

**SENATE***Monday October 26, 2020*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

**PRAYERS**[MR. VICE-PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]**PAPERS LAID**

1. US\$50Mn. Health Emergency Loan and the US\$100Mn. Regional Contingent Credit Line of Anti-Cyclic Support for the COVID-19 Emergency Loan Agreements between Corporacion Andina De Fomento and the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. [*The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan)*]
2. Provision of executed financing agreements issued under the External Loans Act, Chapter 71:05. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]

**FISHERIES MANAGEMENT (NO. 2) BILL, 2020**

Bill to provide for long term sustainable fisheries in Trinidad and Tobago and to regulate fishing and fishing related activities in the fishery waters and in areas beyond national jurisdiction, to repeal the Fisheries Act, Chap. 67:51 and the Control of Importation of Live Fish Act, Chap. 67:52, and to amend the Tobago House of Assembly Act, Chap. 25:03, the Environmental Management Act, Chap. 35:05, the Marine Areas (Preservation and Enhancement) Act, Chap. 37:02, the Shipping Act, Chap. 50:10, the Archipelagic Waters and Exclusive Economic Zone Act, Chap. 51:06, the Conservation of Wildlife Act, Chap. 67:01, the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, the Fish and Fishery Products Regulations, Chap. 30:01 and the Imports and Exports Control Regulations, 1941, and for related matters [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries*]; read the first time.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence**

**Rambharat):** Mr. Vice-President, I beg to move that in accordance with Standing Order 62(1)(c), the Fisheries Management (No.2) Bill, 2020, be referred to the Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020. I thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **SHIPPING BILL, 2020**

Bill to repeal and replace the Shipping Act, Chap. 50:10, the Harbours Act, Chap. 50:06, the Droghers Act, Chap. 50:07, the Motor Launches Act, Chap. 50:08, to amend the Port Authority Act, Chap. 51:01 and the Coroners Act, Chap. 6:04 to provide for and the certification and registration of seafarers and the certification and registration of vessels and offshore installations, matters relating to crew safety and security of life at sea and matters incidental thereto [*The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs*]; read the first time.

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan):** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, I beg to move that in accordance with Standing Order 62(1)(c), the Shipping Bill, 2020, be referred to the Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020.

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2020**

[Second Day]

*Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 23, 2020]:*

That the Bill be now read a second time.

*Question again proposed.*

**Mr. Vice-President:** Hon. Senators, we had 12 speakers including the mover of the Bill on the last occasion. Leader of Government Business.

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan):** [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, it is an honour for me to join the debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2020. I must begin by congratulating the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development, and all the public service staff involved in the preparation of this budget. You have served this country well. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President—Mr. Vice-President sorry, what I am about to say is not a cliché. We are in uncharted waters and as the hon. Prime Minister has said on numerous occasion, “The danger of this COVID-19 situation is that nobody knows what the end game looks like”. That is a fundamental statement you know. Never before in the history of mankind we probably facing a situation like this. Nobody knows what the end game looks like. When the world was at war in World War II two things could have happened, either the allies win or the Germans win. You knew what the end game would have looked like. In this case, nobody knows.

Mr. Vice-President, in my 20 years in public life, I have never seen a budget having such widespread acceptance from all sectors of this society [*Desk thumping*] and this despite the fact that it had no goodies to share. Every group, every sector, every right-thinking individual has concluded that despite the challenges, it is the best that could have possibly been done in the circumstances. [*Desk thumping*] It demonstrates prudent management and an appreciation of the facts and the global realities.

Mr. Vice-President, I would normally begin my contribution with some rebuttals and responses to the Opposition, but today I am sorry to disappoint because there is nothing really of substance that was said on Friday. [*Desk thumping*] I want to congratulate two contributions on Friday—not from the

Opposition Bench by the way—it was from Independent Sen. Deonarine and Independent Sen. Seepersad. [*Desk thumping*] Their contributions, well researched and well delivered. Sen. Deonarine in particular flagged certain, albeit theoretical, points of economics and economic theory that are quite valid especially as it relates to the exchange rate, and I am sure that the Government will take note of it and we welcome your contribution. But even though I said earlier that I would not disappoint, I would disappoint. I do not want to disappoint, but I must say something about my good friends on the other side.

Sen. Mark started his contribution by saying the UNC is the alternative Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Vice-President, I cannot agree with him more because it is the same thing he said in the 2015/2016 budget debate, UNC is the alternative Government, and the UNC will continue to be the alternative Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the foreseeable future. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Mark:** You would not get a chance to—

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** You will always be the bridesmaid, never the bride. The other thing I want to comment on is Sen. Mark saying, “COVID did not crash the economy, the PNM did”. First and foremost the economy is not crashed, but there are challenges and there is some significant contraction. But I ask Sen. Mark: Who crashed the economy of the UK? The PNM? Who crashed the economy of France? Who crashed the economy of Italy? The mighty Dubai is now on its knees. Dubai is supposed to run out of money, of cash, in just under three months if things do not turn around. So Trinidad is not unique in that situation.

And finally, the most ridiculous statement that was made in his contribution, that the PNM is taxing the poor. It is the PNM who moved chargeable income from 60,000 to 72,000, and in this budget chargeable income increase has been increased from 72,000 and is now 80,000—84,000 sorry. So we are putting more

disposable income in the hands of the common man. But that is as much time as I will give them.

Mr. Vice-President, the energy sector has been the main driver of Trinidad and Tobago's economy for decades. In 2008, the sector contributed 35 per cent of GDP, 45 per cent of total Government revenue, 89 per cent of export earning. In 2016 it dropped dramatically for circumstances everybody is aware of to 7.6 per cent of total revenue, and in 2021 we forecast that will increase to 23 per cent of total revenue. But I want to make the point clearly that Government revenue from the sector is based on three factors. It is not what the PNM does or what the PNM does not. It is based on three factors: one, it is commodity price, oil, gas and petrochemicals. We are at the mercy of the market. We are price takers. For heaven sake, understand that. Production: We have some handle on production and production has largely to do with upstream investments which I will cover later on. And finally, Government revenue does not only depend on price and production. It depends on the fiscal regime that is in existence where Government and our policy position that the State has to extract a fair economic rent for the resources of the country.

It is not all well and good to have high price and high production you know, because gross revenue belongs to the energy companies and it is Government take that is important, and that is where we have identified our greatest strength. On the revenue side, the resurgence of the oil and gas sector driven by the Government has resulted in significant improvements in the contribution of the sector to Government's revenue. For 2021, the sector is projected to contribute 23 per cent of Government total revenue compared to a mere 7.6 per cent in 2016. The main drivers of this improvement in energy sector contribution has been the following.

One, the increase in upstream production it is forecasted particularly in

natural gas, and two—and I have made this point over the last session of Parliament—the roll back of overgenerous fiscal allowances and limitation of lost relief which served to significantly reduced taxes to the Government. Those were policies instituted by the United National Congress, write-off all exploration expenditure in the year in which it was expended. No cap on carried forward losses among others.

Most important, Mr. Vice-President, was the introduction in 2018 of a royalty rate of 12.5 per cent on gross income on energy companies on natural gas. Mr. Vice-President, you will be shocked to hear that prior to that there was one particular energy company in Trinidad that was paying TT 1.5 cents per mcf of gas. One mcf of gas today is worth approximately US \$3— that is US 30 cents by six or 7.3, that is TT \$2.00 and they were paying TT 1.5 cents. This measure resulted in royalty income increasing from 400 million in 2016 to 3.5 billion in 2019. The impact of the pandemic lower royalty income to 2.5 billion in 2020, and it is budgeted to be 4.4 billion in 2020. More importantly, we improved marketing arrangements arising from negotiations with the major upstream companies like BP and Shell which emanated from the Government's *Spotlight on Energy* in 2018.

Sen. Mark and his colleagues love to talk about the PM went Houston to negotiate some gas price. They would not tell you that the PNM also went to Hague—the PM—along with myself and other Ministers. He also went to London; he also went to Melbourne, Australia; he also went to Houston to meet with the executive of EOG and BHP. All that culminated in a greater take for the Government. These negotiations have resulted in the payment to the State as follows: 1 billion in 2018 from BPTT. This is not normal taxes you know. This is settlement of outstanding loopholes in the system which the company agreed to, to negotiate in good faith with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. They were

not legally bound to make these payments. A sum of 1.9 billion from Shell in 2019, and the sum of 218 million in 2020. There was no contractual obligations to pay these moneys. They could have dig their feet in the sand like lawyers and say sue me, but we met them head to head, the head of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago with the CEOs of the various oil company at their headquarters and negotiated these deals. Projected payment of 1.7 billion by BPTT over the period 2021—2024. So let us put that to rest.

I will come back to the gas industry shortly. But I want to deal with this aspect of the budget very early in my contribution, and is to bring some clarity to the liberalization of the liquid fuels market. It was always the intention of the Government to stop the gasoline subsidy and to come out of fuel subsidy. In the 2016 budget, the hon. Minister of Finance informed the country that the fuel subsidy represented a public policy agenda which only passes through partially the price of petroleum products to the national economy, and that arrangement has raised a number of economic concerns. In the 2017 budget he said,

“On the expenditure side, we have summoned the political will to take important steps towards the complete elimination of the fuel subsidy, which has been a major strain on the budget and which has been demonstrated to be regressive.”

So today we have come to the end hopefully by January 01, 2021, to the fuel subsidy concept.

Mr. Vice-President, I will just spend five minutes to show how this situation evolved, because, as everybody knows in this Senate, I am deeply rooted in historical antecedent because if you do not understand that we cannot analyze the current situation in its proper context. In 1973/1974, there was something called the Arab oil embargo. Oil prices at that point in time was \$3.56 per barrel. Within

two months, oil price jumped to \$12.00 a barrel, 400 per cent. Then in 1979/1978 there was something called Iranian revolution for those of you who remember the Ayatollah Khomeini? That again saw a steep increase in the price of oil from 14.85 per barrel to \$32 per barrel. Those were big, big sums in those days. In today's money it is over \$100 per barrel.

What a PNM Government of the time under Dr. Williams— In 1974, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago passed the Petroleum Production Levy and Subsidy Act. This, Mr. Vice-President, was the Act that said we have to protect the population of ridiculously high gasoline prices. The companies at the time were making super profits. So the intent of this Act was to say we will fix the price of petroleum products, and the difference between the price of the pump and the international price will be borne by the oil companies. Obviously, you did not have no major objection at the time because in those days oil price was high and oil production was high. Those were the heydays of what you called TSP: Teak, Samaan and Poui. Trinidad was producing in 1977 230,000 barrels of oil per day. Right now we are down to 60.

From 1974, since the inception of this bill, to 1992, the petroleum production levy paid the entire cost of the subsidy. However in 1992 the subsidy was reduced to capping what the oil companies pay to 3 per cent of their gross revenue. And with the decline in production that cap could not pay off the entire subsidy and the difference between the petroleum subsidy revenue and the actual subsidy was borne by the State, and that figure, Mr. Vice-President, for the period 2001 to 2020 the total subsidy paid was a whopping \$37.5 billion. Today, the price of oil hovers around \$40 to \$45 per barrel and we see now as the opportune time to get rid of the subsidy.

How will the system work? Paria will continue to be the sole importer of



fuel into the country. That price in which Paria will sell to the two wholesalers, which is Unipet and NP, will be fixed by the Government. That price will include what you call an ex-terminal price, which is based on the posted price of fuel based on the US Gulf Coast product pricing formula, plus a terminal end fee which is charged by Paria to cover its operating cost and make a reasonable profit. That will be the ex-terminal price. To the ex-terminal price we will add the wholesale margin which is also fixed by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. That wholesale margin goes to NP and it goes to Unipet.

The change will come on the retail margin because as we speak the retail margin now is also fixed, but what the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries would do is that every month it will post in the newspaper for the public consumption the wholesale price. The retailers now, which is the operators of the service station, will now mark-up as they see fit, however you are pegged to the wholesale price because you cannot have a wholesale price and mark it up 100 per cent. The whole population will see you, and then we will introduce competition on the market. So, just as you do not know a grocery could sell a box of cornflakes—probably that is not the best example I should use if I am to listen to the Minister of Trade and Industry, but they mark-up to suit themselves. So in grocery A it might be a 30 cents cheaper, in grocery B it might be 30 cents or 50 cents more, and that is where competition comes into play.

And with regard to the sale of NP service stations, there are several types of service stations, those that the company own and the company operated and the company owned dealer operated would be sold to the dealer or the franchisee in the first instance if they cannot come to a conclusion with NP, well NP in particular, it will be offered on the open market. And people are saying how KFC will get to buy Prestige Holding gas stations. KFC is not a dealer. They are

concessioners in the gas stations. It has nothing to do with the fuels market. So, Mr. Vice-President, this is an extremely transparent process.

I now move on back to the gas industry. The gas value chain is a fundamental concept that the country has to understand. The Opposition continues to speak out of timing on this matter. This is an area with specific expertise. “Don’t jump in the dance jus so.” It is an area of economics that is very specialized, and if you do not understand for heaven sake sit down, listen and learn. [*Desk thumping*] The gas value chain in the Trinidad context consists of four components: upstream, mid-stream, downstream and traders. What you have to understand about gas is that gas unlike oil cannot be stored and exported. Gas in its raw form can only be exported via pipelines. Trinidad is an island. The Russians export their gas to Europe via pipelines. In Trinidad we have to convert natural gas into a saleable commodity, and that saleable commodity is two: petrochemicals in particular ammonia and methanol and, two, liquefied natural gas.

We are fortunate in this country that on the upstream side we have the biggest players in the world, Shell, BP, BHP, EOG and the likes. In the mid-stream we have the natural gas company which was formed to extract economic rent on behalf of the State.

**10.30 a.m.**

On the downstream side, we are also privileged in this country to have three of the world’s largest petrochemical producers and traders in the world: Proman, Methanex and Nutrien. And on the trading side, there is also a part of the value chain where we identify that we were losing value when they have what you call FOB Point Fortin, that is the price in which the cargo is sold at in Point Fortin, there is trading out on the open sea where cargoes are diverted to high-end market and that value does not return to Trinidad. That is the hole we plugged when the

Prime Minister went to the energy capitals of the world. So, Mr. Vice-President, I needed the Members to understand.

So, when you speak of a chain now, I make the point all the time and I will say it again here today, a chain is as strong as its weakest link. A chain exists as an entity. So, if a link breaks in the chain, the chain is of no value anymore, which means that if upstreamers stop investing and finding new gas to sell to the downstreamers, the downstreamers have no business. And if the downstreamers have to shut down their plant and there is no market to send your gas, there is no room for the upstreamers and then you have NGC in the middle who acts as a transportation company who needs to make a profit also and as an aggregator. So, we are in a situation now where the system used to operate in silos before. Now, because of what is happening in the world, we have to operate as a chain.

As in that context, the Government has established a gas value chain committee which is chaired by Mr. Wendell Mottley, ORTT It includes the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and the PS and the DPS, but we are guided, more importantly, by a company called Gas Strategies which is an internationally known UK consultant who has expertise in this area of business.

One of the reasons for our success over this period is that we were taking professional advice. We paid for it, you know. We did not pay lawyers for litigation, you know, we paid top experts: Gas Strategies, Poten & Partners, a New York-based law firm called White & Case to advise us on how to structure contracts and we, in this administration, will always seek, just as we have sought in COVID-19, professional, scientific and expert advice before we act.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

On the upstream side, we are starting to see success. As I mentioned several

times during the course of the last several months, Trinidad and Tobago is one of the few countries in the world where the international majors have not cut back significantly on their capital expenditure in the upstream. Shell has taken a 30 per cent hit on their earnings, BP likewise. All energy companies, internationally, are hurting. They have cut back significantly on capital expenditure. In Trinidad and Tobago, we are fortunate. BPTT has continued its investment profile. The truck project is in operation. Shell is drilling in Barracuda and Colibri as we speak. BHP Ruby platform is being installed. Yesterday, I saw some pictures of it. BPTT has also started to drill on their Matapal prospect. All these areas will be coming on stream in the latter part of 2021/2022.

An important thing to note, Madam President, is that for the first time in over seven or eight years, there are five offshore rigs operating in Trinidad as we speak: two with BHP, one with BP, one with AOG and one with Shell. We are doing deep water drilling now on the Broadside Well. There are very few places in the world that is involved in deep water exploration at this point in time.

On the downstream side, a lot has been said about it but the key factor here—and we are hoping for a turnaround—is that commodity prices for both methanol and ammonia are SUB-US \$200 per metric tonne. Nobody can survive on that. Thank God we have large multinationals operating so that they have the cash resources to ride through this depression and hope for an upturn early or at least by the middle of 2021.

Madam President, I just want to spend two minutes on two pivotal projects that will come over the next five years in the upstream sector. One is BHP's possible development of the deep water gas discoveries off the north-east coast of Trinidad and Tobago. As a matter of fact, the Government has carded to meet with the senior executive of BHP out of Houston later this week to start discussions

along those lines. If all goes successful, first gas from the deep water development could come in 2026. These projects have long gestation periods.

And then there is the Manatee project. A lot has been said about Manatee, a lot has been said about the Venezuelans. I do not want to repeat everything. When we went into Dragon, the UNC was writing to the US Embassy to sanction Trinidad. We withdrew from Dragon because of the sanctions. Then there was a rumour that went out that Paria exported fuel via a ship through Aruba into Venezuela. Where is the evidence for that? All of that has died a natural death. Then it is FSO Nabarima. "What allyuh have against Venezuela?" Turned out to be fake news.

And most importantly now, in the budget debate in the other place, the Leader of the Opposition is now saying we should not go with Manatee alone. The very person who said we should not go into Dragon, we went and delinked Loran from Manatee and got the permission via a treaty from the Government of Venezuela to develop Manatee on our own so that we could get gas by 2024/2025 and they are against that. They will never be for anything in the interest of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

I will just touch on two brief areas before I conclude. One is the success from the restructuring of Petrotrin.

**Madam President:** Minister, you have five more minutes.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** That has been fairly well articulated. Paria is now profitable. It made \$1.4 billion in profits, paid \$800 million in taxes and most importantly, it serviced the entire debt in US dollars of the Petrotrin refinancing of its bond.

The other area I want to focus on is energy diplomacy. We are in the process now of close contacts and discussions at the highest level, at the level of the

Ministers of Finance of both countries with the Government of Guyana to see that as Trinidad and Tobago's businesses move across to Guyana to seek opportunities in the service sector, in the energy sector, how we can have that level of cooperation cemented by more structured agreements? We have a unitization framework agreement with Barbados because just off our north-east coast discoveries of gas, lies the Barbadian border and on the Barbadian side, there is also prospectivity there. So we are doing well on energy cooperation.

And finally, I would not be seeing the future properly if I do not mention renewables. The Government has an agreement to develop a solar park for 120 megawatts of electricity with a joint venture between BP Lightsource and Shell. That will be, Madam President, the largest solar plant or solar farm in the entire Caribbean. [*Desk thumping*] Everybody who say solar, solar— and we will honour our Paris commitment to produce 10 per cent of our electricity by renewables.

So, as I conclude, Madam President, I think with all our challenges we could have been in a worse place. It is because of prudent management from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago led by the hon. Prime Minister. With specific reference to the energy sector, I think it is fairly well managed. As the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, I have expertise in the sector which I bring to the fore. I am ably assisted by several senior Cabinet Ministers and under the direction of the Prime Minister himself.

So, despite what is happening globally, I think Trinidad and Tobago is in a much better place than its equivalent counterparts in the international arena and I attribute that to God's grace and God's help, and the astute leadership of the People's National Movement Government. I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Jearlean John:** Thank you, Madam President. I thank you for the opportunity

to join this budget debate. The 2020/2021 budget is not an exercise in arithmetic. Its passage will determine the price we pay at the pump to fill our tanks, the cereal our children will eat in the morning, if the waitress trying to raise her children on her own ever gets back to work. Madam President, the economy and life as we know it in Trinidad and Tobago will not return to normal unless we get the COVID crisis under control. We cannot turn the corner, flatten any curve or get back to a new normal unless there is a clear strategy, detailed plan acknowledged by the Government and an engagement of the population.

The country now collectively tries to comprehend the lack of logic in the Government's approach to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two weeks ago, the hon. Prime Minister announced the opening of Buccoo Reef but the Buccoo beach remained close. That is the access beach. At this same press conference, the hon. Prime Minister berated public servants for being lazy and insisted, as a result, they must sign a roster when they attend work. Madam President, last Friday in this very honourable House, the hon. Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation told the country, I quote the *Newsday* of 26<sup>th</sup> October:

...West said the government is working on a Remote Work Policy that could help the new normal become permanent.

The work-from-home is here to stay and I think it is something that should be encouraged...

On Saturday, the day after, the hon. Prime Minister announced that the entire public service must return to work from today, Monday. Madam President, it appears that left foot does not know what right foot is doing. I have no issue with public servants returning to work but they have been asked to do so during a period when a very infectious disease is rampant in our country. They have been asked to

work at a workplace which accommodated pre-COVID interaction. But in this during COVID-19 period, is not the Government putting lives at risk? I think that is something the Government has to contemplate that by instructing these public servants to return at once— I have no issue with it— without any planning or the necessary protocols being put in place for high-traffic interactions where groups of people will be congregating inside over long periods of time, will that be counterproductive, harmful to Government employees which perhaps give rise to the Ministries and state companies becoming a superspreader environment?

So, the Prime Minister also needs to tell us if he has given up on the mitigation strategies that are available to us or whether “yuh overs COVID.” People are dying everyday of this disease although the Government’s medical doctors and spin doctors dismissed the 55,000 positive cases and 105 reported deaths as that of the elderly, those with pre-existing conditions and co-morbidities. Perhaps everybody working in the public service either lucky, healthy, young and disease free.

To be fair, this pandemic would have been challenging to any Prime Minister and Government, but the idea that this administration has done anything but taken us backwards because of the lack of foresight and the viciousness with which they scrapped every programme meant to better the lives of our citizens. In adding digital transformation to the Ministry of Public Administration, we have heard little about the initiatives—we have heard little in the budget about the initiatives to facilitate this transformation except they are now “ah begging” every Tom, Dick and Machel Montano to donate devices for the children.

Madam Speaker, months into the pandemic, the Opposition UNC, through the political leader, questioned the lack of testing, testing, testing and contact tracing because that forms a necessary part of the personal distancing,



handwashing, et cetera. So we are doing no testing, testing, testing, so we raised queries about that and what was the Government's rationale for leaving Trinidad and Tobago's citizens stranded all over the world. For that, she was mocked and derided by some segments of the population, told in effect, "Shut yuh mouth, go away".

During the period of the campaign, I was told that the UNC was irresponsible for advocating for the safe and responsible return of T&T citizens stuck outside the borders. This the Government used as a wedge issue to further divide. Madam President, this is not an issue of red or yellow, this is about right and wrong. When you make a health pandemic political in nature and not driven by health and medical conditions, ultimately, people will take sides.

Madam President, in the *Express* editorial of 14<sup>th</sup> October, they said after seven months, the initial reassurance provided by the Government's swift announcement of a suite of income support measures to cushion the impact of COVID-19 is disappearing under a grinding slowdown of the economy. You see, we are now seeing this because the Chamber of Commerce is coming out because on Saturday, when I think it was expected— while they expect that the food and beverage sector, the restaurants and so on, would have opened, the Prime Minister announced that they would remain closed for two more weeks. So, the Chamber now, well, they are saying it is a very challenging environment for many businesses and that is so.

"Meanwhile..."— I am quoting here from the *Guardian*:

"...Terron Mohan, president"—of the—"Bar owners and Operators Association expressed disappointment as they have already incurred millions of dollars in losses."

Mr. Peter George, CEO of Trent Restaurant Group said that the:

“...business is now ‘on its knees’ because of the decision that the Government has made.”

He says:

“‘We are going into eight full months of this lockdown. This is no longer...’—a catastrophe. It is worse. I have nothing to lose.”

Mr. George has said the next step he has to take is to close restaurants and send home workers.

Well, Madam President, it took a pandemic for the private sector to have “ah come to Jesus moment”, and as my grandmother would say, “If the devil bring it, is God dat send it.” So at last, everybody is speaking up [*Desk thumping*] about this wicked, vicious Government. You know, they that do not understand how much people are suffering out there. You know, they sit and they talk, and I heard the good colleague across the aisle giving a very glowing picture of what is happening but out there we have real issues. Right? People do not know where to turn and the people who work in this hospitality industry are sometimes people who are very poor and single mothers and, you know, the sad thing is that those on the other side just cannot care less.

Now, the Minister of Health, when one had advocated earlier in the lockdown to at least use the mitigation strategies and open the bars, you know, we have people who are very poor working in them, and as reported in the *Newsday* of 28<sup>th</sup> April, the Minister of Health, it is reported said:

“‘Hear what the UNC’s solution to covid is. One, state of emergency – but open bars.’”

You know, and it is that inference that the UNC is not patriotic. The UNC does not care about people. I heard it just now from the Member opposite, that inference, that smear, because you know for the Government, if they tell you go out there and

sky is red, you have to bow and say, “Yes, the sky is red”. You know, that is what they do when you speak on behalf of the poor, when you put a face and a voice to the vulnerable.

The UNC proudly speaks on behalf of the poor, the thousands who are employed [*Desk thumping*] in the hospitality food and beverages sector, single mothers who have not had a pay cheque in months. Even organizations owned by the Government, like the Hyatt and the Hilton, these people have been home without a pay cheque. So now we have a perfect storm. “The Government closing down, the private sector collapsing. Well, cinemas closing, the malls are empty, as I said, Hyatt close, Hilton close”. Everything is just closed. I do not know. Does the Government believe that citizens can wait one more day, much more two weeks?

What information this Government will receive in two weeks about COVID? What information that is different than they know today that will cause them to reopen anything else or will cause them to change course? I mean, the World Health Organization, Anthony Fauci, all of these people of note, they are saying even when there is a vaccine, it does not mean that automatically you are turning on a switch. This will take time, how you apply this vaccine. Children, I do not think children are in current trials now being undertaken in terms of this vaccine. How you store the vaccine? So, we are a long way off from the vaccine. What are we going to do? We are just going to sit down here and say, “Wait on the Lord and be of good courage,” and who could open and who could close, and “we open beach buh we eh open river”? That makes no sense. [*Desk thumping*]

So, COVID-19 is going nowhere anytime soon and really, we have to understand what our new normal is and how we operate within this environment and start to do some work, engage the population. On Saturday, the Prime Minister

said yes, they say we are in this together but we are in this together because it is my way or the highway. “Yuh understand?” Because if you do not agree readily, it is that you are unpatriotic and you are an enemy of the State.

So today, just today, the same businessman, Peter George, as I said, who is having this “come to Jesus” moment has accused the hon. Prime Minister and I am just quoting, it is not me saying. He said he does not have:

“...the courage to make the difficult decisions.

‘Our prime minister has been blown out of the sky by the likes of (Mia) Mottley...Chastanet...Holness...Jagdeo...’”

Well, Jagdeo is another matter. I do not know if they could go to Guyana because the last time, I think, they were seen pelting out of there after Mr. Trump announced his sanctions.

“...and (Keith) Mitchell. We have done nothing but throw a cold blanket on this because we don’t understand the problem.”

He said:

“‘None of them have skin in the game.’

George said the entire country is now ‘paying the cake’ for Rowley’s decisions.”

That is Mr. George, I am just quoting here.

Madam President, again, it took a pandemic for the country to realize that when this Government, from 2015 to 2020, showed us who they were, we should have been believed them the first time, because the first time when they took away “yuh laptops, we shoulda believe them”. [*Desk thumping*] The first time when they took away the baby grant, “we shoulda believe” that is who they are. [*Desk thumping*] The first time when they closed down Petrotrin and sent home 7,500 workers. [*Desk thumping*] Right? Right now, they are putting their keys to “dey car

and dey house in de banks”, just putting it there and walking away. “We shoulda believe who this Government is.” [*Desk thumping*]

“Gimme all this thing about success ah company”. Heritage making a profit of 800 million. Petrotrin was making a profit of 3 billion. [*Desk thumping*] “Is only this Government could tell yuh 800 million more than 3 billion.” Yes, it was a company that really needed to be restructured but nobody said “yuh close it down and send home everybody”, and now want to tell me and want to tell the country that it is nice, be happy, “doh worry”, be happy, because accept 800 million because it is more than the 3 billion. Yes it was 3 billion, money was going into the Treasury and we were getting foreign exchange. We could have gone and buy foreign exchange, now nobody cannot get any foreign exchange anywhere. [*Desk thumping*] Everywhere business people are complaining they cannot run their businesses.

So, Madam President, I mean, for some prospective in 2015, the People’s Partnership led a Petrotrin refinery with a throughput of 138,688 barrels of oil per day. I mean, this is just the stats I got. And in February of this year, the OilNOW magazine said the oil production in Trinidad and Tobago reached 55,685 barrels per day and now I am being told we are down to 40,000. I mean, it is a good thing I had some questions to pose to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries but he spoke prior to me, so I heard what he had to say and he was there sounding very jolly because in February, OilNOW magazine said that 55,000 barrels, it was the lowest production since 1950, now they are at 40,000 barrels a day. “Yuh understand?” But that is a matter, “doh worry, be happy”. Who complains, you know, they are unpatriotic.

So, on Friday, Madam President, you will recall, again, the Prime Minister in September promised us that the Government is not closing down Petrotrin. That

was in 2018. He said, in case you are now closing your fridge and did not hear me, the Government is not closing down Petrotrin. Madam President, we believed, I believed because it was my Prime Minister. I mean, when there is a Prime Minister, it is a Prime Minister for all of us. His lips were moving. Yet two months later, all, all, all of 7,500 people and it is not only those people, you have the fenceline communities, you have the casual man. The 7,500 represent temporary and permanent workers.

You have the casual man who rolls up to the gate of Petrotrin every day and he hopes when he knocks on that gate to get “ah lil badge to go inside to get ah two days’ work,” so he could look after his family. You see what we do here, when a Cabinet sits, it is about people’s lives. It is not done in isolation and this Government seems to be—they are just delinked from reality. “Yuh understand?” So, when our Prime Minister said, “If yuh closing yuh fridge, I am not closing down Petrotrin,” we believed. “Yuh understand?”

But last week in Philadelphia, a former president spoke and he said and I quote—he spoke in Philadelphia. He said:

“Our democracy is not going to work if the people who are supposed to be our leaders lie everyday and just make things up. And we’ve just become numb to it. We’ve just become immune to it.”

It is not going to work. When they say we are in this together, we have to all in this together. [*Desk thumping*] You know, two years have gone and there is nothing to replace Petrotrin, and they could jump high, they could jump low, no Heritage, no nothing can ever replace what Petrotrin meant to this country. [*Desk thumping*] It cannot. “Is all right.” This was the greatest injustice ever perpetuated against the people of this country.

And as when Martin Luther King said some years ago, he said:

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

And in Tobago, where I am from, we “does” say “monkey know what tree to climb on,” and “monkey say cool breeze,” and “one day for police, one day for thief.” So today, we are facing another crisis in the energy sector and the fence-line communities, and the Member on the other side just alluded to it but he put “ah nice bow around it” and said, “Well, everything is gonna be all right.”

But, Mr. Curtis Williams on May 14<sup>th</sup>, he wrote:

“Save the petrochemical sector”.

And he said:

“It was meant to urge the Rowley administration to see the great danger the country was in and how our prized possession had been brought to its knees by both the external environment and the domestic gas situation.

It was a few days after the owners of plant operating on the Point Lisas Industrial Estate asked the government’s Roadmap to Recovery Committee for temporary support in natural gas pricing, as the value of methanol, urea and ammonia had plummeted to unsustainable levels.”

I continue to quote Mr. Williams:

“I was therefore happy to hear the Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley and later on...”—the hon. Minister of—“Energy...reveal that the upstream natural gas producers were now selling gas to the National Gas Company...at reduced prices.”

I do not think I heard that in his contribution just now. He said:

“As a matter of fact, the upstreamers have recently reduced their price of natural gas to the NGC but still it is not sufficient...”

Now, they reduced their price—again, the Member opposite, Madam President, spoke about this fateful trip which they are now not talking about and I think Mr.

Williams had also written about rewriting history and—before I go to that, he said:

“Less Mr. Khan misleads us...”

And I do not know if that is what was happening in the House today but this is not me, this is Mr. Williams.

“...the reality is that the...”—

**Madam President:** Sen. John—

**Sen. J. John:**

“...COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant reduction...”

**Madam President:** Sen. John—

**Sen. J. John:** Sorry?

**Madam President:** You cannot say. You cannot say that. Even though you are quoting something, by repeating the quotation, you are imputing improper motives. So I would ask you to withdraw that line about misleading.

**Sen. J. John:** Madam President, I am guided. Sorry, I was just quoting the newspapers. But in any case:

“T&T’s natural gas prices are no longer competitive both in terms of unit cost and in volume.”

And that is a fact. The hon. Member just told that to the honourable House.

“Planes will resume flying but unlike what is being sold to the country by the...”

Look, and I am just quoting—by members—

“...they will continue to choose aviation fuel as their fuel of choice and not methanol.”

Madam President, this is all Mr. Williams. It was published in the newspapers. I just brought it for the benefit of the House.

**11.00 a.m.**



So again, the Member brought it in that there was a trip to the world capital and he said that one was in Houston and there is where the negotiation “were” had and the hon. Member spoke about folks who had expertise in energy. But that it is not my information or the information that was published in the newspaper in an article entitled—well many articles, but one in particular, “The truth matters”, published in the *Trinidad Guardian* on October 01, 2020. But I do not know.

So, Madam President, I want to ask the—if I can pose through you a question to the Minister that he needs tell to the country if it is as a direct consequence of this negotiation of the price. He did not say what the price was, but the price I am told that they negotiated was approximately 20 per cent higher than the price the downstream plants pay or can pay for gas. And now the once mighty NGC, the once mighty NGC, is making a profit of \$300 million when they were making profits in the billions and that is another thing where the sky is red and not blue. Because they want us to believe that it is good that NGC is making a profit of \$300 million and not billions. Because of this negotiation, NGC is losing TT 1.5 billion in revenue per year.

So to be more specific, I heard—I was told NGC was ready to sign at a price \$3.10 per mmbtu, which is the measurement that they use, the unit measurement, and the negotiators in this place agreed to a price of \$3.50 per mmbtu but NGC was willing to settle at that. The upstreamers were asking for 3.25 but the experts from Trinidad and Tobago settled at 3.50. So the country needs to know if the Port of Port of Spain now is on the chopping block because of that, because there is no money anywhere and there is nowhere in which they can find sources of income. So now they have gone to the port. So we need to know and all of this rushed negotiation did not help it.

And on it Madam President, I will only raise this because again the Minister

boasted about imposing some royalties in 2018 of 12.5 per cent on all upstream gas producers and that the former Government would not have done that. And he suggested—what he said suggested that this would increase the revenue base for the country. But what was not disclosed is that for the contracts signed by NGC—the contracts NGC has with the upstream companies allowed this royalty increase to be passed on to NGC. So the Government put a royalty, say, pay a royalty. But in their contract, the Minister did not say that, but embedded in the contract they have to pass that back to NGC who in turn had the ability to pass on to the downstream sector. Right? Because they have to pass on the cost. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, however, instructed NCG not to pass on this cost to the downstreamers, and to absorb this cost. Effectively, what has happened is that an extra 12.5 per cent, which was charged by the upstream companies to the Government and subsequently NGC paid back the same amount to the upstream companies. So the sum effect of that is zero. “Dey pay it.” But because of the contract NGC had to pay it back.

I mean, I really would like to have some clarity on that. You see the plans of “we” on this side, reopening, in terms of the energy sector, and this is just in summary because is not a lot of time, the reopening of a productive and viable Petrotrin refinery. This would have been based on reports prepared by Solomon and Associates and McKinsey, to restructure Petrotrin into a fully integrated oil company, starting back up the Pointe-a-Pierre Oil Refinery on the most efficient and economical basis. The simplification and modernization of production sharing contracts and exploration and production systems as well as reform the supplemental petroleum tax regime and royalty rates. This would encourage further exploration of oil, and I heard some of that, and gas fields on land and in shallow and deep water acreage. It will also reverse the slide in the oil production, and

three, aggressively support the use of alternative energy sources such as solar and wind energy and explore the prospect of developing a regional effort for the long-term sustainability of our energy supply. We would provide the appropriate incentives to encourage the development of an industry to provide energy-saving solutions.

Madam President, these are some of the plans of a party that delivers, the UNC. I am not so hopeful with it coming from the Government, right, because I cannot say that—you see, you can only go with people based on their past or on their track record and this Government really has no track record of accomplishment, no track record of work, no track record of delivery. So all that it is, they do no work. All that it is, is just a question of the country is asked to take a leap of faith and to wait on the Lord.

So Madam President, what is the rationale? I mean, coming out of us losing all of this revenue, what is the rationale, and putting so many people on the job market? What is the rationale for deciding on privatization of the Port of Port of Spain when jobs, the private sector is sending off people, the State sector is sending home people? After Petrotrin has closed down they cannot tell us what is the head count now in that place? WASA is on the chopping block. T&TEC, TSTT, BpTT is saying they are one in three, Atlantic LNG people are going home. Just point, every company in this country people are going home, and then on Saturday, the bars and restaurants, and so on, cinemas, you can go but you cannot eat food and they said there is where the profit lies so they do not know whether they are going to open. So what we have Madam President is a perfect storm. And what the Government has to do is really to help the people. We have to help. We cannot afford to put more people on the job market. So what is the reason behind this? That is their thinking?

And when the hon. Minister of Finance read his budget I think he said, if I recall, that they are going to privatize all their public/private partners and the Minister of Works and Transport said just about the same thing then.

Madam President, the Prime Minister at a meeting he held recently, a public meeting and I quote, he said:

“If we have a proper, modern port in Port of Spain, it becomes a bigger contributor to our national economy. Try as we might, the best place for the Port of Port-of-Spain is not in the Ministry of Works and Transport. We tried that and it has failed.”

From time immemorial the port is with the Ministry of Works and Transport. And now he is saying he tried that under his administration and it failed. Why are you firing 1,600 people? We need to fire the Minister of Works and Transport. Because an organization takes on the DNA of the leader.

I can tell you now—I mean we are talking about public servants lazy, but when my driving permit expires I go to the licensing office in St. James. Madam President I get up and I go there, I get there at 7.30 and it has nothing to do with the Minister of Works and Transport. That was happening long before, because they take credit for everything. You go there at 7.30, there is a line. It opens on time or before time. You go up, there is a security guard with a big smile, gives you a form, and so on. You are processed. You go to take your picture, the senior person in charge will give a word for the day. They have a kind of very unique way they do their business and you are out within an hour. People can work. People work if you challenge them to work, if you set objectives, and they are managed. People can work. Trinidadian people can work. I have worked in the private sector and I have worked in the state sector and I can tell you there is no difference. People will work hard as long as you work with them.

When I was at HDC we opened at 6.00a.m. There was no union negotiation, at 6.00 a.m. because we recognize that people come from all over the country. There was a hub next door and you opened at 6.00 a.m. and at 7.00 the cashier's cage would open. Those were normal Trinidad and Tobago people. They were opened on a Saturday. They were opened on Sundays serving the people. So people can work. So if there is laziness and people are not working now, as I said an organization takes on the DNA of the leader. Take a look at the man in the mirror. "Doh go and fire" 1,600 people and put the people of Sea Lots on the breadline, and the people of Beetham and Laventille and Carenage and Diego Martin where they are from. The main body of workers come from these areas. What are they going to do?

Madam President, I recall this port matter has really been around for a little while. And when I went in to UDeCOTT, the Minister of Finance was the Minister of Works and Transport. And at that time, in 2008, that was prior to me going there, UDeCOTT was engaged by the Ministry of Works and Transport to finance, procure and project manage, design and build a new containerized port at Sea Lots. Now they went on. They went out to tenders. That was something else.

In 2008, there was another Prime Minister and there were tenders and from 2010 to 2015, there was another Prime Minister and there were tenders. But now there are no tenders. All they talk about is public/private, you know, who getting this thing. Why are we not talking about what is the process that we are going out to engage people to have this port? Why is it a done deal and we are not hearing about the process? Because since 2015, that law regarding procurement was passed and all it has now is a regulator in an office with a bin and a desk and nothing doing and I heard a member trying to excuse that. How can you excuse that? So now we had all of this work that was done.

When the People's Partnership came in they did not say that was done by a different Government; they took the work. They looked at it. "Dey say dis is good work", and they looked at it and they took the work and they continued to do it, because this was done by the citizens of this country; good public servants who are working had, was evaluated, and so on. So at that time Madam President, the current throughput was 390,000 TEU, that is per 20-foot container unit and the maximum capacity of the Port was 400,000 TEUs. So it means the port, five years ago was almost at its maximum capacity, and that is why one took the decision to move the port.

As a matter of fact, I went myself to the president of the union and asked him: Why do we not consolidate with the Port of Point Lisas? And he said: No, no, no, the people of Laventille will suffer. So what is happening now? Would they not suffer when you just hand over the port to private hands? And in fact, Madam President, the port lands are worth about \$11 billion; \$11 billion. So you can leverage that land to help to build the port. I am saying that very simply because I need to get on. But there were a lot of studies that went on spanning Governments relative to this port, having a port city, proper cargo port here that can really move from 400,000 TEUs to a million TEUs, you know. And there were linkages with the Port of Singapore, one of the excellent areas of port business in the world. And the regulatory services were to include customs, immigration, port health, quarantine, police, coast guard. What would have been privatized or rented out would have been the restaurants, amenities and hostel accommodation. So everybody would have had a chance. But you do not just take your valuable assets and just hand it out. And there it was, somebody had put, one of the Members on the other side, I saw it in the media, had said somebody asked him for a \$20 and he looked to see the piper in him. Madam President, pipers by their very nature "does

sell out everything”.

So, Madam President, I am of the opinion that the Government needs to wheel and come again with this port matter. It really is not in the interest of the people who have worked there for over 20 and 25 years. The people of Breakfast Shed—you know I am from Tobago and I remember coming for holidays to Breakfast Shed. I had two old aunts down there. That was long ago. “Dey dead. Allyuh doh go and dig dat up nah. Dey dead long time” and they were there legally. And you saw the port people come around and they were very proud, very proud to be working on the port. You know the small business person selling nuts, and channa and pie and fruit. These are people who are going to be impacted because that private sector person, he is about maximizing his capital. That is what he does. So, if it is you are selling all of these things, he is going to take it and he is going to have a stall and he will sell all of these things. So what that means, everybody gone, gone, gone. Everybody who was making a little living, a humble living on that port will be gone.

I think there are a lot of young people there, very well qualified, willing to work. Why do you not engage them? I remember when we were going out to talk about all of this diversification, there was a People’s Partnership Government in office and the first place I went was to the Port of Spain City Corporation. The Mayor there was Mayor Tim Kee. I did not think that there was a PNM mayor. We went because you had to go to everybody and when we were finished laying out our plans, Mayor Tim Kee said: “Listen, I am in this with you.” You know we went to every single major company across this country. That is what consultation is. You consult at the beginning, not after. You consult at the beginning because people matter, what they say matters. And this would not take long if you organize and you know what you are doing, and so on.

I remember going to a particular major private sector business and the head of that business said: “We are going to put with the Government \$4billion because people want the country to develop.” So if it is you go and you believe and you know what you are talking about, people are going to invest in this country. They cannot just pick it up and decide in some room where you have folks in this particular place, Madam President, somebody jumping up 57 times because of conflict. I do not understand these things. I do not understand these things. So we cannot just give away our assets, because it is the easy thing to do. We are better than that. Right? We are better than that. These are not political issues. These are moral issues. Right? After all the billions spent, there is nothing because there is still a mystery as to who got the grants for rent, who got the grants for food, who got the grants for salary relief because people are suffering. I do not know, this is just—nobody could tell you that they got anything at all.

Madam President, I do not know how much time I have again because I just wanted to address very briefly—

**Madam President:** Sen. John, you finish at 11.22.

**Sen. J. John:** 11.17?

**Madam President:** 11.22.

**Sen. J. John:** Okay. Well Madam President, just very briefly, you know, I mean, I am very happy to have contributed to this budget. Very recently, again, I heard that—I read somewhere that there was no Member of the Senate from Tobago. I am very proud to be a person from Charlotteville, Tobago, very proud of that. Well the Minister of Tourism will be interested in Charlotteville because Man of War Bay, the sands are golden and the sea is so blue you can see the fish swimming around in it. That is where I was born, the same place with JD Elder and the great Sister Pam Nicholson and Vanus James and Dr. Eastlyn Boris, et cetera. There,



Madam President, we learnt about do onto others. I learnt to be kind, and we disagree and yet be civil. I learnt “nuh to look down on nobody.” So Madam President, I thank you so much for the opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Sen. Dillon-Remy.

**Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy:** Madam President, I am privileged to be allowed to contribute to this debate on A Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2021.

I agree with many other speakers that this is the most important budget debate in this decade. We find ourselves at a unique time as a nation and as a world with no precedent or formula to navigate our way through. We have only a hope that the leaders of our country will use all the information and resources at their disposal to make informed decisions in the best interest of our country.

This budget debate comes at the start of the new term of office for this PNM Administration and in the middle of a pandemic. Sen. Vieira, in his contribution on Friday, described the pandemic, the declining energy revenues, and the global crisis as a triple whammy affecting multiple facets of our society.

Madam President, if I were to ask everyone here in this Senate the question: “How do you see our nation in the year 2025?” I would get varied responses. From one side, I would hear nation in ruins. On the other, I would hear: I see a rose garden. And I would say: I do not know what it would like, but I know what I would like to see in 2025.

You see, as children we are taught diligently to write out our goals, create a plan, map out what we would like our future to be. But for some, life was right on schedule. Then the COVID-19 virus became a part of our world and the world as we knew it shifted. Dreams were frustrated and visions got distorted. All of a sudden, there was this great divide between the normal and the new normal. And

the reality is that we do not exist in either. We live in the gap between these two dichotomies. The gap where we continue to battle with the usual areas of concern such as unacceptable levels of crime, family violence and corruption, general lawlessness, a population that gets together to vote every five years, but is otherwise disengaged from the political process, political divisiveness with half of the population in support of the Government and the other half perceiving the Government as an enemy and the racial and classes divide, except at carnival time, when for some unknown reason the divisiveness is lessened and COVID-19 has brought in the added issues of increased unemployment and the need for rapid technological advancement and balancing lives and livelihoods.

Madam President, we have spent approximately TT \$540 billion, which translates to US \$79.6 billion over the past 10 years from fiscal 2011 to 2020. And if we take another poll, as to whether the money spent translated into necessary progress for our country and benefits to our people, again some will say no. Others will say we are very good compared with other countries. I know we are not as bad as some people grieve, neither we are as good as others celebrate. But when I assess this billion-dollar figure, along with our current reality, it is clear that we have failed to meet the mark and much still is desired.

The hon. Colm Imbert, Minister of Finance, on October 05, 2020, presented the Appropriation Bill for fiscal year 2021, with the caption aimed at resetting the economy for growth and innovation. Undoubtedly, this is a necessary objective in the midst of this pandemic where our economy seems to be equally as sick as so much of our world. Our economy was in decline for several years and according to the Finance Minister, we had just started to see some light when the COVID pandemic struck, literally like lightning. No one saw this coming or imagined that it would have such a devastating and long-lasting effect.

These effects are evident. Upon examination of budget statement for fiscal year 2021, the hon Minister of Finance indicated that there was a forecasted budget deficit of 5.3 billion or 3.4 per cent of GDP for 2020, and with the collapse in oil and gas oil revenues and in the context of the new pandemic-related expenditure, a deficit of 16.8 billion, or around 11 per cent of GDP is forecasted for fiscal 2020. It implies that this pandemic has brought about an additional deficit spending of about \$11.5 billion in 2020. We had to make a withdrawal from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund as one of the means of financing for 2020. And this is the first year of the existence of a pandemic that is likely to be around for some time. I would love to hear: “Do not worry. It is going to get better” as some people are saying. But precedent has taught us that it always gets worse before it gets better. Therefore it would be remiss of us if we did not factor in the possibility that it is likely that expenditure for 2021 is likely to exceed the amount requested in the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Bill.

To us I say the struggle has become very real. Declining financial state is occurring at a time when the costly feat of becoming as technologically operational as possible is being implemented. I understand that the measure of virtualizing the education sector, creating online public sector services, making work from home directives a reality is necessary to restore some semblance of normalcy. But I cannot help but highlight the irony of the situation that we are in. When Trinidad and Tobago had more financial resources and labour capacity, Governments through the years had not given priority to this area of improving our technological capacity. And now that the financial resources and labour capacity is less, we seek to do more. I say this with the understanding that technology has been around for quite some time and it has been common knowledge that technology and the future are indistinguishable. Why are we now doing what should have been done many

years ago? Was it because we did not anticipate what was going to come? Was it that we planned but fail to execute? The hon. Prime Minister did speak to the fact that there were many plans for digital transformation that were in place but not actioned and COVID-19 has caused us to accelerate this plan. I am happy that the decision is now taken for implementation.

To my opposition colleagues, putting laptops in school is not a plan. I remember when preparing for the new Scarborough General Hospital in 2005, the radiology equipment, the CT scanner that was chosen for the hospital was an analog scanner, and that was 15 years ago. Well, you purchase analog equipment in the year 2005, and what will happen with digitalization? What would happen with you being able to export your images and stuff like that? We sought to get guidance and we had—it was difficult for us to get guidance because there was no policy in place, and that was 15 years ago. Eventually it is because we insisted, the members of staff insisted, that there was a change in plan and the Ministry of Health ensured that we got direct digital equipment and as a result, our hospital in Tobago was the first hospital within the public sector that had direct digital equipment, with all the radiologic equipment was direct digital.

Madam President, I am saying this because the policy for technological change was required then, and that was 15 years ago.

Might I also talk about the fact that we are supposed to have electronic medical records at the hospital? And we still do not have it. It is not yet a reality; something seemingly quite simple but having far-reaching effects. Electronic medical records, not yet a reality despite billions of dollars being spent, none of us should be comfortable with this, and this is neither a PNM problem nor a UNC problem. It is a problem for Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, I raise this issue as a point of caution to our governmental

leaders both present and future to take a more proactive approach, to progress our country and safeguard our people. I urge that going forward we endeavour to envision trees of opportunity when they are presented as seedlings and plant steady roots of realistic execution so that we can bear fruit in and out of season. I am of the view that through more diligent stewardship by Governments over the years, we could have been in a much better position at the present day and these sentiments extend to more than just technology.

Madam President, the hon. Minister of Finance has placed a budget before us where the expenses are more than the revenues and we have been in deficit spending for the last, I think about nine years or so. So the expenses are more than revenues and it is a challenge for us. So my contention is that great leadership is needed and necessary for us to get through this year and those years to come.

I now come to my main thesis as I approach the budget discussion. It is this, COVID-19 gives us as a nation an opportunity to do things we have never done before. You see, Madam President, COVID-19 has shown itself to be a great catalyst and can give us the greatest opportunity and stimulus for change. I implore us to embrace this community. Madam President, for us to use the opportunity that COVID-19 has given us, I humbly submit that there are some things we must do.

Firstly, we must develop our leaders. It is Dr. John Maxwell, leadership expert, who says that everything rises and falls on leadership. So for us to move across the Red Sea that is in front of us right now, we need leadership development in every sphere of influence and I submit that the type of leaders we need to develop are leaders who are purpose-driven, principle-centred and values-based.

### **11.30 a.m.**

What do I mean by this? Leaders that understand their purpose is to serve people, leaders that operate on principles such as fairness and justice, and leaders

that operate by values that are agreed upon by all members of Trinidad and Tobago. I would like to point out to two leaders within the healthcare field in Tobago that show this type of leadership. Having been rejected by several administrations, those leaders have remained steadfast and continue to serve the people of Tobago selflessly, because they understand their purpose, and they are principled in their operation and they operate by specific values.

Secondly, we must agree on shared values, the shared values that we are going to live by in moving across this Red Sea. Values that would cross us—values like humility, curiosity, creativity, courage, honesty, to name a few. In line with this, I must say that I appreciate the Finance Minister's statement that the goal to reset the economy for growth and innovation will be undertaken through collective action at all levels of the society. Having a shared vision is one arm of the organizational success. Participation in this vision by stakeholders at every level of society is the other arm needed.

Therefore, I plead with all of us to take off our party hats. The election is over. I heard Sen. Mark in his contribution on Friday indicate that the people of Trinidad and Tobago made the wrong choice. Sen. Mark, the population has spoken, they have made their choice. [*Desk thumping*] Let us now get on with doing the job they have put us here to do, the job of passing necessary laws to govern our nation. [*Desk thumping*] This time is like none other and we cannot do what we have always done. COVID-19 wears neither a red nor yellow banner and it is not a friend of any political group. [*Desk thumping*] Let us think country rather than party. Let us show good leadership.

I have heard in this Chamber one side telling the other that they are corrupt, and the other side telling the other that they have no vision. Well, Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago needs leaders with both vision and integrity. It is

not either or, we need people with both and in order to go across the path that we have right now that has been presented to us and that we will never have before, we need leaders with both vision and integrity.

Thirdly, we must put action plans in place for critical areas of operation. To begin the planning process, our leaders must have the humility to acknowledge our need for others. This journey cannot be steered alone or within our individual tribes. We must listen to others, especially those closest to the problems and value each voice. In fact, we must empower the persons to know that we need to hear from them going forward. It is a time when our curiosity should be ignited to the extent that we are willing to ask questions, conduct research, and engage the necessary persons to get the best responses. We need to encourage and kindle creative ideas and ingenuity to solve national problems. We have problems before us right now where the answers are with us, but we need to listen to people, put them around the table and give them a hearing.

And when all this is said and done, and the information and options are before us, our leaders must be courageous enough to make tough decisions and ensure that the relevant people understand why the decisions are being made. I do commend the Prime Minister for taking some tough decisions in his last term of office. As more tough decisions need to be taken in the future, please ensure that the implications are explained clearly to the population, so that they could buy-in and support.

And from here on, after decisions are made, they should translate into action so that we can adequately plan and prepare for future generations, and for significant issues such as road development, flood mitigation, food security, crime prevention, and pandemic response. There are significant things that we need to agree to as a people and it is not something that is either UNC or PNM.

When you have to start a project, and because another government comes in office that project is squashed, we waste money as a people. It is not the PNM or the UNC that is wasting money, it is the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And if we have shared vision for major things, flood mitigation, food security, if we have a shared vision for those things and shared values, then it would mean that we would be spending money across time. In other words, we have WASA pipes to lay, we cannot lay all the pipes at one time. If one person is in there, they lay the pipes; the other person comes on, those pipes are continued so that, we do not have what we have right now, where projects are halted because the Government changes. And it is not because the project was not good, it is because it was started by somebody else.

Madam President, it is time that we get value for money and spend, knowing that we must account, if not to the people, since we seem to find loopholes in the laws to get away with accountability, then please remember that God is watching. If one thing COVID-19 has taught us thus far, it is this, that this is an era of responsibility, responsibility for self, responsibility for family, community, workplace and responsibility for our nation. I hope that the lesson that we are being taught is a lasting one that informs all our actions.

And thirdly, we must build on the strengths of our people. Strengths such as generosity, resilience, creativity and a strong faith in God.

Madam President, getting to the budget now, I would like to congratulate the Minister of Planning and Development for the preparation of the budget documents as I saw there was a great effort to link the spending with *Vision 2030*, goals for sustainable development. I trust that these documents would become alive as the programmes are rolled out by each Ministry of the Government and division of Tobago House of Assembly, and that appropriate monitoring is put in place to



ensure that value for money is received. We have less money than we have to spend and therefore, we must get value for money.

I turn now to the allocation for the Tobago House of Assembly. Madam President, the budgetary allocation for the Tobago House of Assembly was 2.134 billion. This aggregated 1.916 billion allocated for recurrent expenditure, 200 million for capital expenditure, and 18 million for the Unemployment Relief Programme. This allocation is 4.3 percent of the national budget. And in addition to the direct allocation to the Tobago House of Assembly, another 754.5 million is allocated for expenditure in Tobago by various Government Ministries and statutory authorities.

Madam President, I note the response of Mr. Ancil Dennis, the Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly as quoted in a CNC3 report dated October 5<sup>th</sup>. I quote:

“Tobago House of Assembly...Chief Secretary Ancil Dennis has described the 2021 Budget Presentation by Finance Minister Colm Imbert as ‘appropriate and fair’. The Tobago House of Assembly requested \$4.71 billion, but received \$2.134 billion. In an exclusive interview with the Guardian Media immediately after the budget preparation, Dennis said that he was pragmatic in his expectations, stating that the THA would make adjustments where necessary.”

He continues:

“We would focus on a number of priority areas like Tourism, Agriculture, Social Support, support for the businesses as well on the island as we have been doing over the last three months, so that will continue and we will make the adjustments where necessary of course on the DP side, we are once again significantly underfunded where we only got \$200 million, \$31

million less than last year. However, we expect an additional \$300 million through Bond Financing and we hope to utilize other mechanisms.”

I end quote.

Madam President, Tobago's tourism product, which is the main source of employment other than the Government, was struggling before COVID-19 and this product is now almost in ruins. Madam President, can these dry bones live again? Could the pandemic really allow the Tobago House of Assembly to look at the tourism product that is offered and seek to re-enter the market with new and improved product? Would the wellness tourism business be the way to go? Sports tourism or some other kind of tourism? Niche tourism?

It will be difficult for Tobago to compete with the other Caribbean islands for sun, sand, and sea. We are now seeking to upgrade our airport. The project is due to start in January 2021. The seaport will benefit from the two new vessels in this financial year. Would these new additions be able to kick start this ailing product? Madam President, the answer will only come from frank and open discussions with persons in the industry in Tobago. How could we pivot and do things differently? The answer lies with us.

The Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association in an article in the *Newsday* dated Thursday, October 15<sup>th</sup> made in part the following recommendations:

- “• Establish a standing committee on tourism.
- Extend bank moratoria on loan payments.
- Expand the Government loan guarantee programmes.
- Make additional funds available to Tobago's accommodation providers through the Tourism Accommodation Relief Grant.
- Make Tobago a duty-free zone.
- Abolish the Land Licence Order of February 2007.”

Those are some of the recommendations they have made. I cannot speak to all of them but the establishing of the standing committee on tourism—I was there in 2005 as hospital medical director when that committee was working. And at the table, you had the people on the ground with the issues and the decision makers there at the same time.

I still remember one afternoon when Tobago was having a problem with flights—I am not sure what the details of the problem was. However, the decision was made at that point in time and the next day LIAT was flying into Tobago. The people, at decision-making level, were at the table and the decision was made quickly and executed. It is stuff like that that the Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association is asking for again. It should be considered.

The other area is the funding that the Ministry of Finance has made for the Tourism Accommodation Relief Grant. So far, my understanding is that—from reliable sources—that 63 properties have received 50 per cent of the grant funds applied for and that is a grant of \$50 million. So, so far, 63 properties have received 50 per cent of the plans.

Madam President, in my budget speech of 2019, I mentioned the success of the tourism product of a small village in Castara. I am asking, again, as the stakeholders undertake their discussion, that they please ensure that these small people are heard, they have something to say.

When our long-awaited new fast ferries arrive, as they are due to arrive soon, as a Tobagonian, I wait expectantly for this service. As we go forward, can I again suggest that it would take great organizational leadership to ensure that this service is provided in a professional and cost effective manner? And it would take great self-leadership for our people to use the ferries and keep them in a manner that would cause them to last. We must look at a maintenance plan to put in place

to make sure that this service is sustained. Can we use this as an opportunity to raise the standard of what we have been providing over the years? We are unlikely to have this level of resource to pay for ferries in the foreseeable future.

I am also tying this service to the proposed privatization of the port. What can be done as the port is restructured to make sure that the management of the Inter-island Ferry Service is better than it is now? The business people in Tobago are waiting anxiously to see what would happen with this restructuring, since they are concerned about what would happen with the cost of transport between Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, I turn to the allocation to the Tobago Regional Health Authority. They were allocated for fiscal 2021, \$401,410,440, an increase of 2.2 million from last fiscal year. Last fiscal year, the TRHA had to be bailed out by given \$50 million funding in March to assist with paying off some necessary outstanding moneys owed to suppliers and preparing for the COVID response.

Madam President, I would like to make a statement that holds true for healthcare planning in both Trinidad and Tobago. I would like to see us discussing how the moneys are being spent as it links to outcome. To do this, we need to have the relevant statistics to plan. For instance, what is our chronic non-communicable diseases rate? As we put services in place, how are the services that we put in place impacting on outcomes? This is necessary so that we would know whether the funding that we are spending in health is appropriate in terms of outcome.

The same goes for cancer, cancer treatment. The only way to be measured, the only way to measure the outcome is to make sure that we know what we are doing in the first place. I note the work that was done on the Scarborough Regional Hospital at Fort King George for the management of patients being treated for COVID-19. This is the same facility that was previously earmarked to be a medical

school. Madam President, in the planning for 2021, could the Tobago House of Assembly please make a decision as to whether all works that are necessary will be undertaken to continue the development of that facility into a fully loaded infectious diseases facility? I am saying this in anticipation that there will be further pandemics coming in the future and we need to be prepared.

Madam President, again, for COVID-19, since we are depending mainly on the prevention to decrease our number of infected persons because there is no cure and at present, there is no vaccine, I would like to see a robust community engagement programme being rolled out in the prevention exercise. While the Ministry of Health and the Tobago House of Assembly have done well in providing ads for television, social media, I would like to see the community becoming partners with the healthcare personnel providing information in real-time on persons with any flu-like illnesses in the community. We should not be waiting on sick persons to call to the hotline before we know what is going on.

Perhaps, we may be able to use the technology. It is being used in other areas. The Minister of Health had mentioned in the early days of the pandemic that they were developing an app for COVID-19. Jamaica is using an app now. As people go in to the country, they download the app and they are monitored on a daily basis through that app. Could we consider this as we roll back the restrictions to movement? It would certainly get our turnaround time for people's illness being quicker.

Madam President, I want to talk about the new Roxborough hospital which is near completion and which would have been funded through development programme last year. How is it going to be operationalized in a period where we have less funds? The Tobago Regional Health Authority was given an increased allocation of \$2.2 million which cannot provide staffing, material and supplies for

this new service. Where is that money going to come from? Can I humbly suggest to the Tobago House of Assembly that they consider linking this project with the tourism product expansion on the eastern end of the island? Could a public-private partnership be considered? Could involvement of Trinbagonians living abroad be considered?

I say this, Madam President, because there was a group of Trinbagonians from an organization called “Touch Tobago”, operating out of Texas, who provided service to the Charlotteville area twice yearly from 2002 to 2011. They brought specialists to the island. These people paid their own way. They paid for their accommodation. They enjoyed the environment. In other words, they were tourists as far as their accommodation that was concerned, and they gave services, specialist services, to the people of Charlotteville free of charge. They even brought a 40-foot container that was transformed to be an operating theater, and that 40-foot container, that operating theatre, was landed in Charlotteville and it is still there. And from that operating theater, minor operations took place. They also provided services for the hospital, providing gynecological services that were not available, specialist gynecological services that were not available at that time, they were providing that too. I am asking this because it is a way of getting our people who are outside and want to come back and probably wanting to get away from what is going on abroad these days, and they can come back and help with the process. Just a suggestion.

I want to turn my attention to an article entitled “Tobago’s white elephant” by CNC3 written by Kyron Regis, dated September 09, 2020. The article spoke about the non-functional cardiac catheterization laboratory at the Scarborough General Hospital. Madam President, I did mention this laboratory was non-functioning in my budget contribution on October 24, 2019. That laboratory

was built by the central government of the day for provision of services by the Tobago Regional Health Authority. However, I am unaware of the clinical programme plan that accompanied the building of the laboratory. The plan that should have included, personnel required, and what training they would need, and what would be the cost of operations for the service. My understanding is that the service had to be withdrawn because they did not have the personnel available. That should not have been happening if we had had planning done appropriately before.

The Secretary of Health, Wellness and Family Development has indicated that they are considering recommencement of the service. Again, I am humbly suggesting that it should be tied to the tourism/income earning project for Tobago. Let COVID-19 allow us to do some things differently, be bold to do something differently.

Allocations for the agricultural sector in Tobago: One of the priority areas of diversification by the Government and also, the Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly is agriculture. There is the allocation in the Public Sector Investment Programme for Tobago for building of access roads. That stated desire that Tobago produces the food it eats and starts exporting again is welcomed. I am aware that in such a highly technological world, the development of the agricultural product must also include the necessary technology in order to provide the food at competitive prices and quality. Once again, we need plans going forward and plans to include the people.

Before I conclude with Tobago, I must congratulate the hard work being done by our public servants within the Ministry of Education, the division of education, principals, teachers of schools in Trinidad and Tobago, as they navigate this new environment. Teachers have been adjusting to their delivery of their

material online, linking with parents to ensure that the children are kept engaged. They are doing this while also taking care of their own families at home. In some cases, taking care of young children while they have to teach. Heartfelt thanks go out to them.

In the first phase of the pandemic, it was the healthcare workers that were under the brunt of fire. Now, it has turned to the—while the healthcare workers are still being affected—

**Madam President:** Sen. Dillion-Remy, you have five more minutes.

**Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy:** Thank you, Madam President.

Allocation to the health sector of \$6.05 billion, the second highest priority spending of the budget for this fiscal year: Madam President, I commend the Minister of Health, the team of the Chief Medical Officer, and other staff of the Ministry of Health and the RHAs, as they have been putting their best effort to manage this COVID-19 pandemic. I did this before, and I am doing it again, since they need all the encouragement as they need to get because the end is not yet in sight. Even if we do get a vaccine sometime next year, in order to take effect and provide a level of herd immunity, it would take some time.

I understand that it must be a tremendously difficult task to make decisions at the level of the Minister of Health where we are trying to balance lives and livelihoods, but this is not unique to us. We see what is going on in countries like Europe, North America, where there is great contention with persons protesting removing their rights and not supporting the levels of restriction. This just indicates to me that no one has the blueprint for us and we must, as a people, work out the solutions together. Again, an issue of leadership connecting with people, influencing people, that is what leaders do so that they can get people working with them.



While speaking of behaviour change, Madam President, just a note that persons within the faith communities are asking for clarification about the restrictions of use of places of worship with a limit of one hour. They do not understand the difference between them being in a place wearing masks, social distancing, et cetera, and other people in any places who are not similarly restricted in terms of time.

Madam President, though happy for the increased allocation to the Ministry of Health, what is currently needed, again, is the scientific evidence based on allocation of the resources to make sure that people can get the services that they need. Much money we spend in buildings and we do not put enough in to make sure that the buildings and equipment are maintained. It is issues like that that have resulted in things like a CAT scanner not working at a time when a member needs it. And we should not be crying at the end, we should be making sure that things are done from before.

Madam President, I am confident that with the right—Madam President, we are facing complex challenges that can either make us or break us as a nation, declining revenues, worldwide recession, COVID-19. The Minister of Finance has presented a budget before us that will be difficult to institute without the necessary shifting of thinking of all our people and putting all hands on deck. I am confident that with the right leadership that is focused on nation building, values that are well defined and agreed upon, that our people will cross this Red Sea. We will look back on 2020 as the year that Trinidad and Tobago took difficult and impacting decisions and actions that started moving us into our preferred future. Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Minister of Social Development and Family Services. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the appropriation fiscal year 2020—fiscal year 2021 of this Bill, 2020.

I want to start, Madam President, I just want to congratulate Sen. Dillon-Remy on her contribution which reminds us that COVID is not about yellow or red. And I think we all need to remember that. But I want to just refer to the Sen. Jearlean John on her contribution. Madam President, you know, some of the information that we got here today was really wrong and I am going to point some of them out. I will not be able to do all. The fact she spoke about people are suffering, people have real issues, spoke about poor and single mothers, and that the Government does not care, in my contribution today, I will show how much this Government cares. [*Desk thumping*]

The Senator also mentioned about the workers from Hyatt and Hilton, that they are not being paid. I would like to say that is not true. [*Desk thumping*] The persons from the Hyatt— all the workers from Hyatt and Hilton have been receiving their salaries. I also saw desk thumping for the comments about the Senator being the only person from the—the only Senator from Tobago in this House, this is not true also. Where is Sen. Dillon-Remy from? Where is Sen. Nigel de Freitas from? They are also from Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

I also want to refer to the fact that the Senator spoke about—made some comments about what was said by Peter George, Curtis Williams and so on, and spoke about the fact that the Government should open up, which I think is indeed very irresponsible. And I would like to say, you know, who here would like to watch their family members suffer or die from COVID-19. And I think we all need to speak about being responsible, instead of just talking about opening up.

**12.00 noon**

You know, it says a lot, because I am wondering why it is that a focus was placed on bars to be opened. Okay. And I heard the Senator quoting the *Bible* talking about Jesus moment and so on, and no time we spoke about opening up the church, places of worship and so on, at no time. But yet, the focus is on opening bars. I wonder why. There were some comments about NGC and I would like to say that you know, I would think that the UNC Government should be ashamed to even mention NGC, because that UNC Government when they were in office plundered, pillaged, ravaged and raided that company and I do not think that anybody should even mention NGC.

And since when they care about Laventille? I represented Laventille, Madam President, and I can tell you that while I was in Opposition and I was pleading with the Government to assist, they did nothing to help Laventille except there was programme dealing with, I think it was something like "Colour Me Orange" where—which was for votes. There was at no time any care about Laventille so, since when now, the Senator is coming to talk about Laventille and people are suffering and people from Laventille over and over, I mean such, hypocrisy. And I would like to now move on to my presentation.

About two weeks ago, I addressed the other place and described in great detail the comprehensive response of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to both, the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing necessity of Government intervention, to ensure that the most vulnerable amongst us, are still afforded the opportunity to engage in a decent quality of life.

Madam President, while I will account for the moneys expended by this Government in the last fiscal year and indicate our plans for the current, it is not my intention today, to repeat all the details of that presentation. I intend to focus not

only on what the Government has done, and will continue to do for persons who find themselves in certain situations but also to what the Government's plans are, to take those persons out of those situations into a place, where they can better survive on their own.

One of the most repeated questions since the 2020 budget was presented by the hon. Minister of Finance was “where the money gone?” Indeed, the Opposition Leader has gone on record as calling for a forensic audit of the money spent on COVID-19, on the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I have said this before and I will repeat in this august Chamber, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has nothing to hide, and we will welcome any probe by any agency into the Ministry's operations.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services was faced with the dilemma of continuing to provide services to clients already in the system, while at the same time providing emergency services to persons affected by COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, Madam President, at no time since the local onset of the pandemic in March, has there been any delay in the payment of senior citizens' pensions, [*Desk thumping*] disability or public assistance grants, or any of the many grants offered to citizens by this Ministry, and that in itself is a phenomenal achievement.

I can report to this honourable Chamber that as at September 2020, the Ministry provided support to 174,798 individuals and households through the various core social programmes. Outside of this, the Ministry provided assistance in the form of income, food or rental support to over 173,000 individuals and families who were impacted by the measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. In short, as at September 30, 2020, this Government provided food, income and other support, to more than one quarter of the entire population of Trinidad and

Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Yet we are hearing that we do not care.

Madam President, fiscal 2020 the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services touched the lives of more than 700,000 citizens of this country. The provision of these grants and services which include senior citizens pension, public assistance, disability grants, food cards, et cetera, cost the taxpayer approximately \$5,113,000,000. So therefore, the evidence is clear. This is a substantial contribution to the fight against poverty. This investment has been able to close the poverty gap and reduce inequality.

The Government's investment through the safety net programmes offered by the Ministry, also contributed to building household resilience during the prevailing pandemic. Of that figure the Ministry expended \$4,012,344,121 on the senior citizens' pension.

Over the last five years, Government introduced measures aimed at providing greater protection to our elderly population and these measures resulted in an increase of a number of older persons accessing the senior citizens grant. Between October 2015 and September 2020, more than 41,000 new persons were added to the system, inclusive of, 9,417 in fiscal 2020. Older persons are now in a better position to overcome the many challenges they encounter. More than 71 per cent are receiving the maximum senior citizens' pension of 3,500 per month.

Madam President, more than 85 per cent of our population over 65 years are currently in receipt of the senior citizens' pension. This on its own is quite a phenomenal achievement. Madam President, in 2017 report titled "Caribbean Synthesis Report of the Implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging, and the San Jose Charter on the Rights of Older Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean", ECLAC cited that Trinidad and Tobago has the most comprehensive contributory and non-contributory pension scheme in Caricom.

[*Desk thumping*] The report also cited that the pension scheme has evolved to become the highest per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean region, and assures that no older person should be in hunger or poverty.

As further testimony of this Government's care for its elderly population, \$703,000 was spent on five senior citizens activity centres, to ensure that those who have contributed so much to the development of our society have a place where they can feel and remain productive. [*Desk thumping*] Moreover, mindful of the fact that not every family is in a position to take care of its elderly at home, this Government paid \$3,874,021 to house 91 residents in community care homes, in fiscal 2020 and a further \$1,144,384 to house residents in eight homes for the aged. For those elderly persons who need assistance in their homes, the Government continues to provide support to the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme to the tune of \$19,852,000 benefiting 988 older persons. As evidence of this Government's commitment to the community of disabled persons, this Ministry, disbursed the sum of \$47,278,912 in subventions to 22 NGOs inclusive of three statutory boards, to support their work and facilitate the delivery of specialized services for persons with disabilities in their care.

So, Madam President, in fiscal 2020, the Government also provided to support those in need as follows—and I want the Members on the other side to listen carefully, because we are hearing that the Government does not care and the Government and people are sick, people are distressed, people are hungry, people are poor and needy—

- permanent food support 27,741 households at a cost of \$193,703,710.
- Public Assistance Grants 18,942 families at a cost of \$339,409,457.

Other miscellaneous grants received:

- 1,000 for families, also benefited from a number of other grants, inclusive of

household grants, household furnishings, medical equipment, funeral grants, house repairs, along with others at the cost of \$5,994,392.

- disability grants, the investment made in 2020 was \$567,003,594.
- natural disasters, the Ministry paid 1,554 affected persons, a total of \$11,652,000
- with specific reference to the support for citizens affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as at September 30, 2020, this Government has provided assistance to 173,020 individuals and families at a cost of \$329,600,240.

And this support came in the form of rental relief, paid directly to landlords, loss of income support, food support for families, as well as for households where children were supported through the School Feeding Programme.

So, Madam President, I have outlined these programmes and the cost to the national economy, if only to indicate to those opposite where the money was spent. For various reasons, including double dipping and attempts at fraud, not all of those who applied for assistance were able to receive such. The Ministry had cause to reject almost 5,000 applications and some of these reasons for rejection include, some applicants were non-nationals, some were students, lack of the required documentation in some cases, and some were unwilling to provide the documentation that they were asked to provide, some applicants had income that exceeded the qualifying limit. So Madam President, some of the applications were blatant attempts to mislead and defraud the Government. All these made them ineligible for the grant. But more importantly, and this is of great concern to me, that the system was clogged, of course, they clogged the system and stopped genuine applicants from accessing support quicker.

At the end of the day though, the Ministry is satisfied that we have done our best in providing support the citizens of our beloved nation, in the midst of the

COVID-19 pandemic. I wish to publicly commend all the NGOs, CBOs and FBOs and all others who stepped up to the plate to ensure that no one was left without.

Proverbs 14:31 says, “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt to his maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God”. We at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services have accepted this as our mandate, to be compassionate to all our fellow Trinbagonians who are poor and needy. But we have gone one step further, to ensure that through the programmes I will now outline, they are presented with opportunities, not only to help themselves, but also to maintain a decent standard of living.

Madam President, the Ministry has been delivering our mandate. Can we do more? The answer is yes. Can we do better? The answer is yes. Can we be more efficient? The answer is yes. But we intend to redouble our efforts in the new fiscal year to fulfil our mandate, to reach the most vulnerable in our beloved country. And perhaps, Madam President, I could begin with the Ministry's last initiative, which is the relaunch of the Ministry's website. As the Government progresses to a state of full digitalization of the economy, a Ministry's website becomes an essential tool, both in bridging the communication gap that exists between Government and end users, and ensuring greater efficiency and impact in the delivery of Government services.

**12.15 p.m.**

In this regard, the Ministry's website was redesigned and relaunched to ensure that, as far as possible, all forms, processes, information about the different grants, et cetera, are readily available to those who need it most. This new website was therefore developed with three principal functions in mind: to offer a more desirable user-friendly service to our clients, to facilitate greater and easier collaboration among our partners and to support the work of our internal teams.



I am extremely elated to use this opportunity to thank the executive and staff of the Ministry, as well as other key stakeholders, who all played critical roles in ensuring that this newly redesigned website met and surpassed the expectations of all for whom it is intended to serve. One such group, Madam President, is the community of persons with disabilities, who were integral partners in the website's redesign. This was an exercise in collaboration and mutual respect and demonstrated, among other things, Government's commitment to establish a greater sense of inclusion, equity and the creation of opportunity for all citizens of our country.

Madam President, the eradication of poverty, social injustice and inequality depend on a lot more than the distribution of grants and services. It is against this background that many of our programmes, grants and services at the Ministry are designed to help persons transition from dependence to self-reliance and sustainability. In this regard, there are a number of additional developments coming from the Ministry that need to be highlighted in the interest of empowering those who are considered the most vulnerable amongst us. Among such are: the Adult Education Programme, the SEED grant and the STEP-UP Programme.

The Adult Education Programme is a longstanding programme designed to help and empower adults through the opportunity of a free, second chance at acquiring their primary, secondary and technical/vocational education, delivered at community centres throughout the country, mainly by our retired educators. Persons who avail themselves of this opportunity are trained in literacy, numeracy and equally important courses through which they can, in fact, obtain an income. These courses include: beauty culture, garment construction, cake decoration, home decor, mix crafts, tiling, masonry, plumbing, electrical installation, welding and fabrication among others. We also provide free computer literacy courses and

associated ICT studies through this programme.

As a reminder, a few weeks ago, this Ministry commissioned Trinidad and Tobago's first wholly owned and operated ICT lab by Government for participants in the Adult Education Programme. And these programmes have the benefit of offering to participants, the opportunity to now earn an independent and sustainable income and, in so doing, lift themselves out of their current circumstances. Madam President, 8,204 persons graduated from the Adult Education Programme since 2015, and today I want to encourage our citizens to register for these courses, find what you like and take that second chance at learning.

The SEED grant: the Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development, called SEED initiative, provides for financial assistance to persons in difficult socio-economic circumstances. This grant, Madam President, is not merely a cash grant to spend on daily requirements, but rather seed assistance for persons to establish, expand or grow their small business venture, as well as develop requisite business management competencies through its training component.

Madam President, there are many of us who because of geography, social standing and a host of other circumstances, look down on the poor and those that may be needy and decry them with a demand that they pull themselves up by their boots straps. The harsh reality is that many of our poor have neither boots nor straps and, therefore, these initiatives are designed to get them to, at least, stand on their own towards sustainable poverty reduction and meaningful participation in the domestic economy. [*Desk thumping*]

STEP-UP: another initiative to be rolled out during the fiscal year is the Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme called STEP-UP. This

programme will be implemented across the Ministry to work with families, households with a view to building resilience and graduate from their programmes. STEP-UP is a holistic approach designed to work with economically challenged and other vulnerable families who are experiencing psychosocial barriers in their family life. Madam President, this approach will allow for the examination of key areas of family life that directly impact or cause poverty, and this will form the basis of our poverty reduction efforts. Such areas include education, employment, income, family dynamics, health, personal identification, housing and safety and security. [*Desk thumping*] STEP-UP is not only designed to treat with the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, but other forms of vulnerability and, more importantly, impact the overall quality of family life.

Madam President, I am certain that there are many amongst us who have fond memories of spending weekends or extended breaks from school with their grandparents. There are many of us who were, in fact, raised by our grandparents due to the absence of our parents for one reason or another. Today, grandparents continue to provide invaluable social support to their families, particularly, in these times of socio-economic constraints. Grandparents raising grandchildren is a common feature of life in Trinidad and Tobago. However, when that care involves full-time responsibility when the biological parents are absent for any reason, then the picture changes significantly.

The evidence is now emerging that in these circumstances, grandparents become very vulnerable and can suffer from many challenges, some very severe, including financial hardships, physical, emotional and psychological stress, isolation and poverty. Some grandparents have difficulty accessing services for their grandchildren as they do not have legal custody of their charges and they have to undergo extensive legal battles to secure these rights. In some situations,

because of issues with patients, grandchildren can themselves suffer from a variety of developmental and behavioural, emotional and other challenges such as depression, ADHD, learning disabilities and may display feelings of resentment, frustration, rejection and anger.

Parenting in these circumstances poses added difficulties for grandparents whose already limited resources may be diverted due to psychological and medical support to overcome the adverse mental and physical consequences of these challenges. The Ministry recognizes this as a major social dilemma. In this regard, we are working on a package of services for grandparents who are taking care of their grandchildren and these will include: parenting skills, psychological support for themselves and their grandchildren, through our National Family Services Division. Our Division of Ageing will provide assistance with respect to social isolation and loneliness and through our enhanced communication efforts, we will make sure they are aware of all the services of the Ministry that are available to them.

Social Support and Empowerment Unit: during this fiscal year, the Ministry will accelerate the establishment of its Social Support and Empowerment Unit, and this unit would be operationalized as an integrated one-stop shop to enable citizens to access all the Ministry's services with a single office visit or visit to our website. We intend to ensure that this model serves as a response to the multifaceted and complex needs of our families. The Social Support and Empowerment Unit will also facilitate coordinated social intervention by the Ministry in an efficient manner wherever and whenever the need arises.

Madam President, within recent years, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has undergone significant changes in organizational structure and mandate, and this new mandate though, suggests a developmental oriented

framework rather than a passive one. What we are focused on is prevention and early recovery in social programmes rather than one of maintenance which offers no assistance in lifting persons out of poverty. The Government has committed to paying greater focus on the needs of the elderly, single parents, children, persons with a disability and other disadvantaged groups. However, the current configuration of the social services protection system can sometimes miss the mark for many citizens. So we intend to move from the one-dimensional siloed strategy in service delivery.

Specifically, the trend is suggesting that an increasing number of families experience interrelated barriers in life that cross delivery units and programmes example, poverty, health issues, unemployment and homelessness among others. Families seeking help are treated in isolation. They have complex needs but are seen by multiple agencies and case workers which can be confusing and time-consuming for clients and may result in duplicated processes. Our strategic priority, therefore, is to enhance customer experience in a more targeted approach through an integrated environment.

Integrated Community First Responders System: this is a strategy for a more responsive family-focused social service delivery system. Madam President, we believe resilient communities form the bedrock of our nation. A key component of a strong resilient community is a stable relationship among residents that will endure over time. Residents of such communities, much like what existed before, invest their time, talent and treasure to protect and support each other so that the community thrives. It is with this understating that the Ministry proposes to lead the thrust towards establishing the Community First Responders System, and this is particularly true of communities where there may be senior citizens, pregnant or nursing mothers, single parents, abused persons and persons with disabilities, who

will require immediate attention.

This is a family support community-based system, consisting of a network of public, private, NGOs, civil society organizations and individual volunteers who come together to protect and support families during times of crisis, bearing in mind that the concept of family also includes single adults living alone. Crises may be unexpected events such as natural or manmade disasters, bereavement, critical illness or family disputes that have a physical, psychological or emotional impact on families within that community.

We are all familiar with the critical role played by the police, the fire services, the regional corporations, the ODPM and international NGOs such as the Red Cross and Is There Not A Cause, during this time of crisis. They will remain an integral part of the Integrated Community First Responders System in their existing capacities. This Integrated Community First Responders System is guided by the National Policy for Sustainable Community Development and will be activated for any family within a community upon the occurrence of any one of the following:

- a public expression of assistance for families and individuals due to losses resulting in homelessness;
- need for counselling or other services provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services;
- a critical incident that would affect families and individuals that is brought to the attention of the head office and the district offices of the Ministry;
- a review of statistical reports indicating a family is or will be in crisis;
- retrenchment or closing down of businesses due to structural adjustments in the economy which affects the family; and

- a referral by a division or a unit within the Ministry or partner Ministry or agency.

And how will this work? This will be led by the National Family Services Division of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Once alerted, the relevant members of the Ministry will be activated, briefed and utilizing the case management approach, deliver the appropriate team response with critical designated roles for each member of the team. Standard operating procedures and individual and group protocols will be established to govern the seamless functioning of the team. Training will be provided for all members of the system. Performance will be monitored and evaluated using critical incident analysis protocols, response times, client satisfaction and other metrics.

The Integrated Community First Responders System will be an important factor in building resilience and more positive relations within communities. When fully implemented, it is expected to usher in a new era of national peace and stability. The Ministry has already identified the broad framework for such collaboration and has begun reaching out to Members of Parliament, partner Ministries and other individuals and groups.

The Integrated Social Enterprise Management System: Madam President, if this Ministry is to live out its grand promise of good governance and service excellence, a comprehensive information system to administer the Ministry's various programmes, grants and services cannot be overemphasized. It is, in fact, the only way forward if we are to reduce duplication and increase efficiency, and there is no better time for its implementation than now.

I am pleased to inform this honourable Chamber that in fiscal 2021, we expect to see the digitalization of all our grants that are currently in our electronic

database through this Integrated Social Enterprise Management System called ISEMS. And what will ISEMS do?

- Provide a single-door approach for accessing social services;
- Address many of the overwhelming operational and technological challenges in the delivery of social services;
- Provide technological framework for the decentralization of social services;
- Improve the effectiveness of the social service through automation and integration of business processes, thereby allowing data and information sharing across the organization; and
- Provide real time reporting and analysis of social services.

A client portal will be established so that clients can interact directly with the Ministry, and this will enable greater efficiency and effectiveness in the processing of grants. The introduction of this technology will also facilitate an integrated, more dynamic and responsive system and, by extension, a more effective solution to the issues raised by our end users. The principal benefit of this exercise, Madam President, is a decrease in the Ministry's response time for persons who are in need of assistance.

The digitalization of recipients' information has an additional quality control benefit which will now enable persons to share this information on a real-time basis with other Ministries and agencies to remove the possibility of person's double dipping into already scarce resources. This is but one step, Madam President, in an overall initiative that will see all Ministries, NGOs, FBOs, civil society organizations, community groups and the private sector working closely together to establish a more integrated and whole of government approach to social services delivery.



**Madam President:** Minister, you have five more minutes.

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** The Social Engagement and Outreach Unit is a unit that will maximize opportunities for citizen engagement beyond those that already exist. This unit will operate in collaboration with the Tobago Desk, which was established on October the 1<sup>st</sup>, and will be the flagship service for resolving client challenges, and reaching out to communities to identify needs and offer appropriate solutions. It will foster better relationships, build rapport and engage citizens, troubleshoot problems, facilitate the removal of bottlenecks within the Ministry and provide the most direct and practical solutions in a caring and professional manner.

Our outreach activities will seek to increase access to the Ministry's services by expanding the communication channels between our clients and the Ministry and vice-versa. In this regard, we will offer a prudent cost-effective mix of engagement options, including traditional and social media; socially distanced and face-to-face meetings and community walkabouts to meet with the communities, discover what is happening in those areas and respond appropriately, and this will not be a one-size-fits-all approach.

We have begun reaching out to partner Ministries, Members of Parliament, members of the private sector and other community organizations to meet with us in their local communities. All 41 Members of Parliament throughout Trinidad and Tobago would have received letters from me inviting them to meet with the Ministry's technical team in their constituency offices or elsewhere in their community to begin the process of collaboration and dialogue on the specific needs of the local area. We shall engage and find solutions to national problems, one constituency at a time.

Madam President, none of the great initiatives I have outlined would be

possible if the one final piece of the puzzle is not in place, and that is a change in our values, attitudes and behaviours to emphasize acceptance of personal responsibility, to recognize that our actions and behaviours have a knock-on effect on our fellow citizens and to normalize delay rather than instant gratification.

Chapter 4 of the national development plan, *Vision 2030*, speaks to the need for more concentration on a positive value system to be embedded in our families, workplaces and places of worship among others. Now, more than ever, as our world is at risk with the negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and we are all called together as a nation to unite, to reflect on what keeps us together, what will help us to recover and how we will achieve full restoration, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services recently launched the internal aspect of the Values Attitudes and Behaviours Campaign to initiate the transformation among the staff of the Ministry. It is our intention later on to launch it at a national level, and it is my hope that this initiative will reenergize our citizenry to rally around each other and restore family life and our society with the love, discipline, respect and productivity that we all know is possible.

In conclusion, I am of the firm view that Trinidad and Tobago continues to be fortunate in that we have had the benefit of a caring and prudent government to guide our country through past and present challenging times. At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, we are therefore proud to carry the mantle for the Resetting of our Economy for Growth and Innovation through the revitalization and modernization of the social sector.

And, as I close, I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their hard work, particularly, during this COVID-19 pandemic. I also wish to thank you and this honourable House for the opportunity to make this contribution in support of the remarkable budget

presentation for fiscal 2020/2021. The budget ensured that the most vulnerable in our society have access to a multifaceted safety net, especially at this time and beyond. I thank you.

**The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell):** Thank you, Madam President, for giving me the opportunity to participate in this, my sixth budget debate, and for that I wish to thank, Madam President, the hon. Prime Minister, for again giving me the opportunity to serve, and in that vein, I wish to thank the people of Trinidad and Tobago for again electing the Hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] As I am on that, Madam President, and only now having the opportunity, allow me to congratulate you as well as Senate Vice-President, Sen. De Freitas in your re-ascension to the President's Chair as well to the Vice-President's Chair.

I wish to comment on some matters at this time raised by Sen. John. In her contribution, Sen. John indicated that this Government cannot get the country under control and turn this country around, there is no clear strategy and there is no clear plan. Madam President, that statement in itself indicates that the UNC simply does not understand the situation that we are in. This COVID-19 is an infectious disease. It is a pandemic, it is unpredictable. Just last weekend Spain had to shut down in a state emergency. You cannot plan for the long term when this COVID-19 pandemic is changing by the day. It is day by day, week by week that we have to plan. And, Madam President, this is not a time for five-day weekends.

Madam President, Sen. John also indicated that public servants returning to work is to put public servants at risk, and I would forgive the hon. Senator. The hon. Senator may not know that since the restrictions had been put in place, the civil service had been putting health and safety measures in place at offices all

around this country. So there is no abnormal risk facing them at this time.

The Senator also indicated that the Prime Minister announced that bars and restaurants would remain closed and the Chambers are disappointed and angry. Madam President, the restrictions are placed on in-house dining. I myself had a slice of Buzo pizza over the weekend, Madam President. But I would remind the hon. Senator that there is no food and rum and coke to be had if you are dead, and the \$10 that you want to sit down and pay for a beer does not compare to the \$10,000 it will cost for a funeral. So we are right to keep the restrictions in place so that we do not suffer the states of emergencies and the complete lockdowns and shutdowns that other countries all over Europe are experiencing right now, having tried to reopen their economies before time.

The hon. Senator spoke about Petrotrin, and her arguments about the closure of Petrotrin—or “if the UNC were in office they would keep Petrotrin”—are largely emotional. What the hon. Senator is not saying, is that the \$3 billion in profit that the hon. Senator spoke about, occurred over a decade ago when oil prices were at their record highs. What the hon. Senator is not saying, that from 2014, the projections were that Petrotrin would lose \$2 billion per year going forward, and there was a massive bullet payment to be made in 2019. Government had to act.

What the hon. Senator is not saying is that several times per year, multiple times per year, Cabinet had to deliberate and grant Petrotrin millions of dollars in working capital—tens of millions of dollars, US dollars, in working capital, to purchase oil to be refined at a loss. So with no emotion in the matter, Government led by the hon. Prime Minister, had to take the decision to restructure Petrotrin, just that we did, and the population pronounced upon that in August gone.

Madam President, the hon. Senator spoke about, regarding the Port of Port

of Spain, a lot about process and tenders; curious, because, Madam President, I clearly remember that when I entered the Ministry of Housing in 2016, I discovered that three contracts worth \$3.5 billion were given out to three contractors without any tendering process, without any process at all.

**12.45 p.m.**

In Union Hall, \$1.5 billion to one contractor; in Egypt Village, 1.5 billion to one contractor and in Princes Town about \$800 million to one contractor. So where was the concern for process and tendering in the HDC then between 2010 and 2015? And let me say as well, Madam President—put on the record—that a committee was formed regarding feasibility, and tendering is further down the road, so we should not be anticipated at this early stage. Sen. John indicated that Government has no track record of accomplishment. Madam President, what this Government has a track record of is never losing one election to the UNC since 2010. And I agree with Sen. Remy—I agree with Sen. Dillon-Remy that the election is over. It is time to stop fighting the last election. [*Desk thumping*] In 2015, Madam President, the UNC took about three years fighting that 2015 election through the courts and other places. But the election is over. We are the Government, you are the Opposition, and [*Desk thumping*] I would advise that you get comfortable because you are projected to be in Opposition for a very, very, very long time. Madam President, we have the right leader at the right time.

To touch on Sen. Dillon-Remy, I would say to Dillon-Remy that I have heard you, and the tourism standing committee called the Tourism Task Force will be recommenced before the end of the year. It is a committee set up. I, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, is the chair, the co-chair the Secretary for Tourism, and all the tourism stakeholders, both in Trinidad and Tobago. And we will be looking at items such as the ones that she described, as well as airlift, cruise

and joint marketing efforts. And the suggestions by the tourism stakeholders in Tobago are being taken on board and discussed between the Chief Secretary and the Minister of Finance.

I wish to touch on something regarding San Fernando, Madam President. Last Friday Sen. Lutchmedial sought to indicate that nothing much was going on in San Fernando except a sign up on the waterfront. Let me just put on the record, there is road widening at Lady Hailes. At the old PTSC compound a \$750 million housing contract has been awarded. A multipurpose car park by the San Fernando Hospital is in the advanced stages and very shortly to begin. Carlton Lane housing project has already started. The district court—it is no longer called the Magistrates' Court—but a District Court has been started near Irving Street. A family court has started at the old Cluny centre. So, Madam President, as a “San Fernandian” there has not been this much development in San Fernando for a very, very, very long time, and I would not be surprised if Sen. Lutchmedial confessed in her private moments that she too may have voted for the hon. Attorney General. But, Madam President, I say that, and San Fernando has re-elected the hon. Attorney General. He is the first MP re-elected there since Errol Mahabir I think, [*Desk thumping*] and, Madam President, San Fernando is very happy with their representative.

I wish now, Madam President, to counter this narrative that the UNC has been peddling for the last few weeks, and even in the campaign, that the PNM crashed the economy before COVID. And, Madam President, “is like” they came together and they decided, “Ah, this is ah strategy, we will use this narrative and we will tie the COVID crash of the economy to the PNM”. But that is to insult the intelligence of right-thinking people in Trinidad and Tobago. So we have to re-examine again how we got to this point. Not too long ago in 2014/2015 budget

the UNC administration, having enjoyed extremely high energy prices and a GDP of close to \$180 billion, estimated revenues of \$60 billion, unveiled the largest budget in our history, \$64 billion. So even though we were enjoying extremely high GDP as a consequence of our very high energy prices, the UNC still did put forward a deficit budget.

It was living for today, no inkling of conservatism, no saving for tomorrow, Madam President. Things were nice, but the niceness was as a consequence of high revenues as a consequence of high energy prices. And when you examine that budget, Madam President, the size of the budget was really attributable to transfers and subsidies, recurrent expenditure, unsustainable expenditure, and we saw how unsustainable it was when in the very next year energy prices tumbled and revenue collapsed with it. Energy revenue went from over \$21 billion in 2014 to just \$13 billion in 2015, and then down to \$3 billion in 2016.

So when we took Government in 2015, Madam President, there was no choice, we had no choice but to rein in expenditure, rein in inefficient spending and restructure the economy, and we have been doing just that since the year 2015, bringing expenditure to a place that is sustainable while increasing revenues, especially non-oil revenues. And from an examination of our fiscal operations, Madam President, everyone can see that that is exactly what we are about, and the people saw that that was what we are about, and that is what majorly contributed to our success at the polls in August.

So, Madam President, prior to COVID, at the start of fiscal 2020, the data and the macroeconomic indicators indicated that our economy was on track to return to sustainable growth in the year 2021. Inflation had moved from 5 per cent to 1 per cent at the start of 2020. Government revenues had increased by over \$10 billion over 2016. Expenditure had decreased by over 20 per cent when compared

to the 2015 expenditure level. And the public sector debt was stabilized at 65 per cent, well under many comparator economies both regionally and internationally. But then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. We had to immediately close borders, and just like that our local economy and the global economy ground to a halt. The decision we made then was to keep as many people employed as possible, keep the economy stable and to cast as wide as possible the social safety net. And, Sen. Cox, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, spoke about it. A fund of \$6 billion was immediately set aside.

Madam President, in the sectors of tourism, culture and the arts, these sectors were hit particularly hard since the closure of the borders, and what that meant was the immediate shut down of travel, air and cruise. It meant that the accommodation sector, ground transportation sector, food and beverage providers, the entertainment industry, were all shut down. As a consequence of the public health guidelines to limit gatherings, individuals in the performing arts sectors, entertainers, persons in the event industry, all, in the proverbial blink of an eye, had all their earnings taken away.

So in terms of the COVID relief safety net as it pertains to these sectors, I wish to reiterate some of the things we did; tourism, culture and the arts. Individuals employed directly or indirectly in these sectors received—persons who lost all or part of their income were provided with support in the form of salary relief grants and income support grants, citizens of both Trinidad and Tobago, citizens employed in the tourism, culture and art sectors. Emergencies hampers were delivered, food vouchers were provided to families in need, rental assistance was provided. A \$25 million fund was set up and allocated to provide relief to artistes in the culture and arts sectors; 1,124 cultural relief grants in the amount of \$5,000 per grant, per person, were distributed to artistes for a total of \$4,080,000



so far.

Income tax refunds were accelerated to individuals. As it relates to businesses operating in these sectors, Madam President, industries in the value chain, they benefited from cash accelerated VAT refunds or VAT bonds depending on the size of the business. Small and medium businesses in these sectors were welcome to a zero interest Government-guaranteed loan. Business owners in these sectors were welcome to loans through the credit union loan facility set up. Microenterprises in the tourism and culture and art sectors, such as tourism operators, tour guides, et cetera, were offered grants in the Micro-Enterprise Grant programme.

Further, Madam President, changes were made to monetary policy to allow for access to more credit through banks, excess liquidity; prime lending rates went down from 9.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent. Mortgage payments to TTMF were deferred and the HDC deferred mortgage and rental payments for a period of three months. So citizens in these sectors who own TTMF mortgages, or HDC mortgage, or rental arrangements were allowed to defer their mortgages allowing them some relief. So, Madam President, the true picture is that Government responded to the call for assistance in all sectors across Trinidad and Tobago, including and especially the tourism sector and the culture and art sectors. But, Madam President, more specifically for Tobago, millions were allocated to assist small businesses, including small tourism operators in the Enterprise Development Programme, and so far close to 200 grants have been distributed.

Sen. Dillon-Remy spoke to the matter of the special fund of \$58 million set up for accommodation providers in Tobago for the upgrade of their properties, Madam President. So far there have been 63 applications, but 48 property owners have received assistance through the accommodation—the Tobago accommodation

grant programme specifically—for COVID-19 support in the amount of \$18million so far. So, Madam President, I am happy to be a part of a Government that has assisted to the tune of tens of millions of dollars provided to individuals and businesses in the tourism, culture and art sectors.

So, Madam President, turning now to Government's fiscal package, the "Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation". I have listened to the hon. Minister of Finance, and at this stage I wish to congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance, and I wish to commend and thank all the efforts of the employees at the Ministry of Finance for their sterling work during this very, very, very difficult time of a pandemic in providing this fiscal package going forward over the next fiscal. Madam President, "Resetting". As we reset the economy for growth and innovation, resetting means continuing to eliminate wasteful and inefficient expenditure, and it also means improving our revenue position with particular focus on our non-energy revenues. And the Minister of Finance also announced a number of institutional building initiatives to improve our revenue position. The Revenue Authority, which, Madam President, once operationalized and enforced promises to reduce our tax gap, that is the amount of tax leakage we experience every year by approximately \$5 billion. And the gaming commission, we ask for support again from those on the Opposition Benches, support for our gaming legislation, support to finally regulate our unregulated gambling industry to improve tax compliance in this sector, among other things. And the national statistical institute, we need support as well for that legislation, that piece of legislation so that Government, as well as businesses, will have all the data, all the information that is needed for better decision-making going forward.

Madam President, with respect to tourism performance in calendar year 2019, and the first two months of 2020 before the pandemic hit, there are set

performance indicators that help to paint the value of the tourism sector in any destination. Madam President, it is no secret that in the years 2015 to 2018 that tourism had seen a decline in terms of the international arrivals by air, which is the most important—the main tourism indicator that we all look to, from 439,000 persons to 375,000 persons. And, Madam President, this is directly attributable to the decline in marketing spending in the tourism sector on account of the downturn in the economy for that period 2015 to 2018. But more so, it is also attributable to the transition that we had put in place from the inefficient arrangements under the TDC, the former marketing company for both destinations, the transition now being the marketing entities now being separated into Tourism Trinidad for marketing the destination Trinidad, and the Tobago destination marketing entity, Tobago Tourism Agency. And I am happy to announce, Madam President, that since 2019 our efforts at turning around the tourism sector started to bear fruit as there were notable increases in international arrivals, Carnival arrivals, visitor spend and room occupancy rate.

In terms of GDP, the World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that the tourism sector in Trinidad and Tobago's direct contribution to GDP is 3 per cent. And using the total value of GDP in Trinidad and Tobago at \$165 billion, the tourism sector in Trinidad and Tobago produces just around \$5 billion in value annually. And by definition, direct contribution to GDP is the value of goods and services generated by industries that deal directly with tourists, including hotels, travel agents, airlines, and other passenger transport services, as well as the activities of restaurants and leisure industries that deal directly with tourists.

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

In terms of employment, Mr. Vice-President, the World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that direct employment in our tourism sector accounts for 3.7 per

cent of the total persons employed in that country. And if we use the figure of 634,000 as the employed labour force according to the CSO, we could estimate that direct employment figures in the tourism sector is 23,000 persons. This is of course at 2019 and we do not have accurate estimates for what that looks like now as a consequence of works and workers being displaced by reason of the pandemic. However, Mr. Vice-President, with respect to disruption, I have already indicated what Government has done with respect to the displacement felt by employees in that sector.

In 2019, Mr. Vice-President, international visitor arrivals by air transport increased over 2018 by 3.5 per cent to 388,000 international visitors. The rebound continued into the first two months of 2020 with an increase of 11.5 per cent over the same two months in 2019, and that trend, Mr. Vice-President, was projected to continue had it not been for the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Where our top source markets are concerned, our top source markets continue to be— In 2019 the United States continues to be our top source market with 178,026 visitors travelling on passports from that country; 74,110 visitors came from the Caribbean islands; 49,492 visitors came from Canada and 32,084 visitors came from the UK. In terms of Carnival, one of the main statistics that we are all concerned about is the performance of arrivals and visitor spend during the carnival season as it is our number one festival; it is the world famous festival.

In 2020, measured over the 19 days prior to Carnival Tuesday, 37,861 visitors travelling on passports that are not Trinidad and Tobago passports, 37,861 visitors arrived for the Carnival celebrations according to the Immigration Department and the CSO. This represents, Mr. Vice-President, a 6.5 per cent increase over the previous period in 2019. In terms of visitor spend the CSO conducts survey of departing visitors bimonthly throughout the year at the

country's two international airports. Interviews are done over a period of six days in the non-Carnival period. In the Carnival period a survey is carried out for 10 days following Ash Wednesday, and for the Carnival period the average visitor spend was approximately TT \$10,660 per person, which works out to approximately \$820 per person, per day, for an average stay of 13 days per visitor. So estimated for Carnival 2020, Carnival spend was TT \$403 million by international visitors, or US \$63 million.

For the year 2019 average visitor spend was \$8,245, which is an increase over 2018 by 16 per cent. At the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts and the marketing agencies, we will continue to look within the tourism ecosystem to maximize visitor spend where we can, and the merger between tourism, culture and the arts provides us with excellent opportunities for doing just that. In terms of the cruise, in 2019, 91,423 cruise passengers came to our shores. This figure is an increase over the previous years, except for 2018 which was an aberrant year due to the closure of several regional ports on account of a severe hurricane season in 2018 where we had unusually high numbers of cruisers in that year. We continue to be at a disadvantage due to our geographical location, but, Mr. Vice-President, we continue to work with the shipping agents and the cruise lines so as to increase the number of calls to these islands. And as soon as the cruise season opens back up, one cruise line had not been here since 2010 has indicated a willingness—in fact has indicated that they are putting the destinations of Tobago and Trinidad on their itinerary.

With respect to room occupancy, room occupancy is measured by STR global, that is the Smith Travel Report global, and according to that report occupancy rate for Trinidad hotels increased by 3 per cent in 2019 and it now stands at 62.1 per cent. The room occupancy rate is now at 62.1 per cent in

Trinidad, and for Tobago the data available for the first six months shows that occupancy rate is at 36 per cent, an increase of 6 per cent over the previous year, but still, Mr. Vice-President, at an unsatisfactory rate, and the Tobago Tourism Agency is well on its way to correcting that disappointing room rate.

With respect to inter-island travel on the air bridge, I am happy to report that over 2019 close to a million passengers travelled on the air bridge, approximately 500,000 recorded as having gone on both legs. And over this period Caribbean Airlines provided total capacity of 1.14 million seats with excess capacity of 140,000 seats. In 2019 this was a significant increase in air travel and seat capacity between Piarco and Crown Point, allowing for easy access to the domestic tourism market. On the sea bridge there were 1,649 trips with approximately 538,000 passengers travelling by ferry. And with the introduction of, very shortly, two brand new state-of-the-art vessels from Austal and Incat, sea bridge operations will see significant increases in trips and passengers with an estimate at this time that we can make of over one million passengers opting to use the fast ferry.

I will turn now, Mr. Vice-President, to investment in the tourism sector, and at the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, the Tobago Tourism Agency and the Tourism Trinidad Limited, we all have investments units and we all work in tandem to facilitate and incentivize investment in the tourism sector. Over the last administration these investments units had worked extremely hard hand in hand to facilitate investment into a number of tourism projects through the Tourism Development Act, as well as the Tourism Accommodation Upgrade Programme. Of particular note, Mr. Vice-President, and the most exciting news we have where investment is concerned, is that in 2021 three brand new hotels with international brands are set to open their doors in Port of Spain and in Scarborough in 2021; the Radisson Blu Hotel, the BRIX Hotel by Marriott, both in Port of Spain, and the

Comfort Inn Suites in Scarborough.

The Radisson Blu Hotel is a five-star hotel located on Ajax Street in Port of Spain and will provide Trinidad with an additional 79 high-quality guest rooms in the form of one and two bedroom suites, as well as two presidential-style suites.

The rooftop of the hotel boasts an infinity pool with a spectacular view of Port of Spain and the Gulf of Paria. Financial Suites Limited invested over \$182 million in this project and during construction and outfitting phases employed approximately 500 nationals. The hotel was able to qualify for over \$6 million in incentives under the Tourism Development Act, and when this hotel finally opens in March an estimated 100 nationals will be employed. The BRIX Hotel when opened—and the BRIX Hotel is a hotel by Marriott and is located on Coblenz Avenue in Port of Spain. The BRIX Hotel when opened will be the embodiment of tourism, culture and art. The name “BRIX” pays homage to our heritage as a once prosperous sugar industry and derives its name from the measurement brix which is a measure of sugar content in a solution.

The hotel will also specifically feature only local artists and art works. It is a boutique hotel and on opening will add 161 high-quality rooms to Trinidad and Tobago’s hotel room stock. This \$350 million hotel has thus far employed 100 nationals to facilitate its construction and qualified for over \$8 million in tourism concessions. The hotel as well will have a rooftop lounge with seating for 60 persons plus a restaurant and bar that will accommodate 90 patrons and in keeping with our thrust into the niche business, the niche—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Thank you very much—the niche area of business tourism, meeting rooms will be available for a seating of 220 persons.

With respect to the Comfort Inn Suites in Tobago, once completed visitors to

picturesque Scarborough Tobago will have access to amenities such as a rooftop restaurant and swimming pool, meeting rooms, fitness rooms, gift shops and spas at a total of 74 guest rooms. Comfort Inn and Suites will be located at Orange Hill in Scarborough and it is well suited to the island's leisure market.

**1.15 p.m.**

The hotel is still in its construction phase, and currently employs 200 nationals. However, when it opens, it will employ 75 nationals of this country. The total investment was \$63 million, and incentives have been approved to the value of .19million.

Mr. Vice-President, you will be very impressed to note that these over \$600million in investments in these major accommodation projects were all made by local investors. These local investors would have done their research, studied the tourism market before making their investments, and have all expressed high levels of confidence in our tourism sector and in this Dr. Rowley-led administration. All told, these three hotels will add 312 high quality rooms to our available room stock on the islands.

Mr. Vice-President, I will skip to going forward and into 2021 and beyond, because the question on everyone's lips is: In the face of this unprecedented crisis, what does the short-term future hold for tourism, culture and the arts sectors? What is the strategy to recovery in tourism, culture and the arts? And while we may be able to project several different scenarios and look towards the scenarios posed by international agencies such as the IDB, the unpredictability of this virus simply renders us unable to make concrete plans or formulate firm strategies going forward.

Lockdowns are being imposed, lifted and swiftly re-imposed. Tourism is being cancelled all around. The tourism transport sector, aviation, has ground to a



halt. In the accommodation sector, low occupancy rates will prevail for some time, and in meetings, conferences, culture, sports and entertainment, events are being cancelled across the globe.

In the face of this prolonged pandemic, at the Ministry, and at the marketing agencies, we are doing three things to move from crisis to prepare for recovery. One is, we are working with the Ministry of Health, CARPHA, and other relevant agencies in developing and rolling out comprehensive hygiene standards for all the stakeholders in the tourism industry.

Piarco and Crown Point International airports have already achieved accreditation through the Airport Council International and the Airport Health Accreditation Programme. Stakeholders are being trained as we speak. We are going to continue with destination development through our agencies as they ramp up marketing efforts to showcase the destination using more cost effective marketing channels and, for example, by the end of November, Trinidad will have its newly designed destination website.

In the short-term, we are going to have to focus on domestic travel and tourism. That is simply what we are going to have to do and domestic tourism is going to be treated as the newest exotic tourism destination. The Tobago Tourism Agency along with Trinidad tourism will ramp up their domestic tourism campaigns as the lockdowns and restrictions are lifted slowly. The local tourism operators must now utilize the right marketing tools to realize the value of domestic tourism since restrictions have been imposed, and almost every day we are learning about new gems right here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, I see you almost about to rise. There is no denying that there are considerable challenges ahead for those in the tourism, culture and arts sectors, and for those in society. The shock to these sectors is unprecedented, but

we will come out of it resilient and better than before under the leadership of the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley. I thank you.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Lyder.

**Sen. Damian Lyder:** I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to contribute today to the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2020. Indeed, I will like to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, and the alternative Prime Minister, for allowing me to contribute to this budget debate today.

Mr. Vice-President, I sat and listened to the Minister of Finance deliver a budget that I deemed to be boring, that I found lacked in vision, ingenuity and innovativeness. A Minister that seemed incapable of presenting anything that hovered outside the box. Instead, I listened to a Minister deliver bad news to a nation using flowery words as if to comfort them from an unknowing pain. You see, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister used statements that were veiled in allegory so as to confuse and bewilder the average citizen.

The Minister of Finance came to this Parliament to say that the Government will be reviewing tariffs on electricity, reviewing tariffs on water, deregulating fuel prices and using rental value to assess property tax. What does that mean to the average man? Whereas the Minister should have been transparent to the nation and tell “de average man, lights going up, water going up, fuel going up, rent going up and property tax is coming for you”. But thank God for the Opposition led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar who has spent the last two weeks unraveling the truth. Some could not handle it. One had to actually reboot.

You see, Mr. Vice-President, this Finance Minister has come once again with the blame game. He wants to blame the state of the economy on COVID. In the last five years that has been the mantra: Blame Kamla, blame the drop in oil

price, now blame COVID. Well, I have come here today as number 23, echoing the sentiments of my colleagues in saying: COVID did not crash this economy. The PNM crashed the economy long before COVID. [*Desk thumping*] “But 24 and 25 coming to say de same thing, eh”.

It was not a COVID pandemic, but it was a PNM pandemic. [*Desk thumping*] Because it is not COVID that shut down Petrotrin. Also, it is not COVID that shut down one third of Point Lisas. Also, it is not COVID that is closing down the manufacturing plants in Lever Brothers. Also, it is certainly not COVID that ran ArcelorMittal from the country. Also, COVID did not destroy the sea bridge. Also, COVID did not reduce foreign reserves. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, let me not continue before I get warned for tedious repetition. I do not want to label the use of the word “also” like my colleague the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, but I have to ask the question: With the long list of achievements claimed by the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, what exactly did the last Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs do in the last five years other than possibly confuse the average listener when he spoke?

Mr. Vice-President, a diplomat actually told me that she felt she needed an *Oxford* and a thesaurus dictionary just to comprehend that last Minister. So I wonder if the new Minister, when he stated that he had to repair strained relationships from the past, if he really meant from the past PNM Government who had a confusing Minister and a government that had to dodge a bullet from US sanctions.

After blaming everyone else but themselves, the PNM now for the first time has the moral authority and credibility to finally blame the last Government for their failure, the last PNM Government to be exact. [*Desk thumping*]

Because, Mr. Vice-President, the numbers do not lie, and the results of the

last five years would show you. GDP down by 16 per cent. The fiscal deficit was 16.8 forecasted but we know it is more. Debt to GDP went from under 50 per cent to now 80 per cent but economists are saying 83 per cent. A credit rating of BA, one step away from junk bond status. A decline in our foreign reserves, ease of doing business declining from 63<sup>rd</sup> in the world to 105 in the world, and foreign direct investment in a whopping negative US \$700 million in 2018. So, Mr. Vice-President, they can fool no one, and they have no one else to blame but themselves.

Now they come to this Parliament, having won an election based on false hopes and a misleading narrative on COVID-19, to admit to the nation that they can no longer rest on their laurels and depend on the bailout from the energy sector after mismanaging this economy. Now they come to tell you about diversification of the economy. Where were those words in the last five years? Is this something new to them, diversifying the economy? Has the UNC not been telling them to diversify the economy for the past five years? Yet now, two of their pillars that they boast so much about for this diversification process were in the sectors of agriculture and manufacturing. So, Mr. Vice-President, let me now turn to the agriculture sector.

The Minister of Finance in his budget presentation in the other place presented what can only be deemed as a lip service budget, masquerading around town a renewed focus on the agricultural sector. Today I say that contribution was nothing more than pie in the sky and a total insult to every hardworking farmer in this country. I will show you why.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to deal with the issue where the Minister of Finance continuously boasts that the agriculture sector is tax-free. The reality, it is simply not true. I will not call the Minister a liar, but I will show the honourable House what the facts are.

The Minister of Finance bragged in this year's budget statement where he states, and I quote:

“We have already decided to make agriculture in all of its facets a tax-free industry and we are going to build on this base.”

He throws these words out and yet gives no indication in the budget statement as to what actually tax-free means to a farmer. Yet, he goes on to say in the very same budget statement on the issue of property tax, and I quote from him:

“The taxation of commercial, industrial, and agriculture properties will follow, in that order.”

So we are clear from the Minister's statement that farmers will have to pay property tax. This does not appear to be tax-free. Furthermore, in budget after budget they have talked about tax-free, but farmers who are registered farmers, who registered their business, have to pay income tax, corporation tax, VAT and other taxes. So to come to this House year after year and throw out words, “tax free” and “agriculture”, is indeed, facetious.

In last year's budget statement of 2020, the same Minister of Finance says:

“No taxes for registered farmers.”

“Madam Speaker, the agriculture sector is now tax-free.”

Mr. Vice-President, this was a year ago budget statement. So it is every year the agriculture Ministry becomes tax-free? This reminds me of that movie, some of us have seen it, *Groundhog Day*, where every year the star of the show wakes up every morning, the same chain of events, the same music playing, the same everything. When I listen to the overall budget, I realize this is a Groundhog Day budget.

This is the bold-facedness and facetiousness of this PNM Administration. They have no problem repeating the same rhetoric year after year whilst

implementing nothing. Mr. Vice-President, PNM, “promises never materialize”.  
[*Desk thumping*]

We could go back to 2019 and 2018, 2017, 2016 budget statement, by the same Minister of Finance, and we see the same khaki pants. It is since the first PNM budget presentation, under the leadership of this current PNM leader in 2015, that they promised a tax-free agriculture sector. Mr. Vice-President, this was five years ago. It is either the Minister has some memory loss or he takes the people of Trinidad and Tobago for fools. Since 2015, they are boasting of a tax-free agriculture sector. Duties and VAT on chemicals in the agricultural sectors were waived years before this. But you come to talk about tax-free chemicals in place since 2015.

Mr. Vice-President, as you see, consecutive budget after budget the Minister boasts of a tax-free agriculture sector, which I showed you is not true. They are still paying income tax, VAT, corporation tax, and now property tax. So I expect next year's budget the Minister's statement would be nothing short of a tax-free agricultural sector.

Well let me go on now to the agriculture incentive programmes. The fact that when you look at the estimates of expenditure you find that the \$500 million cannot be found under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, but under the Ministry of Finance. Mr. Vice-President, they do not even have confidence in the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to handle his own business? Is it because they want these funds to benefit friends, family and financiers of the PNM? Is it because it is mamaguy that they do not put it there, that it is just talk? You see, Mr. Vice-President, the issue here is beyond simply throwing random figures into a speech and expecting the population to buy it.

You did not do anything for the past five years. Doing something over and

over and expecting a different result is tantamount to insanity. Farmers for decades have been trying to get access to funding through these programmes, such as the Agriculture Incentives Programme, which is not new and has existed for a long time. What we would like to know is how many farmers gained access to these agriculture incentive grants. In fact, many of them will tell you that while on paper this grant exists, it is a nightmare to gain access. Oftentimes farmers have to make several trips to one office with paperwork, then to be told they do not qualify because perhaps they do not have land tenure, or if they do qualify, they are waiting two to five years before receiving the grants. “De cow done starve already.”

Let us look at what transpired over the last couple of years with this agriculture incentive programme. Mr. Vice-President, a detailed look at the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure* over the past five years would show that the bulk of the agriculture budget, between 48 to 60 per cent, goes to the administrative and personnel costs, whilst the farmer has to fight against a bureaucratic system and red tape to gain access to a mere 1 to 6 per cent of recurrent agriculture budget. This is the incompetence of this Government that does not invest the right amount of money into agriculture. And I feel sorry for my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, that he has had to go through this.

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries came to this House boasting that he is a registered farmer, and he was a product of GATE—well, ironically, it is his own Government closing the gate on so many today—and that his PNM Government so proud. Over the last five years gave out 100 million under the Agriculture Incentive Programme. Imagine, 100 million over a five-year period is a mere 20million per year on average. He also said that there were 25,138 registered farmers in this country. So by a simple

mathematics, the Minister is therefore proud to report to this House than on average a farmer receives a mere \$3,978.04. He came here in this Chamber with this big dog and pony show, and in the end there was no dog, there was no pony, but only a pappy-show, a pappy-show because you come here having spent only 100 million in five years, yet you want farmers to believe that in a PNM-crashed economy you are coming to spend 500 million on farmers? I am sorry, but we simply “doh” believe it, and I believe many farmers have doubts.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I could go on, on many issues like praedial larceny, land tenure rights, infrastructure or lack thereof, but my colleagues have dealt with that. Let me move on to the topical issue of marijuana. Not one mention of the marijuana industry in this budget. Last year there was a joint select committee for marijuana. I believe it was the Cannabis Control Bill. The Government was beating up their chest on marijuana, how they decriminalized marijuana and would eventually license farmers to grow and commercialize medical marijuana. Their term comes to an end, elections called, we come to the Parliament now, they having won, and not one mention of marijuana, except for the words “medical marijuana” mentioned by the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry.

Mr. Vice-President, St. Vincent and Jamaica, our Caricom neighbours, are now miles ahead of us in marijuana. There are Trinidadians today in St. Vincent involved in marijuana growths legally. Globally, marijuana is now a billion-dollar cash crop. The United States of America and Canada and countries in Europe, are leading the way and generating significant revenues, much needed revenue that T&T needs right now, especially as it pertains to forex.

Why are we now getting this silence? You see, Mr. Vice-President, this takes me back to the trust deficit for this Government. The silence makes you ask the question if the Government is keeping things quiet to ensure their friends,



family and financiers get a chance to take over this industry in time for the law to be passed.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, I have been listening to your contribution so far, but just for guidance, what you are doing right now, the statement that you are making, could be misconstrued as imputing improper motives. So just be careful going down that line.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Guided accordingly, Mr. Vice-President.

But we are indeed hearing about certain people buying up agricultural land. So I do not know if they are buying it to grow bhaji, as the Minister of Finance joked about earlier, but we will leave it there. I take your guidance, but we will be looking. That is what the Opposition's job is to do.

I move on now, Mr. Vice-President, in the area of fisheries and I would have expected that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would speak on fisheries. In fact, when the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries spoke in the other place, little or nothing was mentioned on fisheries. When we look across the length and breadth of this country, the fishing depots are becoming derelict, becoming dilapidated, with no maintenance plan in place. We see fishermen who are now becoming uncompetitive on the global market, a dying breed of ocean farmers.

We see the Government removing the subsidy on fuel, doubling the cost of fuel. We see these fishermen becoming the red-headed stepchild of the agriculture Ministry. No plans in place to improve the plight of our fishing sector. We hear nothing of value whatsoever on fishing in this budget. The price of fish in this country has skyrocketed due to this Government's policy or lack thereof and we see locals playing a negligible part in supplying fish processors in this country. In fact, it is the Venezuelans supplying the fish processors.

We have no problem with the fish processors buying from outside, “yuh know”, just as our manufacturers are forced to import their inputs because of inadequate supply of raw materials locally. But the Venezuelans are now in a competitive position against our own fisher folk. What is this love affair that this Government has with Venezuela? Everywhere you turn is Venezuela. This is starting to sound like a Mills & Boon novel. How can a PNM Government be embracing a president who has been described in the United States of America as a dictator, and is wanted by the US government for narco trafficking?

But, Mr. Vice-President, what I am about to tell you, even you will be surprised. I have seen a number of posts on Facebook with Venezuelan fishermen fishing and moving in our waters, while our fishermen are being locked up in their waters and attacked by pirates because we cannot secure our fishermen. One can go right now in the constituency of none other than the Prime Minister of our country, in Diego Martin West, and see Venezuelan boats parked up mere feet from the jetties of Powerboats, National Fisheries and Crews Inn; 18 to 20.

I went down there myself and saw it with my own eyes. These Venezuelans boats are sailing past Teteron, coming into the National Fisheries. They are docking at our jetties, walking onto our land, jumping into taxis and going off to supermarkets and pharmacies. When they arrive, no customs, no immigration. Immigration is not too far, just right there in Crews Inn. No COVID testing, no quarantine, and not abiding by the health ordinance because they are not wearing their masks.

I have no problem with Venezuelans, but there are Venezuelans walking on our land, some not going back on their boats. What is going on in the Prime Minister’s constituency is a clear and present danger to our national security, [*Desk thumping*] as well as potentially a major health and safety issue for the society and

every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

We are fully aware of the out of control situation with the COVID pandemic in Venezuela with almost 90,000 positive cases, and it is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands, because we also know that there is a collapse in their social and medical situation in Venezuela. So we wonder where the COVID came from, and how this Government lost control over the COVID pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, all of this whilst our nationals are stranded and languishing in foreign lands, some of them broke and penniless, “broken to tief”, whilst they are away from their homes, their families, their jobs and there businesses, being deprived of their constitutional rights to return to their native land.

Mr. Vice-President, the Government continues to leave our borders open to Venezuelan nationals, yet they have closed it to our own citizens. Imagine for a moment you are a citizen of this country, you belong to nowhere else, you lived your life in sweet T&T, you contributed to the development of this country, you paid your taxes, but you have found yourself outside of T&T when the borders were closed and your country tells you cannot come back.

Your country has a national airline that they would not send for you, but they will send to other countries. Where are you supposed to go? You have no rights in whichever foreign land that you have found yourself in. You cannot work. You have no food, accommodation. What are you supposed to do? Look for a next country? Mr. Vice-President, the Government has left these citizens stateless, poor and penniless. [*Desk thumping*]

Imagine you had to hear it from a Member of Parliament of the United Kingdom about the plight of our nationals languishing in his constituency in

England, and the Prime Minister has the audacity to attack the UK MP and accuse him of conspiring as a mouthpiece for the UNC? The PM's hysterical outburst and abnormal conduct towards a sitting MP in the UK Parliament, who was simply demonstrating his compassion and his love for our stranded citizens in the UK and more specifically in his constituency, now demands an unconditional apology from the Prime Minister of this country. [*Desk thumping*] Maybe the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Caricom can add a call to this MP as one of his list of "alsos".

How do you think the many families of those who have died and fallen sick trying to return, how do you think they feel right now? How much anxiety, sleepless nights, many are going through knowing they are trapped in a foreign land whilst their businesses are falling apart? My heart breaks when I hear the story of Sabriya Ali who was trapped in Jamaica, having to live in a shack with two babies, no food, no money, depending on charity, because it is alleged our own foreign missions abandoned her. We hear similar stories about many T&T foreign missions in other countries, where citizens complained about feeling abandoned. And imagine, it took this Government six months after lockdown to distribute any financial aid in September.

Mr. Vice-President, this is the mess that the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs has the challenge of cleaning up, after his predecessor.

**1.45 p.m.**

So they cannot blame Kamla here on this one, you know. This is a shameless travesty. Nationals are abandoned and stranded abroad. This is an insult to every single citizen in this country. [*Desk thumping*] And I call on the Minister of National Security, should he have a few moments rebooting, to go down to Chaguaramas and to see the breach of our borders. I call on the Minister of Health to see that there is no COVID testing on the entry, no quarantine, no compliance to

the health ordinance. I call on the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, my colleague, my friend, to do what is required for the fisherfolk in this nation and stop paying lip service. And I call on the Prime Minister of this country, when he visits the golf course in Chaguaramas, maybe he can look into the border breach as well. And I call on this PNM Government to stop denying their citizens their constitutional right, and return citizens to this country, not on November the 2<sup>nd</sup>, return them now. [*Desk thumping*] They do not have the luxury of time. Your time is up PNM.

Mr. Vice-President, as I tame myself I move towards the Minister of Trade and Industry. The Minister of Trade and Industry came to this Parliament to say one of the PNM strategies was to support manufacturers and businesses during the COVID crisis by giving them their VAT refunds or giving them back in a substantial way. Mr. Vice-President, this is not the Government's money to form any strategy with. This money belongs to the manufacturers, they must give it back to the manufacturers.

Mr. Vice-President, on the food import bill the Minister of Trade and Industry has spelt out the failures of her colleague in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I want to commend here today the Minister of Trade and Industry for her honesty in exposing her colleague in his failings in agriculture. The Minister of Trade and Industry spoke to a high food import bill in excess of \$5.6 billion, and would you believe over \$1 billion in fruits and vegetables imported?

We heard the TTMA, Ernst & Young and the various Chambers of Commerce commenting positively and lauding this Government. They commented that the Government is finally speaking the right language and making promises. But promises are a comfort to fool, Mr. Vice-President, and behind closed doors

these same agencies huddle in their circles with doubt on the Government's capability to deliver on these grandiose promises.

We even saw in a particular WhatsApp conversation that was leaked by a particular person in a Chamber who was critically giving constructive criticism about the Government, and the Prime Minister gets on his high horse on Facebook, and of all places Facebook, to rebuke and scold this man. We have freedom of speech in this place. Mr. Vice-President, the number one flag in listening to the TTMA, red flag in listening to the TTMA, Chambers of Commerce and the general business community including that well-reputed panel that spoke last month in the *Spotlight on the Economy* on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September, is the situation of the ease of doing business. This is the fundamental issue facing the private sector, causing the economy to decline by 16 per cent between 2015 and 2020.

Minister Imbert said all Ministries have to get involved to solve this problem. The question is: Why have you failed as a Government over the past five years, moving us from 63 in the world to 105 in the world. This Government has to stop paying lip service to this process and start putting their shoulders to the wheel. This is the position of the Minister of Finance, you know, Minister Colm Imbert. Every single Minister has to get involved. We now understand, Mr. Vice-President, why the Minister of Trade and Industry's hands are tied, they are slipshod because it does not depend on her. She is a lovely lady, she is; always willing to take calls but the Minister of Finance by his own admission in the *Spotlight on the Economy* declared that the work of the ease of doing business is the fault of a long list of Ministries. In essence, the Minister of Finance has said that the entire Cabinet has failed at this. There has to be a difference between the previous administration and this one because we were ranked at 63 under the UNC-led administration. We were receiving accolades from the European Union. There must have been something

horrible that happened to decline us to 105 since the People's Partnership Government. Mr. Vice-President, what happened was the PNM.

The World Bank does not take into account the level of corruption, inadequate access to foreign exchange and labour productivity when they are doing the ease of doing business measure. If they covered access to foreign exchange alone, we may have been worse off because local businesses now, Mr. Vice-President, are struggling to get foreign exchange. I know. Remember, they killed the cash cow, eh, they closed a fridge and killed the cash cow.

Mr. Vice-President, foreigners are bypassing us as an investment destination. Foreign direct investment has been in the negative zone since 2016. Our last data shows that in 2018, foreign direct investment was a negative US \$701.9 million, showing that the foreigners have literally deserted us. Yet you have a Minister of Trade and Industry in this budget debate and in other place, consoling herself with a mere \$300 million in local investment when in excess of 4 billion Trinidad dollars has left in net foreign direct investment outflows. Incompetence to the highest level I say, Mr. Vice-President.

When we refer to the Central Bank data on loans to the manufacturing sector, the Central Bank is showing that loans to this sector have declined. This is a clear indication that local investment has declined in general. Meanwhile, Mr. Vice-President, Jamaica increased their foreign direct investment by US \$744 million. To compound these problems, the Minister of Trade and Industry reverted to speaking about the same e Teck parks she has been recycling in the last four budgets. "Remember ah tell yuh about de groundhog?" The parks in Moruga and Phoenix Park after five years employ not a single employee. Well, let me tell you what is not pie in the sky: the reality of doing ease of doing business in this country.

If you want to improve, if you want to do construction, a decrease from 77 to 125. So if you want to improve your manufacturing plant as a manufacturer, you now have double the challenge in construction permits. Just getting electricity alone went from 10 to 41, four times harder in the last four budgets. Getting credit in this country went from 20 to 60. So even if you want to manufacture, you cannot get the liquidity for it. After—you cannot get the liquidity and then they do not want to give you your VAT back.

But, Mr. Vice-President, this one is interesting, eh; resolving insolvency. We went from 114 to 77. We improved there because so many people, Mr. Vice-President, they are going out of business today, so they had to fix that one. The banks did what they had to do to get their money back from the people who have gone out of business, we are seeing it now. One only has to walk in Trincity Mall to see how many stores are closed, businesses shut, unemployment on display, it is everywhere.

But I will go on to the port and the port privatization. Now, Mr. Vice-President, I am all for efficiencies in a port but we have to be aware that the Government failed to run what would normally have been a profitable entity in any other country, hence being forced now to privatize. But what we really want to know from the Minister of Finance himself, is if he is going to take the personal responsibility towards ensuring that Customs and Excise becomes efficient through his so-called digitization and training, because an efficient port, Mr. Vice-President, is nothing if there is a backlog at Customs and Excise which will now cause a bottleneck, increased fees to the manufacturer in demurrage and rental. So we want to know if he is going to take personal responsibility.

We can speak about forex shortage; that has been spoken at length. We could speak about taxes. Mr. Vice-President, in a time where we look at United



States of America lowering their taxes to encourage investors to come into this country and bring their manufacturers back home, we are raising taxes; nothing to incentivize the manufacturer.

And then there is that big issue that I started off with, the non-payment of VAT. The TTMA has a target of doubling manufacturing exports in the next five years however, they lament that under this Government, VAT refunds continue to be the bane of manufacturers. The manufacturers have a request which I am compelled—

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President—which I am compelled to reply simply because I wish to give them a voice. The domestic manufacturers, after suffering for the past five years with no respite on VAT refunds, have asked that the Government remove the VAT from the Consolidated Fund to separate entity so as not to muddle it up with other items, such as their notorious Toco port where there is no expected value for money. Some manufacturers are not trusting the VAT bond. The problem is not the VAT bond but it is in correcting the system. The taxpayers are therefore paying for the mismanagement of this Government regarding VAT because they had to dip into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to pay VAT returns in this country, Mr. Vice-President.

So, Mr. Vice-President, as I am winding down on my time and conclude, I would like to state again for the record, this economy crashed before COVID. The Prime Minister laments that everyone on this side is singing from the same hymn sheet when we remind the nation that the economy crashed before COVID but no doubt, over 300,000 persons who voted for the UNC are saying the same today, and I am certain that if we ran a current poll on those that voted for the PNM, they would be feeling and sharing the same sentiments. It was Dr. Roger Hosein in a

newspaper article last week that even said that, the economy crashed before COVID. And if the PM wants us to suggest ideas to fix the economy, well, I invite him to review the UNC manifesto, I invite him to do that. Bottom line, this economy crashed before COVID.

If I had more time to tell you some of the issues, I would have told you about the many industrial parks that are falling into disrepair under this Government; lights, power, drainage, security falling apart. The TTMA made recommendations, I hope the Government listens. But I think the biggest thing here is the ease of doing business. If you are to take manufacturing seriously, if you want to diversify this economy, if you are to put the right measures in place to support the manufacturing sector, to support the agricultural sector, to limit imports of food, to increase our exports of manufacturing products, the Government must fix the ease of doing business in this country.

We heard the Minister of Finance respond to a reporter regarding the ease of doing business in the Spotlight. This is the same Minister of Finance that sat there and told you, do not blame the Ministry of Finance, you know, for failing in the ease of doing business. He sat there and said, there are other Ministries that are not doing their part. He said the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of National Security, he spoke about a plethora of Ministries that needed to work together. The Minister of Finance in his own words echoed this in the Spotlight on the Economy, and in his own words he said that every Ministry has to put their shoulder to the wheel and stop paying lip service.

Mr. Vice-President, you have to give the hon. Minister of Finance some credit because after five long years of blaming Kamla Persad-Bissessar while we went from 63<sup>rd</sup> to 105 in the ease of doing business in the world, he has finally blamed the last Rowley administration for their failure. [*Desk thumping*] He

inherited it from the last Rowley administration and now he has to fix it. And I ask the People's National Movement to take the advice from the Minister of Finance, stop paying lip service to the ease of doing business, and every Minister must sign a pact and put their shoulder to the wheel, as he so said, and should they need my assistance, Mr. Vice-President, in signing that pact, I have here in my hand a golden pen, not a gold-painted fake PNM pen but a gold-plated Cross pen which I can lend them to sign that pact. And with those few words, Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Works and Transport. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan):** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, after listening to the hon. Senator in his contribution, I am a bit baffled because what I heard from him basically was what I heard on the run-up to the 2020 general election. This is a budget debate, and as the Minister of Works and Transport I would like to report on the performance of the Ministry of Works and Transport. I have seen in this debate, a debate on the Government's performance from the other side. What I want to remind the other side is that the debate on the Government was held on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020, [*Desk thumping*] and in that debate the People's National Movement did not only win the majority of seats in the national Parliament, they also won the popular vote in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

So everything that I just heard there was said before the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020, and the population had a choice to make: listen to the UNC propaganda or trust the performance of the People's National Movement. [*Desk thumping*] And we all know the results of the 2020 general election. This population, the UNC had a track record between 2010 and 2015, the PNM had a track record between 2015 and 2020, and here we are in the Parliament with Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley as

the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] For that I compliment the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who would listen to a contribution like what we just heard and understand fully well that it is all politics.

Mr. Vice-President, having said that, I thank you for the opportunity today to present in this honourable House the road map for sustainable growth and development for the Ministry of Works and Transport. Over the past five years the Ministry has delivered an ambitious slate of national projects that are aligned with the Government's development agenda. These efforts have ultimately been aimed to improve the quality of life for all citizens in this evolving world that demands an expanded network of resilience infrastructure, efficient transportation and service that harness the information-communication technology platform that has [*Inaudible*] a common place for us all.

Mr. Vice-President, while Trinidad and Tobago, like the rest of the world, is grappling with the global pandemic, at the Ministry of Works and Transport we see this as an opportunity to merge innovation and traditional practice. This paradigm shift allows us to develop more efficient digital service that provides 24/7 access to our customers. As well, it teaches us that we can more innovatively and find new ways to cope, remain connected and devise a new way ahead for the future. Our very astute Minister of Finance laid before us on October 5<sup>th</sup>: 2021 Budget Statement, Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. And I truly believe that with this Government at the helm of leadership we can continue to develop, innovate and even thrive.

The Ministry of Works and Transport with responsibility for the national transportation infrastructure and related service will continue to implement the Government's *2030 National Development Strategy* to attain the desired growth for Trinidad and Tobago once again. I see this time as the Government's

opportunity to close the infrastructure and transportation service gap in order to build a more equitable and prosperous Trinidad and Tobago for all.

In working to fulfil this promise we intend to continue to achieve more progressive firsts for Trinidad and Tobago and successfully lead the charge in implementing several major transportation infrastructures and service projects to benefit the nation at large.

Mr. Vice-President, as I started I indicated that the population had a choice to make on August 10. That choice was a promise we made way back in 2015, and the test was then, if the PNM kept their promise that they made to the population. In terms of our infrastructure projects in our 2015 manifesto that we promised this population, we said that we will complete the San Fernando to Point Fortin Highway in a manner that best serves the national interest and the interest of all affected parties and stakeholders; that was one.

Two: construction of the San Fernando to Mayaro freeway; construction of the Wallerfield to Manzanilla Highway and ring road around Sangre Grande; construction of a ring road around Chaguanas; construction of the Port of Spain/Chaguaramas crossway and highway; removal of all traffic lights and the construction of an overpass and interchange from Port of Spain to Sangre Grande; implementation of a comprehensive programme for the construction and maintenance of all roads and bridges throughout Trinidad and Tobago; implementation of a comprehensive national drainage plan; establish a transit authority to regulate all forms of public transportation; develop once and for all a national transportation plan; improve the efficiency of the air and sea transport to Tobago with particular attention to the sea bridge, and the acquisition of new fast ferries; construction of a new first-class road to Toco and a fast ferry port in Toco thus providing faster alternative sea routes to and from Tobago; construction of a

new first-class road to Moruga, and a fishing port in Moruga; construction of a world-class container port in Port of Spain; and construction of a new world-class international airport in Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, I speak about these projects because this is about reporting, this is not just about coming and making allegations and not being able to report on the achievements or the non-achievements of any government. I look at this process as a very serious process in reporting to the population. At the end of the day, the population voted us into office based on the promises from our manifesto and the belief that they had in us as a Government.

Mr. Vice-President, for the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago there are several ongoing highway projects in every quadrant of the country. The completion of these projects will rest in economic growth and innovation, as well as reshape and rejuvenate the economies of smaller communities across Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, these projects are not merely about constructing roads but instead creating opportunities for all, thereby ensuring that no one is left behind. Mr. Vice-President, I speak of projects like the Solomon Hochoy Highway extension to Point Fortin. This project will advance the entire southern peninsular. Two, the Churchill Roosevelt highway extension to Sangre Grande. This will offer new and improved access to communities between Cumana and Sangre Grande which are now unserved by a highway. The Valencia to Toco highway, this will deliver faster and safer travel and create economic activities that will invigorate smaller communities along the path like Salybia, Cumana and Grande Riviere. The Churchill Roosevelt Highway extension to Sangre Grande will eventually link seamlessly to the Valencia to Toco Road. The Diego Martin Highway/Western Main Road improvement project, this project will address the problems of the

traffic congestion in the western peninsular. Port of Spain East-West Corridor expansion and improvement work programme, this will remove all traffic lights along the Churchill Roosevelt Highway. This project will not only reduce traffic congestion but will also decrease travel time for commuters thereby improving levels of productivity. The Moruga road rehabilitation project will rehabilitate the road from Petit Cafe in the north to Marac Village, Moruga in the south. This project will improve access to the Gran Chemin port that is currently under construction.

The programme of upgrade road efficiencies. Mr. Vice-President, under the PURE unit over 150 projects are scheduled for completion including the San Fernando waterfront project. And I did hear one of the Senators indicate that the only thing happening in San Fernando is some signs up. That is the furthest from the truth. The PURE unit in fiscal 2019/2020, created over 2,331 jobs across eight counties in Trinidad. In 2021, it is envisaged that the expertise of hundreds of construction workers including skilled and unskilled labourers, technical and administrative construction professionals will be utilized. The San Fernando waterfront development project, this year the Ministry commenced work on key elements of this project which includes the widening of the Lady Hailes Avenue to a dual carriageway by the PURE unit. Repairs to the sea wall along King's Wharf central, the establishment of a boardwalk along King's Wharf central and the south road. These are projects that are ongoing, it is not just about a sign up. These projects have been started and there are two major contractors on the ground employing people and rejuvenating San Fernando.

Mr. Vice-President, the PURE unit will focus on preventative maintenance which includes spot-paving and minor rehabilitation work on sections of the roadway that are in a critical condition. The Highways Division will utilize the

Agua Santa plant to facilitate extensive patching work throughout the country.

The Highways Division will place more focus on vegetation and management and cleaning of drains and culverts and the repair of damaged manholes in fiscal 2021. The Ministry will continue to collaborate with the Water and Sewerage Authority to improve road maintenance and repairs.

Mr. Vice-President, under our bridges programme, we have identified 62 structures in need of repairs. So far between 2015 and 2020, we have reconstructed 25 of those bridges. This year we intend to complete about 18 and we intend to start an additional 12. We also intend to start to focus on 259 landslips throughout the country.

Mr. Vice-President, flooding is a major challenge for us at the Ministry. Most of the problems with the flooding are problems that would have occurred over the last—I would—couple decades which are not readily—they are not problems that we can easily solve, they are problems that will take time. But at the Ministry of Works and Transport the Drainage Division in 2015 to 2020, completed over 1,500 desilting projects at various locations throughout Trinidad. The projects include the desilting of major watercourses to mitigate flooding, the rebuilding of the embankment and the construction of projects to afford protection to properties which are close to watercourses along with the following: Upgrade of the existing pumps and gate inventory, flood mitigation and erosion control programme, major river cleaning programme and the infrastructure mitigation and rehabilitation programme.

As we move forward, the Ministry of Works and Transport remains committed to building capacity, building upon our capital projects and increasing maintenance work through the National Desilting Programme.



**2.15 p.m.**

Mr. Vice-President, in fiscal 2021, the Ministry will continue work in the following areas:

1. The national drainage plan for Trinidad and Tobago. The Development Bank of Latin America will work with the Ministry to develop a strategic drainage plan to diverse solutions to mitigate flooding across Trinidad.
2. A programme of upgrade to existing drainage pumps and out-gate inventory. Under this programme, 13 projects are being identified and involve the upgrade and modernization of various pumps and gates in flood-prone areas, including: Sea Lots, Debe, El Socorro, Bamboo 1, Bamboo 2 and Bamboo No. 3, Aranguez and Penal. The Caroni irrigation area, Kelly Village, St. Augustine and the El Socorro Bamboo No. 1 and Penal will also see replacement and upgrade of gates along with the desilting of sumps and associated works.

Mr. Vice-President, the Drainage Division continues to execute on its mandate. However, the Ministry is forced to now deal with selfish acts of sabotage which have been deliberately done on the wider society. As you are aware, on October the 11<sup>th</sup>, the Bamboo No. 1 pump site was subjected to an arson attack which resulted in damage estimated between 3 and 500,000. This grossly irresponsible and unpatriotic act has left a large percentage of our Bamboo No. 1 community exposed to the possibility of flooding. While the Drainage Division was able to successfully mobilize two mobile pumps to serve in the interim, the facts remain that these pump sites will now operate at a diminished capacity taking into consideration that we are in the peak of the rainy season. Over the last two years, the Ministry has invested a considerable amount of money to upgrade these particular pump sites. Regretfully, the money now allocated for repair work could

have been invested in other areas for development as opposed to remedying unlawful actions.

Mr. Vice-President, while the Ministry has its role to play, I urge all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to be more responsible in their action as each one of us has a role to play in sustaining national development. Furthermore, as we continue to treat with the critical issue of drainage to mitigate flooding inland, the Ministry is also focused on finding the best and most practical solution to treat with coastal erosion and coastal flooding. Mr. Vice-President, the Ministry of Works and Transport has developed a programme of work to treat with the effects of coastal erosion and coastal flooding in Trinidad and Tobago. Through the Comprehensive National Coastal Monitoring Programme, the Ministry will bridge the gap between science and decision making as it pertains to management of our shorelines and how we treat with coastal erosions in a strategic manner.

Projects for fiscal 2021 include the Mayaro/Guayaguayare coastal management programme; the Otaheite shoreline stabilization works; Salybia shoreline management programme; Cap-de-Ville Shoreline Stabilization Works, Phase 2; Matelot Shoreline Stabilization Work, Phase 3; Paria Main Road coastline protection work; Macqueripe Bay seawall restoration projection; our Comprehensive National Coastal Monitoring Programme; and the Granville shoreline stabilization work, also the La Brea shoreline stabilization work.

Mr. Vice-President, the Port of Port of Spain, and I have heard several commentators today here, and in the other place, comment on the Government's decision to look at the opportunities to have the Port of Port of Spain brought to a standard that can compete with all the international ports around us and in different parts of the world. Mr. Vice-President, please allow me the opportunity to address this issue. My colleagues on the other side, as usual, have chosen to dwell on what

they see as negativity regarding this project. This project purely seeks to improve efficiency and productivity at the Port of Port of Spain. The introduction of a public/private partnership will improve the competitiveness of the port. It is also envisaged that this new model will allow for private financing of public infrastructure and development needs, improve competitiveness, improve foreign exchange, improve governance, improve operational efficiency, and reduce operational subsidies.

Mr. Vice-President, the hon. Sen. Jearlean John indicated, why are we touching the port at this time? There are some people who would like the port to remain exactly as it is, because there are people who benefit from the port exactly as it is. This Government has taken a difficult decision to deal with the port. This Government has had the track record of making some of the most difficult decisions for Trinidad and Tobago. This Government made that decision to deal with Petrotrin, a very difficult decision at the time. However, someone had to make that decision. The Port of Port of Spain at this point in time, it cannot be business as usual. The Port of Port of Spain at one point in time was the leading port in the Caribbean. That is no longer so. That is no longer so. We have been left behind by ports in Jamaica, Barbados and several other countries around us. The reason for that, we continue to have a port without the private sector playing a role in it, and this Government has taken that very difficult decision at this point in time to ensure that our Port at Port of Spain is brought up to an international standard, so we can continue to attract vessels, especially those vessels that will be built for the new Panama Canal. Unfortunately, our port cannot facilitate them. And what we have seen at the port is a continued reduction in the vessels that bring cargo to our port, and this Government intends to bring that port back up to the standard that we can continue to attract these vessels.

It is unfortunate that we only speak about loss of jobs. It is not about losing jobs, it is about improving the Port of Port of Spain, and that includes creating new jobs, but also being more efficient in the way the port operates. I have found myself as the Minister of Works and Transport having to go to the Cabinet for funding for the port, because there are some people who feel the port just needs to exist to pay salaries. Someone spoke about the port in Singapore. Singapore was built around a port. Unfortunately, our port, situated in one of the best locations, has to be subsidized by the Government. And I agree, there are some people who would want us to continue in that vein. This Government has taken that decision, enough is enough, and the Port of Port of Spain has to start to contribute to the Treasury and the development of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, in terms of our public transportation— But before I go to public transportation let me speak a little bit about the sea bridge. This Government has inherited a sea bridge that cost the citizens of Tobago and Trinidad a lot of heartaches. We promised the population that we will fix that, and when we fix that sea bridge we will fix it in a manner that it will be— Going forward we will have a sea bridge that all would be very proud of. I can tell you as the Minister of Works and Transport, we are here. We have, as we speak, 1,800 seats one way going to Tobago. Very soon that figure will go up to 3,100 seats. We are expecting two new vessels coming in, one by the end of this year and one at the end of the first quarter in next year. And I am very happy to say that that sea bridge that gave us so much of challenges early in our term, this Government took to the task and we have fixed that problem once and for all going forward.

Mr. Vice-President, our public transportation system, the PTSC service, we intend, later on this year, to have that PTSC move towards the introduction of an intelligent transportation solution to leverage the effects and innovation of

technology. Mr. Vice-President, what I mean by that, the Public Transport Service Corporation, the standard that they are moving to where the commuters no longer have to wait for a bus in the terminal building or at a bus stop, and you do not know what time it is coming. The technology that they are using now is where you can stay and look at the app, you can track the buses, you can see exactly where the buses are, what time it is coming. However, in order to reach to that stage we have to ensure that we have the amount of buses that is required. Over the last three years we introduced 75 new buses to the system. Going forward we intend to introduce 300 additional buses. What that will do, that will do for the first time, bring the fleet to close to 550 buses. That is the fleet that is required if we have to have an efficient bus service operating in Trinidad and Tobago. And this Government has given permission to the PTSC to have that tender completed for an additional 300 buses sometime in 2021. And we look forward to the day when the Public Transport Service Corporation can be the number one mode of public transportation.

Mr. Vice-President, while the Ministry has been undergoing transformation—the licensing office has been undergoing transformation, due to the COVID regulations we continue to have some challenges. However, to continue the service provided by the Licensing Division, the Ministry established an online appointment system offering particular service on specific days. This solution arose out of the effect to manage and adopt to the increased volume of customers in a situation of reduced capacity. To expand the service delivery touch point, the Ministry will officially launch its licensing mobile service units, which will carry out scheduled visits to rural communities and villages. This mobile licensing office will be fully equipped with all the necessary technology tools and consumables to allow for printing of certified copies, processing of learners'

permits, renewal of drivers' permits, regulation tests for all drivers, permit class, renewal of taxi badges, verification and update of drivers' permit records. In other words, Mr. Vice-President, the licensing office will be coming to rural areas. The Ministry also intends to expand debit card payment to service to all sites including the new mobile unit, making transaction easier for customers. Deploying an electronic vehicle inspection system directly linked to all approved testing stations, implementing an online vehicle registration system, introducing an online application for learners' permits, introducing an online certified copy request and delivery system, offering an online renewal for drivers' permits, reintroducing specialized numbers via a transparent online system.

Mr. Vice-President, I am pleased to report today on the successful implementation of the UTURN system, a technology platform that supports the operationalization of the demerit point system, and the reinforced traffic ticketing system. Since implementation of this initiative, the Ministry has recorded a 22 per cent decrease in fatal road traffic accidents and a 29 per cent decline in road traffic death compared to last year. Additionally, the number of suspensions and disqualifications as of September 20, 2020 still stands at 235. Mr. Vice-President, I want to also make mention of the Piarco airport, which was the first airport in this region to be certified by the CAI, which indicated that the Piarco airport and that ANR Robinson airport in Tobago have been certified as airports that have qualified under the COVID regulations for completing all the necessary requirements under the regulations that airports should be certified for. So I want to compliment the Piarco International—the Airports Authority for their work in ensuring that the COVID regulations are adhered to at both international airports. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, before I close I just want to—I did start by indicating the promise that we made in 2015 to the population, and what I would like to do

now is to go back and give an indication as to where we are.

- The San Fernando to Point Fortin highway, the entire project is under full construction. Promise one; kept.
- Promise two, the construction of the Wallerfield to Sangre Grande highway, project fully under construction.
- Ring Road around Chaguanas, Phase 1 complete, Phase 2 started.
- Removing all traffic lights from Port of Spain to Sangre Grande.
- Curepe Interchange completed, tenders out for three additional overpasses.
- Diego Martin interchange, started; promise kept.
- Implementation of a comprehensive programme for the construction and maintenance of all roads and bridges; promise kept; 62 bridges identified, 25 completed, 18 ongoing, 12 to start shortly, over 300 roads have been rehabilitated.
- Implementation of a comprehensive drainage plan; an award is imminent, we expect that by the end of November a contract will be issued to a foreign consultant—it was an international tender by the Andean Development Bank—for the implementation of a national drainage plan.
- Establishment of the transit authority and the development of a national transportation plan; that is before the Cabinet, Mr. Vice-President, and we await a decision from Cabinet so we can award the contract or the consultant; promise kept.
- Improvement of an efficient air and sea transport; Mr. Vice-President, I am very pleased that this Government was able to acquire two additional fast ferries to improve the sea bridge. Again, promise kept.

- Construction of a new first class road to Toco and a port in Toco; Mr. Vice-President, construction on the Valencia to Toco highway is fully underway, work on the port is at the design stage and we expect to have the construction of the port started in the shortest possible time; promise kept.
- Construction of a new first class road to Moruga; that project is 80 per cent completed.
- Construction of new world-class container Port in Port of Spain; this Government took that decision to have the Port of Port of Spain be at a standard that we can be proud about, that we will have one of the most modern ports in the Caribbean.
- The construction of an international airport in Tobago; that contract has already been awarded and work has started on the Tobago international airport.

Mr. Vice-President, this is the reason why on August 10, 2020, the population voted back into government the People's National Movement led by the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Mr. Vice-President—sorry, Madam President, the Ministry of Works and Transport has stuck to this mandate in ensuring that government vision and government policy is achieved. We have done so with much fewer resources than our predecessors had. We have done a lot more with a lot less, and I am happy to say that at the Ministry of Works and Transport, finally, we are at a point where every contract that is awarded would have gone through proper procurement exercises. We were one of the first Ministries to ensure in early 2017, that we had



our procurement department operating at full strength, utilizing all the guidelines that are set forth by the procurement department. So we can stand scrutiny going forward that all projects handled by the Ministry of Works and Transport earn this country value for money, and that is why at the Ministry of Works and Transport we continue to boast of doing more with less.

Madam President, I can go on with several other projects, however, I would want to conclude at the time, and to say to this population that we are going through trying times. However, now is the time for us all not to give up hope, we have a government that is leading us, we have a Prime Minister who understands the situation and is willing to take the harsh decisions to ensure that this country continues to survive. Madam President, with those few words I say may God bless our nation. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal):** Madam President, as I stand in this most august Chamber for the first time, it is with a great sense of pride and humility I stand before you and the people of Trinidad and Tobago to make my contribution, not only towards the Appropriation Bill, 2020, but towards the development of our great nation, where no doubt, Madam President, every creed and race find an equal place and there is boundless faith in our destiny. Let me firstly congratulate you, Madam President, on your appointment as the President of the Senate, and sincerely thank you for the opportunity to contribute towards this Bill.

Madam President, Hinduism echoes, [*Hindi spoken*] which is, I bow to the feet of my parents and my elders. The blessings of this world lie at their feet.

Therefore, as I begin I must put on the record and sincerely thank my political leader, our political father and our Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley for the confidence he has in me by allowing me the blessings to serve our country in the capacity of Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. I must also thank my line Minister, the hon. Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Faris Al-Rawi, for his mentorship and guidance thus far as, as we are both charged with the mammoth responsibility of leading the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. Madam President, I want to recognize and thank my father and mother. I must thank them both for leading our home by example. My father especially, whose dedication to service, and the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and his integrity has no doubt motivated me to aspire to enter public office and be a good human being, a good citizen to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, I felt somewhat compelled, somewhat required to aggressively respond to some of the accusations made by Sen. Wade Mark on the first day of this discussion. Accusations against my Government, accusations against my hon. Prime Minister, “An oppressive government, an inequitable government, an uncaring government, and a brutal assassination on the working class” were some of the choice adjectives used by the Senator to describe the PNM administration. But, Madam President, I shall restrain myself. I shall restrain myself because my country is looking on. Madam President, when I stand here I recognize my responsibility to do my part to bring our nation together. I have a 13-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son whom I want to live in a unified, united Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, I was also brought up by my parents to focus on positivity rather than negativity, to try to build a nation rather than destroy it, and as an advocate for positivity, I am aware that in the days and years to come I

will have ample opportunities to unleash the fire inside me.

Today as I begin my maiden contribution in this most honourable Chamber, I will start from a place of positivity as I report on what my Ministry—as set out in Head No. 23 of the Schedule of the Bill before us here today—has done, and intends to do in the years to come. And then and only then, Madam President, when I have done my Government and my Prime Minister justice by representing to Trinidad and Tobago all that the Government has done and intends to do, notwithstanding a pandemic, notwithstanding the fall in energy prices, then and only then will I set the record straight on some of the untruths mouthed by my colleagues on the Opposition Bench.

Madam President, I thank God I have a political leader who has urged the new ones to be measured, to be calculated. For example, if this was a game of cricket, it is necessary to understand the field, it is necessary to understand the game before I try to hit them for six, and definitely before I could become a star batsman or woman. But unfortunately in this Chamber, some of the young ones in the Opposition Bench in an attempt to hastily and aggressively hit for six, “they vooping, vooping, vooping” right through this debate. Madam President, I will not be a victim of that. I will not embarrass myself and my Government like that. The PNM are not “voopers”.

Madam President, I want to address something that Sen. Wade Mark and Sen. Lutchmedial, and perhaps most of the Opposition in another place continue to perpetuate in the public domain. There seems to be a constant narrative amongst the Opposition Bench which suggests that PNM policies are designed to benefit people only from a particular geographical place or a particular status in society. Not true, Madam President. There seems to be a narrative conveyed by the Opposition that central to south constituencies and people are neglected by the

PNM administration. More untruths, Madam President. Madam President, I humbly submit to our population, the election is over, but the PNM—at the PNM we are an empathetic party. To the supporters of the UNC and other political groups in our great democratic nation, we acknowledge your pain and disappointment in the election results. We understand that your pain and discomfort are real to you. For like our supporters, you would have wanted the success of your party. We acknowledge this, and we do not intend to rub salt in your wounds. That is not the *modus operandi* at the PNM. Madam President, however, what I do submit to Trinidad and Tobago is that we are an intelligent people, and let us not allow the negative noise that continually seeks to divide us to continue. Let us drown that noise.

Throughout the length and breadth of this budget debate, too many times I have heard suggestions being made that PNM policies are inequitable. Madam President, this document I have in my hand [*Holds up document*] is *The Constitution* of the PNM. At page 3 of *The Constitution* we find aims and objectives of a political organization. There are 13 of them. My dear Trinidad and Tobago, at No. 9 reads:

“Equality...for all, and a career open to talent;”

It did not say, equality of opportunities for those who support the PNM. It did not say equality of opportunity for those of a particular race. It did not say equality of opportunities for those who look in a certain way. It did not say equality of opportunities for those who live in a particular place. It says, as long as you are a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago you are guaranteed equality, notwithstanding creed, notwithstanding race, notwithstanding any other social construct. Once there is equality of opportunity, Madam President, then every one of us starts with an even foot. Therefore, we have to go no further than this document to conclude that no

part of PNM policy speaks to discrimination. Any policy that the PNM has put into place, if it has to stay true and keep faith with the founding fathers who created our great party, no aspect of PNM policy could ever suggest or encourage discrimination or disharmony in our great nation.

The 2020 budget, like every other policy created by the PNM, was predicated on our fundamental belief as a party, which is for all the people, with a key focus on youth, the most vulnerable in our society, and even agriculture. So, Madam President, I must begin by saying and respectfully submitting to my country, my dear country, that the PNM cares for all. And while we did not have a magic wand, as the Opposition seems to believe, to miraculously create money from out of the sky, what we have done is use what we did have to make life better for every single citizen, irrespective of social class, creed or race.

So, as I begin my contribution towards the Appropriation Bill, I must put on the record my unequivocal support for the national budget, and congratulate the Minister of Finance, and congratulate him for continuing to do more with less, as he continues to steer the economic trajectory of our nation. I must also put on the record my recognition and support for the Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis, and her team of technocrats for the contribution to the Bill before us.

**2.45 p.m.**

Madam President, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, as this honourable Chamber may be aware, is an amalgamation of the Ministry of the Attorney General, Legal Affairs and the Ministry of Justice which now stands today as the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. This amalgamation brought together almost 21 departments, 13 statutory boards, 1,840 employees and an indirect coordination between the Police

Complaints Authority and the Judiciary. The Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs has a multitude of functions ranging from the litigation of Trinidad and Tobago, commercial transactions, registration of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, statistical information, records from births to deaths, and thereafter.

At our Ministry, I wish to note, our expenditure set out for this year is significantly reduced. If we look at the past, for example, under the UNC administration, for example, and their financial history of running combined Ministries, one would see the significant disparity between their figures and our Government's figures; 314-odd million is our budgeted sum. This is near to 200 million less than what the UNC government managed the same combined Ministry with. Then, they did so with approximately \$515-odd million during their tenure, Madam President.

Madam President, with all these figures jumping up here, the question is: What can the people of Trinidad and Tobago say has been purchased or has been done to benefit them with the spent money? Approximately 144 million of this budgeted sum pays salaries alone. That is why at the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs we can boast, to date, not one public servant was sent home, notwithstanding a pandemic. Further, notwithstanding operating with less money, we have managed to grow the Ministry in several areas. When we assess the work at AGLA I will jump into areas of improvement, those items next on deck and those matters affecting the lives of our people.

In 2015, Madam President, the hon. Attorney General was first charged with pulling the reigns of these three entities together. To bring these moving parts together, it was imperative to develop a strategy to effectively manage the marriage of these moving parts. The strategy the hon. Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi

adopted was taking control of his Ministry from the perspective of plant and machinery, people, processes and the law.

Madam President, over the last five years, the Office of Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs has no doubt had many, many, many wins as our Attorney General's mantra is now operationalized in every nook and cranny of our Ministry. Congratulations, again, to my line Minister, you have my support and together, we will make our Ministry even greater than it presently is. I will now continue to report on what has happened and will continue to happen in our Ministry. I will begin with legal affairs.

The Ministry of Legal Affairs deals with primarily all the transactional business and statistical information of our citizenry. In 2015, we inherited inconvenient facilities, outdated processes and even the prevalence of criminal activity and fraud in the department. How did we improve it? Firstly, our Attorney General and Government moved from a dingy South Quay office to Government Campus. We also, Madam President, increased the capacity and human resource at our Ministry. In January 2020, we had an increase in human resource from permanent contract and temporary contract by 75 per cent. New positions were created, legal officers, paralegals, administrative staff, information technology staff, all moved from temporary and short-term employment to even full-time contract.

Madam President, now, the Registrar General's Department is one of the divisions within our Ministry comprising of three registries, namely the Companies, Civil and Land Registry. This department, Madam President, has been seeking ways to improve its service delivery and is cognizant that customer service, staff expertise, technological advancement is paramount. To this end, a number of online services have been launched by the Registrar General's

Department. I will closely examine some of these departments. For example, in the Land Registry, there has been significant positive changes in the Land Registry. In the last fiscal year, the Registrar General's Department registered 126,208 documents in the Land Registry. We have had a number of online services, for example, a Land Document E-Filing Application. This application, Madam President, is a web interface which facilitates the electronic summation of data relative to land records prior to filing at the RG's Department.

Madam President, what does this do? This gives attorneys the convenience of preliminary submission of data allowing them for a faster processing time by the time they entered the Registrar General's Department. Madam President, we also continue to take steps towards the improvement of our service delivery. The Land Registry has also launched an e-certify copies application. This new application allows practitioners, lawyers to apply and pay for their certified copies online and even specify which one of our four offices they would want to receive the certified copies or even indicate an address that they would want these copies to be delivered to.

Greater news, Madam President, greater news, Trinidad and Tobago, is that this month the Land Registry has launched a new information technology solution known as the Property Business Registration Solution. When launched, and it has been launched, this new application will replace the current application currently being used known as the Property Information Management System and the Real Property Act Online Service. This is yet another initiative geared towards improving our service delivery through the expansion of our e-services which is in keeping with our overall objectives highlighted earlier.

Madam President, I wish to report sensitization and training for our stakeholders in the use of the PBRS has begun. And I wish to report that the



training has begun only about two days ago and already, the numbers of attorneys-at-law who have reached out to us is phenomenal. For example, Madam President, on the first day of our training, which was October 22, 2020, 163 attorneys-at-law were trained; 53 clerks and abstractors; 15 law clerks, carded for today as we speak; 249 attorney-at-law are being trained in that system; 79 clerks and abstractors; 13 law clerks.

So, when Sen. Lutchmedial in her contribution spoke about the inadequacy at the Registrar General's Department and spoke on behalf of lawyers who were complaining that this system, they were not being trained, it begs the question, who are the attorneys-at-law that Sen. Lutchmedial spoke about? Because the statistics indicate—in Tunapuna, we have had five attorneys-at-law; San Fernando, eight; Port of Spain, 39; Chaguanas, 17 lawyers; Marabella, we have had lawyers being trained; Manzanilla, La Brea, Tobago, Princes Town, La Romain, and the list goes on of the number of attorneys-at-law who are accessing this online system. So again, again, when an attempt is made to mislead this nation that attorneys-at-law are complaining, it begs the question, who are the attorneys-at-law? Because clearly the attorney-at-law are coming online, coming on board and utilizing this training system.

Title clerks and government agencies, Madam President, will continue to receive training because over—as I said, over 500 additional persons had indicated their interest in utilizing this system. In the Civil Registry Department, for example, in the last fiscal year, the Registrar General's Department processed 337,507 applications for vital records. Quite notably, 40,156 of these online applications were from citizens residing outside of Trinidad and Tobago. So, when the Opposition Bench knocks the ease of doing business, this statistic is an indicator that we are also improving the ease of doing business for citizens outside

of Trinidad and Tobago. Because as I said, out of this 40,156, this 10 per cent of the entire sum are from citizens outside of Trinidad and Tobago using our registry online application to make their applications for their vital records.

Madam President, at the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, we have also introduced the electronic payment platform and the online registration of births. In the last fiscal year, the Registrar General's Department registered 8,470 businesses and incorporated 4,276 companies; 57,261 post-incorporation documents were filed and 2,684 additional business registration documents were filed. So again, when I hear the complaint that the Ministry of Legal Affairs is not operating, when I hear the complaint that we are not improving the ease of doing business for the citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, again, it begs the question, who are the people that are complaining?

Now, Madam President, to this end, in defence of our Registrar General—I must stand in the defence of the department and the Registrar General and the staff at AGLA, those especially who show social responsibility, and while working remotely, they continued to work. From our cashiers who are our frontline workers, to our security guards who, through this pandemic, have had to interface with the public, to our cleaners who have constantly kept the place sanitized and clean, on behalf of my Attorney General and myself, I say thank you, thank you, thank you. To all our professional administrative staff, thank you.

I want to, however, Madam President, assure our stakeholders that your Attorney General and your Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General is working assiduously to improve some of the areas you have complained to us about. To all our stakeholders, we thank you for your patience with us thus far and rest assured that we are doing everything humanly possible to bring resolve to your concerns and areas of improvement you want to see at the Ministry of Legal

Affairs. At the same time though, again I repeat, I must stand in the defence of my Registrar General and her staff who are not sitting by idly, but every single day since I have assumed office, I have personally witnessed the department brainstorming and attempting to rectify and find resolve for all of your concerns.

Madam President, I wish to report on the Office of the Attorney General. In 2015, we were plagued with some of the following problems: delayed justice system, insufficient courts, no division of courts, insufficient judicial officers, insufficient prosecutions, insufficient defence attorneys, and the list goes on. As a result again, the hon. Attorney General strategically addressed these problems using his mantra, plant and machinery, people, processes and the law. So, in an effort to rectify some of these issues, as I mentioned above, we did or the Attorney General and his then Minister did the following: there was significant improvement in the criminal justice system, contrary to what the Opposition tries to say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We have brought notable improvements to the Judiciary, for example.

There were increased courts. Madam President, we dedicated resources towards the creation of over 100 new court rooms throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. This meant greater access of justice to the population. Since access to justice necessitates access to physical location, that is why we moved on a drive to create courtrooms. In addition, Madam President, as I said, we increased courtrooms for magisterial High Court matters. There was a dedicated Family Court and Children Court, and even virtual court. At the prisons, the Government has approved additional accommodation to be outfitted specifically for the conduct of jury trials. The introduction of the virtual courts at the prisons, while enabling the conduct of matters during COVID-19, it also bypasses the expenses of physical attendance. What this does, Madam President, is

it saves taxpayers thousands—hundreds of thousands of dollars by not having to bring prisoners to court.

Madam President, at the Office of the Attorney General, we strengthened the Judiciary by passing a spate of legislation which allowed us to increase the Judiciary's capacity. Legislation was passed to increase the number of High Court judges, for example, from 36 to 64, and the number Court of Appeal judges from 12 to 15. Legislation was passed to provide for full judicial immunity for magistrates as well, akin to High Court judges, which essentially prevents a flood of litigation that would impede the judicial system and promotes greater efficiency as magistrates would not have to be over cautious or timid in making decisions that could impair their independent and impartial adjudication.

Madam President, as it relates to judicial support staff, the Government approved the creation of over a thousand new job positions in the criminal family and children divisions of court which will directly impact on the speed and the productivity at which our courts are able and our courts' output. Long before COVID-19, our forward-thinking Attorney General saw the need to bring massive improvement to the courts' technology. The digitization of the Judiciary allowed for the migration from a document to a content management and initiated customer relations management to improve the quality of justice, access to justice, and public trust and confidence in our institution. The Electronic Court Management saw the creation of such various platforms to improve the efficiency and document processing as well.

Madam President, I wish to report to our country, we introduced the court order payment system. It is an online system for making and receiving court order payments in and out of court. I recall in a previous incarnation, I would have had clients complaining, for example, when they had to make their maintenance

payment and line up in long lines. And when these systems were introduced, as practitioners of the law, one would appreciate how this would have benefited our client significantly from not having to face lines to make maintenance payments and so on.

Madam President, legislatively, we saw the electronic payment, as I said before, in and out of courts through the Act, the Electronic Payments into and out of Court Act, 2018. We had court mail which was introduced. It is a secure medium for the electronic creation and certification, signing and transmission of court orders, judgments and notices between the courts and the attorneys, prisons— police and prisons. As a practitioner, in a previous incarnation, that was something that I welcomed and I know my colleagues at the bar welcomed, because it meant that from the comfort of your office, orders of the courts were sent to you. You did not have to wait for an order to be posted to you. And these are digital benefits, these are modernization attempts taken by the Attorney General during his tenure to improve systems, and again, I will beat it, the ease of doing business at our Ministry.

We also had the audio digital voice transcription software for making recordings of the court proceedings more efficient. Again, in a previous incarnation I can say as a practitioner of the law, at the end of a trial, most attorneys-at-law, you await the transcription evidence to assist you in being able to document your closing submissions. Practitioners of the law will tell you that and sometimes the line and the queue you have to wait in, in order to receive these transcriptions, sometimes you are unable to meet with the court's deadline to submit to a closing submissions. Worst yet, "wus yet" if your clients want to appeal a matter. But since we have had this software introduced, attorneys-at-law, especially practitioners who run trials and understand the adversity sometimes in doing a trial, would

indicate to you that this software has incredibly facilitated us in allowing us to have access to these transcription evidence almost at the snap of our fingers. So, again, I must commend the Attorney General and the then Ministers for the work they have done in introducing this software and certainly assisting practitioners of law and citizens of this country.

Madam President, we created divisions of court: Civil, Criminal and Family and Children Court, supplemented by specialized rules of court. Through legislative mechanisms, specialized court structures we created with accompanying rules aimed at improving efficiency, specialized procedures, staff and judges reducing exorbitant amount of backlog within the court. Madam President, anchoring exclusive jurisdiction for the areas of law to enhance uniformity of decisions in those areas thereby contributing to greater predictability and confidence in the court and possibly reducing even appeal rates.

So, Madam President, certainly at the Office of the Attorney General a lot has been done. Madam President, Sen. Lutchmedial knocked, again, the Government for the DPP being understaff and having a lack of resources. Well, I will say to Trinidad and Tobago, since I have assumed office as the Minister in the Office of the Attorney General, I have hit the ground running like all of our Government Ministers. I have already, to date, reached out to the DPP and other heads within our Ministry and indicated to his respectful office my intent on visiting every single department that falls under the Office of the DPP. The DPP has indicated his availability and it is my intention, with the blessings of my Attorney General, to visit these offices so that we can see as a Government what other areas of support— what further areas of support we can lend to his office. But I will say this Trinidad and Tobago, respectfully, before my assuming office in the Office of the Attorney General, my predecessors had already blaze a trail for

me to follow through. So, for example, again, the Attorney General, he worked with the DPP to improve their plant and machinery, people, processes and the law.

The Office of the DPP received substantial resources in order to increase their capacity, their plant and machinery. The Gulf City Lowlands office opened in July 2018. The north office, Park Street in Port of Spain, UDeCOTT handed that building over in August 2020. The south office, Gulf City at Gulf View, is being built out and the lease is finalized and ready to do a handover by 2020. We increased the staff at the DPP's Office, State Counsels I and II were hired, 27 to a 40 per cent increase, more positions to be occupied after the delivery of the building of course, and that, of course, will be a Cabinet's decision.

Madam President, at the Office of the DPP, we also improved IT solutions, the introduction of a case management system. The harmonization between the DPP, the TTPS, public defenders' office and the Judiciary was also something this PNM administration was able to achieved. And do not talk about the spate of legislation empowering police prosecutors to do pretrial hearings, prosecutors including police prosecutors. What this did was put less strain on DPP prosecutors. So therefore, again, it amazes me when Sen. Lutchmedial spoke about this Government's neglect of the DPP Department. This evidence is a clear indication to Trinidad and Tobago that this is the furthest from the truth. For those who were denied justice because they could not afford a defence counsel, we sought to improve that. We saw the creation of the Public Defender's Office and "yay", that for me, that is a significant win, especially in a previous incarnation being a defence counsel. What this mean is that the establishment of the public defenders' department, it provides a pool of state-paid defence attorneys readily available to represent accused persons. Where counsel of choice is not available, counsel will be provided to the accused to ensure that the matter proceeds. This is indeed a

benefit to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

At the public defenders' office, we have had the Stanmore Avenue, NEDCO building also delivered. With respect to our capacity, Cabinet approved 51 employment positions, comprising of 30 legal officers ranging from a head to a junior, and 24 legal positions filled to date. What I understand at the public defenders' office there is also ongoing training schedule to commence from the Judicial Education Institute and the Atlanta Public Defender's Department, and I wish to report to Trinidad and Tobago that is to no cost to us as a nation. I also understand, as I indicated earlier, it is my intention as the line Minister to visit all of the departments that fall under us. I believe that we cannot—and like all of my Government colleagues, Minister colleagues, we do not believe in running a Government just from our offices. We believe that we have to get down on the ground and understand what the people and our charges are enduring. So, again, I have also reached out to the public defenders' office, that it is my intention, it is our intention to go to this public defenders' office and visit them and see what other areas of support we can lend. I wish to report to Trinidad and Tobago, every Thursday, I understand, there is mock session which is prepared by the public defenders' office and this is to keep our public defence counsels sharp. It is my hope to probably join one of these mock trials soon and see if I still have what it takes to be a defence counsel. I do not know, I guess time will tell.

Madam President, we have secured \$100 million—with respect to the area of evidence, there has also been significant improvement. We have empowered the police with the capacity to improve forensic investigations, we secured \$100 million contract from the Chinese Government for UDeCOTT to construct a new lab. This would certainly benefit the TTPS to conduct forensic analysis on firearms which obviously reduces the work load on the forensic department. Madam



President, we have also hired DNA custodians—that is how we are improving the people, machinery—the DNA database ready and procurement of 15,000 DNA kits to initiate sampling for the DNA database. And, of course, every—the law, as I said, plant and machinery—

**Madam President:** Minister, you have five more minutes.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:** Thank you, thank you, Madam President. In the area of family law as well, Madam President, the family, we understand, is the single most important influence in a child's life. From their first moments of life, it is very crucial. So, what our Government would have done, we created the child protection unit of Trinidad and Tobago. This is the CPU unit—sorry, this arm of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service was established to investigate matters of sexual offence and different types of abuse that our children may face. We created dedicated courts throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad—that is the dedicated Children Court to assist our young ones using, of course, a rehabilitative and less punitive approach when it came to our children. Madam President, what we also have, the Family Court deals with specific family matters at a High and Magistrates' Court level and it is less adversarial and therefore, again, we advocated for the continuation of the family court. Family and Children Division Act of 2016 also makes jurisdiction for all family matters and children matters, exercisable in the division, to be heard. So, that was yet another improvement for us.

Madam President, in the area of domestic violence—on September 30<sup>th</sup>, I will repeat what my Prime Minister posted. Our Prime Minister stated on a Facebook post:

“As...I am calling on all men of our republic to treat women like their sisters, daughters and mothers who are deserving of our love and respect.”

In recognition of the role of women in society, what our Government would have also done is bring significant improvement to our domestic violence legislation. And, Madam President, this is just to name a few of the things that we have done in our Ministry.

In some of the earlier contributions, to Sen. Jearlean John, Sen. Lyder, in their ranting about the Government's poor decisions relative to Petrotrin, relative to the port, all I can say in this PNM Government, "what pass yuh in de day, yuh musn't take flambeau tuh look for in de night. What yuh cyah see in de day, why take flambeau tuh look for it in de night?" So, this PNM Government, when we see something is wrong, we would do what is necessary even if it is making unpopular decisions because we are not going to take flambeau to look for it in the night.

So, Madam President, I believe that as we move into another fiscal and with digitization, youth and agriculture being some of the focus of this Government, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, we will continue to digitize, we will continue with our legislative agenda to facilitate the key areas and continue to innovate in an effort to improve the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago, and certainly, to improve the lives of all of our people in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, permit me to congratulate the Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs on her maiden contribution. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye:** Thank you, Madam President, for this opportunity. Madam President, soon after the Senate moved into this Red House, I was walking into this hallowed Chamber when I was greeted by the Member of the House of Representatives who engineered the budget we are debating here today. He did not

say to me, “Good afternoon, Senator” or “How are you today, Senator?” No! He asked me with his characteristic broad and mischievous smile, “Who you going to harass today?”

Madam President, if I were minded to harass anybody in this august Chamber, it would not be the Minister of Finance. I come here not to harass but to praise him for bringing to the Parliament a budget that has received more favourable responses than negative reactions. [*Desk thumping*] But beware a sting in the tail—let me begin with good news. It is evident that the Minister listened and took advice and this budget was a result of extensive consultation, but to a point. There are some good sound bites but some fury was aroused among importers of secondhand vehicles who feared they would have close shop with new restrictions placed on them regarding the age of the vehicles they could import coupled with their perennial struggle to get foreign exchange.

### **3.15 p.m.**

The Minister will do well to understand that for many foreign used is the only route to acquiring a vehicle. Government must not be viewed as favouring big business to the detriment of small business. Preparing a budget is a challenge. How to raise revenue and satisfy competing interests in the face of scarce resources? We are not short on ideas, but long on execution. We suffer not only from the consequences of COVID, but from an implementation deficit, save for spectacular edifices, health institutions, flyovers, and walkovers that people walk under. We have little information about some good work taking place in some Ministries. Had I not been invited to present a paper virtually at the COMSATS, that is the Commission on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in the South seminar in Pakistan, and had the Ministry not briefed me, I would not have known the extent of export expansion engaged in by our Ministry of Trade and Industry.

I would have been unaware of the large number of trade agreements and bilateral treaties signed by Government, resulting in positive trade balances amounting to millions of dollars with countries like Chile, Colombia, Panama, Cuba, Dominican Republic and others. The hon. Madam Minister should let her light shine before men. This should be widely publicized for manufacturers to access the new markets. I was disappointed though that the Foreign and Caricom Affairs Minister did not join me at the seminar especially as another regional foreign Minister was there, but having heard his budget contribution I understand. He was busy meeting and greeting the marish and the parish.

Madam President, workers have welcomed the additional tax exemption of \$84,000. We trust property tax will be reasonable. Most people are willing to pay this tax, you know, which we have been paying religiously since 2009. We trust though that it will be fairly administered. Years ago I was at a dinner party at Hilton. Present was a former Government Minister, the conversation turned to land and building taxes. I discovered to my horror that he, who was living in an upscale Port of Spain suburb in a property valued over five times my humble home, was paying less tax than I was. I thought it was very unfair and I told him so. He said, "The Mayor dare not change that". I trust that this inequity will be rectified. I must warn though that when we are paying tax we expect improvements in utilities especially the reliable water supply and roads without potholes resembling moon craters.

Madam President, we see opportunities for entrepreneurship in the divesting of gas stations. I hope credit unions and other smaller business, little peoples' organizations, will be able to invest in this venture. There are possibilities for consumer savings in this potentially competitive environment. Whenever I visit my daughter in Florida and she said, "Mom I have to put gas in the car," and I point

out a gas station, she says, “Not that one, there is a cheaper one down the road”. When I protest it is only a few cents difference she will counter, “Every cent counts mom”. In the present state of the economy I have to adopt her words, “Every cent counts.” I trust we will not later be bawling because gas station owners gang up and act against us. We depend on Government now to safeguard our interest. Ignore us at your peril.

Madam President, I applaud Government’s plan to establish Internet cafes all over the country. I am equally pleased with his plan to provide good quality of low cost housing. Waiver of stamp duty on residential properties for first time owners will surely benefit young people trying to establish their homes. It is sensible to increase praedial larceny fines and custodial sentencing to protect the agriculture produce of our farmers. Too many farmers have the fruits of their hard labour stolen, but without an effective, well-resourced praedial larceny squad, backed up by the police to investigate and arrest these criminals, amending the legislation will be wasting parliamentary time.

One morning I opened my window and saw a young man perched on my fence, a crocus bag in one hand and a rod in the other picking our Julie mangoes. That is how bold face they are. Since we were put under house arrest by Mr. COVID we started a kitchen garden. We living the slogan, “Eat what you grow and grow what you eat”. It is rewarding. I have new respect for farmers. I would hate though to return home one evening or awake one morning to find someone has reaped what he has not sown. The financial boost for the agricultural sector is most welcome. Achieving food security is one of the sustainable development goals, but farmers must have guaranteed markets and policies that boost their industry. In tandem with production, must come the manufacture of food products. Government should review its decision to dismantle Caroni Green Limited. The

rapidly growing international market for hot peppers can result in the company becoming a valuable medium to earn much needed foreign exchange. So, I ask you to consider privatization or enter into a joint venture.

The theme of the budget speech, “Putting People First: Nurturing our Greatest Asset” is praiseworthy. It promised social services delivery will be improved to better serve the needs of vulnerable groups. And among the vulnerable groups I want to focus on the children, the elderly and domestic violence victims. The children: Kevin Baldeosingh in his book *Child Proof 0-3: A Guide to Modern Caribbean Parenting*, which as a new grandmother I have been digesting, makes a seemingly startling comment to which I agree, “Most Trinidadians doh like children”.

Years ago I was pained to read some inhumane public comments when a six-year-old boy who was pictured wearing a heavy gold chain was shot dead. Over the last few years thousands of children have been brought to the Children Court in need of care and protection, or deemed beyond control and placed in institutions. International Child Rights Law decrees that institutionalization must be a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. Instead of building probation services and increasing parental training programmes, Government has cut subvention to Servol resulting in programmes being curtailed.

Madam President, the increase in penalties for selling alcohol to minors, while welcome, fails to address another serious problem, parental complicity in the crime of giving alcohol to minors. Some years ago a father complained to me that his son’s mother was planning a birthday party and asked him to bring a case of beer. He had refused saying it was not appropriate to serve beer at a party for a 12-year-old child. The mother’s response was, “What child? He is a big man now.” This is not an isolated case but no laws specifically address this issue. Do we love

children? We have the lowest number of foster care providers in the Caribbean. This month is adoption and foster care month. The Children's Authority every year embarks on a programme to increase awareness of the need for us to adopt older children and for foster carers to assist children especially those with special needs. These campaigns have not borne fruit.

Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, hereafter the CRC, enjoins Government to provide alternative care for children. With proper care children become successful adults. Article 18 of the CRC makes it clear the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of children lies with both parents of the child. However, when parents cannot fulfil that responsibility, Government must step into the role of parent. Many private community residents fulfil Government's responsibility in that regard. Somehow when Government makes subvention to children's home they believe they are helping the homes. Let me disabuse Government's collective mind of that erroneous notion. The homes are helping you. What you give is never enough, and many homes must engage in fundraising activities to keep their heads above water. Most of the children in institutions are special needs children. Our child psychiatrist informed that a high portion of them have mental health problems, exhibit signs of aggression, suicidal ideation and highly sexualized behaviour and require counselling and other services which come with a huge cost.

Unlike other homes that have suffered the consequences of COVID, St. Dominic's Home has quarantine facilities. They have moved away from the dormitory style setting to small homes with close supervision. They provide exceptional service. I am at a loss, therefore, to rationalize Government slashing the sum of \$4 million from their annual subvention. The Children's Authority has not escaped the knife as well. They too have had budget cuts for years. Concerns

have been expressed about the large portion of the CA's budget being spent annually on rent; millions of dollars that could have been used to buy or even build more than one building. There is not enough political will to stop benefiting landlords. The Office of the PM having vacated the Waterfront Towers instead of giving that space to the Children's Authority, the Attorney General proposes to house numerous civil courts there.

The 2002 International Legal Practitioner, a publication of the International Bar Association contains, several articles on cyber courts, electronic filing, judicial system and the Internet. Eighteen years later we now getting there. Virtual courts will remain with us when we return to normal, and many of us are enjoying the virtual courts, stay in your office and attend to the matter. So a number of courts should be revisited and the space given to the Authority. The rent saved can be used for the many unmet needs of the children. We are failing children in many ways.

I will not speak today about our disgracefully low age of criminal responsibility. Is it because of our many breaches of child rights in our report to the UN Child Rights Committee is 11 year overdue? Government has finally seen the economic and employment creating potential of creative and cultural industries. I have weighed specifics we should be arrived at after consultation with stakeholders across all sectors. As a start, I suggest that we employ in every school teachers to train children in the performing and visual arts. Teachers have over the years for love of the arts, but without financial compensation, trained children for competitions in drama and dance after school, on weekends and during school vacation. I was envious when our former honorary consul in Bern, Switzerland took me to his daughter's school and I saw shinny chrome steel pans such as I have never seen in any school here.



Under Article 29 of the CRC, Government agreed that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. God gave different talents to his people. Too often we emphasize the academic and discount the creative. I have seen children who are ridiculed by their peers for having lesser academic ability come alive and perform brilliantly on stage and finally earn the respect of their classmates. We do those students a disservice ignoring the development of their talents which will help to build their self-esteem. Many a child bullied at school from being a weak student turns out bad. Their thinking is, if I am not loved and admired, I will be hateful and feared. Welcome to gang. I trust that the increase in taxes allowance for corporate sponsorship of creative activities will stimulate that economy and need to increase opportunities for artistes, young and old.

The Minister of Education has been given the largest slice of the budget and deservedly so. Having worked with her in a Joint Select Committee on Human Rights in the last Parliament, and observed her management of Carifesta, I was impressed and I am not easily impressed. Her task is monumental. There is much that needs fixing. I consider her equal to the task. Should I lose faith I will surely state. The SEA exam, got to go. We cannot keep traumatizing our young children with that stressful exam. That is wrong on so many levels. We cannot sing every creed and race finds an equal place when schools are not equal. When there is a difference in success and failure depends on the primary school you attended, and your future depends on the school you passed for and which you were placed, that should not be dictated solely by any of the grounds of discrimination set out in Article 2 of the CRC. Be it race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status, all schools must be equally resourced so no child will be disadvantaged by choice

of school. An alternative to the Concordat which is fair to all must be found. Nigel Henry's investigation and analysis shows abuse of the Concordat is no longer a sacred cow.

Just as parents should care for their children so too the state under the doctrine of *parens patriae* is the guardian of all children and must look after all. Just as the shepherd leaves his flock to go and look for the one in trouble, the State has the responsibility to rescue children who are in need, not only when it involves abuse, neglect or conflict with the law, but also failure in the education system. The Academic Performance Index Report 2016 identifies schools along a range from those that were failing to schools that were excelling. Most of the schools deemed under academic watch were in urban areas populated by children of African descent. In Singapore when analysis of school performance in a particular ethnic group was failing the Government moved to address the issue with good results. If we subscribe to the principle that no child must be left behind, we will follow suit and institute measures to remedy the situation. Absent from school must be investigated. It is a major ingredient in failure.

There are children who are fearful of attending school because they must cross turf lines. You are in Nelson Street, you cannot go to Beetham. My heart goes out to secondary school students who have been traumatized by startling results. Many years ago when my younger daughter was given her results in another jurisdiction she said, "Mummy, they make a mistake with my grades." When I accompanied to the school to clarify the matter her class teacher, the vice principal, the principal, all maintained the grade she had been given was correct. In all the years they said their computer has never made an error. My daughter distressed said, "Mom, I checked it over and over. Queen's College wrong". The school found out more than a week later the origin of their error and apologized to her. That

error had it not been corrected had implications for the amount of university fees we would have had to pay. When facts suggest a systemic error, an organization must take responsibility and fix it. Institutional reputation must not take pride of place.

Madam President, our literacy level is an all-time low. We are in a crisis. When you listen to the radio, read newspaper, or hear people speak you realize we have a problem. I have taught students from all over the Caribbean. At two regional law schools, students from Barbados and the eastern Caribbean, Guyana, British Virgin Islands generally write better than students from Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas. Why? What went wrong? I have been viewing from time to time the online classes and at times I see errors of grammar and spelling. Public speakers no longer seem to understand the difference in usage between “each” and “every one”, “other” and “each other”, “between” and “among”, “less” and “fewer”. In the old days, I taught common entrance students that prepositions govern the objective case, the verb “to be” takes the same case after it or before it. Do they not teach those rules anymore? Madam Minister of Education, you have it to do.

As for the “would have man” that everyone has joined, Lord put a hand. I was pleased to see the Chief Parliament Counsel Office has advertised for proof readers. Newspaper editors should follow suit. Critical thinking is non-existent in the thought processes of many Government employees. The private sector—and as I found out recently—employees of commercial banks. I often wish to ask people to whom I interact, does that make sense? Do we love children? When we came to Parliament to debate the amendment to the Public Health Act I enquired about the implication for children. I did not get a response, but when the regulations were published what was highlighted was the fact that children eight years old could be

issued a fixed penalty notice. If we love children why would we want to traumatize them in that way? Fortunately, police have been sensible.

We were supposedly following the UK, but the regulations in England provide that no one under age 18 shall be given a fixed penalty notice. In Scotland is 16, Ireland 13. Ah Trinidad. Our lack of caring for children is the reason there is no political will to abolish corporal punishment of children despite the compelling evidence from psychologists regarding its harmful effect. Our lack of love for children is what prompts us to adopt zero tolerance for school misbehaviour especially disrespect for teachers and favours suspension and expulsion instead of using restorative practices to build community within the schools.

Madam President, I welcome plans for reopening of the youth camps. When I sat on the child protection task force we went on a tour of the youth camps. While there we engaged with the youths sitting around ideal on bleachers. The instructors told us of successive stories of graduates whom they have trained and who now earn good living as plumbers and other trades. Recently I needed a plumber. None of the regulars was available, the hardware recommended one. She did an excellent job and owns her own business. Both boys and girls need skills training. Our youths, particularly our young men, are in need of direction. They need men whom they can emulate, men worthy of being their mentors. In our society there is a dearth of men or a lack of identification of upstanding men who youths can admire and who can inspire them to become good men in whose hands we can safely place the reins of leadership. Men who can steer boys on the right road to continue to build the great society that Trinidad and Tobago can be.

We recently lost such a man, former Government Minister, La Brea MP, Fitzgerald Jeffrey. Hon. Sen. Browne, thank you for your kindness. Sometimes all one needs in one's last days is a kind word. Our young boys and youths are crying

out, longing for heroes. There is an ache in their hearts that must be filled. At present gang leaders are fulfilling that need to detriment to our society. One afternoon years ago in the mid-1990s I was taking my housekeeper home. She lives in a heavily populated housing settlement along the East-West Corridor, suddenly I saw a throng of children and youths coming from all directions. There was an air of excitement and urgency as they recklessly rushed along the pavement and the streets ignoring the risk to them posed by oncoming cars. I was totally confused at this mass movement of children. I turned to my housekeeper, “What is happening?” She responded simply, “Ms. Ahye, that is what happen when they hear Mr. Bakr visiting someone who live on my block.”

I realized I had witnessed a Trini version of the Pied Piper. I often wondered why we had never engaged the youths to find out what constituted the allure of Mr. Bakr that brought youths from Mucurapo Road. Instead of an expensive commission of enquiry, it would have been more beneficial to have used restorative practices such as a truth and reconciliation commission held in South Africa after the dismantling of apartheid, or in Rwanda following the ethnic war. We should have engaged the major players in discussing the 1990 attempted coup to learn what caused this affection in our youths to propel them in that direction. There are lessons yet to be learned.

A few months ago on my way to the Senate I saw hundreds of youths, male and female, walking into the city. They were being beaten and chased by the police. That mass movement was reminiscent of that surging tide of youths I had witnessed in the housing development so many areas ago. I wonder if they are sitting on a powder keg, and all that is needed is leader to harness the restless energy of youths and ignite that fire in their belly. The vision and capability of that leader can spell disaster or hope for our country. Which will Mr. Hinds be? I hope

to God the latter. His is a challenge in deed. Will he be that hero for whom the youths yearn? Minister Hinds, there are people who are anxious to help you because they are already working with those youths. Young men need men to talk to and interact with.

Much as I love to talk to men, I have spoken to men's groups in the Anglican and Presbyterian Church in Tunapuna and elsewhere, as a woman I cannot really fulfil that need. I recall feeling quite inadequate when during the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of the probation service, I addressed a group of secondary school students at City Hall on sexual offences. A teenage boy came to me privately afterwards, looking not at all tranquil as the school shirt he wore. He asked me a question involving sexual intimacy, to this day I am not all satisfied with my response. I wish I could have referred him to a man who could better understand his problem. Today, he is probably a father and I hope he can answer his son's questions.

Parents are resisting sex education of children in school. It is time they get real and Government lead on this issue. Children are getting sex education from their peers and the Internet. Their use of the Internet is not being properly monitored. They are increasingly falling prey to predators whom they meet online, and then in person and are being sexually assaulted. The Child Protection Unit and the Children's Authority are kept busy with such crimes. I was happy to hear about plans for day-care centres using the community centres. For years, the UWI women and development studies group, we have lobbied the administration. Ministries and private companies should follow suit.

The elderly. I read with great interest Government's lofty goals for the elderly. In 2011, I wrote a paper entitled "Generational Solidarity and the Aged in Trinidad and Tobago: A Crisis of Conscience" for a family law world conference

in France. I spoke of physical and sexual abuse, accidental death especially in fires, financial abuse and fraud perpetrated against the elderly. I visited homes for the aged along the East-West Corridor. In one home elderly men were packed in like sardines in a tin. It was heart breaking. I could not walk between the beds. I also observed where homes were unisexed, women enjoyed better facilities than men.

The Home for Older Persons Act, 2007, provides for the licensing regulation and control of homes for older persons. It remains a legislative limbo. COVID-19 has curtailed visits to home. Family members cannot oversee what is happening with their love ones. When will this Act be proclaimed? Coincidentally, I saw in the newspaper today that the Minister of Social Development and Family Services is also calling for this Act to be proclaimed.

Domestic violence victims. Madam President, one issue on which we all agree is that domestic violence especially intimate femicide is a problem which the demands our collective and urgent attention. It requires a multifaceted approach. We all have a role to play, the family, neighbours, employers, medical staff, education officials, social workers, psychologists, religious leaders and the police. Oh, the police. The Commissioner should be told that because there is no record of a domestic violence complaint in a station, is not conclusive of the fact such that he can assume no report was made. I say without fear of contradiction, police sometimes do not write down reports; they do not give receipts; and in an effort to protect the perpetrator or for other reasons best known to themselves may writing incomplete receipts. I have a receipt given to a victim it bears the complainant's name, but nowhere on the receipt is the name of the perpetrator. Why? He was one of their own.

The domestic violence unit is a great initiative, but unless all members of the unit are trained in the law, policies, principles, practices and dynamics of domestic

violence and follow them, until there is a domestic violence unit in every district and the regular of police who at times interact with victims do not place smart with foolishness, we will continue to mourn for the victims. The police must understand domestic violence is a crime before it becomes a fatality and must process domestic violence incidents as a crime scene. They must gather evidence, preserve medical reports, take photographs, record statements carefully and investigate the crime as though it were a robbery. They must record each report.

Unlike Barbados laws, ours does not provide for a copy of the police report to be given to the person making the complaint. If that was done it will prevent what too often happens, the victim or her family are certain that reports had been made and the police denying that that is so. Perhaps the time has come to instigate a no drop case policy, relieving the victim of decision making so investigation and prosecution can proceed against the wishes of the victim. I know the pros and cons of this policy, but surely the police are aware of financial constraints, fear of further harm, family pressure, learnt helplessness and bad advice from pastors at times which may deter a victim from continuing with a case.

A few domestic violence activists is giving advice to victims have in their tool kit only their personal experiences of violence. They need training. One popular advice is run at the first lash, but there are men who have hit once and never again. I can think of a couple more than 40 years after that one incident he is still living happily. It was so uncharacteristic of that man everyone was shocked. He was full of remorse and shame at the loss of his good standing in the community and in the courts where he worked, and he never made that mistake again. A woman now 80 years old related to me that once when she was a young girl she saw her stepfather hit her mother. She jumped up on the dining table and scream repeatedly "Doh hit meh mother." He never did it again. Assessment



should be done to determine the risk of further violence.

Police cannot make an assessment like that without the requisite training. Families must not get involved in domestic violence matters. In many countries in Europe, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand restorative practices such as family group conferences are held. Even children are involved in them. They speak of the effects of violence on them to hold the perpetrator accountable. Victim survivor panels are also used to combat domestic violence. During these panels, victim survivors, not victims of the men, attending the sessions share experiences of violence. Listening to these stories evoke feelings of empathy in some perpetrators, Madam President.

Sexual harassment is on the continuum of violence against women. A sexual harassment policy was laid in Parliament on the occasion of International Women's Day in March this year by the then Labour and Small Enterprise Development Minister. Where is the law? "Doh tell me it coming because Christmas coming too, is Carnival that gone through." There does not seem to be a zero tolerance policy for sexual harassment which affects women's performance on the job, and in many times lead them to leave the employment. Women in the workplace continue to suffer at the hands, the mouths, and other organs of men. This has occurred ironically even in the Office of the Prime Minister, Child and Gender Affairs, and recently even aboard a ferry.

So we had a COVID-19 budget. This virus has cost Government millions of dollars as they have sought to relieve the financial distress occasioned to a citizen. COVID-19 has been blamed from a multiplicity of ills, but it is an ill-will that does nobody any good. We have saved millions of dollars by not having to transport prisoners to court, provide for their meals when they are at court. We saved in having to pay mileage for travelling officers who are not travelling, to buy tickets

for people who gone overseas travelling frequently, Ministers and so on, and senior Government personnel. Electricity bills lower because employees are at work fewer hours, schools closed, cancellation of planned celebration of national holidays, Independence, Republic Day and Diwali have resulted in substantial saving for Government. Thank the Lord for small mercies.

There are area the budget has not touched. Banks are among the untouchables, free to roam the land seeking ruin of body and soul. Where is their conscience when a widow's mite is eroded month after month because a bank balance is too low? Who protects her from this injustice in the face of some indecent profit declared year after year? Whatever the name of the bank their game is the same. Low interest, high charges. Is the Government asleep or just in bed with banks? Strange bed fellows indeed, but when you come to the credit union the Government does not give them the respect.

I have pointed out all the provision in the Credit Union Act amended recently which fails to recognize the wishes of deceased members regarding nominated beneficiaries when shares exceed \$50,000. It is wrong and insulting to credit union members to be treated as children as they nomination is rendered ineffective, unlike persons with Unit Trust shares. Laws in Jamaica, Grenada, Bahamas, Guyana, Hong Kong and other jurisdictions provides for a deceased member shares to be transferred according to his wishes. In Trinidad, you must then incur the cost of applying for the estate if your shares exceed \$50,000.

COVID-19 has caused us to dig deep. Many acts of charity have been performed as we try to be our sister's keeper. I apologize to James Ingram, Madam President, and I say you did your best or so you think, but I guess your best was not good enough. Can we not find a way to finally make it right? We are no good without each other. Take the best and make it better. I know we could break

through it. If we could just get to it, just once.

Thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

**3.45 p.m.**

**Sen. Yokymma Bethelmy:** Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to rise and to deliver my maiden contribution to this august Chamber and for permitting me to speak in support of the Appropriation Bill for the Financial Year 2021. It is indeed an honour to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago as the youngest Member of the Senate on the Government side in the Twelfth Parliament of the Republic.

Madam President, I must first begin by congratulating you on your re-election to the Senate as the Senate President. It is indeed a pleasure to serve under your stewardship. I also wish to extend sincere congratulations to all other Senators on their appointment and look forward to fostering great working relationships in the interest of all citizens of our twin-island Republic. As a new Member of this Chamber, I am extremely grateful for the warm reception extended to me by the Parliament staff and I extend my sincere thanks for their support.

Thank you to our esteemed Prime Minister and my political leader, Hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley who has been a strong voice of reason, a proponent of discipline and an advocate of unity as he inspires hope and courage in these very challenging times we face. But foremost, I am thankful to God for the very special privilege of representing the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, it was just five years ago that the hon. Minister of Finance tabled a budget themed, Restoring Confidence and Re-building Trust. He did an exceptional job in navigating our country's economy during that period of change. Now, five years later, we are faced with yet another challenge that requires him to reset our economy. I have every confidence that he will once more channel us

towards economic sustainability.

Madam President, it would be remiss of me if I did not thank our honourable Minister of Health and his team of health care professionals for their hard work and sacrifice during this time. They have worked diligently to educate and protect citizens and to save lives of victims of this deadly virus. Through all of this, he and his staff have maintained an image of transparency and credibility.

I also wish to thank the hon. Minister of Planning and Development for her role in setting up vigorous and prudent development plans, such as our Public Sector and Social Sector Investment Programmes which are geared to navigating our country back to socio-economic prosperity. With our hon. Prime Minister leading this dynamic team, I am confident that we are in indeed on the road to recovery.

Madam President, my appointment to the Senate is an opportunity that I do not take lightly and I accept with this utmost humility. I believe that my conduct in this Chamber should demonstrate my respect for those who I aim to represent and I must strive to be an example of civil discourse in the manner in which I engage with those who share the grave responsibility of governance. It was on the eve of independence in 1962, that the founder of our party, Dr. Eric Eustace Williams gave us our national watchwords: Discipline, Tolerance and Production. The occasion was the independence youth rally at the Queen's Park Oval on August 30, 1962. His words then which are pointedly relevant now, were discipline is both individual and national. The individual cannot be allowed to seek his personal interest and gratify his personal ambitions at the expense of a nation. We must produce in order to enjoy; reduce production and in effect, you reduce the total amount available to be shared among the total number of people.

I believe that that call to youth is of particular importance today as we find

innovative ways to drive new revenue streams and create sustainability and create sustainable economic growth. The pandemic and sustained low oil prices have taken a toll on businesses and revenue earnings and young persons preparing to enter the job market now face a daunting prospect. The balance of health and well-being is both a delicate one and a difficult one.

Madam President, COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. At the beginning of the year, no one would have ever thought that this silent virus would have caused all this destruction that it has. The pandemic continues to spread at an alarming rate worldwide, wreaking havoc and pain in families all over the world. I would like to take this opportunity to extend condolences to the families who have lost their loved ones to this virus. This pandemic has brought economic activity to a near halt as countries impose tight restrictions on movement to stop the spread of the virus. Even though the restrictions may seem challenging to some citizens, I support the view that this is the only way we can survive this together. I particularly implore all young people to be more responsible and to be considerate of others who are making sacrifices at the front line and those who have borne momentary inconveniences to deter the spread of the virus.

Madam President, in the face of adversity, I have witnessed hope. I have seen our citizens flourish, finding opportunity within the crisis, finding themselves back on the job market. Many people are now venturing into the space of entrepreneurship, following their passion and experimenting with ideas that they probably would never have considered pursuing. I have met a former DJ who has ventured into artisan food and promotes COVID-19 protocols in his business. Innovative delivery services, food, grocery stops and even doctor's trips are emerging as part of our SME sector. There are community gardens that are feeding families in need and domestic gardeners trading organic vegetables.

Madam President, who would have thought that some of the companies that previously insisted on employees clocking are now comfortably accommodating work-from-home policies. The rate of transition to online interfaces and the ways of doing business are astounding. The move to e-business and digital communication presents great opportunity for young people as there is no re-learning curve.

Madam President, this leads me to declare that I believe that while it is my intention to ably contribute to all the areas of governance that come to this Chamber, I believe that I can add particular value to matters related to youth development, entrepreneurship, specifically in the sectors of agriculture, manufacturing and digital transformation. The opportunities for increased productivity and related revenue generation are tremendous and present opportunities for those among us whom we call millennials and Generation X.

Madam President, on October 5<sup>th</sup> this year, the hon. Minister of Finance presented Trinidad and Tobago with our financial Bill for the year 2021, titled Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. I submit that this is not just a budget, it is a way forward for our country. I see a government making the necessary financial adjustments to ensure the recovery and sustainability of our economy. I see the benefits for aspiring entrepreneurs and for young professionals who will become first-time home owners. I see a digital future that will eliminate long lines, save time and most importantly promote accountability. I see continued investment into the empowerment of young people in our society. I see innovation. I see sustainability. Madam President, I see that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has a robust plan to take us forward into 2030.

Madam President, the COVID-19 has placed an inconceivable strain on global economies. This pandemic has led to decline in economic activity with

global growth projected to contract 4.9 per cent in 2020. Madam President, upon analysing the socio-economic implications of this virus, our Minister of Finance with the approval from Cabinet implemented various programmes of financial and economic support to assist affected individuals and businesses in coping with the associated difficulties being experienced. In addition to these programmes, our government appointed a high level multi-sectoral committee called the Roadmap to Recovery Committee that developed and published the “Roadmap for Trinidad and Tobago Post COVID-19 Pandemic”, which will be used alongside our *Vision 2030* and our Public Sector and Social Sector Investment Programmes as a guide to socio-economic development. This committee consisted of industry experts—as the Government providing guidance as part of the road map, consultations were held by the Government in its commitment to encourage inclusive dialogue.

If we look closely at our plans from the PNM Manifesto to *Vision 2030* and our Public Sector and Social Sector Investment Programmes, we can see that youth development and empowerment is at the core of our government’s plan to take this country forward. Madam President, this newly elected Government created the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service with a mandate to develop our young people, foster youth engagement and promote national service. Under the astute leadership of the hon. Minister of Youth Development and National Service, this Ministry will be working closely with other Ministries that have a specific focus on the lives of youth, such as the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts.

Madam President, for every young citizen, financial independence is an important step into completing the transition to adulthood; a milestone towards independence and self-reliance. This Government will continue to promote self-

reliance and independence. Financially-independent adults are necessary for the healthy development of any society.

Madam President, if we look closely at our *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the Financial Year 2021*, under the Head 81, Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, Sub-Head 009, Item 01, we can see that the National Entrepreneurship Development Company Limited was transferred from the Ministry of Labour to the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. This adjustment clearly highlights our government's intention to promote entrepreneurship among the young citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. When a government creates entrepreneurial opportunities for young people, this increases the possibility of financial independence and can contribute to poverty alleviation which might I add is number one on the United Nations list of Sustainable Development Goals and has been identified as one of Trinidad and Tobago's long-term goals in our *Vision 2030*.

Madam President, youth empowerment significantly contributes to socio-economic development by facilitating the entry of young skilled entrepreneurs into different sectors of an economy, we can increase our productivity and competitiveness in the global marketplace. Madam President, as I would have mentioned previously, our aim is to develop our youth and promote youth engagement. Allow me to elaborate on some of the sectors which I believe we can do so: agriculture and agro-processing.

Madam President, COVID-19 has made food security a national priority. According to the World Food Programme, if trends continue, the number of hungry people worldwide will reach 840 million by 2030. Currently, Trinidad and Tobago has a food import Bill of over \$4 billion yearly. American author John C. Maxwell once said:



“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way and shows the way.”

Madam President, our hon. Prime Minister is a registered farmer and understands the positive impact and benefits the agricultural industry has on our economy and how it contributes to food security. Through his example, he has shown all of us that agriculture and more so investing in growing what you eat must become a household priority.

Madam President, the PNM Government believes that young people can drive the country's economy forward through immense potential of agriculture. We also believe that engaging youth more meaningfully in agriculture through farming, aquaponics and animal husbandry can provide young people, not only with income but with meaningful, respectable and attractive work. In conversing with many of my contemporaries, they have all agreed that agriculture presents the opportunity for them to feed their families, contribute to national development and create generational wealth.

Madam President, the pandemic has pointed many young people into the agriculture sector and into agropreneurship. In response to this new-found drive, the Ministry of Agriculture successfully implemented the Grow Trinbago Initiative which provided over 50,000 households with plant seeds to encourage home gardening. The Ministry of Sport and Community Development also facilitated the Grow It Yourself Challenge which was geared towards engaging youth and stimulating interest in home gardening. Madam President, I know some of my colleagues on the other side may ask the question as to how young people can invest in agriculture if they do not have land. Well, through the agriculture Homestead Programme, young persons would be given the opportunity to apply for a minimum parcel of land of one acre and our hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will elaborate more.

In addition to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal No. 2 of ending hunger, the Government is resolute in achieving food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture through youth engagement. This is highlighted as a pillar in our *Vision 2030*. In this vein, as we make well on our promise to the nation, the Minister of Finance and this Government via the 2021 fiscal package will remove all taxes on the entire agricultural sector and invest in a \$500 million agricultural stimulus package. The launch of this initiative as stated in the Roadmap to Recovery Report will encourage the expansion in the producing and marketing of selected high-demand agricultural commodities with short production cycles such as vegetables, roots, tubers, grains, fruits and small livestock.

Madam President, with these initiatives, our goal is to decrease our food import bill. We understand the role of technology in bringing the agricultural sector into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century if we are to sustain our domestic food supply. The PNM Government believes that identifying appropriate entry points for young citizens along the agriculture value chain such as packaging, transportation, storage, agro-processing and agro-tech is critical to strengthening the agricultural sector and increasing incomes. Our investment into this sector will have commensurate effects on reducing our country's heavy dependence of revenues from the energy industry. This thrust is equally supported by an investment in the manufacturing industry which drives productivity, growth and innovation.

As you know, our government does not operate in silos. Every state agency and Ministry at times depend on another for the successful implementations of some policies and to support the growth of other industries. The agriculture and manufacturing industries are an excellent example as we speak about agro-processing. As a graduate of the University of Trinidad and Tobago and a holder of

a Masters in Innovation, Manufacturing Management and Entrepreneurship, I appreciate the impact manufacturing has on a nation's economy. With that being said, there is a clear linkage between government investment in agriculture and manufacturing evident by the establishment of the new Moruga agro-processing plant, the catalyst for development in the Moruga community and for young people in agriculture.

Further to government investment in agriculture and its downstream industries, the Minister of Trade and Industry has elucidated her mandate to exponentially increase exports into new and existing markets. This drive is reflected in the budget's substantial investment into the manufacturing sector such as the establishment of the new national special economic zone regime. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago will continue to encourage an enabling environment for this sector to flourish, particularly with regard to increasing the ease of doing business in this competitive and significantly saturated industry.

Madam President, as the Government invests in manufacturing and other industries, we intend to support our efforts by significant investment into digital transformation and the development of interoperability of the Government. The digitalization will facilitate the ease of doing business, particularly for young entrepreneurs through initiatives like utilizing the electronic fund transfer window which will allow for electronic payments of the Government such as taxes and customs duties.

In this year alone, we are witnessing an unprecedented global thrust towards digital solutions. We have seen that development locally in education as schooling is catapulted into the digital age, in manufacturing as business solutions must now become virtual, and in justice as our courts have now delved deep into digital operation. With mandates such as social distancing, our government continues to

develop and implement new ways of conducting business in the digital environment.

Madam President, the world is currently into the fourth industrial revolution as young people are at the forefront of this wave. We are seeing the fusion of digital, biological and physical worlds as well as the growing utilization of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, robotics, 3D, the Internet of things and advanced wireless technologies. Madam President, agrotech, fintech, software, software as a service, social media platforms, e-commerce platforms and digital marketplaces are disrupting traditional business models and keeping global corporations on their toes. Young start-ups are unleashing a worldwide revolution with unconventional business ideas drastically shifting the way business is conceptualized and conducted. New business models and digital trends are leading to a new rapid type of consumption.

Madam President, young people are typically the first movers in the digital revolution and as a Government, we have taken note of this. We have shown our commitment to this by making it a strategic priority identified as retooling and restructuring the economy via digital transformation in the Public Sector Investment Programme. The eco-system being implemented by our Government involves key enhancement of existing applications such as TTBizLink which serves as our national single electronic window, a user-friendly online platform that businesses and individuals can access 24-7 for applications to conduct Government trade and business services.

The DevelopTT automated construction system which will improve the speed of interaction with the Town and Country Planning Division and municipal corporations, and a new Government service delivery model will improve transactions with Immigration, the Licensing Office and the BIR and other key

institutions. This is an important step in creating and facilitating the landscape for new existing businesses in agriculture, manufacturing and other key sectors to succeed and young people have a key role in playing in this development. To support this key role, the Government is creating a tech investment fund as part of our 2021—2025 investment strategy.

To grow the pool of participants in our digital society, any young or new tech entrepreneur or agropreneur whose business model is powered by technology and who has a solid plan of action for developing their business can get that much-needed injection of capital to get them off the ground or to expand their business. This is the other side of the coin where one's public services are digitized, digitally enabled, the public sector is now encouraged to participate and collaborate effectively within the eco-system.

Madam President, we have seen the rapid rise of ride-sharing companies, food delivery companies, e-commerce platforms and even payment gateways. With recent key policies such as the e-money policy which was introduced to drive digital money solutions, we are creating the provisions for the fintech industry that will only further support the growth of other traditional and tech-enabled companies. Madam President, upstream, mid-stream and downstream in any sector, e-commerce platforms can provide a virtual marketplace for farmers or food processors. E-money providers can facilitate immediate payment, improve the nationwide 4G and 5G broadband infrastructure, can make communication and connectivity seamless and these are becoming a reality as a result of policy and investments by this Government.

The PNM leadership, through the COVID-19 pandemic has provided young people once again with a chance to develop solutions and to be a part of pushing our country forward. This is an opportunity to work together with our digital skills

and the know-how to improve processes, reduce inefficiency, optimize outputs and provide a better quality of life for all of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, entrepreneurs provide job opportunities and our digital entrepreneurs will not only provide opportunities for their counterparts and enhance the quality of life for the nation, but they will also play a key role in reshaping how Trinidad and Tobago conducts its business globally after the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has accelerated the process of digital transformation across all sectors including education and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has had the vision to invest in this system-wide digitization. That vision is already coming to fruition.

Before I conclude my contribution, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, Sen. The Hon. Hassell Bacchus and our Minister of Education, hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly who three days ago on Friday, 23 October, 2020, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Telecommunication Authority of Trinidad and Tobago which will allow for the supply of 10,000 ICT-enabled devices and 10,000 sim cards with three-month Internet packages to public schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Both the Telecommunication Services Limited and Digicel Trinidad will procure and provide these devices.

Madam President, I want to congratulate the Trinidad and Tobago Government for having the vision to understand that simply providing ICT devices will not have a meaningful impact on the lives of our students unless accompanied by the needed framework. This MOU supports the Government of Trinidad and Tobago's commitment to ensuring impartial, accessible and quality education for all students. That is PNM vision, Madam President. That is PNM delivery, that is PNM support, that is PNM performance, beating ole talk every time.

Madam President, in conclusion, my contribution has directed to those sectors and strategies where I believe my knowledge and experience can be of particular benefit. So it is appropriate at this juncture, I remind all young people that the ball is now in your court. We must rise up and make it happen. Yes, we are all in this together and we can do this together. As a young citizen, I have benefited from many of the policies and programmes offered by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and I understood that it was my responsibility to take advantage of those opportunities.

So, today, I encourage all of our youth to reflect. Take stock and grasp the opportunities being offered by our government and five years from now, I promise you, you will be in a better place. As a colleague of mine once said, choose your sacrifices or they will choose you. In other words, make your sacrifices intentional, you hold the power to do this and you have this.

Madam President, with those few words and in support of this PNM Government, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I would like to congratulate Sen. Bethelmy on her maiden contribution. [*Desk thumping*]

**4.15 p.m.**

**Sen. Evans Welch:** Madam President, I consider it an honour and privilege to be addressing this House on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Bill. Madam President, during my maiden contribution on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, I actually ran out of time. So, to avoid that situation developing, I propose to abandon the introduction I had planned on making to my contribution to help to explain its context and to go immediately into the meat of the matter without a long run up to the wicket, if I may use a cricket analogy. So, although I would be engaging in a very short run up, I would try to avoid putting any spin on what I basically would

be saying on these issues.

I would like to start with the fiscal measures identified by the hon. Minister of Finance in his budget presentation, as well as the budget document. Madam President, to put what I have to say about the fiscal measures in context, it is my view that when one is dealing with a budget, one cannot approach it like one does with a company or how a bank or a firm or an entity in the private sector would approach it. They are concerned with profitability. They are concerned with reconciliation of figures. They are concerned with ensuring that revenue always exceeds expenses.

However, when one is dealing with a budget, a national budget, one is dealing with the population of a country, the citizenry, to ensure their livelihoods. And sometimes deficits are necessary if one is to achieve that objective. One has to abandon the notion of reconciliation and one has to sometimes sacrifice revenue in favour of expenditure and take the position that in the long run things will take care of itself. So that is why it is often said the word “economy” does not appear by itself but you quite often see the socio-economic impact as opposed to economic impact only. So a level of sensitivity has to be shown in the drafting and presentation of a budget and the fiscal measures which are to be associated with it.

Having said that, Madam President, I would wish to commend the hon. Minister of Finance for some of the measures which have been identified under fiscal measures because they showed, in my view, the appropriate level of sensitivity to the population at this time, especially in these times where the COVID pandemic has had such an economic impact. Persons have lost their income. Persons have lost their ability to sustain themselves and their livelihoods at the standards they are used to and accustomed to. And therefore it is important any measure which takes accounts of that fact is indeed commendable.



One such measure is the waiver of stamp duty, for instance on first-time homeowners, which has been increased from 1.5 million to 2 million so that first-time homeowners who are purchasing a home valued 2 million do not have to pay any stamp duty. The Minister, whose figures of course I cannot question because his technocrats would have calculated this, anticipates that that would result in a loss of revenue of something in the vicinity of 28 million. But as I pointed out one cannot always be concerned with loss of revenue when one is dealing with such matters. Because for instance, first-time homeowners have a number of expenses with which to deal, legal expenses, closing expenses to be paid to the bank, deposits of 10 per cent and also a first installment which would be coming very soon after closing. So in those circumstances, any measure which reduces the burden on them, even though it may involve a sacrifice of Government revenue is to be commended. And I see that the estimate by the hon. Minister of Finance is that it would be something in the vicinity of 28 million in tax revenues being sacrificed by this measure.

The same has to be said, Madam President, with respect to the personal income tax, and increasing the chargeable amount from 72,000 to 84,000, which is the equivalent of 6,000 per month to \$7,000 per month. It means that persons in that category, and I believe the majority of our population falls within that sort of category, would now have an additional \$250 per month in their pockets. Two hundred and fifty dollars may not be much to some of us, but to a low-income person it would mean a lot. And with their ability to be frugal and to manage their own domestic households, it will be a significant savings.

And I see again here, I say it shows the appropriate level of sensitivity because the estimated amount, according to the budget document and the budget presentation, is that it would result in a loss of some 750 million, in terms of

Government revenue annually. So that is to be commended, and even if it involves a deficit, as I said, we must operate on some level of faith that the future will take care of itself and there will be a tendency naturally to recover.

Opposite to that effect however, I come to what I would describe as the thorny issue of property tax. And as we attorneys sometimes say in court about the attorneys appearing on the other side, you cannot blow hot and cold. If, when you speak of raising the threshold, from 72,000 to 84,000 you identify \$250 as a significant savings to persons, because they have an additional \$250 in their pockets, then when a property tax is imposed, which may result, let us say in someone having to pay \$3,000 per year, which works out to be about the same \$250 per month, you cannot argue, well that is not too bad. It is not a significant burden. It is not too unreasonable, because that would be inconsistent with the argument, which you just advanced that \$250 is a significant savings. If it is a significant savings then by equivalent argument it must be a significant burden as well.

Madam President, having said that in my opening about the property tax, it may sound surprising for me to, in the same breath say nevertheless I support the introduction of the property tax, both in concept and in intention. I support it however, because I see it as somewhat necessary but I also would add it is a necessary evil, in my respective view, for want of better language. And if it is going to be a necessary evil then some evils to be accepted must be mitigated. They must be subject to exemptions and exceptions and they must not be imposed with the full brunt of whatever it is intended.

Madam President, I say it is necessary because, in these times especially, our expectations for Government providing for the citizenry does not decrease. We expect the same obligations from Government and therefore if you are expecting

the same obligations from Government, especially in these times where Government revenues are reduced because of the COVID pandemic, then it is natural to expect that the Government has to raise its revenue by some means.

I also say it is necessary because the existing system to some extent, because of the very low level of payments under the old land building taxes scheme, to some extent is almost meaningless. Sometimes the amount you are collecting does not even justify the administrative cost that is involved in collecting it. And so for these reasons I say it is necessary. However, I think message is important, and I think in the imposition and the institution of this measure, it lacks a certain message.

What I have heard so far is that, from the hon. Minister of Finance, in reading the documents and hearing him speak both in the media and at pre-budget conferences, is that property tax is coming, prepare for it. It will be here. However the philosophy behind it was lacking. And sometimes if you are imposing a burden on the population, it is best to try and secure their co-operation, their compliance, by communicating the philosophy and an understanding behind it, so that they will feel comfortable and co-operate, so to speak.

For instance, I make this point because I have had the recent example of speaking to someone who resides in the United States and who was saying to me, Madam President, that this property tax is killing me and this school in the district is making it even worse. So I asked: What did the school in the district have to do with the level of property tax you are paying? And I was given the explanation that the school in the district is a public school and the property tax is used to meet local expenses, such as the financing of the school. The first time I have ever heard this explanation was not from within our country but from outside and this is the point I am making why message is important in order to gain an appreciation from

the population.

I have also had a similar example not too long ago. I have one of those very regrettable things called a time share, and recently I received some mail from the company explaining how your property tax that you have to pay is going to be used. And at least that put me at ease because I had been complaining repeatedly: What am I paying this for? I think it is the same approach and therefore we need in the messaging, if it is going to be used and this burden is going to be imposed, we need in the messaging an explanation that it is going to be applied to local expenses, taking care of garbage, it goes to the corporations, it takes care of potholes in the road in your local community, so that the citizenry can see what it is this is being used for.

Madam President, the reason why I said why it is necessary, the reason why I have called it an evil is because in these times people can least afford it. At the time it was intended to be imposed, which we had signals for, long before, there was no COVID as yet, but COVID has now made it even more difficult. So it is now a burden. I regard it as an evil because it is going—it is almost like a vehicle, you are going from zero to 60 in a few seconds. At the stroke of midnight, at the close of this year into another year, you are moving from figures, which were very low under the land and building tax regime to a figure which is significantly much higher. And, therefore, that adjustment becomes even more difficult when one moves from one extreme to the other. And also it is of concern that it would be felt mainly in a lot of instances by the landless, those who do not own property, because a lot of our population are tenants who rent. And it is believed and it is anticipated, lot of landlords, at the expiration of a year's lease or a year's tenancy are going to pass on that burden to their tenants. So you may find a situation where the landless is paying for a liability which belongs to owners of property.

So, for these reasons I say—because it should be mitigated in some way. If it is that it is 3 per cent of the annual value that it is intended, the annual rental value, I suggest it be mitigated and reduce that amount to 2 per cent. If there is any suggestion of retroactivity in it, as I have heard the hon. Leader of the Opposition suggest, that it may be imposed from 2017, I suggest that one gets rid of that notion of retroactivity. I suggest exceptions be made for persons who may own property but who are unemployed or otherwise incapacitated be it physically or mentally. And because it is coming so soon after COVID, it may be a very useful suggestion to perhaps delay it by a further year, during which interim time we might be in a position to be recovering, as opposed to coming so immediately after.

Another measure which has been addressed is the thorny issue of the motor car industry and the restrictions which are intended to be imposed on it. To put what I have to say in context on this issue, Madam President, I would just want to make some bullet points as to what the Minister of Finance has said about this; the reason for the restrictions, the quotas, the taking away of concessions, and he has indicated it is a drain on foreign exchange. It is resulting in a leak of foreign exchange, 25,000 cars a year being imported, I believe he said. There are simply too many cars on the road and the philosophy is to try and suppress demand because of the drain that it is on foreign exchange.

Madam President, while I understand the foreign exchange issue is a serious issue and the balance of payments is an important aspect of the economy, I would like to suggest that one cannot equate the motor car industry with the importation of luxury food items such as escargots to which has been alluded to. I see the car as an industry, the sale of cars as an industry and as industry it is an important part of economic activity in the country. It sustains many livelihoods. You have auto mechanics. You have car washers, you have salesmen, you have the dealers, you

have auto body repairmen, et cetera. So one cannot equate it with, one cannot look at it simply from the point of view of a drain on the economy. Each transaction involving a car, be it new or used, is a unit of economic activity and although I am not an economist, I am at best an A-level economist, but what I remember from those days is that every unit, every transaction, which is a unit of economic activity is a contribution to the GDP of a country. And also it represents significant government revenues each purchase because you have custom duties, you have VAT, you have importation duties. For instance a car which is valued at \$825,000, if you take off all those things it comes down to \$500,000. So that is \$325,000 on a car that is selling show price for \$825,000; \$325,000 represents Government revenues.

And when the Minister of Finance speaks of suppressing demand therefore, I do not see any difficulty with a young family having the demand for the use of a car. Different people have different goals and people in the lower income bracket, the acquisition of a car is something which is important to them. And I think persons in the industry are entitled to argue, for instance, that they have paid their dues over the years because several conditions have been imposed over the years, one after the other.

Madam President, on the last point I would wish to make on this is that I would also find it very difficult to reconcile the concept of suppressing demand with the fact of the right of us as parliamentarians to have exemptions, which allow us to purchase cars which use far more foreign currency than what the ordinary young individual or young family would use in the purchase of a car. I am not suggesting that these privileges be taken away from us as parliamentarians, but what I am saying however, is while they exist, we ought not to be putting any further restrictions on the motor car industry on the basis of suppressing demand while we continue to satisfy our demands with cars which use far more foreign

exchange in their purchase.

Madam President, I also commend the waiver on the removal of VAT on importation of building materials, as well as what the hon. Minister of Finance has called the property development allowance, which allows property developers to claim a 20 per cent deduction on their capital expenditure from the taxes they have to pay. However, while that helps with developers, I think missing from that message, and I am sure it was intended, although it does not appear here, is that the hope and the expression of view that developers who benefit in this way would transfer that benefit on to employees, their workers in the construction industry who comprise a very large percentage of our working population, so that one can see an increase in, let us say, construction wages and daily rates that they are paid resulting from this benefit. This benefit should not only be about developers. It should also reflect in the price of home construction. So that if you have these benefits, you should pass it on to the person who approaches you to build a house. It should reflect in the cost reduction if you do not have to pay any importation, if you do not have to pay VAT on the building materials you import. Without that message, it looks almost like if it is only about the developers, which, as I have said, I am sure was not the intention of the hon. Minister of Finance. Far too often businesses readily pass on the burden when taxes are increased but the benefits are not. So I think this message should reflect that as well.

Madam President, one of the measures identified in the budget document as well is that of VAT refunds. The hon. Minister indicated that he wishes to bring VAT refunds up-to-date so that businesses can have their VAT refunds much faster. He has also made reference to the fact that, in the past year, the Finance Ministry has stepped up on the payment of VAT refunds and has given examples of sums in the vicinity of millions being paid back to small businesses and other

businesses in VAT refunds, to enable them to continue their operations and to keep alive and to keep persons employed. And that is very commendable, I dare say. It is a commendable move indeed. However, it needs to be pointed out and it is a matter of public record that there is need for caution in the enthusiasm with which such refunds are paid. There needs to be caution and supervision and scrutiny, because I can tell you, Madam President, that as a matter of public record there are several convictions before the Magistrate's Court for fraud involving VAT refunds and VAT schemes.

I have a list here which I would not use up my time by going through, but for instance one recent conviction was in the sum of \$500,000. A person who, based on 70 charges, of collecting VAT refunds. Some persons do not have any companies, they become registered for VAT, and having become registered for VAT they submit VAT returns indicating: I have paid out more VAT than I collected so I am entitled to a refund. And in those circumstances, they have been paid refunds. And I want to emphasize that I am talking only of convictions because there are matters which are before the court for the same offences, which are sub judice and those persons are entitled to the presumption of innocence and the burden is on the prosecution to prove their case beyond reasonable doubt. So I am not referring to those at all. Those persons are to be treated as innocent. I am talk about the convictions which have occurred. And the convictions which have occurred demonstrate that persons are getting VAT refunds when they have no business operating. They just submit and they have received refunds. That is why I said, while the Minister's enthusiasm is commendable, there needs to be some level of control and scrutiny and care exercise with respect to it.

There have also been convictions for persons charging VAT and not registered. So they take VAT from their customers, which they do not transmit to



the Board of Inland Revenue, but the customers may request a refund. So this VAT scheme and payment of it is working to the disadvantage of the Revenue Authority. And there are persons who are registering companies as well, not because they intend to operate a business but because they intend to pretend to be operating a business in order to claim VAT refunds.

**4.45 p.m.**

And let me say, Madam President, at this stage, the reasons why all these matters are before the court is there is a unit of the Board of Inland Revenue, the Criminal Tax Investigation Unit, which is to be commended for unearthing these fraudulent schemes and bringing such persons before the court and having them convicted. It is a rather small unit. It is somewhat under-resourced and it falling under the Minister of Finance's portfolio he may wish to have a look at beefing up that unit, providing it with more resources that it needs, so that it can continue with this productive operation and working beyond the call of duty to bring such matters before the court. Because at least in those instances where we have seen convictions the activity has stopped, but what it clearly indicates and what it clearly suggests, as the saying goes, "where there is smoke there is fire". The fact that we have had these convictions taking place and these companies being charged, and individuals being charged perhaps means there are quite a few more out there who are doing it. And it also reflects on the fact that we see, if this is news to anyone, it reflects on the fact that we see when the young man pulls a gun and robs somebody, but when white collar crime occurs it does not register on us in the same way.

However, as condemnatory as the actions of a young man is in pulling a gun and robbing someone, I am not minimizing it, it is very bad and it is a wrong act. But whereas he may be stealing from an individual, these companies and

individuals who engage in what we call white-collar crime, when they get VAT refunds in this manner they are stealing from all of us, and they are no less culpable in their evil. And this is why I call for this matter to be dealt with in a most serious manner.

Madam President, may I just enquire how much more time do I have?

**Madam President:** You finish at five minutes to five.

**Sen. E. Welch:** Wow.

**Madam President:** 4.55.

**Sen. E. Welch:** Well, Madam President, I am going to very quickly see what I can say in five minutes because I think I have about 30 minutes of talk time left to condense into that five minutes. So rather than even taking a short run up to the wicket I may have to take the baseball approach just stand on one spot and pelt.

Madam President, let me say very quickly, I commend the Ministry of Health for the manner in which it has been handling the COVID issue and for the daily updates et cetera, and for the technocrats associated with that daily update, the CMO, and the other persons employed under him. One thing I would rather see though, because the Minister of Health keeps speaking about non-compliance and he keeps speaking about the financial burden that is involved in treating COVID patients. And of course that is relevant to the budget because it means the more you have to spend on health because of non-compliance it affects the deficit.

But perhaps, he may wish to change the message to some extent because I have observed on every occasion when a death is reported there is the usual mantra that follows the report of a death, "Someone new has died today, it is an elderly person with comorbidities." I do not understand the purpose or the necessity of attaching that mantra. Because what the population at large, the younger population could misinterpret it to mean is that, "we do not have any reason to

worry, we do not have any reason to worry.” And that is why on a Friday and a Saturday you often see many of them with their mask under their chin, their mask over their head, or no mask at all. I am not against a general indication to persons. At some point in time, well, it affects the elderly population more. But to be attaching that to every announcement is, in my view, Madam President, to send to wrong message. That is all I would say on that. Madam President, when it comes to—

**Madam President:** Sen. Welch, you have five more minutes.

**Sen. E. Welch:** Five?

**Madam President:** Five more minutes.

**Sen. E. Welch:** Five minutes again?

**Madam President:** Yeah, five more minutes. Yes.

**Sen. E. Welch:** Madam President, when it comes to the question of Wi-Fi and children in schools, I fully agree because we are going digital. In order to maximize the education they need support with provision of laptops, provision of Wi-Fi, provision of internet cafes and so on. What I find missing from the message though, is that as educational as the Internet can be it can be as potentially damaging as well—misuse of it. So, if we are going to have Internet cafes perhaps especially sponsored by Government, perhaps there is need for supervision to ensure how it is used. If we are going to have distribution of laptops and devices to such persons, perhaps it can have something incorporated into it which can ban young persons from certain websites. Because it can be as educational as it could be dangerous.

Madam President, I want say in my last few minutes I thought I may have had some more time to say it, but in my last new minutes I would just want to say that I notice the allocation to the Judiciary is in the vicinity of some 445—\$446

million et cetera. And I notice from the Estimate some of that is intended to be used in terms of shifting, concentrating the civil courts at the Waterfront, converting the Hall of Justice to a dedicated criminal court et cetera.

Madam President, the number one problem associated with the Judiciary is the backlog of criminal cases and I am only talking about the higher Judiciary now, the High Court. And you cannot spend your way out of that problem. You cannot deficit your way out of that problem. What that needs at this stage the statistics indicate the volume is far too much and what it requires is a radical solution. A radical solution which is nevertheless consistent with the interest of justice. For instance, from the recent reports the tit for tat so to speak between the heads who are stakeholders, who in my view rather than knocking each other in the media should be knocking their heads together so that some ideas can fall out from it.

Madam President, 1,706 matters in the High Court awaiting trial. Presently there are five criminal judges, 960 of the matters in the High Court are more than 10 years old. Many of these are for non-bailable offences. Persons are in custody for more than 15 years awaiting trial for serious crimes. That is an unacceptable situation and it cannot be solved by anybody blaming each other. It needs serious coming together and coming up with solutions and radical solutions. And I suggest, Madam President, perhaps what we need is something similar to that controversial measure that took place sometime ago, that Section 34. Some kind of legislative measure of that nature because you cannot try those cases out of existence. Even if a trial takes place every day, 1,706 matters cannot be tried in a reasonable time. People who are in custody more than 15 years would still have to wait another six years even if we go every day because you only have five criminal judges as it is said. So this time you need a Section 34 measure, and it is one which this time a well-intentioned one.

And, Madam President, the last thing I would wish to say as well is that persons who are in custody on murder charges they should be given the right to plead. Once it is over 15 years they should be given the right to plead either to manslaughter or to felony murder. They do not have that right presently. The DPP has to be asked and he often refuses.

**Madam President:** Sen. Welch, your time is up.

**Sen. E. Welch:** Thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Minister in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation.

**Minister in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus):** Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to join this debate, my first debate be that as well, on the Act to provide a service for Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending September 30, 2020. Madam President are you hearing me? [*Madam President makes hand gesture*]

Yes, again, let me start again. So, let me thank you for giving me the opportunity, Madam President, to join this debate on an Act to provide for the service to Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending September 30, 2021. This also being my first opportunity I want to congratulate you on your election as Senate President. Also the hon. Sen. de Freitas on Senate Vice-President as well. I want to thank the hon. Prime Minister for the opportunity to serve and also to contribute to national development. I further want to thank the parliamentary staff for the warm welcome that I got on my entry into Parliament and the continued support that they give to me as we go ahead.

I want to use my time to discuss matters as it relates to the transformation aspect of what is happening within the Ministry of Public Administration and

Digital Transformation as well as what is happening within the Government at large. I am going to try to demystify if I can use that appropriate word what is happening in that space and specifically dealing with digital government.

My colleague Minister West, would have spoken on Friday and would have given a discourse on digital Trinidad and Tobago, and really spoke on four specific things: people, infrastructure, the business and the economy, as well as the environment. Given the allocations that we received in the fiscal package, the increases that is specifically for the use of digital transformation I am going to put how some of that is going to be used but I am going to speak specifically about digital government. And I am going to probably deal with five subcomponents of that: people, public service infrastructure, public services themselves, governance, and of course the environment.

But before I do that I just want to touch on one item and show the level of collaboration that is required when you are dealing with digital items even in what appears to be a simple thing. Sen. Yokymma would have spoken about the fact that there is a MOU that is signed to deliver 10, 000 devices to students to use. That MOU was signed between the Telecommunications Authority and the Ministry of Education and while the output of that seems simple the things that make this doable, the outcome of having services provided on a wireless network to 10,000 people, that did not happen on Friday. It did not happen the month before that. It did not even happen in July. And I want to show how this works together so people would get an understanding of the collaborative nature of what we are trying to do when we are talking about transformation.

So, way back in March, and the Telecommunication Authority of Trinidad and Tobago should be complimented for this. They got together with the service providers identifying the issues that would arise as a result of the restrictions of

COVID, and said, “Look, how can we help you be able to manage what is obviously going to come at you and your networks?” And through that collaborative process they came up with what they thought was a reasonable solution, with TATT providing spectral resources to them free of charge on an interim basis to allow them to expand their networks to be able to cater for what was coming. Had that decision not been made then we could have gotten 5 million devices they would not have worked because the networks on which they ride, the infrastructure on which they depend to connect would not have been suitably sized to allow for them to work.

The outcome of this MOU is not 10,000 devices. It is not the SIM cards, and it is not the fact that there is contractually free service for a duration of time. The outcome of this is the fact that 10,000—at least 10,000 students, and these devices are shared so it could be a multiple of that will have access to the actual communication medium that is required for them to be able to do the work that they have to do, that is the outcome. And so, when we look at the devices, if we look at it, all of this is done because of a collaborative effort that was done between one set of people and the other, and you ended up in the end with an outcome that is scalable, that allows for the addition of devices to go on to it and for things to work. So I just thought it was worthy to mention that and the telecommunication authority and the service providers as the two entrants in this space should be commended for what they have done.

Digital transformation as it relates to digital government and the creation of a digital nation. So a digital government is really a subset of a larger group called a digital nation. Now all of this transformation and digital stuff is not new, it really accelerated because of COVID and that is happening worldwide. Rarely digital government represents a shift in the way governments around the world and

Trinidad and Tobago is no different is going about embracing their mission. It really involves the leveraging of power, you know, the power of information technologies to transform the ways in which things happen.

If you look at how nations are doing this, what are they getting out of it? Well, it allows them to set measurable administrative goals to improve the public service delivery. It allows for the making of data driven decisions because you have information that is disposable—at your disposal. It allows for evidence-based policies because you are dealing in the empirical, you have the actual thing itself. Greater accountability and transparency within the Government and of course the building of greater public trust.

Madam President, trust is the one piece of transformation and use of it, particularly in government, that we have to guard very zealously. I speak a lot at different places, and even when I observe things you find people going still walking into places to pay for things in person that they could online. Yes, some of it is about people just wanting to commune with other people. Well a lot of it is simply because they do not trust the mechanism that they are using to pay. Yet those same people would buy devices and items on Amazon because they trust them, but they would not trust using a local service in Trinidad and Tobago. Trust is of absolute importance in what we are trying to do.

Madam President, how will we know once we started on this digital journey whether we are making progress or not? How could the casual observer look and say, “Well, wait nah these guys set out to do this, are they really doing anything that is progressing for us?” Well a couple ways you could do it and within the Government this is how you will see it. The ubiquitous use of technology by public officers in their everyday transaction. So, the natural thing to do now, the culture of the public service becomes the fact that you are using technology. The existence of



the correct, the adequate, the right fit, robust, cutting edge, but yet secure technology across the whole Government being supplied and managed by a thriving technology sector.

A Government that has adapted modern technology in the efficient delivery of goods and services, and of course a Government that is open, trustworthy, and accountable. If we are on this journey and these things are visible and tangible to the public, then you can know that we are on the correct journey. So, digital government therefore exists where technology has improved the ease of doing business; this is what you see at the end of it. The delivery of public goods and services is there and you are getting it done with increased productivity and efficiency. The process of digital transformation towards creating a digital government therefore seeks to improve the lives of not only the people who are receiving the services, but the public officers who are delivering them. The population gets it of course and if all goes well the international rating of Trinidad and Tobago improves.

While all of this is happening we are trying to do this within a green, serene and reasonably positioned and costed place to say within, you know, these environmental and green guidelines that we have. So we are not going to be exploiting and doing damage on one side while we try to digitize on the other.

Transformation of this type is really about people, the outcomes of our people. This is about being in public focus. You really have to focus on that or else you get lost in the technology. A lot of people believe this kind of thing is about technology, it is not. It is about people and process. So for public officers one of the key targets in all of what we are trying to do, particularly in the case of digital government, we want to make sure that every public officer is digitally literate. Public officers have to become digital employees. You have to understand how to

operate digital devices, computers, laptops, smart phones. You have to be able to retrieve information electronically, print, screen, scan, all those things are things that form part of your basic digital literacy. To ensure that this happens what we are going to do in fiscal 2021, the Ministry is developing a digital literacy programme, and it is aiming to deliver this and as we would do it in the MPADT electronically, and we are going to do it through the Public Service Academy which is our training arm at the Ministry.

The programme obviously will be ongoing and we are going to refresh the content as required to ensure that we remain relevant and current. But that is going to be rolled out and the target of that is to make sure that all public officers have a baseline of digital literacy, and this is all, this is everybody. But that alone will not fix this. Yeah? The Ministry is planning to ensure that the Government's learning policy performance management frameworks and recruitment practices establish digital literacy as a compulsory piece if you want to enter and work in the public service. Because if we are going to have digital government we need to have digital employees.

So, those that we have we will train, anybody coming in should have at minimum digital literacy as part of what they do. Digital skills, so on top of your digital literacy we are going to build digital skills. So the digital skills really deals with the idea of how do you really execute your tasks using the digital technology that is created, and using your basic digital literacy skills. So effectively what we are saying is, we are going to now train you to use digital processes, using the digital skills that you have to have to do it. So it is all interwoven.

So, I will give an example so for public officers who are operate in the registry for example, will have a module of training for you to learn how to set up and use electronic mail registers. And I will talk a little bit more about that in some

of the digitization projects. For officers who work in HR for example, and I am talking specifically about public officers, I am talking about digital government, you will have a module for you to do your headcount electronically, leave management, et cetera. All of that will be tied to an electronic HRM system and I will talk a bit about that later as well.

People operating corporate services, public officers again, we will have a module of training for you to ensure that you are using ICTs for recording mileage, car mileage, gas usage, utility payments, moving away from books and records and moving into electronic registers. These are just a few examples of what I am talking about but that is how it has to happen.

Madam President, I want to re-emphasize as it speaks to that, that digital transformation is not a technology thing. Yeah? To use the technology to improve operations requires digital skills, reengineered processes, change management, and changes to regulations, policies, and guidelines. So it may look simple on the outside but all of that has to happen in concert for this to be successful.

Even when you have digital skills you have the technology and you have the basic digital format it still does not always work because what we are trying to do represents a change in culture. Change management is now critically important or else you do all this and nothing happens. What are we going to do? Well, we are going to create a project to create digitally ready public officers in targeted and specific Ministries where what we are going to implement is more advanced. And being digitally ready means having the correct attitude, your culture is one of digital. And that is not an easy transition to make particularly if you have been seasoned and working in an analog world for a long time. This change does not come easily. There is a lot of communication, a lot of training, a lot of coaching, and a lot of let me see if this works before I really buy into it.

I recognize that we are a show me country. People like to be shown and things have to work for them to understand it, but I like to use examples to define how that works. If we do not do the processes and get the technology right all we would be doing to public officers is adding work to what they already do. A bad process is worse than none. And I will give an example.

If you go into any public office to transact business, any kind of business that you would like to do, and the person that you meet, the public officer you meet, we have quote-unquote “digitized what he does”, we did not change the process with him, fully digitalized the whole thing, he was not sensitized to what he needed to do, he was not trained in with the right skills and you walk in, when you get in there what is going to happen to you is that the person sitting behind the desk being the public officer now views what we have asked him to do as an additional piece of work. Before, somebody would make up the form, you give them the form, he photocopies the form and he hands it to someone. Now you are asking him to get the information from the form, sit at a computer, enter the data and then continue with the same process he was doing before which is take the form and give it somewhere else. All you have done is added one step to what he was doing before. That is not digital government. That is not digital transformation. That is not digitalization.

Digitalization in that case would be:

1. The person does not have to appear, they could enter the data online;
2. The process would be automated all the way to where it needs to go; and
3. Human intervention in that would involve analysis, vetting, et cetera, et cetera.

You are not adding work, you are making the public officer’s work easier.

Transformation also like I said, involves not just changing how you do your

job but it also changes in some aspects what your job is. So all of that has to be taken in mind when we look at what we do.

I know Sen. Vieira yesterday had mentioned that all the training and all the technology in the world does not necessarily account for some of the levels of bad service that people receive when they go to public offices. I am saying we are doing the training, there is a full suite of training that is coming out about that, and we are going to be putting the officers through that. It is absolutely important. Some of this is a training issue. Some of it is the fact that they are simply working with technology that frustrates them. They are not able to be efficient. All of that is changed and fixed in digitalization. Digital government does not utilize unsuitable technology.

Madam President, I want to talk about the ICT staff. These are the people who will have to maintain these solutions that we are going to deploy that form the technical infrastructure that we need.

**5.15 p.m.**

So, the Government through its own funds, and via enterprise agreements, will provide ICT training and development opportunities. To achieve the digital Government vision, this ubiquitous technology, throughout the length and breadth of the public service means that the public service must have technical capacity to manage its ICTs. We are going to have to get people and we are in a competitive market because everybody else needs the same people. So, we want to assure the ICT staff that, you know, they are targeted for training and development under the digital transformation and what is happening in the labour market, like I said, it is not just the Government that needs good ICT people.

When transformation projects are being implemented, as with most transitions, there is always need for additional capacity while the projects are

running. So we will, you know, have to recruit some people to make sure that that is so but we will always ensure that we have the right amount of people. It does allow for—well, we would need to establish, really, a skills database that allows us to understand the skills that we have sitting within the public service and also, those that are outside, so that we could vet and employ on short term if necessary. You know, the word they use—the buzzword in the industry for that now is doing it by a “gig”, gig as not in gigabit, but “gig” as in, you know, a band going to do a “gig”. Basically, it speaks to a labour market characterized by, you know, the prevalence of the short-term contracts and freelance work, as opposed to permanent jobs. A lot of people prefer that type of employment because they are not tied to any particular organization and more so, it gives them the freedom to move from business to business and from place to place, thus maximizing on their earning power.

As far as Sen. Yokymma talked about this from the youth prospective, earlier in her presentation on Friday, Minister West mentioned the Ministry is currently engaged in a project with the ITU, the International Telecommunication Union, for the development of a digital innovation and competitive ICT ecosystem for Trinidad and Tobago. In that endeavor, we would also be identifying ICT talent as part of the exercise that would also help us in our own skills framework. So, we are gathering people from everywhere and there is a lot of talent in Trinidad and Tobago. Let us talk about the ICT infrastructure.

So, all of—I like to say the easiest part of this is the infrastructure but we have to be careful that that is also a part that if you get wrong, it derails the entire mission. We drafted, at the Ministry, a governance policy, an ICT Government policy, that we will soon submit to Cabinet for approval. That policy will address a number of the things that could go wrong if left unchecked and Ministries go off

doing their own thing without having a reference framework and way to work. The Auditor General's Report has numerous citations surrounding lack of policy, dated policy, lack of standard, inefficiencies, duplications, et cetera, et cetera. All of this will be addressed with the policy and the enforcement of same. So, the assurance we will give, Madam President, is that we have taken what came out of the Auditor General's Report seriously and we are focused on implementing what is—and the word in this case is “implementing”, because I am not sure that this is done anywhere in the public service—basically an enterprise architecture that will allow for efficient management of ICT people, technology, information and facilities.

Enterprise infrastructure is not—enterprise architecture, sorry. Enterprise architecture is not new in the private sector, it is not new globally. It is really one of the best ways if we want to do efficient operations within a firm, a government, anywhere that has it. Most well-organized segments or areas of implementation within multiple states, use some measure or some aspect of enterprise architecture. Gartner has described it as a form of internal management consulting because it helps define and shape businesses and operating models to identify risks, opportunities and create technology roadmaps to suit effectively. It allows you to look at what you have and build the right things to achieve the outcome.

Analysts from Ovum also recognizes enterprise architecture, referring to it as the architects of everything. So, there are numerous studies on it, people can look it up if they so wish, Madam President, but it is the way in which we are going to enforce a lot of what we have.

The policy that we are putting together will strengthen the ICT center that is the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation and iGovTT, of course, to ensure increased value for money in the Government—in the governance of all ICT, basically, everything just happening inside of it. It is not

that we were going to say to all Ministries who have their own ambitions and what they are doing, “Do not do what you are doing, we have to do it for you,” what we are saying is, “There has to be a reference architecture and standards to which all things have to be built. And unless those things are satisfied, you would not be able to continue.”

Madam President, in terms of the actual infrastructure itself, the Government has a government backbone that it implemented way back in the year 2000 and that has since been renamed and upgraded significantly. It is now called “GovNet” and that is also being upgraded again to GovNet, next-generation”. There are a number of things going on there. It is intended to connect all Government agencies, all, everybody. It gets to most of them now, it does not have all of them and it is not necessarily the only medium by which communication happens between them. We are going to have to fix that because there is a cost involved to not using it, which means that we are using something else out of the private sector and those types of connections are actually extremely expensive. So, there are significant cost savings to deal with that.

Simultaneous to that, we are also working on cloud. And cloud is a buzzword everywhere. The Government currently—the State currently has access to a cloud that is pretty much for their proprietary use. It is not necessarily in alignment with the way specific services and core services should be and as such, we are going to embark on the creation of our own cloud. The Government currently has a proliferation of storage and infrastructure all over Trinidad and Tobago and in some cases outside of the country. What we are working to establish is effectively the concept and I put quote, unquote, “a government data centre” where we can store sensitive data and related applications. Of course, that does not preclude us and it will eventually include the use of other certified centers.



We have a number of high-quality data centres existing here in Trinidad and Tobago, and we will leverage those. But for that to work and be in alignment with what we have, the Ministry will provide an updating cloud policy later in the year. As I say that, I guess that it will involve Government-owned and Government-housed infrastructure, along with local existing infrastructure. There is no sense in not using that, a lot of it is already in use with other service providers and may involve the use of global enterprise cloud as your Amazon Web Services, et cetera. So that is not precluded from that, transactional things can happen there. Again, legislation has to allow for that data sovereignty, data transactions, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

We are going to really launch a big project to get and house in one place the information relative to all of Government services across the entirety of Trinidad and Tobago. We will find all of it and we will start putting things together so that we have a one view of it to know how to consolidate it and address it within, what will now become the new national infrastructure.

A major project we have going that we are going to work on is e-Identity. You would have heard a number of persons talk about it. It represents the fundamental way in which the State will identify you. People keep asking, "It is another ID card again?" That is not what this is. A number of the things that people take around in their wallets as identification does not uniquely identify you to the State. It is normally something that gives you permission to do something. The driver's permit is something that gives you permission to drive, a passport gives you permission to travel. While they may identify you to the particular Ministry for the purpose of which it is there, it does not uniquely identify you to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. You go to a Ministry to do something, you went to fill out the form, it has the same information. You go to another

Ministry, it is the same information. You go to the same Ministry twice, you have to fill out the same information. This is not the way this is supposed to be.

With a unique identity card, it identifies you uniquely to the State. This is not just for state purposes, eventually everyone will use this, the businesses will use this, everyone will have to use this because this will be the way in which you are uniquely identified. There is a big hullabaloo and an uproar about facial recognition. Well, facial recognition is one thing but facial identification is something that is used globally all over the place. Madam President, you couple a few of these things together and you create really, really strong ways to uniquely identify yourself and, of course, it makes your interactions with the State so much easier. I just went to a private institution recently to renew insurance for one of my vehicles and add my son as a youth driver, I had to fill out the same information four times, and that is in the private sector. Yeah?

Another big project we have is the interoperability project. Why is that important? Well, part of having Ministries operate is that they are still responsible for their own data and the things that happen between them. But if for reasons they need to share information, unless you build one big massive solution that all the Ministries collect to, which we are not doing, you are going to have to find a way, a language, to securely move information from one Ministry to the other. That represents how you go from having, “yeah, I can identify you in this Ministry”, to “I can identify you in all Ministries.” Only the relevant information will be available for you wherever you—that it needs to be. So, in other words, if you are conducting a transaction at the license office, they would not have your medical record, for example. But Ministries need to find a way to securely, efficiently, and in a very robust manner, communicate with one another. There is a massive project on for us to do that. That is being done concurrently with the e-Identity

programme. So we are going to work on that. Why is that important? Well, if we just build the e-Identity programme by itself, it does not do anything other than identify you to the State. It needs to become valuable to the Ministries, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, for example.

The Minister spoke earlier about their plans and what they are doing about, you know, you only need to present information once, you go to get your—you are applying for a grant here, you apply for grant in another—for a different type of grant, you have to make up different things. So, what we are doing in this case is saying, okay, let us tie the e-Identity to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, for example. So, you present your e-Identity, and we say, “Okay, we know who you are. What grant are you looking— Oh, by the way, oh, you actually did apply for a grant before? Oh yes, we have all your information.” So, it is a lot about the collaborative effect of it. It would not happen without the interoperability project.

Digitization is a key part of this, of digital Government. So, part of what we are going to have to do is digitize all of the public records of the State, all of them. And it is not just as simple as taking a picture of it and putting it in a registry. After you digitized it, you have to be able to find it and all of us search for things on the Internet. The key word in that is “search”. You do not actually know the document that you are looking for. If you digitize documents and the only way you could reference them is by the document, knowing the document itself, you would have failed. If you digitize the documents and continue to use analog processes where the paper files continue to be used, you have failed. If you digitize the documents and did not validate and verify that the information contained, prior to and post-migration, you have failed. All of these processes have to be zealously guarded to ensure that we do not end up in a situation with garbage in equals garbage out. It

would be interesting if you are searching for your title of land, and you find mine, because somebody in the migration process did not migrate it properly.

So, this is a key component of what we are doing. It has to be controlled and we are setting up ways in which we are going to deal with that, specifically. A number of Ministries have and agencies have already embarked on doing a null of this. We are going to have to review that to see where it is to ensure that the correct amount of document integrity exists in what we are doing. We are going to open something for that. Let us talk a little bit about services.

**5.30 p.m.**

Madam President, I think I have, maybe seven, eight minutes?

**Madam President:** You have six minutes remaining.

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Got it. Doing well. We talk about services, and when we talk about services, we are talking about services that are available online. Most Senators and Ministers here would have elaborated on a number of them that are available. Today, Sen. Yokymma gave a number, and pretty much everyone that will speak will talk about that. But it is not just having the services, having the channel available to access the services. Some people prefer the different mediums. No one would be left behind. If you do not want to type, you can call. Some people do not want to call, you can text. If you do not want to text, you can chat. And it is interesting that, I mean, with all the channels that we have, the one that has shown the highest growth, 119 per cent—I am speaking about 107,000 transactions—is LiveChat. Phone calls are down, self-service kiosk is down, virtual calls is down, not down by much, but down nonetheless. But 119, 120 per cent growth in LiveChat, gives you an idea of what is happening with people in the industry.

TTConnect continues to be our main way in which the primary portal in which delivery of government to citizen services exist and pretty much that

capacity—

**Madam President:** Minister, you have five more minutes.

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:**—where that is concerned. We are going to have to do some upgrades on that and get it going. But in this past year, apart from all the services that exist, six new services were launched, and I am not sure if people are aware of them. I would mention them by name: DevelopTT, for example, GovPay, CourtPay, a number of those exist and there are six of them—the list can be provided—and we are going to do even more of those.

In the manifesto and in the 2021 Budget Statement, there are a number of things that have to come out of that: the issuance of passports within two weeks, registration of motor vehicles, taxes, et cetera. All of those things would be encompassed in what we are doing in the transformation. Not all services can be provided digitally and not all services should be provided digitally. I mean, even places where you have maximum digitalization, like in Estonia, for example, you still have to show up to get married. So marriages are not done remotely.

So, there is a number of things that we are going to do. There is a pilot project going on in St. James in the medical area, in the North West Regional Health Authority, that is dealing with—I remember that Sen. Dillon-Remy was talking about digital records and there is a tremendous pilot project going on there, where the results from all stakeholders has been extremely, extremely good.

The HRM system, we are going to have to finish that up. That is something that we have had since earlier on, but we have done a revamp on it and now we are putting out an RFP to get some services to help us maximize on what it does. This will provide the HRM services for over 60,000 public officers. And really, imagine I have to use the word “over” because that number is not necessarily within my purview to get fixed. By the time we are finished with this solution, all of that will

be there.

I want to close by adding just the last piece on the environment that what we are doing, we are going to do it in an environmentally friendly manner. We are not going to do anything that increases the waste of what we have. And last, but not least, if there is anything at all you take from what I have said, remember that digital government is first and foremost—and we are talking about digital government specifically here—about the digital public officer using digital infrastructure to deliver as many public goods and services as possible in an efficient, open, environmentally friendly, and secure manner. Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** I wish to congratulate the Minister in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation on his maiden contribution. Sen. Teemal.

**Sen. Deeroop Teemal:** Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute on this Bill before us. Madam President, first of all, I would like to focus on the issue of water security. The budget statement of the hon. Minister of Finance, on pages 71 to 72, the Minister stated and I quote:

“We have put at the top of our agenda the delivery of a sustainable water supply to our citizens. Combatting the COVID-19 virus requires proper sanitation and health practices and our citizens deserve no less.

...in respect of water supply and sanitation, the Water and Sewage Authority (WASA) is central to achieving the objectives of Government. A Cabinet Sub-Committee is now focusing its attention on the issues which are impeding WASA from meeting our needs.”

He goes on to state that:

“The Sub-Committee will review the operations of WASA, including its

unsustainable debt position, its aging pipelines, its governance structure and the inadequate water distribution.”

End of quote from that statement, Madam President.

Madam President, while no doubt WASA has a key role to play in water supply and distribution, are we seeing a persistence with the sectoral approach to water security by this primary focus on WASA? In the *Public Sector Investment Programme, 2021* on page 137 under “Water Security” it is stated that, and I quote:

“In keeping with its mandate...(WASA) will continue initiatives for improving the production and delivery of water. In this regard, WASA, seeks to ascertain water security through ensuring a sustainable supply of safe water.”

The PSIP 2021, identifies \$168.5 million to continue certain water projects. Madam President, while there is no doubt whatsoever that WASA plays a central role in water security, it is quite misleading to imply that water security is solely dependent on water supply. In the overall context of water security and the sustainable approach to ensuring this water security for the nation, we still have not been able to come up with a national water policy for Trinidad and Tobago that would ensure a sustainable approach for water woes.

Madam President, the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme* expenditure 2021, page 92, Item 055, under the heading “Adopt and Implement Integrated WASA Resources Management” indicates that no moneys was spent on this Item in 2019 and also 2020 and a rather minuscule amount of \$500,000 have been allocated for fiscal 2021. Madam President, I really hope that this is not an indication that the Government is placing the implementation of this policy which is vital to the pursuance of water security on the backburner. And so, I strongly

urge the Government to reconsider the funding and the position on this seemingly lack of implementation on this policy.

Integrated Water Resource Management or IWRM, Madam President, promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximize economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems. IWRM is based on three pillars, namely:

- “1. Enabling Environment of policies and legislation
2. Institutional Framework to give effect to policies, strategies, and legislation, and
3. Management Instruments that include water allocation, assessments, and economic tools”—which involves full—“stakeholder participation.”

Madam President, IWRM has been conceptualized as providing a framework for strengthening water governance and adaptation and, by doing so, fostering good decision making. A key requirement is the involvement of other economic and social sectors that would not normally deal directly with water issues, but whose activities either impact on water or water has an impact on them. In other words, it seeks to move away from a purely sector-based to a cross sectoral-based water management approach. An IWRM agenda ensures that water issues are mainstreamed into the business of the Ministries of Finance, Public Utilities, National Planning and Development and other Ministries, Madam President.

In spite of being a relatively water-abundant country, Trinidad and Tobago has its fair share of water sector problems. Supplies are intermittent, leakage levels are high and demand is suppressed due to restricted supplies. Notwithstanding the tens of billions of dollars of expenditure over the past decades by successive



Governments, we are still faced with the situation of over 50 per cent of our population receiving a supply of water for less than three days per week.

The many studies undertaken have identified challenges, such as inappropriate governance arrangements, Madam President; deficient legislation and regulation; ageing infrastructure and high levels of unaccounted for water. Madam President, almost 40 per cent concerns over potable water quality and poor infrastructure governance.

Other than WASA, there are a number of agencies and institutions involved in the planning, management and execution of the water sector and in the execution of water resources management functions. These include: the EMA, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Tobago House of Assembly, Ministry of Planning and Development, the Drainage Division, Ministry of Works and Transport, Water Resources Agency, Institute of Marine Affairs and several others, Madam President. It is worth noting that there is the absence of a coordinating agency and coordinative mechanism to facilitate effective water resources management and, as a result, it is not surprising that Trinidad and Tobago currently lacks a coherent policy and institutional framework for water resources management.

Studies have clearly identified the need for water policy development and the reconfiguration of institutional frameworks to effect water sector reform. There is indeed, a checkered history with regard to the development of such a policy. A degree of impetus for water sector reform, Madam President, arose out of a World Bank Public Sector Institutional Strengthening exercise in the 1990s. One of the outcomes was a water resources management strategy study completed in the year 2000. This recommended the adoption of IWRM and the need to establish an effective and financially autonomous institutional framework.

In order to address these problems, the then Ministry of Public Utilities and the Environment drafted a National Water Resources Management Policy in 2003, Madam President, with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank. Since the National Water Resources Management Policy was adopted in 2005, there has been several changes in Government. It would appear this has contributed significantly to the lack of continuity in the pursuit of water security based on the principles of integrated water resources management. And what we have seen, subsequently, is mainly a supply driven sectoral approach through WASA in an effort to solve to nation's water woes.

The latest draft document regarding IWRM was prepared under the guidance of a Cabinet-appointed technical steering committee for the review and revision of the National IWRM Policy in March of 2017, and I understand that this policy is still awaiting approval from Cabinet. Allow me to quote from page one of this document, Madam President.

“In order to achieve this goal, the”—Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago—“intends to adopt and implement the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) approach, which is recognized as international best practice for the management of the water sector.”

Madam President, in *Vision 2030: National Development Strategy 2016 to 2030*, one of the goals for improved public utilities, that is Goal 2.2.1, on page 19—on page 99 sorry, it is stated that and I quote:

“Promote an integrated approach to Water Resources Management  
Integrated water resources management promotes the coordinated development and management of water land and related resources in order to maximize available water supply.”

Madam President, in the context of all that I have said, thus far, and in

relation to, one, the absence of any spending on the implementation of this policy for the past years and to the small amount of \$500,000 allocated in the estimated expenditure, I repeat that I really hope that this is not an indication that the Government is placing the implementation of this policy which is vital to the pursuance of water security on the backburner. Whilst we continue to expend huge amounts of capital on WASA, there is a need for political courage, commitment and will to advance the implementation of an IWRM agenda, as it offers the best sustainable approach for ensuring water security in the long term. And, as such, the initial stages of implementation cannot be abandoned or postponed in the short and medium term.

I, therefore, urge the Government to provide increased funding under this allocation which is necessary for the initial stages of the implementation of this policy in order that a well-resourced, dedicated IWRM unit, within the Ministry of Public Utilities is established. This unit will begin to implement the recommendations of the Cabinet-appointed technical steering committee for the review and revision of a national IWRM policy, once it is approved by Cabinet, and which I hope and sincerely hope will be very, very, soon, Madam President.

Madam President, I would like to next focus on the issue of flood alleviation and mitigation measures. Madam President, the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* expenditure 2021, on page 216, “Item A. 001: Comprehensive National Drainage Development Study” indicates that no moneys were spent on this Item in 2019 as well as 2020, and I am not seeing any funding being allocated for this Item for fiscal 2021.

Madam President, in his contribution, the Minister of Works and Transport, did indicate that his Ministry would be awarding a contract in November for this Item of work, and I am kindly seeking clarification. If there are no allocations for

this Item in the draft estimates, where have funds been allocated for this item of work?

Notwithstanding the declaration by the Minister of Works and Transport, Madam President, please allow me to offer some comments regarding this Comprehensive National Drainage Development Study. In the *Vision 2030: National Development Strategy 2016 to 2030* one of the goals for improved public utilities that is, Goal 3.2, on page 101, the intention to:

“Adopt an integrated planning approach to flood mitigation”

—is stated, and I quote:

“The piecemeal and localised approach in addressing flooding is uneconomical and unsustainable. Through the development and implementation of an Integrated Flood Management Plan, strategies to maintain or augment the productivity of floodplains while providing protective measures against losses due to flooding, will be adopted.”

End of quote.

Madam President, the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure, Tenth Report, Fifth Session, Twelfth Parliament, on an Enquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchment in Trinidad and Tobago, general finding 29, on page 23, states that, and I quote:

“In seeking to expedite the National Drainage Plan, the”—Ministry of Works and Transport—“has approached the CAF”—Latin American—“Multi-Lateral Development Bank for technical assistance with the formulation of the Plan and discussions are still ongoing”.

Page 126 of the *Public Sector Investment Programme 2021* under the section on “Drainage” it is stated that the:

“...work is being undertaken to develop a Comprehensive National Drainage Plan with the aim of improving drainage planning and management throughout the country.”

With regard to all that I have outlined, thus far, Madam President, I would again request some clarification about what seems to be a lack of allocated funding for the completion of this vital plan, and which the Minister of Works and Transport has advised would be awarded in November. Against this backdrop of an integrated flood development plan in the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* expenditure 2021, Madam President, we see allocations of approximately \$63 million for drainage works such as river clearing, upgrade of existing drainage pods and sluice gates, upgrade of river channels, embankment repair and erosion control. Madam President, no doubt that these are very important works needed to minimize flooding. However, with the exception of the allocation for the upgrade of existing pumps and gates and embankment rehabilitation, it seems that we are prepared to continue with the clearing watercourse and desilting sluice approach to solving our flooding problems. This approach has been quite a popular run from successive Governments over decades, consuming hundreds of millions of dollars and seems to be now entrenched, Madam President, in our drainage culture.

Madam President, I ask the question, in light of the continuous desilting programmes and its considerable expenditure to date, what has been done to effectively prevent, manage and/or control the occurrence of erosion and siltation through effective legislation, enforcement and watershed management? Madam President, the development and implementation of an integrated flood management plan would effectively address the reduction of this considerable recurrent expenditure, and address other issues as it is intrinsically linked with the Integrated

Water Resources Management Policy of which I earlier spoke. And, again, I ask for the funding, commitment and will to complete these plans expeditiously so that they can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals which have been established.

Madam President, I would like to just address some issues regarding planning approvals. Under “Diversification” in the budget statement on page 54, reference is made to the ease of doing business. The intention, as stated, is to improve—this is within the budget statement—on the position of 105 in the 2020 World Bank report on doing business. The Minister also indicated here that every effort is being made on improving the existing measurable benchmarks, many of which are totally unacceptable, according to him, the hon. Minister. One of the benchmarks being identified is 254 days for receiving construction permits. Madam President, I agree with the hon. Minister of Finance here, but I think his words “totally unacceptable” is rather mild based on reality, but I hesitate to add my words since this would definitely not be appropriate in this honourable Senate, Madam President.

Madam President, an actual experience that I have, because I am engaged in this industry, for a single residence approval, pre-COVID-19, Town and Country Planning, five months; Chaguanas Borough Corporation, three months and post-COVID, at the beginning of the COVID period, WASA New Services Department, nine months and counting, still not approved. Despite the COVID restrictions, Madam President, WASA’s New Services Department continues to be one of the worst and most inefficient departments when it comes to approvals for new development, nine months and counting as I said. Madam President, if we add up that five and three and nine, just waiting for an approval is a year and two months and still it is not fully available.

For decades the issue of statutory approvals have been discussed ad nauseam, and several solutions identified, but after decades we have still failed to bring about desired change in this crucial aspect of national development. Each of the many statutory stakeholders continue to be a law unto themselves, Madam President, and seem to be accountable to no one but themselves. What we have is a corrupt and inefficient system that costs citizens and developers no end of heartache, headache, stress and financial losses. [*Desk thumping*] Building Inspectors in the regional corporations have morphed into architects. They have morphed into engineers as they provide a service to potential home builders and developers for private fees and making private arrangements outside of the job that they are supposed to conduct.

Madam President, the hon. Minister identified a period of 254 days to obtain a construction permit. However, it should be noted that this does not include the inordinately long time it also takes to obtain a Completion Certificate after the building is completed from the regional corporations. This could add another three to six to nine months up to the overall process at a time when interest on bridging loans is at its peak, and homeowners and developers are to continue paying this peak interest for such prolonged periods of time, often leading to bankruptcy for the developers or total loss of profits from developers on their projects, and do not talk about homeowners and the impact that extended period of interest has on their finances.

Madam President, under “Diversification” in the budget statement, page 54, the hon. Minister of Finance states and I quote:

“We are expediting progress on improving the ease of doing business by reducing the time for obtaining approvals from the statutory agencies to build or to develop property.”

End of quote.

Against this pronouncement, Madam President, I see no allocations or mention made for proclamation of the Planning and Facilitation of Development Act, 2014, and I cannot see the intent of the statement by the hon. Minister of Finance being achieved without operationalization of this Planning and Facilitation of Development Act. The Act calls for the establishment of a national planning authority that will have as a standing committee, a development controlled committee, comprising of representative of all statutory stakeholders and which would, as one of its major responsibilities, coordinate the approval process.

Again, the hon. Minister is asked to look at allocating the necessary funding and the Ministry of Planning and Development to get this Act operationalized, so that the whole process of approvals, we stand a good chance of finally achieving an efficient and non-corrupt system.

**6.00 p.m.**

Madam President, I would like to just spend a little time on the issue of climate change. Madam President, I would like to bring attention to the adoption of mitigating measures to combat climate change. I would like to bring attention to the National Climate Change Policy done in 2011. Madam President, where are we with the implementation of this policy? Section 9.1 of this policy, “Policy Implementation and Integration” of this policy, page 17, states that, and I quote:

“The implementation of this policy shall be coordinated by the Multilateral Environmental Agreements Unit of the Ministry of Housing and the Environment, which has primary responsibility for the implementation of the...Kyoto Protocol as well as other multilateral environmental agreements to which Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory...”

Of course, since this time, Madam President, we have had changes of governments



and the issue of continuity with this policy is questionable.

In addition to just greenhouse gas emissions, the policy addresses sectoral vulnerability with regard to agriculture, human health, human settlements and infrastructure, coastal zones, water resources and tourism, and as such encompasses key issues of water and food security. These vulnerabilities are seen from the potential impacts, Madam President, of certain projected climate changes, such as temperature increases, extreme events such as floods, droughts and earthquakes, sea surface temperature increases, sea level rise and changes in rainfall precipitation. Madam President, given that climate change is a multifaceted, multisectoral issue, any climate change policy would have necessity—have implications for the revision of other sectoral policies in order to integrate and place in the relevant context, the climate change issue, in the relevant sectoral policy.

Madam President, an examination of the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* expenditure 2021, does not reveal a clear allocation for the implementation of any policy dealing specifically with climate change under any Ministry. There may be possibilities that aspects of climate change are being addressed. There is no doubt about it. There are aspects being addressed but no mention is made in subject headings of the draft expenditures.

Madam President, in addition, climate change is not specifically addressed in existing sectoral policies, although there are broad references to mitigation and adaptation in National Environmental Policy 2006 of Trinidad and Tobago and other related national environmental policies, rules and regulations. Madam President, it must be noted, however, that under coastal protection in this year's budget, \$39 million was spent in 2019, \$76 million in 2020, and under the revised estimated expenditure and allocations for 2021 is 32 million, so we are addressing

the issue of coastal protection. I am not saying no, but in terms of the pursuance of an overall policy on climate change, I am not sure where this is being covered.

Madam President, *Vision 2030*, Goal 3 of the “Short-Term Goals” states that:

“Climate vulnerability will be assessed”

And that same Goal 3 of *Vision 2030* of the “Short-Term Goals” goes on to identify two action items:

“1. Determine Areas of Greatest Climate Risk”—and secondly, to:

“...Design and implement adaptation actions for vulnerable sectors”

Madam President, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought us to the realization of how devastating the impact of an epidemic pandemic can be. The negative impacts of climate change if not mitigated efficiently have similar potential to bring about natural disasters which can wreak havoc to agriculture, infrastructure, human life, life itself and the economy.

Madam President, we are seeing the acceleration of some of these impacts, increased flooding, coastal erosion due to rising sea levels, et cetera. It is therefore urgent that we become exceedingly proactive regarding this threat, and a key step, in my opinion, is the establishment of a definite policy on climate change. I therefore urge, strongly urge, that funding be allocated for, one, the appointment of a technical steering committee for a review of the National Climate Policy 2011, and which would lead to the development of a revised national climate change policy, and two, a national climate change unit be created within the Ministry of Planning and Development to ensure the implementation of this revised policy.

Madam President, how much time do I have?

**Madam President:** You have seven more minutes.

**Sen. D. Teemal:** Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President, I ask the question, how does a government do business in this rapidly changing world and with all of the constraints and all of the potential disasters and epidemics and everything that is lining up on the world scenario? How do we do business? In the context of sustainable development, Madam President, and the challenges of water security, food security, and other aspects of integrated national development, the sectoral approach has its limitations. We must stop working in silos. In fact, *Vision 2030*, page 118, in the section under Implementation states, and I quote:

“Furthermore, given the integrative nature of the five Development Themes, Ministries and Departments will no longer operate in ‘silos’ and will adopt an integrated and a ‘whole of Government’ approach to implementation as national development objectives are hardly linear and mostly intertwined. As such, each Plan must be contextualised within the broader sector focus.”

Madam President, this absolutely necessary paradigm shift demands political courage and the will to ensure that adequate funding must be made available in a timely manner for the establishment and implementation of the policies and plans aimed at bringing about the necessary legislative and institutional framework that will stitch the respective sectoral inputs together to achieve desired objectives and avoid—very importantly, Madam President, avoid duplication of efforts.

I remember when the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure was conducting that enquiry into flood alleviation. What we found out was that flood mapping was being done, and flood mapping was being done by several stakeholders, the Met Office, the Ministry of Planning and Development, Drainage Division. They were all doing their own flood mapping separate from each other without that inter-sectoral cooperation—and this duplication of effort that I am referring to. Madam President, on page 52 of the budget statement by the

hon. Minister of Finance, it is stated that the construction programme will be anchored on several key pillars, including, and I quote:

“smart growth will be scored and rewarded by assessing and rating incoming applications for development as well as by other Government agencies and the private sector. The utilisation of a Smart Growth Scorecard made up of key performance indicators would measure the adherence of development projects to the desired planning and design principles and ensure that the country transits from the status quo of purely shovel-ready projects towards shovel-worthy projects;”

Madam President, I like how the hon. Minister of Finance has stated it in terms of “purely shovel-ready projects” and a shift towards “shovel-worthy projects”, for this statement infers timely and appropriate integrated planning for all projects undertaken by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

As we continue to see billions being spent on mega projects spawned by the water, transport, housing and other sectors, Madam President, I would like to ask the question: Are we giving the necessary priority and funding to advance and complete comprehensive integrated plans and policies and ensure their implementation? Madam President, the gap between pronouncements and actualization has to be narrowed significantly. Madam President, in the couple of minutes I have remaining, if you would allow me just on the question of ease of doing business and the Board of Inland Revenue. I know we have the Revenue Authority we are looking operationalize and bring it into action, but with regard to the ease of doing business, Madam President and the Board of Inland Revenue—

**Madam President:** Sen. Teemal, you have one minute.

**Sen. D. Teemal:** Okay. In terms of tax and VAT registration delays, Madam President, since the end of 2019, BIR has been requesting info from companies not

required by law in order to have these companies for tax and VAT. This has been delaying the registration process significantly.

Madam President, I thank you very much for this opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Leader of Government Business.

### ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, I now beg to move that this Senate do adjourn to Tuesday, October 27<sup>th</sup>—that is tomorrow—2020, at 10.00 a.m. During that sitting we would conclude the debate on this Appropriation Bill and bring it to an end, I guess, in a reasonable time based on the amount of speakers remaining. Thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 6.14 p.m.*