August, 2018, at around 5.30p.m., I heard a roar coming down the Diego Martin valley. The ground began to shake and the light poles and the trees around me started to sway. As I looked down towards Westmoorings and Port of Spain, I said, “Oh my gosh, this is it, this is it”. At any moment I expected everything to come crashing down. We had just experienced a 6.8 earthquake, and yet miraculously everything still remained standing.

But what if everything had come down? What if we had, like we saw in Puerto Rico and other places, to rebuild our roads, our houses, our businesses, our towns and cities, rebuild from scratch? Where would we start? What would we prioritize?

Today a different situation faces us, one that could be just as dire. A convergence of forces, declining energy prices, oil wars between the Saudis and Russia and a global pandemic. These threaten jobs, our livelihoods and the economy, and we are not alone. Because of the pandemic many countries are bracing for a period of economic hardship ahead. Indeed, over 90 countries have gone to the IMF for financial assistance.

Minister West said COVID poses the most serious threat ever to our physical and economic well-being. In fact, many have likened the situation to the Great Depression of the 20th Century which lasted as you know for 10 years, 1929 to 1939. And what characterized the Great Depression? Substantial unemployment, unavailable credit, bankruptcies, declining property sales, reduced trade and commerce. One does not need a crystal ball to see the similarities, and the very real possibility of a severe and prolonged downturn in economic activity characterized by a sharp fall in employment and production.

Whoever wins the next election is going to have a very difficult time

economically. But paradoxically they may also have an amazing and a unique opportunity to effect seminal far-reaching and meaningful changes, because of the current appetite for real change. Often people say they want change, but when one tries to effect change they resist and they rally against it. I believe this time is different.

COVID-19 has affected the world's consciousness in a way we have never seen before. Just look at it: the Black Lives Matter movement. Cynical and jaded world leaders all talking all of a sudden about climate change and ready to embrace the green economy. Just consider how the world of business, our court practice and the holding of meetings are now routinely taking place over Zoom and via video conferencing. Enormous changes in behaviour, all under three months; 2020 is a turning point in history. Our leaders have a chance to do things differently, to do things over, to do things better, but it is going to require some changes. It is going to require a national vision. It is going to require discipline, hope and consensus.

Unfortunately when I look at the appropriations under consideration in this Bill, to me it seems a little bit of the "same ole', same ole'". We appear content to be trudging along a well-worn footpath, when we should be looking to build a superhighway to the future. I believe that our potential as a country is bigger than the current situation, but we have to believe in ourselves, and our leaders both in the public and in the private sector, they must be willing to take bold action.

Let me say that my views and recommendations are very much influenced by the writings of the economists like John Maynard Keynes, Francis Fukuyama, Paul Krugman and others who have studied depression economics. In depression economics the usual tools and rules no longer apply. The standard policy response

does not work. According to depression economics, frugality and austerity, those are prescriptions for slow motion disaster. As history has shown, the antidote to the Great Depression, not counting the outbreak of World War II, was President Roosevelt's willingness to inject liquidity into the economy.

So this is not a time for penny pinching. That may be the right prescription for individuals and for families, but it is absolutely the wrong approach for the national economy. According to depression economics, going into debt, unlike the case of a household budget, can actually stimulate economic growth, and I am an advocate for strong stimulus. I would encourage Government to spend more, spend more with a view to forestalling a shrinking economy. Spend more with a view to forestalling rising unemployment. Because if unemployment rises and too many workers are displaced, the economy is going to destabilize. Precautions that might be smart for individuals and families, can magnify the distress of an economy as a whole. Economic recovery, when money is not readily available and people are not spending, may require borrowing from our future selves to pay for and invest in our present selves.

Now, the new normal is not going to be easy. Successful coping will require selective change. The challenge is to figure out which parts are working well, what parts need to change. We are very, very mature, very experienced in oil and gas, those parts are working well, but we need to do more.

My recommendations would be things like, let us invest in public infrastructure. We need to invest substantial resources in helping the unemployed to adjust and to get back on their feet. We need to invest in human capital via education and to align education with the country's needs. We need to invest in our arts and culture. Not only do we need the arts to make sense of our world, the

country's survival will depend on creativity.

We need to invest in the green economy. Recently at a world forum, Sir David Attenborough called on parliamentarians to prioritize climate change and to move beyond the five-year government horizon that typically obtains in western democracies, and to move beyond that horizon to long-term sustainable planning. Now, Sir David was no stranger to Trinidad and Tobago. He often featured wild life from Trinidad and Tobago in his documentaries, in particular *Life on Earth*.

I remember watching the oilbirds. The first time I saw about oilbirds was on his programme, and being amazed when I saw the fishing bats down at Gasparee, night bats scooping fish out. Sir David appreciated our unique and precious ecosystem, and we should as well, as it may be one of the most significant ways to reinvigorate our economy.

In fact at this moment, over 200 of the world's most senior economists and researchers are predicting that climate friendly green policy initiatives may offer the best economic return for government spending. Senior G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank officials give some of their highest ratings for climate benefit and economic outcomes to green measures, including clean energy and building retrofits.

Many years ago, late '70s, early '80s, I knew the hon. Minister of Finance's mother, Dr. Maura Imbert. She was one of the country's best scientists, and she was working at CARIRI at the time. I remember her telling me about research she was doing into Bois Bande. Now people would laugh, but I want to tell you if we had succeeded with Bois Bande the way Pfizer accidentally stumbled upon Viagra, man, we would have raked in billions. Viagra has brought in billions annually since its patent. So there is money to be made in the plant sciences. There is

money to be made in tropical plant research. There is money to be made in horticulture and plant varieties. We need to be putting some money and invest and research in those areas. It should be a matter of national interest to guard against biodiversity loss and to restore our ecosystems.

Ideal investments are those that put the unemployed to work quickly, delivering a high short-term multiplier while producing valuable assets that meet the needs of the future, so as to deliver a high long-term multiplier. Some of the best policies identified by the experts, when I see what the experts are saying: Invest in clean physical infrastructure, natural capital investment, ecosystem resilience and regeneration, including restoration of carbon rich habitats and climate friendly agriculture, sustainable food, farming and fishing.

Food security is vital. It is time to stop importing the grapes and the apples and the pears all year round. Let us do as we used to before. Let us enjoy these fruits as special treats at Christmas time. We need to revisit the national food bill and nonessential imported food items. We should be encouraging the cultivation and enjoyment of our delicious local food and blue food. Not only is it healthier, but it is going to reduce the loss of much needed foreign currency. Let us actively consider the new technologies in agriculture, things like vertical farming and the greening of our cities and living spaces. Our future is bound to the health of our environment. We need to shape an economy and a society that is greener, cleaner and sustainable.

Another suggestion I want to make is—the other day we debated the revenue authority Bill—let the multinationals pay their taxes in foreign currency. Why do they have to go and convert their money into TT to pay their taxes? We need the foreign currency. Let us take sterling, let us take US, let us take euros. One of my

favourite topics, we should be considering positioning Trinidad and Tobago as a space centre.

As many of you may have seen during the stay home restriction period, space is being commercialized. We saw Elon Musk's SpaceX, and we saw Richard Branson's attempted rocket launch. For years Microsoft has been funding space programmes. And now you are hearing—it is no longer a sci-fi thing in a novel or movie—you are hearing about space tourism. If we could align ourselves with space entrepreneurs and be part of the emerging space club, there is potential for employment opportunities and the transfer of technology. Many industries rely on space technology, in the communication sector, but also in things like medical research, satellites. Space activity is a promising emergent economy and we should have it on our radar. The Europeans launched their rockets from French Guiana, because it is closer to the equator. We are right on the equator.

So to get out of the Great Depression, money had to be put back into circulation, and we will need the same tools when tackling the emerging crisis. Everything changes when an economy is deeply depressed. We will need to stimulate full employment, and we may even need to do things that appear counterintuitive. To paraphrase the words of Paul Krugman: Getting people to work or giving them relief is imperative. We cannot turn our backs on the unemployed.

Doing too little is a bigger risk than doing too much. Caution is risky. Prudence may be folly. Budget deficits may be helpful, not hurtful.

At one level we want to avoid and counteract deflation and depression, and I expect that there are those who will see my call for a space programme and the benefits of the green economy as “pie in the sky”. You do not have to agree with

me, but the point I want to make is we need to be considering our capabilities, our potential and we have to be innovative. Perhaps we can do like Singapore and become a service oriented economy. But if we are to prosper we need bold new initiatives. Vision is the role of leadership, and our leaders will have to make some deliberate choices. We are at a turning point in epoch-making times. Time will tell whether our leaders rose to the occasion, whether they empowered or they disempowered our future.

In charting the way forward those who would lead should be asking some crucial questions: What kind of society do we want? What is our economic philosophy? What are the businesses of the future? What are our available resources? What are our long-term fundamental advantages? Is it geography, natural resources, human talent, a stable democracy, the rule of law? What can we, what should we do to develop and exploit our potential? What are we changing from and moving towards? What are we overlooking? What is holding us back from our true potential as a nation?

We need to do some spring cleaning. You see those little bottlenecks like the way the service commissions are being handled, we need to unclog those bottlenecks. What is holding us back? What investments would give us the most bang for our dollar? What do we want Trinidad and Tobago to look like 20 or 50 years from now?

Someone has written that the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there. As we seek to reinvigorate our economy and to navigate bold, new directions at the helm of this turning point, those words may be particularly apt. I thank you.

Sen. Khadijah Ameen: Thank you very much, Madam President, and as always

thank you to the staff of Parliament for their support in all these precautions that we take during this COVID pandemic, with regard to the safety and sanitation of our environment.

Madam President, coming this late in the debate on a Bill to supplement the appropriation of the sum of issue which was authorized by the appropriation Act which is the financial—for the year 2020, which essentially was the last budget that was read to this Parliament. This I thought would have been the opportunity for this Government to account to the Parliament and to the population, on its stewardship and its financial management of Trinidad and Tobago since the last budget was read. It is what happens after the first half of the financial year.

The COVID pandemic is the unforeseeable circumstance that has interrupted the Government's four and half years of broken promises and mismanagement of the economy. It seems to be the plaster that they will use for every sore and every criticism they get. The lacklustre contributions from various Ministers, the lack of contributions from Ministries that have a serious impact on the well-being of our citizens, speaks volumes.

6.00 p.m.

I think it reflects the Government's own dissatisfaction with its performance. For four and a half years this Government has relied on increased taxes, new taxes. We had the online tax, we had the shift in the VAT regime to increase the overall amount of taxes to be collected under VAT. We had the tyre tax. We have not heard any account from the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government or any other Ministry with regard to that. We have had several broken promises. We had promises of free Wi-Fi throughout the country. We had promises of free light bulbs, we had many promises along the way that the population is still

waiting to materialize, promises that never materialized.

We have had year after year of continuous unreasonable revenue projections. We have had a Government who has maxed out the overdraft, who has on more than one occasion increased the borrowing the limit to allow themselves to have more access to taxpayers' moneys. We have allowed this Government to break the HSF, the little piggy bank of our nation, and today to see this kind of lacklustre response, to see, I myself thought I would get a different dimension in the opening of this debate. I myself was really surprised because I did listen to the Minister of Finance in the Lower House and I thought that the Minister in the Ministry would give a different perspective today, so I was really surprised to hear an almost word for word repeat of the Minister's speech. So the Government has moved from four years of blame Kamla, blame the Opposition, blame the UNC, to blame COVID-19.

Almost every speaker today put their arguments across as though they were accounting for their stewardship of COVID-19 spending. Let us not pretend that this Government that this year, all that took place in this year was the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, the Government was failing even before the pandemic. You cannot fool all of the people all of the time, and in this election year the people are looking on even more keenly, and the action will come with that one finger that they will be each entitled to use to cast their vote for upcoming general elections.

Since September of 2015 we all knew that there would be a general election in 2020. Unless there was some snap election, we knew that the election was constitutionally due in 2020. Yet in this Bill we have an increase of \$43 million to the EBC for preparation for the 2020 parliamentary elections. Why? At the beginning of this fiscal year we knew there would be a local government election

and a general election in this financial year. We know what the costs of running an election is because the EBC has been doing it for years. You come at this stage where this should have been in the last budget that was read.

You have the Service Commissions having an increase of \$2.1 million for rent for properties, this is in addition to what they have already paid. You have UDeCOTT getting an additional 11,220,000 for interest payments on existing loans. These are foreseeable expenses. These are standard expenses.

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government indicated that CEPEP would have an additional allocation of 56,700,000—let me just make sure—and that is correct, and that would cover the 15 per cent increase in wages. The Minister of Finance read in his budget that the wages for CEPEP workers would be increased by 15 per cent. That should have been in the budget to begin with.

The senior citizens grant, the additional funding being placed under this Bill for exiting beneficiaries, beneficiaries that were part of this grant programme at the time the budget was read. The disability grant, the Government made such a big thing about their increase, but yet it was not budgeted for. It makes us question—and by “us” I mean the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—whether this Government deliberately wanted the deficit to look low in their budget, so that they left out all these things so that their expenditure would not be as it truly is, and therefore they would show a smaller deficit, because many of the measures in this Bill, Mr. Vice-President, are predictable and should have been in the budget that was read at the beginning of this financial year.

Mr. Vice-President, that brings us to the measures that the Government has outlined in this Bill that really has something to do with the COVID pandemic. So

the Government would have made an announcement that they would have all government workers to stay home. Mr. Vice-President, up to today we are waiting for an explanation of what “pandemic leave” is. Up to today we are waiting to hear who would qualify, what would be the criteria, how they would go about doing this; we have not heard anything.

Mr. Vice-President, mention was made, of course, to the grants that would be paid by the National Insurance Board, as well as by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. I want to reiterate, I know many would have mentioned it, I want to reiterate that the payment of these grants are way too slow. These grants are relief to people who have lost their jobs because of this COVID pandemic. As of today, all the children who get school feeding lunches on the School Feeding Programme have not been given cards, food cards as indicated by the Government. And the purpose of the grant for families, people who have lost their jobs, would be lost if for the entire lockdown period they have not gotten the grant and they are now going back out of work. Mr. Vice-President, the incompetence of the Government really showed in the three or four times that they changed the forms and all of the confusion with the application, as my colleague Sen. Saddam Hosein had mentioned.

Another measure has to do with the rent assistance grant. Mr. Vice-President, this is a democracy, this country is governed by laws, we cannot by royal decree declare that all landlords should stop collecting rent from their tenants. It is improper for any Prime Minister or any leader of a democratic country to say such a thing with no laws to back it up and expect that to be followed. So by royal decree landlords in Trinidad and Tobago were instructed to not collect rent from their tenants, and it was mostly directed at commercial

tenants.

Be that as it may, the Government also agreed to provide rent assistance grants for residents for private persons who are renting for residential purposes. Many of these landlords have not received this cheque from the Government, and many landlords are now evicting applicants because they can no longer wait on their rent to be paid. We cannot presume that every landlord is a millionaire. There are people who live on the rent that they collect, it may not be much, and even though they may be sympathetic and they await the payment from the rent assistance grant from their tenant, it is only so long that they can go without food. This Government has a duty because it is you who asked landlords to be a little—show a little mercy, be a little patient, therefore, you have a duty to ensure that the rent assistance grant is quickly processed. But, Mr. Vice-President, does this same royal decree given to landlords throughout this country apply to landlords where the State is concerned? Do landlords who collect rent from the State for properties rented to the Government, are they still receiving their rent? Is the building for the Children Court in Fyzabad being paid for while it is not in use during the COVID pandemic? Is No. 1 and No. 3 Alexandra still being paid for by the Government while it is not in use during the pandemic? This Government must set the example.

If you ask landlords not to collect rent, then that should apply to the landlords of these properties, in fact all the properties. What is your explanation? What is your account? You cannot be double standard.

What about properties that are rented that the Government own? HDC has provided a deferral of mortgages to tenants, to occupants, a deferral of rent as well. A deferral, it is not that the rent will be totally forgiven. It is that during this time

you will not pay, but before you finish your business here, you will pay it at the end of your mortgage period, at the end of loan period, arrangements will be made.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I am saying that there must be consistency, there must be fairness. There are HDC tenants who are paying rent to own, who are paying mortgages, and they are happy to have the deferral, but we have also asked landlords, private landlords, commercial landlords not to take rent from your tenant. You have, in fact, empowered tenants to tell their landlords, "I am not moving from your property, and the Prime Minister says I do not have to pay rent", yet you have a different standard for certain people who are renting properties to the Government; that double standard must stop.

Mr. Vice-President, I move now to another point, local government. The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government has indicated that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has provided, I think, he said 13 million, but in the document that came, I saw funding for emergency food support to needy households being 20 million. Nevertheless, the Minister in his contribution indicated that \$2.142 million will go to each corporation and that will feed about 20,000 families in each corporation.

Mr. Vice-President, this is commendable when you compare it to the alternative which is nothing. I want to point out, there is a disparity in the size of electoral districts in various regional corporations. In Point Fortin borough, in Arima borough you have an electorate of about 2,700 to 3,000 burgesses in one electoral district.

In Couva/Tabaquite, in Tunapuna/Piarco you have about 10 to 12,000 electors, and probably double that in residents in each electoral district. So to have 20,000 families in a region like Tunapuna/Piarco where the population is close to a

quarter million people, 244,000 people in the last census, how fair is it to distribute 20,000 hampers in that region, and the same 20,000 in a region where you have, could be about 30,000 or 50,000 electors? So there must be fairness, there must be equity. How are these hampers allocated? Is it that in each regional corporation the councillors are given a certain amount of input? You must have transparency, Mr. Vice-President, but I want to urge the Minister to find a way to ensure that there is equity so that my brothers and sisters in Tunapuna/Piarco region, in Couva region where they have large populations will be just as fairly treated as the regions with smaller populations such as Arima, such as Point Fortin borough.

I also want to ask that accountability and transparency be brought when it comes to the measure that the Government implemented to provide religious organizations with \$30million to do food relief programmes; accountability and transparency. Mr. Vice-President, religious organizations should be a pillar of transparency and accountability. God will deal with them is not the policy of Trinidad and Tobago. Is that the policy of the PNM when it comes to transparency? This is taxpayers' dollars. For the Government to take that approach that the religious organizations should not account for the spending, I think it sends a totally wrong message. I do not think that there exists any legitimate religious leader who will not want to account for the moneys, the taxpayers' dollars that are allocated to them in this time of need where the religious organizations can reach out to families and individuals in need. So, please, I ask the Government, this is not PNM money, this is not PNM country, this is taxpayers' dollars, and if you are going to give it to anyone, individual, organization, institution, let them account for it; accountability and transparency must be applied to all.

Mr. Vice-President, the religious organizations, not every religious organization that is registered— In the Office of the Prime Minister there is an inventory, there is a list of all organizations. For some reason not all organizations were selected to get some of this money to reach out to those in need. I do not know what the criteria is, I suppose it is by royal decree, but the Government should not pick and choose which religious organization should get funding. Is there a political preference?—because a political creature is making the decision. Who is selecting the churches, the mosques, the mandirs, the religious organizations that will get money? Who is to say that one will get and one should not get. I am concerned about that, and I feel that we should—while we should continue to engage the religious organizations, that is another part of the transparency that I would like to see. Mr. Vice-President, how much time do I have again?

Mr. Vice-President: You finish at 6.27.

Sen. K. Ameen: Okay. So I do not intend to use all my time. Mr. Vice-President, I also wanted to touch very briefly on the fact that this Bill, this Bill while giving additional funding to the Judiciary, none of the explanations have anything to with COVID. I thought I would have seen some measures to improve the rate of justice particularly during the COVID time. I am aware that my friends in the legal fraternity have had more frequent use of video technology to attend courts to have hearings. That is an exciting direction and it has been in use for some time, but I think because of the COVID pandemic we have had an increase in the use of it. That, I think, is a very welcomed thing. The People's Partnership when we had designed the justice centre in Arouca, it was designed to do quite a lot of that, the video calling, conference calling and conducting hearings in that

manner.

The Judiciary has been plagued by accommodation issues, poor facilities. In fact, the Princes Town court is still not opened, they are going to Rio Claro. Even there the conditions are not suitable, many courtrooms are very small and it does not permit social distancing, it does not permit all the measures that are recommended at this time by the health authorities. Even if temporary sinks are installed and hand sanitizers are installed, the rooms are very closed in. Should the Judiciary staff be allowed to stay in there for such a long time and, you know, even if they are wearing face masks, but to be in an enclosed air-conditioned space with other persons puts them at risk.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

So I thought I would have seen when I saw \$99,648,000 under Judiciary, I thought that some of that would have gone to the new requirements with regard to keeping our judicial staff safe.

What I want to suggest, Madam President, we are seeing a bit of relief from the crime rate in this country maybe because of the COVID pandemic. We still had a lot of murders which is unacceptable. Maybe because the new is focused on the COVID activity, we are not seeing the reports of crime in the newspaper, but maybe the number of robberies and the numbers of murders have gone down. I do not have the figures, but I am an optimist, and I believe and we have been talking, Madam President, about improving the rate of justice in this country, so that is an area that I would want to see, I thought we would have seen some provisions for.

Nonetheless, Madam President, I did not hear from the Government in terms of what measures they would employ to get this country on a footing ready to recover from the effects of the COVID pandemic. COVID pandemic did not only

affect us in terms of our health and public health and our safety, there is a tremendous economic impact, and if the Government wanted to couch this as a debate on its performance in terms of managing the economy, I would like to think that they would give the country an idea of where they are heading, telling us about the relief grants that you have not effectively paid, telling us about other measures that were mentioned, but have not materialized yet is not satisfactory. This country is looking on at this Parliament, is looking on at the political parties at this time where an election is imminent to see the direction, to see the teams, to see the players, to see the policies that will be put forward to get this country out of the present economic state.

The PNM has proven themselves. You did not begin to fail when the COVID pandemic hit Trinidad and Tobago, you have been failing for four and a half years before that. And I want to give this country the assurance that as the United National Congress continues our screening and putting forward candidates for this general election, you will see emerging a competent team of people, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, who will implement our economic recovery plan, our post COVID plan for Trinidad and Tobago in a manner of fairness and equity. And all of Trinidad and Tobago, if you have to ask yourself, who do you trust to take Trinidad and Tobago through the rocky economic times that are ahead, through the post COVID recovery period, it is either the PNM or the UNC. Clearly, the PNM has proven that they cannot do the job. I so patiently await election 2020.

Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President: Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs.

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and Minister in the Ministry of

National Security (Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses): Thank you. Thank you, Madam President. I will change and treat with the supplementary appropriation matter we have before us. Madam President, thanks for the privilege to make a contribution on an Bill to supplement the appropriation of the sum, the issue of which was authorized by the appropriation financial year 2020 Act, 2019 (Act No. 21 of 2019).

Madam President, an important and necessary part of the mandate of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs is the interaction of the representatives of Trinidad and Tobago to the various multilateral organizations, regional and international, on behalf of the Government and people of our country.

Such interaction, Madam President, allows the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs to participate in the many fora of the organizations of which Trinidad and Tobago holds membership, and which are the platforms that the Ministry represents the interest of Trinidad and Tobago in advancement of the country.

In fulfilment of its mandate, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs engages and articulates Trinidad and Tobago's foreign policy and its position on a range of issues that include security, the protection of democracy, institution strengthening, capacity building and technical cooperation. Among the organizations that which the Ministry undertakes discussion and decision making on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago are the Caribbean community, Caricom, and the bodies and organs of the United Nations.

Madam President, in order to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago maintains the rights and privileges within these organizations, including voting rights and participation in programmes essential to the support of national development

objectives, payment of this country's assessed contributions must be made.

In this regard, Madam President, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs' allocation for fiscal year 2020 under the Sub-Head "Current Transfers and Subsidies" was insufficient to cover Trinidad and Tobago's obligation for contribution to the Caricom Secretariat, the United Nations regular budget and working capital fund, and the United Nations Peacekeeping operations. The issues covered by these bodies are pertinent to Trinidad and Tobago's maintenance of relations with countries in the multilateral setting, as well as benefits to derive from the work of the bodies in other jurisdictions.

6.30 p.m.

Within Caricom, Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago bears responsibility for a significant portion of the annual budget of the secretariat. In fact, Trinidad and Tobago's contribution to the Caricom Secretariat's budget was increased last year to 25 per cent. The service to the region provided by the Caricom Secretariat cannot be overestimated. In support for neighbouring Caricom Member States has direct impact on the well-being of Trinidad and Tobago, given the close proximity of the states and our position in the regional markets. In addition, the irreplaceable support given through advocacy and issues germane to the region must be highlighted. Without the individual contributions of member states the grouping would not be able to function and obtain an optimal benefit for the region and for each member state. Further, acting collectively as a regional group in various multilateral fora affords numerous benefits. For example, advancing the interest of small states like Trinidad and Tobago and support for candidatures that would provide leverage for the work of such countries in advancement of development priorities. Acting collectively also

brings more ready receipt of technical cooperation from extra-regional donors and partners.

Madam President, with regard to the United Nations, among the benefits to membership as a small country are access to financial and other resources, expanded reach in solidarity with like-minded countries, strengths through collective participation in the international environment and protection under resolutions and international illegal arrangements. Trinidad and Tobago's conformity with decisions taken which are consistent with international law, or international legal commitments, enhanced opportunities for productive collaboration internationally, and with other countries within the fold of the United Nations. Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago's inability to meet its financial commitment to these organizations would not only trigger the loss of benefits, but could deny opportunities for interaction in these fora, and concomitantly the Ministry's ability to protect the interest of the country. Further, Trinidad and Tobago may be regarded as a pariah state, and the country's ability to engage would be severely circumscribed. Being in good financial standing also enhances Trinidad and Tobago's stature, reputation and its engagement with other countries within these organizations. The Ministry has therefore found it necessary to obtain supplementary allocations to meet the obligations of Trinidad and Tobago to these organizations, to sport, the maintenance of necessary levels of interaction and engagement. Continued and meaningful engagement would yield benefits and buttress this country's domestic development agenda.

Madam President, hence the need for the additional subvention at this time. The supplementation contemplated in this Act in respect of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs of \$35,374,200 will ensure uninterrupted participation in the

organizations concerned, and avoid curtailment of benefits to Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, I wholeheartedly support the Act to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorized by the appropriation financial year, 2020, Act 2019 Act, No. 21 of 2019. Allow me, Madam President, to thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: The Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Madam President, thank you very much. Once again, Madam President, Members of the Opposition in particular tried to give the public the impression that this supplemental appropriation Bill debate is supposed to be all things to all people where we account and where we determine what our plans are and so on, and so forth. What it essentially is, is an exercise to bring to the Parliament and to the public a report of where we see the changes in expenditure and to get approval for those changes. Where we need to report to the public on other things like what our plans post COVID we would do so and we would do so in the not too distant future.

Sen. Mark tried to give the impression that because we did not provide more detail around the adjustments that we were trying to hide something, that there was something nefarious going on. But as Sen. Mark, as probably the longest serving parliamentarian in this Chamber, is well aware, there is a process for this Bill which entails a full reporting and interrogation by the Standing Finance Committee in the other place. That was gone through, all the questions were answered, and any member of the public or any Member of this Chamber who wishes to get further detail that could not possibly be provided in a 40-minute presentation on the Bill has access to that information.

A few Senators including Sen. Seepersad questioned why there was so many non-COVID adjustments at this time. What I would like to say to you is that some of the adjustments that may not appear to be COVID related are in fact COVID related. For example, we have an increase of an allocation to the Ministry of Works and Transport to do with the inter-island ferry. Now, we would have reported to this House some time ago that we had ordered two new ferries to Trinidad and they were due during the course of this year. The shutdown of various economies throughout the world would have delayed the delivery of those. We would therefore have had to extend the lease on the current ferry which would have impacted the recurrent account expenditure, which would in part account for the increase due to the Ministry of Works and Transport. So there are lots of consequential adjustments brought on by COVID that would not necessarily appear at first glance to be COVID.

Before I proceed, Madam President, I would like to thank the Independents in particular for their very thoughtful review of the Bill, and their very pointed and relevant questions and comments. Sen. Deonarine, for example, I thought she had a very robust contribution and asked specific questions which I would like to attempt to respond to. She asked, for example, whether some of the funds that we expected to recover came from reductions in expenditure in Ministries, and yes that is in fact happening. And there are lots of things that would have accounted for those: more careful management of the expenses, the partial shutdown of the Ministries during the last three months that would have changed some of the deliverables, and the Minister of Finance directly going to the various Ministries once the COVID issue had arisen and we realized that our expenditure pattern would have to be adjusted significantly, to say to the Ministry, you need to identify

potential savings in the Ministry, because we have so many additional expenses that were unbudgeted that we need to look to savings where we can get them. So, those were the essential things that would have impacted the savings in the Ministries.

Sen. Deonarine as well indicated that we should give more money to microenterprises because they are most vulnerable, and Sen. Dillon-Remy made the same comment in respect of the small businesses in Tobago, and I would like to assure both Senators that the funds that we have identified were for the short term to deal with the immediate results from the COVID and what we expected these businesses to suffer during that period. So, if you look at all our measures you would see that we are saying this is for the period April to July. What we were doing largely in the Roadmap to Recovery committee is looking at all the sectors, determining what support they need from the Government and other places to come up with a more long-term plan. So it is not that we have identified \$5 million, for example, for the small business in Tobago and that is it, they sink or swim going forward. So we are looking to see what longer term support will be provided and we are putting things in place to provide that support.

Sen. Deonarine, again, expressed concern about forex reserves and the fact that the reopening of the economy would negatively impact on those reserves, because we would see an increase in demand for imported goods. We have recognized this Sen. Deonarine, and one of the many issues being considered by the committee which is really taking a very broad approach to the COVID-19 recovery matters is that we need to focus on import placement, particularly in food, but also in other things, and we need to influence change in local businesses in terms of what they are supplying to consumers and in local consumption.

I agree with Sen. Vieira who said that we need to move away from having apples and grapes as our main fruit fare throughout the year, and move towards more lucrative consumption. The Roadmap committee is looking at that too and we are coming up with a plan to generate income replacement too in addition to us eating healthy and supporting our farmers and local industry and creating more employment, this will positively impact on our forex demands. Another comment by Sen. Deonarine, we need to avoid excessive dependency on the social safety net. Again, a point that we agree on and we have been discussing that with the Roadmap committee to come up with a plan to transition people off the social safety net into self-dependence. So we are looking at that, we would come to the nation when we are ready to report on that in the not too distant future. Sen. Deonarine asked about, how do we decrease the deficit over the next two years if it is —Because the only two options she identified was a cut in expenditure or an increase in income. And one of the things I would like to—and she followed that with a comment about cleaning up the tax administration even in the absence of a TTRA. One of the things I would like to indicate to Sen. Deonarine is that in looking at how we go forward we are determined to make tax administration more efficient. I continue to be convinced that the best way to do that is through the TTRA, but even in anticipation of the TTRA we are coming up with strategies to recover moneys that are already outstanding to the taxpayer—from taxpayers who have not been accounting for taxes as they should. So, we are looking at that.

It was heartening to see that Sen. Haynes in giving the UNC credit for the Couva hospital and for the Penal/Debe campus, moved away from the UNC's last week approach of also taken credit for the Arima Hospital. It appears that the Prime Minister's response indicating exactly when the hospital was built and who

is responsible hit home, and they have moved away from that position. This Government, this administration's approach has always been where state money has been used to create an asset that we would use that asset, and it is for that reason, it does not matter who built the asset, we have been using the Couva Hospital and the Penal/Debe campus effectively in this COVID period. Again, Sen. Haynes has said that this administration has no plan and we are now trying to come up with a plan using the Roadmap committee, and that could not be further from the truth. This administration, as I have said time and time again, it does not have a plan, it has the plan, which is *Vision 2030*. What the Roadmap committee has been set up to do is in recognition of the fact that whenever you have a significant change in circumstances you have to pause, revisit what your plans are, determine whether you need to adjust those plans to cater for the changes that have occurred. COVID-19 pandemic has had so significantly impact on the world that it would be irresponsible for any government to ignore that impact and just say we have a plan, we are going through blindly. So, we are reassessing our situation, determining what needs to be changed, what needs to be accelerated to determine how best to take Trinidad and Tobago forward.

Sen. Sobers mentioned the disconnect between this Government and the people, and as examples of that he indicated that we were asking people without laptops to download forms from the Internet, and we were asking them for details on their bank accounts. What I would like to assure Sen. Sobers is that we are very connected with our people and we know we are dealing with a range of different situations. We have people from all walks of life who have been terminated during this period, and therefore they have different challenges. So there are some people who have computers and can download and some people who do not which is why

we gave them the option, you could either download the forms or you can go to a central location located in various parts of the country to collect those forms. We also know that some people have bank accounts and some people do not, so if you have a bank account give us your bank account information so we could deposit the money directly into that, and if not we would give you a cheque or a card. So, we are connected with our people and we are using the various resources that allowing them to use the various resources at their disposal so that we can most effectively and efficiently help them.

Sen. Teemal referred to the current credit rating and said that it indicates that we have a significant risk in our ability to repay our debt because we have moved from one credit rating to the credit rating where we are now. Now, just to reiterate, our credit rating was not adjusted downwards in this last assessment, it was maintained. But I would like to assure Sen. Teemal separate and apart from that that our current rating is investment grade, it allows us to borrow, our borrowers are prepared to lend to us at reasonable rates, and we would continue to manage that to maintain and hopefully in the not too distant future improve that investment rating that we have. He also mentioned that small and medium sized enterprises are unable to access the facilities in the banks because the banks would be insisting on full security. Now, the reason why we set up the facility the way we did, providing a full guarantee to the banks in respect of money that they are unable to recover, if so that they could relax those standard requirements placed on the small and medium sized businesses. So the banks no longer have to ask for full security because the Government is guaranteeing the loan and therefore the bank would not be at risk. So we expect many more people than would otherwise be able to borrow from the Government to be able to borrow under this facility, to preserve

and maintain their businesses and hopefully grow their businesses.

Sen. Hosein and Sen. Obika made much weather about the contributions of the UNC, the last administration, to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund which put us in a position to be able to access money from that fund. Now, what I would like to say in response to that are two things: the last administration was not doing the country any favour by putting money into the account. There is legislation, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, which requires—section 13 of that Act—a government, where oil prices are or the income from energy exceeds a particular amount, to make a contribution. That is statutorily required. So you are not doing any favours. Secondly, I would like to point out that during the period 2007 to 2010, under the last PNM administration, the total contributions made to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was \$1.7 billion, \$1 billion of which was deposited in 2008, and it is by far the largest contribution made to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. By comparison the contributions made under the UNC administration during the period 2010 to 2015 totalled \$700 million. So I do not see when you compare those figures 1.7 billion under PNM versus 700 million under the UNC that the Senators Hosein and Obika could take credit for the health of the fund and indicate to the public that it is because of the UNC administration that we have the ability now to withdraw from that fund. I do not accept that argument at all.

Sen. Ameen mentioned that the Prime Minister by royal decree sought to dictate to landlords that they should not collect rent. Nothing could be further from the truth. What Government has been saying, including the Prime Minister, has been saying to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, is we cannot indicate to the private sector what they must do. We had indicated what the Government is doing

in respect of its rentals and we are asking the private sector including the landlords to exercise forbearance. The same way was asked the banks to exercise forbearance, we asked the insurance companies, the telecommunications providers, we asked them all, demanded of none, because we cannot, that they exercise forbearance. We did the same thing of the landlords. And Sen. Ameen's suggestion that we should deprive two sets of landlords of rent merely because they may have a connection with Government Ministers in the context of the Government adopting a policy that where it owes members of the private sector, it would free up funds, VAT refunds, contractors payments and all of these things to put people in funds to keep the economy going that you should deprive two specific landlords of rent merely because they may or may not be connected to this administration is very unreasonable.

Sen. Dillon-Remy, I too would like to congratulate you for your contribution. A lot of what you said resonated very significantly with me. I agree completely that Trinidad and Tobago will not recover or survive unless the parties get together and do things differently. The Prime Minister has been saying from the very start of this pandemic that we are in this together. It is not just a statement that he throws out there. It is an understanding and a recognition that this thing is larger than all of us, and that it is so significantly debilitating potentially that if we do not do things as a unit that the country will not come out of it in a way that we would want to come out of it, strong, healthy, moving forward as a nation. And so, yes, it requires us to do things together, that is why in putting together the team for the Roadmap the Prime Minister was very careful in inviting membership from all aspects of society. He invited former public servants, current public servants, members of the labour union, members of academia, members of the private

sector. He also, I would like to remind the nation, invited past and present members of the Opposition. The past members of the Opposition who were invited accepted and are working assiduously with us. The current members of the Opposition chose not to join us. But we saw it as a national effort, we are continuing with it on the basis that it is a national effort because we all have to move forward in a particular way.

One of the implications of not accepting and moving forward with this plan, is a national plan, is that those of us with a following whether large or small can instigate that following to pull away from the plan, which means that it will not be a combined approach, which means that it could compromise the success of the plan, and this is not something we could afford to do. If Trinidad and Tobago does not properly survive COVID it will not be PNM Members who are negatively affected, or UNC Members who are negatively affected, it will be all of Trinidad and Tobago, big business, small business, individuals, the very rich, the very poor. We all have to pull together to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago survives, and I would like to recommend that approach to us going forward.

Sen. Remy asked a couple of specific questions about the airport project, and I would like to assure Sen. Remy that that project is moving forward as she realized from the allocations, that we have actually started making payments to landowners in the area, and we are trying—in the process of settling any disputes that exist in respect of other pieces of land that we need to acquire. So we are moving forward to settle that as soon as possible, and in the meantime we are starting work on the current building at the airport, and once we acquire all the land we would move to the expansion. So, Sen. Remy, I agree with you, our task, the task that is ahead of us requires a change in attitude, and it requires value

transformation. It will not get this in the absence of strong leadership. We need responsible Government, we need responsible Opposition, we need a responsible public sector, a responsible private sector, a responsible labour movement, and responsible citizens. And I would urge you all to bear that in mind going forward.

So, Sen. Mark, after seeking to vilify everything that we have put forward, said to us that he recommends to the country the astute leadership of the current Opposition Leader. But, in contemplating that concept, I would like you to remember the vacillation of the said leader and her members in respect of this very COVID pandemic. So on the one hand they called for a state of emergency, two days later they called for the opening of the borders and the bars, they called for us to reopen the economy more speedily. They said to us, do not release the low-risk prisoners to allow us to free up the prisons and allow for better distancing, but continue to give bail to persons in possession of weapons of war.

Sen. S. Hosein: Madam President, Standing Order 46(6). At no time did we say give bail to persons with high powered weapons. That is incorrect.

Madam President: Minister, continue.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Madam President. She said to the public who we have been trying to keep apprised of the situation and to keep exercising caution, that we have done well in the pandemic not because of the action of the Government but because of the weather. But she did not go on to explain why Trinidad is doing well but Brazil has 870,000 confirmed cases and 43,000 deaths.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark, please! You are not revoking a Standing Order there, and I would ask you to just allow the Minister to finish her contribution. Minister continue.

Sen. S. Hosein: Madam President, I rise on Standing Order 46(5).

Madam President: Minister, continue please.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Madam President. And finally, Sen. Haynes said, “Are we better off now?” And my question would be, not are we better off now in an economy where oil has moved to \$90 in 2014 to zero dollars in March of 2020, where revenue has moved from \$58 billion to \$47 million, but would we be better off at this time under the leadership of the people who call themselves the alternative Government, or are we better off under the current administration?

Madam President, Sen. Vieira said that COVID-19, though tragic and debilitating and traumatic, has given us the unique opportunity effect seminal and substantial change in Trinidad and Tobago but with we need at this time is a national vision. I would like to adopt those words. It has given us a unique opportunity, because out of tragedy quite often, if you take the right approach, you can get and create an opportunity. This is the way I am choosing to see COVID-19. That is the opportunity for us to revisit the plans to come up with more robust approaches to things, to transform the public service, to build on the kind of dedication we have seen from the members of the health sector and other members of the public service, build on that to transform how we treat with our nationals, how we deliver services.

And so, Madam President, I want to recommend to the country that they accept now as a launching pad to a positive future. Let us follow the entreaty of Sen. Dillon-Remy and take a different approach. Let us come together to become the kind of society that Trinidad and Tobago has the ability to become. Madam President, I thank you and I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

Finance (Supplementary Appropriation)
 (Financial Year 2020) Bill, 2020
 Sen. The Hon. A. West (cont'd)

2020.06.15

Bill accordingly read a second time.

7.00 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Madam President, in accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that the Bill not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill be read a third time.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE

(APPOINTMENT OF)

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, having regard to the correspondence from the Speaker of the House in relation to the establishment of the Joint Select Committee to consider and report on the Fisheries Management Bill, 2020, by August 31, 2020, I beg to move that the Senate concur with the House of Representatives in their establishment of the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Monday, June 22, 2020 at 10.00 a.m. Madam President, at that sitting the Government intends to move the second reading of the Bill for an Act to amend the Domestic Violence Act.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, before I put the question on the adjournment, leave has been granted for one matter to be raised on the Motion for the

adjournment. Sen. Mark.

**Gasoline Purchased by ES Euro Shipping SA
(Government to Lay Customs Declaration)**

Sen. Wade Mark: [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, the matter which I propose to prosecute today seeks to journey to the root of the gasoline scandal involving the Government and the proposed or supposedly shipment of 150,000 barrels of gasoline to Aruba which mysteriously ended up in Venezuela.

Madam President, I have done my research on this matter and I wish to bring to your attention and to the Senate's attention the following procedure. In order to export any cargo out of Trinidad and Tobago, the following must take place: The exporter and importer must make arrangements for payment of the cargo. This may involve a formal contact. The exporter, through his customs broker, would prepare an invoice stating inter alia: exporter, importer's name and address in the foreign country, the description of the goods, value, and a declaration that the facts on the invoice are true and correct. It is then signed by one of the senior officials in the exporting company.

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

The customs broker, based on the information on the invoice, then prepares a customs declaration, this is form eC82, and it signs the form eC82 certifying that the information is correct. The customs declaration is then submitted online to the Customs and Excise Division, where it is approved. According to the law, this is now a written declaration to customs. The local agents for the exporting vessel will then prepare a bill of lading which, in essence, is a contract for the transportation of the goods. It will have the address of the importer in the foreign country. Basically, Mr. Vice-President, all three documents have most of the same

information, all state and name and address in the foreign country. The forms eC82 is endorsed by customs giving permission to ship the cargo and the goods are exported, under international norms, best practices and conventions. If the Comptroller of Customs and Excise wants to assure or wants to be assured that the goods actually landed in the foreign country, then the Comptroller can write the counterpart in the foreign country and request a certificate of landing.

Mr. Vice-President, this certificate will state whether the cargo actually landed at the address as declared in the customs declaration. For any reason the cargo did not land at the particular form eC82, then it is a breach of the Customs Act, it is a false declaration under section 212 of the Customs Act. The Comptroller also has the power to call on the local exporter to produce a certificate of landing as regard to the cargo that is stated in the eC82 form.

Mr. Vice-President, in light of what I have outlined, the Comptroller, in the matter at hand, should write the foreign counterpart to obtain a certificate of landing in order to verify that the cargo landed at the address as stated in the customs documents. The Comptroller should also demand that the exporter, which is a local company, produces a certificate of landing for the cargo as stated on the customs document.

Mr. Vice-President, the Opposition, United National Congress, is calling on the Government to lay the following documents as a matter of urgency: the relevant customs declaration, the bill of lading, certificate of landing of the country by the ES Euro Shipping SA and which was destined for Aruba, but which ended up in Venezuela.

Mr. Vice-President, failure on the part of the Government to lay these vital documents to determine the guilt or innocence of the Dr. Rowley-led

administration in this entire fiasco and our transaction, would lead the country to conclude that there is something fishy or suspicious in this arrangement. Therefore, the Parliament demands, the Opposition demands accountability and transparency on behalf of the people whose interest we have all pledged to serve, to protect, to safeguard, and to promote.

Mr. Vice-President, this Motion is very simple and straightforward. This Motion that I have raised on behalf of the Opposition says: the need for the Government to lay in Parliament the relevant customs declaration, bill of lading and certificate of landing of the country of import, in respect of the gasoline purchased by ES Euro Shipping SA and destined for Aruba.

Mr. Vice-President, the ball is now firmly in the Government's court and we in the UNC eagerly and anxiously await the tabling of these documents and the Government's response thereof. Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Vice-President, I thank you for the opportunity. Mr. Vice-President, I noted the reference at the start of Sen. Mark's contribution to a scandal and I also note the absence of any evidence or any matter in what he has said in relation to a scandal. I also note the reference at the end to a fiasco with absolutely no evidence of a fiasco.

So, Mr. Vice-President, the customs declaration form and the bill of lading referred to by Sen. Mark, all related to the sales agreement with ES Euro Shipping SA was submitted this afternoon to the Clerk of the Senate for the attention of the Senate. Hopefully that closes the matter. I should note that aspects of the customs declaration form, that is the eC82 have been redacted as to the value of the goods because that matter is confidential.

Gasoline Purchased by ES Euro
Shipping SA
Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat (cont'd)

2020.06.15

Mr. Vice-President, in regard to the certificate of lading referred to in the Motion, this was not required by Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited, as the sales transaction with ES Euro Shipping SA was a free on board arrangement whereby the ownership of the product was transferred to the buyer on delivery to the vessel. To repeat the words of Sen. Mark, this matter is a very simple matter. Thank you.
[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Hon. Senators, I now invite the Benches to bring greetings on the occasion of Labour Day which would be observed on Friday June 19, 2020. Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development.

Labour Day Greetings

The Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development (Sen. The Hon. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, the Government and staff of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development joins with me in extending heartfelt greetings on the occasion of the celebration of Labour Day 2020. Understandably, we do so with mixed emotions for we are celebrating this national historic workers landmark at a time when our nation, like societies all over the world are uncompromisingly focused on grappling with the unprecedented COVID-19 calamities that have befallen us as a civilization, calamities that have plunged the peoples of the world into the unscrupulous and evil arms of a silent invisible, evasive and frighteningly ferocious force, an adversarial entity yet to be subdued and conquered.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has commandeered a screeching halt on the normalcies and courtesies, have taken for granted everyday cultures and lifestyles and have forced humanity to consciously and unapologetically distance ourselves

from one another if only for our own safety, protection, well-being and survival. Paradoxically, the intrusion is exacerbated by the realism that we have been subjugated into this dilemma during the spike of an era which demands of us all, a spirit of brotherhoods, sisterhood, of bridging the social and economic divides and a bonding together, as we have never done before as a people.

It has placed upon us the harsh limitations of celebrating our own home-grown Labour Day in non-traditional ways: workers not joining but avoiding hands; communities echoing voices not of freedom and liberation but of lockdown and shutdown; neighbours and friends not enjoined in sodality but solidarity, but severed into self-quarantine, compulsory separation and self-imposed isolation.

Mr. Vice-President, from my own part, this 2020 Labour Day as downgraded as they are expected to be, must not deprive us of the joys of reflecting on our very rich labour history in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Device goes off*].

Sen. Mark: My apologies.

Mr. Vice-President: Understandably so. Sen. Mark, just—as I remind all Members, you know what you need to do with your phones before you enter the Chamber so that we do not have these kinds of interruptions. Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, continue.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I dare say Sen. Mark is lucky that you are in the Chair.

Mr. Vice-President, charged with the responsibility for the prescription and protection of the rights and privileges of both workers and employers in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the growth and development of the small business sector of the economy, the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development has endeavoured to keep faith with its mandate, the underlying concept being the

development of a stable economy through the creation and maintenance of decent work, industrial peace and opportunity for all. Our programme of activities has catered for the improvement of the standard of living of citizens and maintenance of a safe and productive work environment.

Mr. Vice-President, it is well known that at the top of our agenda has been the focus on labour legislation reform, the revision review and updating of the nation's wide range of multifaceted and multidimensional labour legislation, to bring them in line with the ever changing technologically-driven and contemporarily dynamic labour market environment both in Trinidad and Tobago and the world at large.

Mr. Vice-President, the end of the labour legislative reform programme has seen us, in the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development as far back as January 2016, engaging in over 30 consultation for the review of labour legislation. In respect of numerous pieces of legislation, I would like to, Mr. Vice-President, take the opportunity to place on record that stakeholder consultations were held on these pieces of legislation, all in the interest of the workers of Trinidad and Tobago: the Industrial Relations Act, Chap. 88:01; the Trade Unions Act, Chap. 88:02; the Private Security Order under the Minimum Wages Act, Chap. 88:04; the Workmen's Compensation Act, Chap. 88:05; the Occupational Safety and Health Act, Chap. 88:08; the Employment Exchange Act, Chap. 88:09; the Recruiting of Workers Act, Chap. 88:10; the Foreign Labour Contracts Act, Chap. 88:11; the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act—something that is very close to my heart— Chap. 88:13; the basic terms and conditions of work code and employment standards; legislation governing the employment of contract labour; the Co-operative Societies Act, Chap. 81:03; the Friendly Societies Act, Chap. 32:05; the Cipriani College of Labour and

Co-operative Studies Act, Chap. 39:51; the Draft National Workplace Policy on Sexual Harassment, just to name a few, Mr. Vice-President.

The Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development has been working assiduously on the foregoing items of labour legislation of which several, at least eight policy position papers have been placed before the Cabinet for its consideration. I would like to take the opportunity on behalf of the team at the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, Mr. Vice-President, to thank the over 1,800 stakeholders who attended our various consultations, included among have been the leadership of the trade union movement, JTUM and FITUN and NATUC; the business community; the Joint Chambers Industrial Relations Committee; the Employers Consultative Association; the co-operative sector; representatives of state boards and committees and Government Ministries, in like manner; representatives of the International Labour Organization; the Tobago House of Assembly; the University of the West Indies; High Commissions; and sector- specific organizations, depending on the nature of the consultation.

Mr. Vice-President, in closing, a monumental volume of work has been dedicated towards each piece of legislation, prior to, during and following each actual consultation. I would like to thank the staff, in particular, the Senior Legal Officer at the Ministry, Ms. Sangeeta Boondoo for her unfailing commitment. Mr. Vice-President, without her input and guidance, all this work would not have been possible.

Mr. Vice-President, I trust that the population at large will appreciate the update that I have given in celebrating and observing Labour Day 2020. I want to wish all, the trade union movement, workers and all the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago, a happy, peaceful and reflective Labour Day. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Wade Mark: Mr. Vice-President, on behalf of the incoming United National Congress, I wish to stand in militant solidarity with all of my comrades in the labour movement. I cannot but reflect on the misfortune that has befallen the labour movement over the last four and a half years. Where did we leave labour in 2015? We had sought to bring all outstanding public sector negotiations up-to-date. Over 100 negotiations were settled; the dispute settlement machinery was adequately staffed and working well; no public sector agencies or state companies were shut down; not a man or woman was retrenched. In fact, we created over 50,000 new jobs. We allowed and provided the resources for the children of trade unionists to attend university for free, at taxpayers' expense that is, and we allowed also food to be purchased at reduced prices.

Mr. Vice-President, today I mourn for the loss of the labour movement. Where are we today? Over 100,000 workers have lost their jobs through retrenchment, most of which through the closure of state companies. The entire period is littered with job losses, a significant portion of which decimated the numerical and financial strength of the trade union movement. The Steel Workers Union of Trinidad and Tobago is but a ghost of itself and the once powerful Oilfields Workers' Trade Union, with the loss of Petrotrin, has been weakened and its role as a vanguard of the labour movement has also been weakened. Even its political clout has now been weakened. The closure of Petrotrin came like a thief in the night, just as the assault on Caroni (1975) Limited had been carried out by an earlier PNM administration.

Mr. Vice-President, trade unions in Trinidad and Tobago from the days of Arthur Cipriani; Tubal Uriah "Buzz" Butler; Adrian Cola Rienzi; George Weekes; Joe Young; Clive Nunez; Basdeo Panday and others, have historically stood out as a beacon of protection of workers' rights and presented itself as a potent political

force against the excesses of authoritarian governments. When placed in the context of the closure of the last four and a half years, the weakening of unions representing workers of Petrotrin, ArcelorMittal, TIDCO, UTT, and others, demonstrate losses, not just for workers protection, but our very democracy.

And what about our institutions? The Industrial Court is understaffed and under-resourced. Its rulings are undermined by Government's appeals on points of law to the Court of Appeal, using its deep pockets that stretch the financial resources of the trade unions. The delay in trade union recognition and certification are exacerbated by the lethargy in properly constituting the registration recognition and certification board. Let us be brutal. The present Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development who claims to have come from the labour movement does not appear to be aware of the role of labour conflict management and refuses to take proactive measures when major disputes arise, preferring to wait for a report to come to the Ministry. But for the most, Mr. Vice-President, is best known, that is the hon. Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, who is my good friend. She is on her way out. She is noted for her silence in defence of workers.

Mr. Vice-President, just imagine the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development has raised membership in good standing in a case where a member of the conciliation staff sought to have a union report a dispute which the employee's contract of employment had been violated. This Ministry has traditionally frowned upon small employers who occasionally raise such a question, mainly as a delaying tactic. Where have we reached?

Mr. Vice-President, I have a few more things to say, in closing, I do not know what is going on today at that Ministry. The staff level of the Conciliation Unit is less than 30 per cent and the majority are employees on short term three

months contracts as service providers, a hybrid between worker and the independent contractor. Mr. Vice-President, it is alarming to note that since 2015, these service providers, some specially selected retirees, other hand-picked OJTs have been illegally conducting conciliation and issuing unresolved certificates on referral to the RRCB and the Industrial Court, contrary to the provisions of the delegations of powers.

7.30 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President, it is therefore not surprising that notwithstanding the valiant efforts, or the valiant efforts of three or so properly delegated officers, the performance of this vital unit is dismal. We have seen, based on research, out of an average of 12,000 reported disputes per annum, less than 25 per cent have settled. A significant number of the remaining disputes are declared as unresolved without a single conciliation meeting being held.

Mr. Vice-President, I am going to close now. This sad state of affairs has nothing to do with COVID-19. If anything the unemployment situation will get worse, and further assaults on the working class and labour will come. We should not be fooled by the present free campaign spending to upkeep workers' jobs. All of that will change if this Government ever gets a chance to be re-elected.

Mr. Vice-President, mark my words, I would like to say on this occasion of Labour Day and on behalf of the glorious United National Congress and its visionary leader, I would like to convey to all our comrades in the labour movement our best wishes and solidarity on the occasion of the 83rd anniversary of the founding of the modern trade union in Trinidad and Tobago. To the labour movement I say to them this evening, hold the fort for we are coming. Unionists be strong. Side by side we battle onwards, victory will come. Long live the labour movement and the working class. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Paul Richards: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I will be brief. As I bring greetings on behalf of the Members of the Independent Bench, the workforce in Trinidad and Tobago, and no doubt the world, has been challenged by COVID-19 and the pandemic. “Descriptives” like uncertainty, doubt, anxiety, furlough, pandemic leave, sacrifice, salary relief, job security have become quite common phrases, but they are phrases that we face together as a nation because we all face a common enemy. The issues of decent work, worker protection, and no doubt workers’ undeniable and indispensable sacrifice, and contribution to nation building cannot be more underscored on a day like today.

Today I choose to celebrate the workers and the workforce in Trinidad and Tobago in both the public and private sectors. I think it is an opportune time for us to recognize a sector that in many times has been maligned by public commentators, and that is workers in the public sector who have shone and risen to the occasion during this pandemic: law enforcement, nurses, doctors, orderlies, media, sanitation workers, teachers and many others have shown us that the public sector is invaluable and indispensable in our time of need, and I think that needs to be commended in Trinidad and Tobago as we move towards Labour Day.

I saw a recent quote as we move towards Labour Day and the battles that have been fought since the early days of the labour movement in Trinidad and Tobago, which the history books tell us started with an uprising in 1937, we saw the beginning of the modern trade union movement in Trinidad and Tobago and the efforts of Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler, Adrian Cola Rienzi, and many others who Sen. Mark outlined, who are well documented, who fought for the rights of workers and for the development of Trinidad and Tobago, and by extension the Caribbean because of Trinidad and Tobago’s contribution, the Caribbean growth must be celebrated.

And the quote provided a question in the context of work and the right to work as a human being:

What is the opposite of poverty? Most people would suggest the opposite of poverty is riches, but the philosopher said the opposite of poverty is justice. Justice is the opposite of poverty which underscores the continued struggles of the trade union movement and workers' rights in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. On behalf of the Members of the Independent Bench, we hope that this justice is eternal and everlasting, and transcends and transfers to all sectors of work in Trinidad and Tobago and certainly the Caribbean. On behalf of the Members of the Independent Bench, Happy safe Labour Day to Trinidad and Tobago as we celebrate Labour Day 2020. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Hon. Senators, before I join you in bringing greetings for the occasion of Labour Day, let me just take this opportunity to remind Senators that when we invite you to bring greetings we do so as a courtesy of each Bench to be able to bring those greetings to the respective community that is celebrating a particular occasion. I remind you at this point in time that when we do so we try to keep it brief, and we also focus on the fact that it is greetings that you are bringing. What I heard here today bordered on less than greetings and more something else. So what we try to do is focus on bringing those greetings and we do it briefly and succinctly.

I now join you, hon. Senators, in bringing greetings on the occasion of the Labour Day, which is on Friday, June the 19th, 2020. The country shall pay deference to the 83rd anniversary of the modern trade union movement by virtue of Labour Day. On June the 19th, 1937, following the unsuccessful pleas to the then colonial government, Mr. Tubal Uriah "Buzz" Butler emerged as a voice for the workers of the oilfields. The strike that happened on that day was the first of many which

evoked unrest. He fought for the rights of workers and for the advancement of living conditions in a time of economic downturn where oppression and economic exploitation were commonplace.

The Butler oilfield riots sparked the working class consciousness and consequently the growth of trade unionism. This led to a positive change in working conditions, a step towards self-governance and independence which was seen subsequent to the enactment of several labour legislation such as the trade disputes ordinance. This social unrest was a national precedent and it paved the way for other labour leaders such as Arthur Andrew Cipriani, Adrian Cola Rienzi, John Rojas, George Weekes, John Hackshaw to name a few, who also made significant contributions during this era.

Let us salute the past efforts of the pioneers as well as the continuing efforts of the trade union movement who advocate for the rights of those in the workforce. Let us recognize the determination and hard work of all workers who play a pertinent role in the progress of our nation. Happy Labour Day to all of Trinidad and Tobago.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 7.39 p.m.