

SENATE

Friday, June 11, 2021

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I have received a request for leave of absence from today's sitting from Sen. Anil Roberts. The leave the Member seeks has been granted.

Hon. Senators, just to let you know that I am awaiting correspondence from Her Excellency and, therefore, with your leave, I will revert to this item on the Order Paper later in the proceedings.

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTATION AND VARIATION OF
APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2021**

Bill to supplement and vary the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage of the Bill be taken later in the proceedings. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Extension of Period for Payment of Fifty Percent of Fixed Penalty) (No. 2) Order, 2021. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan)*]
2. Non-Contentious Business (Amendment) Rules, 2021. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat)*]

UNREVISED

3. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
4. Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
5. Land Acquisition (Requisition) Order, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
6. Immigration (Amendment) Regulations, 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS

(Presentation)

Cannabis Control Bill, 2020

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

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

Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2020

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

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2020.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, there are three questions for oral response. The Government intends to respond to all three. There are two questions for written

response. The Government intends to respond to 154, and we are respectfully asking for a deferral of question 146 for written response. Thank you.

Madam President: Are you asking for a two-week deferral?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: A two-week deferral, Madam President.

Madam President: Question No. 146 is deferred for two weeks. Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, if I may? I wanted to raise this with my colleague a little earlier but it slipped me. Given the fact that we have agreed, in principle, to manage our time very productively and efficiently, with your leave, through you, if we can defer these questions to the next sitting, along with the three others, because we will have more flexibility, we can deal with business at hand. Do I have your support on that?

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Yes, Madam President.

Madam President: Thank you very much. So all three questions for written answer—for oral answer will be deferred to the next sitting as well as the question for written? No. The question for written answer is deferred for two weeks.

WRITTEN ANSWER TO QUESTION

Financial Institutions Paying Contractors

(Details of)

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

Can the Minister provide the following information, per year, for the financial years 2016—2020:

- (i) the names of each of the financial institutions employed in paying contractors through the factoring services method;
- (ii) the respective debt incurred by each financial institution; and

- (iii) a detailed breakdown of the amount of outstanding Government debt owed to the various contractors, consequent to payment by the factoring services method?

Vide end of sitting for written answer.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Sen. Wade Mark:

FIFA-Appointed Committee

(Rejection of Application)

- 104.** Can the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development indicate the reason(s) why the application of the FIFA-appointed normalization committee to host the Guyana versus Trinidad and Tobago World Cup qualifier game was rejected?

Water and Sewerage Authority

(Privatization of)

- 105.** Can the hon. Minister of Public Utilities indicate whether a decision has been taken to privatize the Water and Sewerage Authority?

Decline in Student Admission at UWI

(Impact on Labour Force)

- 107.** Can the hon. Minister of Education advise as to how the decline in new student admissions and a reduction in courses at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus is expected to impact this country's professional labour force?

Questions, by leave, deferred.

GAMBLING (GAMING AND BETTING) CONTROL BILL, 2021

Bill to provide for the regulation and control of gaming and betting and matters related thereto [*The Attorney General*]; read the first time.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Hon. Clarence Rambharat):

Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, I have been in contact with the Leader and Coordinator of the Benches opposite with regards to today's proceedings. As a result, I wish to indicate that in accordance with Standing Order 117, an agreement was reached in relation to the speaking time of Members during the debate of the second reading of the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2021.

Madam President, as I read the agreement, I would just like you to note that there has been a small change from what is before you. As such, debate on the Bill will proceed as follows: Forty minutes for the mover and first speakers on the benches opposite; 20 minutes for the Government and Independent speakers, including the Minister in wrapping up, and the speakers on the Opposition Bench will use best effort to speak within a 20-minute limit.

The benches further agreed, Madam President, that having regard to the Emergency Powers (No. 2) Regulations, 2021, the 7.00 p.m. starts with tonight's curfew that today's sitting should be concluded no later than 4.30 p.m. I thank you.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, in accordance with Standing Order 117, I wish to announce that an agreement was reached as follows: the speaking time for Members during the debate on the second reading of the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2021, only will be 40 minutes for the mover and first speaker on the Benches opposite, 20 minutes for all other Government and Independent speakers, including the Minister in wrapping

up, and that the Opposition Senators will use every effort to have their contributions made within 20 minutes.

Sen. Mark, you wanted to say something? Sure.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, I find it very unfortunate that the language that is used in this document, gives the impression that there was agreement. I think my hon. colleague would recognize that he had put forward a suggestion, and I told him that that is a matter I have to discuss with my colleagues before we can agree. For it to be put across as if there was an agreement, and then we are not taking part in this agreement as it relates to the 20 minutes is not an accurate reflection of the submission that has been made. But I have told my colleague this morning that we will do everything in our power, even though we are entitled to 30 minutes, my colleagues will try their best to see if they can make their contribution within a reasonable time frame that will not exceed, possibly, the 30 minutes. Some people might go for 21, some might be for 22. But I think it is very wrong to put on the parliamentary record that we have agreed to this arrangement. So, I just wanted to bring this to your attention.

Madam President: I am being very hopeful, because “Hope springs eternal in the human breast” that Standing Order 117, what I had read out initially, was the agreement of everyone. Therefore, there is no agreement really, pursuant to Standing Order 117 and based on what Sen. Mark has just said. I do not think that I can fashion an agreement based on what has just been said by Sen. Mark. Leader of Government Business.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, I assure you that there was agreement, and the agreement was reached on the basis that we would work within a certain time frame, as is obvious. The Government has made concessions in terms of the number of speakers and the time. The Independent Bench has also

made concessions and, as a result, the Opposition have been able to field their five speakers, if they wish to, within the 40 minutes for the first speaker and the 20 minutes for each of the second, third, fourth and fifth, if they so desire.

My understanding, very clearly, was there was an agreement and having spoken to my friend this morning, I accepted. I did not see it destroying the agreement with the use of the expression “best efforts”. So, I am resolute in my view that there is an agreement that is before you.

Sen. Mark: I am also equally resolute in my view that there is no agreement.
[Crosstalk]

Madam President: No, Sen. Mark, no need. I think we have to bring this to an end. At this stage though, I will ask, if there is agreement among the Government, the Opposition and the coordinator that we are finishing these proceedings and finishing deliberations on this Bill at 4.30 p.m. today. Is that my understanding as well so that I can announce that agreement please?

I just want to point out to Members, and to anyone who is viewing that it is important, we have a 7.00 p.m. curfew today, and may I just say that Parliament and having a sitting is not just about the Members who are sitting in this Chamber, it is about the support staff. There is work to be done before, during and after the sitting. When everyone else in this Chamber leaves, there is more work to be done, and we need to ensure that the staff will be able to leave comfortably to meet the 7.00 p.m. curfew. So, am I asking, once again, pursuant to 117 Standing Order, whether there is agreement that deliberation of this Bill, the Bill will be concluded today by 4.30 p.m.? That is all I want to know now? Leader of Government Business.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, we are very clear that the intention is to complete, not to complete the sitting, but to complete the Bill that is

before us by 4.30 p.m. and in pursuance of that, I actually timed it and shared it and even shared it with the Clerk, that assuming a start of 10.30 a.m., and given the time, the limits which were, in my view, agreed, this will take us to 4.30. So to get to 4.30, it requires that the speakers, the first speaker on each bench, stick within a limit of 40 minutes, and every speaker after that, including the Minister in winding up, sticks within a limit of 20 minutes. And if we do that, we will be out of here, not us, the Parliament staff, will have the freedom to be out of here by 4.30 p.m.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, let me make it very clear, a proposal cannot be imposed on the Opposition.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, my—

Sen. Mark: I am answering, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, just one second, please. Just one second. The simple question that I am putting at this stage is that we are completing deliberation of this Bill and completing the proceedings today by 4.30 p.m. Is that correct, Sen. Mark?

Sen. Mark: Madam President, we shall work towards completing this Bill at 4.30 p.m. We shall work towards that.

Madam President: Thank you very much. Sen. Richards?

Sen. Richards: Yes, Madam, that is the understanding, Madam President.

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTATION AND VARIATION OF
 APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2021**

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam President, I am sorry. I beg to move:

That a Bill to supplement and vary the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020, be now read a second time.

Madam President, the matter before the Senate is a supplementary appropriation and a variation of appropriation which together total just over \$2.9 billion. Before I go into the details of the actual proposed supplementation and variation, I would like to deal with some matters that have found themselves into the public domain.

Firstly, there is no gainsaying the fact that because of the reduction in revenue as a result of COVID-19, that the fiscal deficit, the budget deficit for 2021 would be significantly more than was originally anticipated. That is simple mathematics, and I would have thought that would have been obvious from the statements made in the other place where I indicated that we are looking at a shortfall of approximately \$5 billion in revenue, mostly from the energy sector, and we are also seeking parliamentary approval for an additional 3.3 billion, more or less, 2.9, for inescapable expenses.

We have been trying as a Government, over the last six years, to maintain an expenditure envelope in the vicinity of \$50 billion, more or less, and we have achieved that since 2016. However, in preparing the 2021 Estimates of Expenditure, an effort was made to do a further reduction down to approximately 48 billion, 48.5 billion and, unfortunately, because of the various demands of the various Ministries for Goods and Services, for Salaries and Wages, we have to take it back up to the \$51 billion level. So, that is the purpose of the Bill, and I would go through the details in due course, but I just want to deal with some issues.

Now, within a 40-minute period, it is impossible to respond to all the requirements of everyone. I sometimes wonder when I see the commentary, a budget statement is usually, at least under this administration, is usually about three hours long, sometimes more, hundreds of pages of texts. It is impossible

within a 40-minute period to be all things to all men. I have noticed commentary that as Minister of Finance, I should go through every variation in income and expenditure for every quarter for the last three quarters. If I were to do that, I would not have any time to discuss the actual supplementation and variations and give some sort of justification for them. So, that is just not possible, but I want to deal with an issue.

I have noticed two, possibly three, local economists, insisting that the Trinidad and Tobago Government should go to the IMF for funding. And when confronted with the fact that whenever you approach the IMF, you have to agree or commit to certain policy adjustments, they run away from that fact. So I thought I would put into the record what the facts are, because these commentators are university lecturers and this is what they are teaching our children at the university. So, let me correct the record.

There are two emergency funding sources within the IMF: The Rapid Credit Facility or RCF, and the Rapid Financing Instrument. The Rapid Credit Facility is for low and very low-income countries. The Rapid Financing Facility is for middle and upper-income countries. In order to qualify for the Rapid Financing Instrument, a country has to show an urgent balance of payments need or crisis, which would be assessed by the IMF staff. The repayment period for this Rapid Financing Instrument is three to five years. So, it is a very short repayment period. The interest rate is 1.05 currently, and it requires quarterly payments over that period of three to five years, three and a half to five years actually.

A number of countries have approached the IMF for this Rapid Financing Facility or Rapid Credit Facility. Many Caricom countries have done so. Some have been denied outright, like Suriname, was denied. Others are facing difficulty

in getting agreement from the IMF, Belize and Antigua. But when you approach the IMF for the Rapid Financing Instrument, you have to do a letter of intent, and let me just read from the letter of intent that the Government of Jamaica did on the 8th of May, 2020, last year. And I would like to just highlight two areas in this letter, written to the Managing Director of the IMF.

To respond to increasing fiscal needs, we are revising our primary balance target to 3.5 per cent of GDP.

What that means is that the Government of Jamaica is committing to have a fiscal surplus, 3.5 per cent of GDP. If we were to do that, we would have to generate a fiscal surplus of about \$5 billion. If we generate a fiscal surplus of \$5 billion, which means that our expenditure would be \$5 billion less than our revenue that would mean that the Government will be spending somewhere in the vicinity of \$35 billion at most.

If we were to spend \$35 billion, we would have to retrench about 30,000 people in the public service. We would have to remove all subsidies on water and electricity. And, in the other place, the Minister of Public Utilities pointed out that the cost of electricity in other islands in the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica, is five times what it is in Trinidad and Tobago. We would have to devalue the currency, because the other commitment the Jamaican Government has given that they will continue to rely on a flexible exchange rate and limit forex interventions.

So that people must understand that it is not right to just glibly say that we should go to the IMF for money. We in this Government have sought to do our own restructuring without the imposition of IMF conditionalities. All of the countries in the region that have gone to the IMF, have had to reduce the size of the public service, remove all subsidies on government's supplied goods and

services and allow their exchange rate to float. I think, as I speak now, the Jamaica dollar is now about 130:1. So, we are not going to do that. And it is irresponsible of people to say that is what we should do.

I saw another economist this morning saying that we should take the opportunity after the COVID-19 crisis is over to deal with issues in our economy and, essentially, run a balanced budget which as, I have just said, would mean that we will be spending 35 billion, and we will be retrenching 30,000 public servants. It is easy for these amateur commentators to say that, but they are not charged with the responsibility of providing for the service of Trinidad and Tobago.

Let me now move to another issue. I am very pleased to announce this morning that yesterday a number of Members of Parliament would have received, on behalf of the Government, through the National Insurance Property Development Company, NIPDEC, 1,000 face masks each. So, we are now distributing. By the end of next week, we should have distributed 41,000 cloth face masks; 1,000 to each MP office courtesy the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for distribution to their constituents. I am very happy to announce that.

With respect to fiscal operations, up to the end of April, the Budget Division had forecasted, because revenue and expenditure in Trinidad and Tobago is not laid. The budget is front-loaded in terms of expenditure and then, as the year ends, the expenditure starts to level off. So that at various points in time in the fiscal year, the Budget Division would project what they expect the deficit to be, at that point in time. And for the period October 2020 to April 2021, a deficit of 6.25 billion was projected and a deficit of 5.15 billion was realized, just 1.1 billion lower than the projected outcome. This was as a result of two things, lower than

projected revenue of about 2.5 billion and lower than projected expenditure of about 3.6 billion.

10.30 a.m.

When one goes through the figures themselves, one sees that the greatest negative variants is revenues from petroleum, and in particular the receipts collected from oil companies, up to April of 2021, were just about \$400 million lower than anticipated. And that is because of slippages in natural gas prices and natural gas production in particular. There was also a reduction from other companies which would be the nonoil sector and the petrochemical sector; those are bundled into the other companies' category. There was a reduction there of about \$119 million. Taxation from individuals was surprisingly on target, more or less. There was just a 28 million, small variance, in terms of taxation from individuals.

In terms of royalties, because the economy derives most of its revenue from natural gas—and the ratio in the past time, it may have changed a bit now, was that oil contributed one-third of Government revenue from petroleum and natural gas contributed two-thirds. So any time there is a reduction in production of natural gas and natural gas prices are not at the estimated levels, you have a significant and profound effect on Government revenue, and in particular on royalties. Because there is a royalty across the board of 12½ per cent and that is simply a factor of production by price.

Royalties on oil and gas were \$1.8 billion lower than anticipated and this is because gas production is in the region of 2.5 to 2.6 billion standard cubic feet as compared to the expected production of 3.2 billion standard cubic feet per day. And that is due to a number of factors, all related to COVID, particularly with

respect to BP which has been unable to bring in its platform infrastructure to maintain the production of gas because the areas where their infrastructure is being constructed are all under lockdown. So they have been able to meet their targets in terms of bringing in infrastructure to continue their gas production programme at the level that they had expected.

So that we are down 1.8 billion from royalties and this also affects the production sharing contracts where because of the lack of revenue, because the gas production and the prices are significantly down, we have also lost about \$300 million in terms of the Government share from production sharing contracts. So basically, when you look at the reasons for the reduction in revenue, they are all primarily associated with the energy sector with royalties, production sharing revenue and taxation from oil companies, making up almost the entire \$2.5 billion shortfall in the first part of the year. The other sources of revenue has not done too badly but, as I indicated, we are profoundly affected by lower production in the energy sector.

There is a much better oil price than anticipated. We had pegged the budget at \$45 oil price, it is now averaging in excess of \$52 for the fiscal year. So that we are getting a boost there from the increased oil price but it is insufficient to deal with the significant shortfall from collections of revenue from natural gas production. I would also give some preliminary figures on the gross domestic product for the year 2020. We are looking at, as I had indicated previously, a decline in GDP in fiscal 2020 with the full brunt of COVID of somewhere around the order of 8 per cent. I am pleased to announce that this has been reduced significantly in 2021 so far based on interim estimates that the 8 per cent—8.6 per cent reduction in GDP in 2020 has been cut down to almost zero, 0.9 per cent in

2021. That is what the experts in the Ministry of Finance are estimating at this point in time, that for fiscal 2021—calendar 2021 sorry, the GDP will be virtually flat. We would not have that dramatic decline that we saw in 2020.

Let me just reiterate some things that I said before. And, Madam President, before I continue, how much time do I have?

Madam President: You finish at three minutes to 11.00. You have some 50 seconds additionally. So 10.57.50.

Hon. C. Imbert: Fifty-seven, okay. So I have about 23 minutes. All right. Let me just reiterate some statements I made in the other place about the money that the Government has spent on the acquisition of vaccines. I have to use my memory. So far, Madam President, we have spent, as a Government, just over US \$10 million, TT \$70 million, to pay for a commercial shipment—actually, more than one commercial shipment of vaccines and also to pay a down payment. Those are the Sinopharm vaccines I am referring to.

We have made two payments in full for two substantial commercial shipments of Sinopharm vaccines. And we have also made a down payment—the required down payment within the required time frame to the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust, or AVAT as it is also known. And prior to that commercial acquisition of Sinopharm vaccines, we had received donations, and the last time I checked I saw donations of the order of 170,000, more or less. We got donations of Sinopharm. We got donations of AstraZeneca. We have also paid for three shipments of AstraZeneca, vaccines from the COVAX alliance, and those three shipments would make up just over 100,000 AstraZeneca vaccines.

So when you take the 100,000 AstraZeneca vaccines that we have paid for—and we received two shipments of that already and the third shipment is either on

its way or close to being here already—those are three shipments of just over 33,000 vaccines each. You take the 100,000 donation from Sinopharm and you take the various other donations; the donations from the Government of India, the donations from Caricom countries, we have put all of that together, you get vaccines of over 250,000 outside of the commercial arrangements with Sinopharm and the commercial arrangements—well, the multilateral arrangements with the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust. When you add that all up you would have sufficient vaccines; 800,000 Johnson & Johnson from AVAT and significant other vaccines from Sinopharm and vaccines from AstraZeneca, you would have sufficient vaccines to vaccinate 1.2 million people, which from my last check is about 85 per cent of the population. But these vaccines will come over time. The estimated date of the first shipment of vaccines from the African Trust is sometime in August but that will come in stages, I assume. That is what they have told us so far. We hope they will meet that schedule. And the other vaccines are here already or on their way. So I thought I would put that into the system.

With respect to grants, I have already announced that we have had 30,000 applications for our salary relief grant for the month of May and we will look and see whether we can also extend that grant into June, funds permitting. I am advised by the Minister of Social Development and Family Services that they will be closing off their application process for the month of May shortly and the applications are smaller in number for the Income Support Grant salary than we have received for the Salary Relief Grant, but I would not want to talk out of turn until the actual numbers become available within the next day or so. But I would say on the face of it, we are looking at 40,000, more or less, in aggregate in terms of applications for grants or less and we have sufficient funding to cater for that.

Within the original budget there was a block allocation of \$250 million for COVID relief in the form of grants and so on, and let us assume that we are looking at 40,000; on the upper end, applications for grants—let us assume they are all eligible, taken an average of about \$1,200 because it is \$1,500 for persons who lost their employment at the beginning of May and \$1,000 for persons who lost their employment after the 8th of May. And so, taking an average of 12, you are looking at perhaps \$50 million, so that we have more than sufficient. We have varied the appropriation to send \$40 million to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for these Income Support Grants for the month of May. And I will hold discussions with that Ministry on that with the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services to see how we could best use that \$40 million since the amount for grants for May that would be required may be less than May. So perhaps that funding can be used for other relief.

We have also extended our small and medium enterprise loan programme to the end of December; and our credit union loan programme, these are subsidized loans guaranteed by Government to the end of December. Let me restate the terms of the small and medium enterprise loan programme; 75 per cent of the loan is guaranteed by Government. The interest is zero and there is a moratorium for the first two years on repayment. And yet, despite all of that, many small and medium enterprises cannot meet the basic requirements for a loan programme. We also had a request that we extend the purpose of the loans beyond operational expenses, such as payroll and rental and utility bills and so on, to other things, such as acquisition of machinery and equipment, and expansion of facilities and so on, and we are prepared to look at that favourably. We are also looking favourably at increasing the loan guarantee up to 100 per cent, but unfortunately, we cannot

remove the requirement for accounts, even management accounts from the SMEs which is where the greatest area of failure to meet basic requirements for a loan has manifested itself.

I do not think there is a proper understanding among many SMEs that if you go to borrow money, you have to demonstrate that you can pay it back. And the only way you can demonstrate that you can pay it back is that you show income and expenditure and you must show an ability to repay a loan. But what we found with many of these SMEs who approached the banks because they have no accounts, they could not demonstrate a capacity to repay the loan, even with the guarantee. So we are looking at this. They could not demonstrate an ability to produce tax clearances, et cetera, so we are looking as to whether we can use the year prior to the COVID. So seeing whether if these entities could be up to date for 2019, see if that could assist the process and also increasing the guarantee to 100 per cent and see how we could help these SMEs, and of course we would have to have a major financial literacy outreach programme as well to explain to SMEs that they must have basic corporate structures, basic accounting and so on.

I can also say that we are also seriously considering another wave of VAT refunds so that that would put some more cash into the hands of businesses, and that will be dealt with, I would think, within the next two weeks or so. We would make a submission and see what sort of approval we can get for VAT refunds and see if we can accelerate VAT refunds. We had already received a list from the TTMA of VAT refunds of about 100 million and I already authorized the staff in the Ministry of Finance to make those VAT refunds available to those businesses that had been identified by the TTMA and we will see if we can broaden that

exercise to other business associations. So we can work with the private sector to identify those businesses which are most in need of these VAT refunds.

Let me go now to what we are about basically, Madam President. The matter before the Senate is the provision of supplementary funds, as I had indicated previously in the amount of about 2.9 billion. It is in fact 2.927 billion—2,927,600,002. And the areas to be supplemented are the Elections and Boundaries Commission, the Office of the Prime Minister, Tobago House of Assembly, Ministry of Finance, National Security, Attorney General, Health, Public Administration, Public Utilities, Rural Development, Works and Transport, Housing, the police and Planning and Development. And I can briefly give you some indication of what this is all about. The 4 million—4.1 million for the EBC is to make a payment on the electronic voter registration and election management system which is in use and is being used by the EBC to roll out their new ID card programme. The EBC had made a decision to improve their ID card system in terms of the security features and they had deferred this before the last election. I think they quite correctly thought that would lead to some confusion in the election year in 2020, but now they are in the process of implementing the roll out of the new ID cards, of course, under the COVID constraints. So it would be a phased approach. So this money is required to provide them with the ability to do their new ID card roll out programme and also to improve their electronic voter registration.

For the Prime Minister, the recurrent expenditures for the Children's Authority, is just simply to increase the budgetary allocation to deal with the increased demands on the Children's Authority because of the requirements of the Children Act which are quite onerous from a financial perspective. For the THA,

the \$80 million is built up of 50 million in recurrent and 30 million in their Public Sector Investment Programme. The 50 million is built up of 25 million for the operationalization of the Roxborough Hospital as well as the Moriah Health Centre, and to facilitate payment of debts to suppliers, such as National Helicopter Services, other creditors and so on, in the amount of 15. And also 10 million for needs of the COVID pandemic in terms of PPE supplies, et cetera.

Under the Public Sector Investment Programme, there is an enterprise grant—enterprise assistance grant programme, similar to our NEDCO entrepreneurial grant. We have provided an additional 5 million to the THA for the rest of the fiscal year. And for airport relocation, the THA has gone ahead and done a significant development of service lots at Cove and Shirvan in order to relocate residents at Crown Point and Store Bay.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Madam President—

Hon. C. Imbert: And I must say that the—

Madam President: Minister, a request is being made of you.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Minister, I am unable to hear you, could you speak a bit more into the mike, please. Thank you.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Thanks.

Hon. C. Imbert: I am so sorry. Wish somebody had told me that before. The money for the THA that is being asked for is \$80 million and this is comprised of 25 million for the Roxborough Hospital and Moriah Health Centre to fully operationalize those facilities, pay debts to entities such as National Helicopter Services, enable the acquisition of personal protective equipment and provide money for their enterprise assistance grant programme which is a small business

grant programme and to assist in the cost of development of lands at Cove and Shirvan for airport relocation. And I was just about to say that I have seen these lots and this is very attractive land, very well located and the price at which the land is being offered to residents who are being relocated is extremely attractive, perhaps may be 20 to 30 per cent of its market value.

With respect to the Ministry of Finance, the Infrastructure Development Fund is being supplemented in the amount of \$115 million. This is to allow payments to the contractor on the Point Fortin Hospital, VAMED, \$65 million for that, and also \$50 million which is a book entry to bring to account amongst disbursed under the IDB waste water project. For the Ministry of National Security, there are a number of items that are being supplemented, wages, COLA, allowances—wages and COLA, NIS for all of the divisions of the Ministry—Travelling and Subsistence, Uniforms, Rental Accommodation, Materials and Supplies, Maintenance of Vehicles for the fire service, prison service, coast guard, et cetera, life guards, Repairs and Maintenance Equipment, Contract Employment, Repairs and Maintenance of Buildings, such as fire service buildings, prison service, regiment, coast guard, Forensic Science Centre, life guards, et cetera, and also to allow the Ministry of National Security to meet its contractual obligations to overseas missions who have persons stationed there from the Ministry of National Security, as well as money for the various divisions in the Ministry to meet their contractual obligations.

There is also funding to the Ministry to pay security providers, to pay for fuel, to provide an annual contribution to Vision on Mission, to supplement that contribution; to also supplement the Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund, ex gratia awards; compensation to estates of members of the protective services, a

further \$3 million; and 188 million for the Strategic Services Agency and 9 million for the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management. With respect to the Attorney General, there is a small supplementation for salaries, 13 million for materials to meet the cost of acquisition of polymer paper used in the Civil Registry for marriage certificates, death certificates, birth certificates, et cetera; also, some sums for Contract Employment; \$51 million for fees to attorneys; another \$33 million to Deloitte & Touche for enquires taking place; funding for legal aid—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much.

With respect to the Ministry of Health, we are supplementing their appropriation by 267 million to allow them to acquire vaccines, although the Ministry of Finance has already gone ahead and spent quite a bit of money on this. And we are supplementing the CDAP allocation, medical treatment of nationals in institutions and we are also providing \$86 million to the RHAs for a number of purposes. We are also providing funding for the ambulance service to deal with arrears that have built up over time, for extra trips which must be audited. The audit is very cumbersome. It takes a long time but we have reached the point now where we can make a payment, a partial payment for extra trips by the ambulance provider because the contract is based on a certain number of trips and you have to pay an amount for every extra trip. There is also some funding for debt service payments. We have been trying throughout the year to reschedule, stretch out, renegotiate loan arrangements but we have found it inescapable and we must provide some of these loan debt service payments at this point in time.

Public Administration: we are assisting with another debt payment on the Government campus loan fit-out. And for Public Utilities, as I indicated earlier, we would have hoped that we would be further along with WASA but unfortunately, we still need to provide a significant amount of money to WASA, \$575 million and we are also increasing the allocation for street lighting and so on. The other items, we are providing a significant amount of money for the regional corporations in local government to provide them with additional funds, almost 100 million; 94 million for that. In terms of the Ministry of Works and Transport, we are also providing them with funding to carry on their basic minimum operations, including the ferry service to Tobago. With respect to the Ministry of Housing and Development, we are providing supplemental funding for maintenance of apartments, for housing grants and so on. And with respect to the police service, we are adding 57 million, which together with a loan of 200 million and an original allocation of 335 million will give the police service approximately 600 million for Goods and Services in this fiscal, including the ability to wipe off previous debts.

So, Madam Speaker, within the constraints of time, I have tried my best in the 40 minutes allotted to try and cover as many things as possible but it is impossible to cover everything in 40 minutes. I will try my best within the 20 minutes allowed for winding up to cover any other matters that may need to be covered. I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam President: Sen. Mark. [*Desk thumping*] May I just ask though, someone's phone seems to be going off regularly and I will just ask you to just check because you should have all your phones on silent in the Chamber.

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, we are very pleased to respond to the measure that is before us contained in the Bill entitled, an Act to supplement and vary the appropriation of the sum issued of which was authorized by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020. The hon. Minister of Finance, in presenting the midterm review, really put forward this morning a very weak, unimpressive, unconvincing and deficient presentation.

Madam President, I think that he would need more than 20 minutes because there are a number of areas that we would like the hon. Minister to clear the air on which I will deal with in my contribution. We would like to hon. Minister to address the sources of funding for this \$3 billion which is supposed to come or is coming, I should say, from the Consolidated Fund which is in a very negative state at this time. So the hon. Minister would need to clear the air as to the sources or the source of financing for this \$3 billion that this (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill seeks to address.

11.00 a.m.

There is also need for the hon. Minister to deal with the widening fiscal deficit, which we would like him to clear the air on during this presentation. We would also like, Madam President, for the hon. Minister to clear the air on the loans, donations, and cross contributions by various agencies, through loans, donations and cross contributions amounting to some \$2.8 billion. So these are matters that we would like the hon. Minister to address, among others, in his winding up.

Madam President, this midterm review represents a national disappointment, if not an insult to this nation. The Minister of Finance, in his 40-minute presentation here this morning, offered no intelligent, scientific, or orderly

approach to how the Trinidad and Tobago economy is going to gradually reopen, particularly, Madam President, those entities that have been defined under the state of emergency powers, and regulations rather, as nonessential. When are we going to open up this economy to facilitate those nonessential areas where tens of thousands of workers are engaged but are currently unemployed in Trinidad and Tobago and on the breadline? It is clear that there is no plan on the part of this administration to rescue our economy and society, particularly in this period of COVID-19.

Madam President, we would want to ask the Minister, from the very outset, that the bulk of the moneys that are being appropriated via the supplementation, out of the \$3 billion that is being allocated via supplementation, if you look at the breakdown under the various headings, both in terms of the broad categories and the specific Heads of Expenditure, what you would notice and observe is that almost 90 per cent to 99 per cent of the allocation is going towards recurrent expenditure. That is what we are seeing in this supplementation, and, Madam President, these are matters, which in any proper financial planning and forecasting, the Minister of Finance ought to have taken on board. But we will come to those specific matters in a short while.

Madam President, we would like the Minister to understand and to appreciate that when it comes to transparency and accountability of public moneys, it is essential that the Minister comes very clean, comes very truthful and give the population the facts. Madam President, it has been said that the best disinfectant for secrecy is the sunshine of transparency, and corruption flourishes in darkness.

Madam President, the Minister of Finance—and he repeated it today—said that there is going to be a deficit or a shortfall of some \$5 billion arising out of

declines in revenues from the energy sector in particular, and gave Trinidad and Tobago the impression that given the initial deficit of 5 billion that is being projected here—5 billion—the Minister gave the impression that with the three additional billion that we are to locate in this supplementation, we are going to be experiencing a fiscal deficit of \$8 billion. We need the Minister to clear the air on this first matter.

We have done our research, and the research that we have done is revealing that as we speak, as the Minister presented that particular midterm review, Trinidad and Tobago's fiscal deficit for 2021 thus far is not \$8 billion, but \$16.47 billion. Madam President, this is a wide gap, and I will tell you how we arrived at this.

The Minister of Finance on page 31 of his budget statement projected revenue for fiscal 2021 of \$46.3 billion, and a total expenditure of 49.357 billion, yielding, Madam President, an estimated fiscal deficit of \$8.2 billion. In the midterm review that the Minister just presented, the Minister indicated that the country was experiencing a shortfall in revenue of some \$5 billion. So, Madam President, when you total the 2021 revenue, which was estimated in the order of \$36.4 billion, what we are talking about is a further projection of 2.9 or \$3 billion based on what we are debating at this time.

Madam President, what this tells us is that the total Government expenditure is \$52.5 billion for the current year. This means that the Government has a deficit—now has a deficit not of \$8 billion or 8.5 billion, but has a deficit of 16.4 billion, double what the hon. Minister has projected. Therefore, we want the hon. Minister to come very clean, because this is very concerning to our country because if our figures are correct and the deficit is not 8.5 but \$16.4 billion, you

understand the state that we are in, where the Government has to borrow in order to finance this deficit. This is where we want the hon. Minister of Finance to clear the air on this fiscal deficit. Is it 8.5 billion, which we are rejecting, or is it what we have analysed, based on his own figures presented here today and in the 2021 Budget, 16.4 billion, the fiscal deficit? So come clean; tell the country the truth. That is the first area we want the hon. Minister to clear for us in this supplementation and variation.

As I am on this point, let us deal with sources of revenues, or sources of funding I should say, to finance this 3 billion supplementation. Where is the money going to come from? The Auditor General's report that was tabled recently in this honourable Parliament indicates that the Consolidated Fund is in a negative zone. So it means to say that the Consolidated Fund is not able, or does not have the capacity to finance this \$3 billion. The Minister must tell us where he intends to raise those sums in order to place into the Consolidated Fund. Is it going to be through overdraft at the Central Bank? Is it going to be continued domestic and foreign borrowings? Or is it going to be a further drawdown on our country's rainy-day fund called the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund? Madam President, sunshine is the best disinfectant for secrecy. Let us deal with transparency and accountability. Let us tell the nation the truth as to where we are. You cannot present a \$3 billion supplementation and variation of appropriation, and not tell this honourable Senate where is the money going to come from, where are you going to source the money. So the Minister must tell the Senate where he is going to source the money.

Madam President, when we examine closely the various Heads of Expenditure, certain issues come to the fore immediately. But before we deal with

those issues that I want to address, Trinidad and Tobago has not been informed by the hon. Minister as to where we stand as a nation in this particular period, and at this particular juncture as it relates to our debt to GDP ratio. This borrowing and borrowing, both domestically and externally, has led to our overall public sector debt and the debt to GDP rising to some 80 to 90 per cent. In fact, right now we are closer to 90 per cent of debt to GDP, and the rate that we are going to be borrowing in order to just keep current expenditure afloat in this country, we are predicting that in the next couple of months Trinidad and Tobago will pass the 100 per cent debt to GDP ratio.

That is a crisis. That is a crisis for Trinidad and Tobago because we are mortgaging the future of our children and the next generation to the payment of onerous, burdensome debts. So that is an area that the Minister ought to have paid attention to when he presented this statement this morning, because we are talking about 3 billion. We do not know where the 3 billion is coming from. We are positive it is going to come from either drawdowns or borrowings, and we are saying the Government has drawn down in the last five years some \$14 billion from our HSF, and the bulk of that money has gone into recurrent expenditure, and paying their friends in the contracts—paying contractors I should say, and essentially, the moneys that we are withdrawing from the HSF, the moneys are not going towards productive capacity building. It is not about going into capacity building for the long-term growth and development of Trinidad and Tobago. Everything is being sucked into recurrent expenditure. These are issues that we are concerned about.

Madam President, when we look and we assess and we evaluate the sums, the various sums that are being allocated to the 14 Heads of Expenditure in the

Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation Bill 2021 amounting to just about \$3 billion, some of the issues and concerns that arise, that we need to address, are the following. Madam President, it is sheer poor financial planning that has resulted, if you look at Head 15, Head 22, Head 23, Head 43, Head 64 and Head 67, you would see where hundreds and billions of dollars, hundreds of millions of dollars rather, are being spent in the payment of acting allowances, increments, salaries, pensions. These are matters that ought to have been included in the 2021 Budget when it was presented in October by the Minister of Finance.

Why are we coming in the mid-year review, with just June, July, August, September, four months again to go, to tell us you want an increase in expenditure to deal with gratuities, to deal with pensions, to deal with salaries, to deal with wages, to deal with COLA, to deal with increments? These are matters that the Minister of Finance ought to have projected. Or is it a deliberate attempt on the part of the Government to suppress expenditure by withholding payments to public officers and daily-rated workers as it relates to wages and salaries and COLA and acting allowance and increments?

I have seen in this document before us that we are paying arrears of travelling allowances for 2018 and 2019 and 2020. Why did the Minister not deal with those matters when they arose at that time? Madam President, I will tell you why. The Government attempted to pull a trick on the nation by presenting the fiscal deficit in a more favourable light than what it really is. It is like what we are dealing with today, where the Minister of Finance has told us that the deficit is 8.5billion. When you check the figures carefully, it is double that amount, 16.4billion. Madam President, this cannot be proper. You are dealing with people's property rights. Wages and increments and acting allowances and salaries and

pensions and severance payments, these constitute property, the property of workers. And the Government, in a very whimsical manner, has decided to suppress expenditure and now they suppress expenditure in the first eight months of the year. The Government is now coming to say, listen, we are now projecting salary payments for the rest of the fiscal year in these sums and these amounts.

Madam President, that is what you call creative but deceptive accounting and allocation of resources. That is what that amounts to. It is a deliberate, calculated decision by the Government to suppress personal emoluments in order for their deficit to look good, in order for them to come with a lower overall expenditure package, not knowing these are having serious impacts on people's living and working lives.

Madam President, at the same time, what this represents is an attack on the collective bargaining process because what the Government is doing is undermining the rights of public officers to the enjoyment of their property, which is guaranteed under the Constitution. I want to call on the Minister to discontinue this pattern of behaviour in which he is deliberately suppressing expenditure, and when he does that, he harms, he injures and he hurts the people who are entitled to those allowances and those salaries, wages, severance payments and pensions. Madam President, it is not good, and this must stop.

Madam President, I want to also bring to your attention a very important matter. The Minister talked about the Government allocating what he called a sum of money which amounts to close to \$107 million, toward the purchase of vaccines to inoculate, as he claims, some 85 per cent of the population. I think we need a forensic investigation into the expenditure of COVID-19 grants, and particularly as it relates to this programme, not only of vaccination, but supplies and equipment

and material, of training of personnel. We need to get a forensic enquiry.

Madam President, I have done the research on the amount of moneys that this Government has collected, or is about to collect, as it relates to loans, donations and what I call cross contributions from various institutions internationally. It comes up to \$2.8 billion and I want the hon. Minister to deny this. I have a report from something called the Media Institute of the Caribbean. It is dated the 1st of June, 2021. It is a country report. It details all the moneys that Trinidad and Tobago got through loans, donations and other contributions, from February of 2020 to April of—I think, March of 2021. Madam President, these loans came from external sources like the IADB, US \$100 million. It came from the World Bank, a US \$20 million. It came from China, \$204 million. It came from the United States in terms of the US Embassy donating field hospitals amounting to US \$1.5 million. It came from the European Union donating some US \$3.3 million for Caricom and those agencies associated with Caricom.

So, you have loans coming to CARPHA, to PAHO, from the EU, from Canada, in the sums of millions of dollars, and we need the Government to tell this country what have they done with this money. The United Nations UNICEF has supplied moneys to this country and to this Government. And we are being told by this Government, it has drawn down moneys from the HSF to deal with COVID-19 matters, including grants and salary support, but what they are not telling us is the amount of moneys that they have collected, or they are about to collect from these external sources as it relates to loans and donations and cross contributions. We need answers to these questions, Madam President. These are very serious issues affecting our nation and the Government needs to come clean on this.

We are boasting how we are about saving lives and livelihoods, but more so

at this time the Government says the focus is on saving lives. Who could argue against that? We are in support of Government and so on moving to save lives and provide contributions toward that end, but when we look at what is facing our nation and our country, what do we find? What do we see? We see a total fiasco as it relates to a simple roll-out programme, a simple roll-out vaccination programme, where our mothers and elderly sisters, our grandparents, 94 years, 84 years, being subjected to some of the worst forms of treatment. Madam President, would you believe this is day three of a government in office unable to conduct and execute a simple managerial task as it relates to a vaccination roll-out programme? These are moneys that they have said they have allocated, and this honourable Parliament has approved, to buy vaccines from different countries in the world, and just to roll out those vaccines to our people the Government has failed miserably. The Minister of Finance has failed miserably. The Government, headed by the Prime Minister, has failed miserably the people of this country.

Madam President, you must be there on the scene to witness the “sufferation” or the suffering that our mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers are experiencing, not because they wanted to do it. They were instructed, they were advised by the Government to go and get vaccinated. Vaccines are available, go to all the centres, and they went in their numbers. What they were told, hundreds of them, only 100 vaccines are available. This morning they are being told only 40 vaccines are available. Why did the Government not tell the people that in advance? Madam President, this is unacceptable. This is inexcusable. This is indefensible. We must condemn completely and strongly the conduct of this Government in this matter. And we call on the Government to either resign or get out of office. You are incapable and incompetent of dealing with the elementary

affairs of our country, the rolling out of a vaccination programme.

Madam President, \$267 million is allocated to the Ministry of Health, and a large chunk of that has to deal with COVAX and vaccines, and that is the talk in town, vaccines. But why did the Government mislead the population? Why did the Government not tell the population they did not have sufficient vaccines for all of them? Why did you have our mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers suffering out there. “Rain coming and beating them”. That is unacceptable.

Madam President, more importantly is that we exposed our fathers and our elderly to potential harm as it relates to COVID-19. I am praying to Almighty God that in two weeks’ time we would not have a super spreader, a super spreader that took place on the invitation of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. This must be bolted firmly to the chest of Dr. The Hon. Keith Rowley, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and his entire Government. They must take full responsibility for whatever happens in two weeks’ time with our people.

11.30 a.m.

So, Madam President, this is unacceptable. I believe that the Government has a lot to answer, and we call for the resignation of the Minister of Health, his removal. And if the Prime Minister does not remove him, the Prime Minister must call fresh elections in this country so that the people can decide where they want to go. The Government has failed the country and failed the people, Madam President. So, Madam President, these are issues as it relates to health and its allocation that are of concern to us, Madam President.

Madam President, another issue I would want to touch on briefly deals with Head 64, Madam President. Madam President, if you go to Head 64 which is on

page 20 of the document that was circulated, I cannot deal with all the Heads, all the Items rather, I just want to deal with two briefly, Madam President.

Madam President, go to page—the Ministry of Works and Transport, that is, Madam President, Head 43, I beg your pardon, on page 17, Madam President. Madam President, if you could join me on page 17 of this Senate document that deals with the Ministry of Works and Transport, I would like to bring to your attention and this honourable Senate's attention, what is going on in Trinidad and Tobago. If you go to page 18 of this report, Madam President, you will see where the Government has allocated \$23million between the months of July, or June to September to a boat, a vessel called *Jean de la Valette*. We have just purchased two fast ferries, Madam President, for over \$1 billion where we need proper accountability as it relates to that, Madam President.

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

Sen. W. Mark: Yeah. As it relates to accountability. Madam President, why did the Government not project that this amount of moneys that we are allocating to the *Jean de la Valette*? Could the Government not indicate to us and could I not—I would like to ask the Minister of Works and Transport when he speaks, what is the duration of the contract of this particular vessel? We are paying millions and millions of dollars, Madam President, and we have two new vessels side by side. This vessel should be returned to their owners. So the Minister of Works and Transport must tell us the duration of this contract.

Madam President, I am also seeing \$160 million for the two new vessels. Madam President, I want to ask the Minister of Works and Transport, has NIDCO taken over the role as Government's chief shipping agent? If it has, Madam President, I would like to ask whether the Government is operating illegally and

unlawfully. The Port Authority Act makes it very clear that the agent for the Government is the Port Authority for shipping purposes. The Government has handed over those two vessels and they have brought in foreign crews, Madam President, foreign crews to man those vessels and they have undermined the Port Authority, they have undermined the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union and they are now about to privatize the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, sell out our port, Madam President, to whoever they choose to do it, because we have no transparency, there is no accountability, there is no procurement regulator, so it is the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago determining, Madam President, who gets what, when and how much. That is criminal, Madam President.

We need accountability, we need independent oversight and we cannot allow Government to be spending our taxpayers' money in this kind of whimsical and arbitrary manner, Madam President. So we call on the Government to account for this \$160 million. Give us a breakdown. Is it a fact that these two vessels have completely—they have completely employed, Madam President, totally employed only foreigners, or if they have locals, it is a sprinkling; and is that patriotic? Is that nationalistic, Madam President?

And I saw recently, Madam President, where they purchased a crane to speed up delivery of goods and services containers to and from import and export costing us \$70 million according to reports. The Government has spent close to \$100million to upgrade the port in order to privatize the port. Who is going to be their partner in this so-called public/private sector partnership? But, Madam President, that no longer exists under the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act. The Government came here and amended it, so it is the

Cabinet that determines everything. That cannot be right.

And I want to tell you, Madam President, in closing, \$35 billion is spent every year for the last five years going into six years on what, Madam President?—the procurement of goods, services and works. That is over \$170 billion the Government is spending without any accountability, without any independent oversight as it relates to the issuance of contracts to purchase goods and services. That, Madam President, leads to poor governance, it leads to corruption and it leads, Madam President, to an undermining of our democracy. That is why the *Newsday* in a recent editorial spoke about democracy in this country being muted by this Government. They are doing everything to mute democracy according to these people, and that is what we are witnessing.

So, Madam President, in closing we ask the Minister to clear the air on several matters. We want the truth on the fiscal deficit. We want the truth on the vaccines in terms of loans and donations. We want the truth, Madam President, on this whole fiscal, the rising debt crisis in our country. Thank you very much, Madam President, for the opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine.

Sen. Amrita Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to speak on this supplementation of appropriation Bill before us today. Today we are here to seek another \$2.93 billion in supplementation to the fiscal 2021 package to the Consolidated Fund and a variation of \$107 million for the fiscal year. When we look at the details, Madam President, of this supplementation and variation, I have to admit that these expenses really do appear inescapable as they either address the existing COVID-19 pandemic expenses or try to finance primarily recurrent expenditure that has been either outstanding, and to help sustain the very cash-

strapped Ministries meet their existing commitments.

Madam President, far too many times we hear about these Ministries waiting for releases from the Ministry of Finance to proceed with their agenda, many times resulting in delays causing cost overruns and discontent with numerous contractors. Further, with so many vulnerable persons in urgent need of relief due to the COVID-19 crisis, especially in the hospitality and retail and construction sectors, how could one say no to allocating supplemental financing for religious organizations, for market boxes, for food, income support grants, finances for income support grants to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and allocation to the Tobago House of Assembly for small businesses, allocation of \$267 million to the Ministry of Health and allocation to the TTPS to pay for 2020 outstanding bills and goods and services and other minor equipment.

Now, I am sure that the Minister of Finance would have looked at these in detail given the financial situation, looked at every single request for these supplementations. And in the supplementation several debt payments are—debt servicing payments are included. And the Minister did clarify in his presentation saying that how a lot of these supplementations that are going towards debt repayment have to do with the fact that the Ministry of Finance is conducting an ongoing streamlining of debt payments and debt refinancing of all the loans in the portfolio. So given that this is the situation that is an ongoing assessment, I would like to seek from the Minister some sort of clarification in terms of how much savings we are generating from this streamlining and refinancing debt exercise.

So, Madam President, today I would look at the supplementation Bill in the context of the current fiscal situation, so I will look at the Bill in aggregate. And as saving lives and livelihoods continues to be a priority, proving short-term relief to

the vulnerable is necessary. Despite the financial constraints, the Government has committed to spending their way out of the crisis. This means a financing strategy which I am assuming includes a blend of borrowing and withdrawal from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. But I do not want to assume too much, Madam President. I too am not sure and I am also seeking clarification from the Minister of Finance whether this additional supplementation, this additional deficit, whether it is going to be financed by 100 per cent borrowed funds; what proportion is domestic? If yes, what proportion is domestic, what proportion is international financing, and if we intend to go into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

Now, it is difficult in a mid-year review to get an update on the key macroeconomic indicators. And when I did pay attention to this debate in the other place, I really found that a lot of the statistics were missing from the hon. Minister's presentation but I am glad that the Minister came here today with updated figures giving us an indication of the level of contraction of the economy; in 2020, an 8.6 per cent contraction and the forecast for 2021 being, I think, it is a 1 per cent contraction he is looking at. I would just like to humbly ask that these figures be released to the public on a more timely basis because these things are necessary for proper analysis of the economy.

Now, missing from the—what I was eagerly looking forward to here was, since the pandemic how many jobs have we lost? I did not hear any update on the unemployment rate. What is the unemployment rate we are dealing with? We are still looking at 2019 quarter one unemployment rate of, I believe, 4 per cent. Where are we projecting debt to reach? What is our primary source of financing in the supplementation? And what are our projections looking like beyond 2021?

Now, the Minister was generous to give us some detail in terms of the

revenue shortfall in the energy sector, and I thank him for that. But, again, Madam President, there seems to be some confusion. Forgive me if it is my misunderstanding but I listened to the Minister during his press conference on May 21, 2021, and then he said from October to March a shortfall of \$1.6 billion was reported. In the House of Representatives, I heard an updated figure from October to April, a shortfall of \$2.5 billion was realized. Today I heard for the same period October to April there was a 5.1 billion shortfall.

So, Madam President, this, I humbly seek clarification because if it is a \$5 billion shortfall, then we are looking at the first six months of this year we have been having close to 700 million to 800 million shortfall on a monthly basis. And if we take this supplementation of \$3 billion, the resulting deficit will be 7.1 per cent of GDP which is 11.2 billion. And this is suspecting that we are using loan financing and not dipping into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

Now, any additional shortfalls beyond this \$3 billion would send us into a double digits deficit and that is when we need to worry. Now, running temporary double-digit deficits are all well fine and good to avoid any permanent economic damage and social damage from the pandemic but we need to have an idea on what our trajectory looks like to reducing the deficit over the next three to five years.

I understand the Minister's position, we cannot cut expenditure right now. But as much as we do not like to talk about the debt-to-GDP ratio, Madam President, it is an internationally used benchmark for economic performance and will continue to be relevant and a determining factor when assessments are being made by not only credit rating agencies, potential lenders and potential investors. So let us not be too ignorant about that fact. With any negative economic shock like we are experiencing right now from this third wave of infections and the

resulting required or mandatory state of emergency, debt to GDP levels are set to cross way more than 90 per cent of GDP, assuming that the HFS is not used. And this expected contraction of 0.9 per cent that the Minister presented to us today may very well be far more than that contraction.

So, Madam President, with this supplementation most of the expenditure listed is recurrent in nature, as I mentioned, with the exception of the allocation to the *Development Programme* which is 170 million, that is 2.76 billion in additional recurrent expenditure. Should we continue to borrow to spend our way out of the crisis, then it is critical that we have projections on where GDP growth is going, where unemployment is going and where our debt to GDP forecast is heading towards for the next three to five years.

And I say this because during the budget debate in October of last year the Minister did allude to some level of projections in terms of, he was anticipating that we would attain, at least, 2 per cent of GDP by 2023 and strive for pre-pandemic debt to GDP levels at about 63 per cent by 2023. Obviously with this negative economic shock that we are going through right now, things would change and our recovery will now be extended. But without the information of where we expect to be or how we expect to recover, you run into the trouble of being accused of poor fiscal management.

Now, if this rate of economic contraction continues into 2023, public debt could well reach, go beyond 97 per cent of GDP because, Madam President, it is obvious, it is a ratio; debt over GDP. As your debt increases and your economy contracts, obviously the debt figure, the percentage would increase. So, Madam President, hence the reason I have repeatedly asked for a published medium-term fiscal framework. If we have one, we will be forced to constantly revise and relook

these figures, these fundamental macroeconomic indicators and abide by proper fiscal financial management and fiscal planning.

Now, there is a misconception that once economists ask for an economic plan or a medium-term fiscal framework, they are asking for structural adjustment. I just want to be clear. I am not asking the Government to withdraw any much-needed support that it is providing to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That will be irresponsible advice. Nor am I asking you to undergo structural adjustment. I do not think now is the time for that. We as a population are currently too vulnerable. What I am saying is that, it will be irresponsible to allow our future borrowing and debt to rise unchecked. I am saying that in the medium term you need to have a strategy or plan so that we can continue to keep a close eye on its affordability, a plan that is fully available to the public for scrutiny. The people must know.

You know, Madam President, we sometimes like to compare our evolving debt situation since this pandemic with the United Kingdom and these other developed countries, more developed countries like Canada, Germany and so on. But do you know that in the case of all these countries, UK, Germany and Canada, they have an independent public body that provides independent economic forecast and analysis for public finances? And especially in the case of the United Kingdom, although they are planning to increase debt considerably over the next couple of years and they are actually running double-digit deficits in the medium term, there is complete transparency via the Office of Budget Responsibility. The Office of Budget Responsibility has an executive responsibility to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to deliver the fiscal and economic forecast he needs for tax and spending decisions. Could Trinidad and Tobago aspire to that?

Now, Madam President, it may be okay if you do your medium-term fiscal

framework with borrowing for the next couple of years included in it. That is okay. But it must be demonstrated that the borrowing will be used to secure growth and that is what I am not sure of. To ensure lost jobs are recovered swiftly as possible and to ensure that hard hit businesses rebound quickly, right now we are in survival mode. Securing growth is contingent upon our ability to deal with the level of joblessness emerging from this crisis. If it continues for an extended period of time, it could lead to long-term economic scarring.

So when this supplementation before us allocates money towards the support for the vulnerable to help them get through the third wave of this lockdown, I am immediately thinking what are our plans to create jobs in the days to come, in the years to come. Just like I said last year during the midterm review; every budget, every midterm review I always expect to see a greater role or responsibility for the Ministry of Labour, and it continues to be absent.

Madam President, during the first lockdown let us look at some figures of persons who would have received support from the Government, and I am sure that this is a gross underestimation. During the first lockdown, approximately 144,000 persons would have lost their jobs or suffered reduced income and received support from the State either from the Salary Relief Grant or the Income Support Grant. Taking into consideration those who were existing beneficiaries prior to the pandemic brings the figure up to around 186,500 persons, and these are persons who are at risk of becoming highly dependent on the State. But, Madam President, do you know 186,000 persons account for 29 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago's labour force? And I say again, I am sure this figure is a gross underestimation because we do not have the updated figures.

When we partially reopened, we do not know how—in the last quarter of

last year, we do not know how many of them would have been reabsorbed or found meaningful employment elsewhere. Now we have another shutdown which is even more severe than the first, and the Minister of Finance did indicate in his presentation that within the space of two weeks almost 30,000 persons applied for the Salary Relief Grant. And I think today he updated the figure to 40,000 persons. These are all persons who would have lost jobs. These are all persons who are on the breadline.

Madam President, we need to quickly implement a well thought out jobs programme or a workforce recovery programme, call it whatever you may. If we do not have one that is underway now to ensure that these people are in some way or the other reabsorbed into productive work, a large proportion of them could become dependent or continue to be dependent on the State; an increasing level of dependency that we can no longer afford. Right now, acquiring more loan financing, cleaning up state enterprises and statutory bodies is being done just so that we can afford to sustain livelihoods. I mean, look at the allocation to the Water and Sewerage Authority alone, 575 million.

Now remember, according to the 2014 Survey of Living Conditions, estimated poverty back then in 2014 was 24.5 per cent. This was long before we suffered a cumulative 10 per cent contraction in our economy in the past decade. So we do not know where poverty stands today, how many persons have fallen into poverty since the pandemic, and we are in a position where we are not entirely sure how these persons are going to be reabsorbed into the labour force.

Madam President, in the absence of labour force, labour market data, I must commend the Minister of Finance for finally, although delayed, but finally launching an online portal for the applications of the Salary Relief Grants, and I

understand that he could capture a lot of data from this online portal. And what I would say is that—what I would advise is that this portal, this online Salary Relief Grants portal could already be used to kinda help and craft some sort of response to the foreseeable challenge that we may have in the labour market because he is already able to pinpoint that the critical sectors that are affected are the retail sector, the restaurant sector.

So what I would say is that, further to the Salary Relief Grants targeting to give persons a Salary Relief Grant after the period ends, follow up with them—and the economy partially reopens, follow up with them. See whether they are being reabsorbed into meaningful work in the labour force. Because the last thing you want is for them to fall in the informal economy. If not, invest in retooling them and re-skilling. I think the Minister spoke about multiple means today. There are multiple programmes in the NEDCO programme. But there was this one programme, Madam President, that was really—that was spoken about during the budget, the Coursera Workforce Recovery Programme was mentioned during the budget but I have not heard about it since then. It was a programme to target youth to help retrain and retool persons but I have not heard anything about them. How are we using—what is the progress on that? How are we using that in the face of the adversities that we face today?

12.00 noon

You know, Madam President, the UK, for example—I am going back to the UK because I realize they like to make these comparisons with far more developed countries. Take UK for the example, they recently completed their budget in April 2021, and have released details on how it is going to achieve growth in the coming years using borrowed funds. Because remember earlier on, I said that they are very

well going into—running double-digit deficits but they are painting a clear picture as to where the growth is coming from and they are borrowing to finance the building of human capital and reliance in the economy. They are borrowing to keep businesses afloat, keep persons employed, help businesses keep persons employed—so for self-employed persons whose profit has fallen below 30 per cent, and they are even implementing critical programmes such as the restart programme to support a number of long-term unemployed persons—not just those persons who would have gotten laid off from the crisis—long-term unemployed persons. They have a Kickstart Scheme to help fund high quality jobs for young graduates. What about all those graduates who would have graduated last year and this year? Where are they finding jobs? They even have lifestyle skills guarantee programme, giving every adult the opportunity to attain some level of minimum education to make themselves employable.

Madam President, I know these examples may appear over ambitious and sound out of pocket but I am very sure that we can adopt similar programmes at lesser scale. The bottom line is that we have to have some vision or plan and execute it to create more jobs and prosperity, so that when—even—we reach close to this pandemic coming to an end, whenever that may be, we do not know, we will be well on our way to healing the economic wounds that the recession would have left and avoiding economic scarring.

Supporting displaced—I want to move, Madam President, to the SME loan facility that the Minister spoke about. And he did indicate a critical problem that the country is facing with trying to assist the small and medium enterprises. And it is that they cannot demonstrate their ability to repay their loans when they go to apply for them, therefore they are not considered eligible for the loans. These loans

are, I understand, 75 per cent guaranteed by the Government and carries zero per cent interest for two years. This should be accessible but it is not, because they are just not registered, they do not have financial records and so on. And this is a critical problem, and addressing this large number of informality should be a priority. Now, I know the Minister did indicate that he intends to provide a wide-scale financial literacy programme but I would recommend that perhaps consider offering an amnesty to register their businesses by providing them tax breaks for the next three to five years just to get them out of the informal economy and into the formal economy.

Because, you see, Madam President, when you have a high level of informality in SMEs and micro SMEs, it is an indication that these businesses feel that they have no incentives to grow. They just want to remain small. They just want to survive. And the longer they remain small, perhaps it is some level of disincentivization. And the longer they become disincentivized to become part of the formal economy, you end up having a preponderance of low productivity firms, which means that the Government returns on investment in education and other aspects of the economy can deplete over time. So, Madam President, I think we need to look at this head on. I think the Minister did indicate that. And I do not know how far we can go in terms of assisting them by guaranteeing the loan facility 100 per cent, but I am really hopeful that something can be done to support these small and medium-sized enterprises and these microbusinesses.

So, Madam President, our prospects for growth and recovery is dependent on the rate at which—is also dependent on the rate at which the global economy rebounds. This is when we are speaking about the energy sector here. Because a turnaround in energy prices and with the easing of restrictions internationally,

majority of the developed countries are vaccinating their population, we will end up in a situation where, because investments in the natural gas sector would be at a halt—not in Trinidad, worldwide I am speaking about—would be slow in this year, and the next 12 to 24 months, we will end up in a situation where we could sustain higher energy prices. So there is some hope there and hopefully, we can reap some benefits there. But more importantly, Madam President, for realizing any growth in the non-energy, it is dependent on containing the spread of the virus at home: securing vaccines and streamlining a well-thought-out efficient vaccination plan. The allocation to the Ministry of Health of \$267 million is missing one thing: the necessary funds to hire the much-needed human resources to carry out these mass vaccinations, so that we can reach somewhere to achieving herd immunity, at least early in the year 2022.

Madam President, now, as I begin to conclude, and I start to speak about the pandemic and where we are now in terms of vaccinations, allow me some—just a couple minutes to speak about this situation that we are in, in terms of the vaccines and the vaccinations and the third wave. Madam President, health care workers continue to struggle with the demands of this third wave in the pandemic. And as individuals and businesses continue to reel with the lockdown induced in constraints, and as Government tries to get all hands on deck to deal with the urgent needs of today, I could safely say that pandemic fatigue and frustration has fully set in at this point. We are all tired and frustrated. But this country has suffered more than 600 tragedies since the pandemic. We moved from one of the countries in the world with the lowest viral load to one of the highest in the past few weeks. I ask the question: What really happened? While I understand the life of the virus evolves in waves, I understand that all of this is new for every

government, but for a country that went as far as closing the borders to its citizens, how could we arrive at this situation?

Every step of dealing with this pandemic, we seem to have encountered a great deal of challenges when compared to other countries: the acquisition of vaccines, while I understand there were some difficulties in sourcing them. We have experienced challenges in preventing illegal entry of immigrants into our country while our borders remain closed to our citizens, securing an efficient IT system for vaccine appointment, managing mass vaccines for persons over the age of 60. Why so much drama? We had a year to prepare for vaccines.

Now, I am saying this, Madam President, because these hiccups have showcased us in a very negative light amongst the international community. For an advanced country in the region, this chaos should not be happening. It reflects poorly on our ability to lead in a crisis, or is it a reflection of what happens when proper data and statistics are not used or are not available and reliable to inform policy decision? Madam President, I have had numerous persons from international organizations calling me up, asking me, what it is really going on in Trinidad? What risks do you see? What risk can be put down on paper here to assess Trinidad and Tobago? Madam President, we cannot continue like this. We are in this thing a long time, we understand the psyche of the population. We are more than able to carry out a mass undertaking seamlessly. We have done it before with the help of the private sector. First Citizens Bank, for example, facilitated the transition to bank accounts for CEPEP and URP workers many years ago, bringing an end to the long lines waiting to cash a cheque. Why not bring the private sector in to assist with the vaccinations?

So, Madam President, my final word is that—my final words are: to avoid a

long, drawn out recession with economic scarring taking place, we need to address two fundamental challenges that we face today in this pandemic. We need to contain the spread of the virus, supporting health care system, vaccinating our population. And the second thing is that we need to deal with the joblessness that has the possibility, the potential to exacerbate the recession. I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Madam. President: Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, I would like us to revert to Item 3 on the Order Paper, as I had indicated earlier. I am now in receipt of correspondence from Her Excellency.

VACANT SEAT

Madam President:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: SENATOR THE HONOURABLE IMAM SHERAZ ALI

WHEREAS by the provisions of Section 43 (2) (e) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the President, in exercise of the power vested in her, and acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister is empowered to declare the seat of a Senator to be vacant:

NOW, THEREFORE I, PAULA-MAE WEEKS, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, in

UNREVISED

exercise of the power vested in me by the said Section 43 (2) (e) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby declare the seat of you SHERAZ ALI, to be vacant, with effect from 10th June, 2021.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the
President of the Republic of Trinidad and
Tobago at the Office of the President, St.
Ann's, this 11th day of June, 2021.”

SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

Madam President:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes

President

TO: DR. MUHAMMAD YUNUS IBRAHIM

In exercise of the power vested in me by section 40 (2) (a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, I PAULA-MAE WEEKS, President as aforesaid, do hereby appoint you, DR. MUHAMMAD YUNUS IBRAHIM, a Senator with effect from 10th June, 2021.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the
President of the Republic of Trinidad and
Tobago at the Office of the President, St.
Ann's, this 11th day of June, 2021.”

UNREVISED

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Dr. Muhammad Yunus Ibrahim took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTATION AND VARIATION OF APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2021

Madam President: Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, the Minister of Finance today seeks what is an essential TT \$2.9 billion in supplemental funding for the good service of the people and nation of Trinidad and Tobago. The Minister had a very limited time frame within which to set the framework for this request to this particular Chamber. I thought he used his time well and gave the context of a shortfall of about TT \$5 billion due to COVID-19 and also referenced the need for expenditure of up to \$51 billion due to the prevailing conditions in the country.

But, Madam President, after that contribution by the Minister of Finance, we had an intervention by Sen. Wade Mark. And once again, I must admit that I was somewhat disappointed in Sen. Mark's intervention. It appears that the United National Congress continues to view the COVID-19 pandemic as a political football as opposed to what it really is, a clear and present danger to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the region and the entire globe. So once again, the tone and content of some of the comments proffered by Sen. Mark, I view as quite unfortunate and I will get into a little more detail as we proceed. And then there was a striking contrast in the contribution of Sen. Deonarine, who was far more measured and dare I say senatorial, and who gave some quite useful suggestions and placed some questions on the table that we would be considering further during the course of the debate. But both the tone and content were quite, I would

say, appropriate to the times and also directed particularly at some of the requests—the details of the request of the Minister of Finance that are before us this morning.

And, Madam President, I want to spend some time in my contribution focusing on the expenditure of the Ministry of Finance, the request for supplemental appropriation for the Ministry of Finance, particularly for the COVID-19 response. The national response to COVID-19, both contributors before me did spend some time on that aspect and I would like to put some of this expenditure into a wider context as well as respond to some of the concerns that have been ventilated and others that may have preceded the debate itself.

Madam President, I would want to start with a basic reality. We are living in unprecedented times. Certainly, in my lifetime, and I would dare say in the lifetime of every Senator in this Chamber, this is by far the most serious pandemic the world has seen in terms of its impact on humanity, in terms of its mortality, in terms of its morbidity. And I say that with some context, because I spend the earlier part of my career focused on a very different pandemic, which is also extremely serious, that of HIV/AIDS. Little did I think we would be standing here today in 2021, talking about something that has made just about every infectious disease before it, seem almost manageable because this one has affected us all, every single country to an unprecedented degree. No country has been spared. And I listened to some of the references and the perception that Trinidad and Tobago has it the worst in the world. That is absolutely not the case and I am going to give some demonstration of that. So, no country has been spared. The global economy has been contracting and there have been challenges to all citizens of the globe, to children around the world, to workers around the world, to small and medium and

large businesses in every country. There are some places where restaurants and other businesses have been closed for over a year, and are still closed. I am not saying that to make what is happening here seem trite or light, but to help put it into some context.

When I hear the references that we have it the worst. That is not the case at all. And sometimes when we look into the international news, if we do that simply to harvest negative comparisons, that is going to lead us into a space of negativity. But we have to have a much broader perspective. That is my suggestion in how we lead the discourse in the Chamber, and elsewhere, related COVID-19. And all sectors are affected: the housewives, the elderly, the disabled and ordinary people, as we can see from the headlines and we can see on the streets. And when we say “ordinary people”, well, you know what, we are all ordinary. So global debt has increased due to COVID by over \$24 trillion. Now the global debt is over \$281 trillion, and that is not Trinidad and Tobago dollars, that is US dollars. I heard Sen. Mark referred to his prediction on the debt to GDP ratio. Madam President, do you know what the global debt to GDP ratio is in 2021, after one and a half years of COVID-19? It is 355 per cent. That is the big picture. And the implications and the antecedents for that, we are not immune from, we cannot escape in Trinidad—in this country, in Trinidad and Tobago. Generally, hydrocarbon markets have been down, have been suppressed, and therefore, royalties for small producing countries like ours are going to be affected as well.

But, Madam President, speaking of COVID-19, I see it as a bit of a paradox because on one hand, the economies across the board are suppressed and also revenues are suppressed, but demand on the public purse has increased. So that is a very difficult formula and I do not envy the Minister of Finance, but he has been

doing an admirable job with his team, but demands are increasing quite across the board. With respect to poverty and deviation, our social safety net continues to be tested and continues to be strengthened. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services is a Member of this honourable House, and I can attest that she and her team have been working very hard to further strengthen the social safety net in this country. The demand is increasing with respect to provision of food and food supplies for the poor and indigent, and the Minister—we have an elite gathering here. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is a Member of this Chamber. And again, the expenditure is not in a vacuum but is as a response to the increased demands being placed on the public purse for the benefit of the citizens, for the survival and continuance of the citizens of this country. The demand for purchase of vaccines. On one hand they are saying, “Well, buy more vaccines.” And when we are making the advancements in that regard, I hear some very general questions loaded with insinuations as if somebody is stealing.

You know, really, Madam President, it pains me to know that we can have Senators and other public officials just throwing negative insinuations against public officers, against public servants, against elected officials and Ministers without a shred of evidence to support some of these very vacuous claims and rumors that are being circulated. And then, of course, the demands are also there with respect to relief to the business sector. And again, Trinidad and Tobago has done more than many others, more than a number of our neighbours and other countries in this hemisphere with regard to ensuring that key elements of the business sector can be supported and sustained. And this did not just happen yesterday, this was put in place since early 2020, as part of the national response to COVID-19. So when you see a request for additional expenditure of quarter of a

billion TT dollars for the Ministry of Health, that has to be placed in a wider context of a national effort.

So in this global scenario, Madam President, in my perspective, the Government and the Ministry of Finance have done quite well in managing the economy thus far. We can say that at the same time as expressing empathy for all of the citizens that have been affected negatively and all of the sectors that continue to carry a heavy burden as we make our way through this pandemic. But the good news is this will not last forever, progress is being made. I will give a few updates on some of the areas of progress that would suggest the next time the Minister of Finance comes here, maybe the burden on his shoulders might be lightened. Because the Prime Minister has sent the signal, once we are able to continue some of, what we are regarding cautiously as some positive trends in the epidemiology, we can begin to open back up and that balance between revenues going down and demand going up is going to change, once again, in a positive direction. So that is the note of hope I would want to extend during my brief contribution here today.

So, Madam President, we cannot have a debate like this without looking at some of the excellent measures that have already been put in place. I have mentioned some of them: the Salary Relief Grants, again being funded here. The food supply to the poor and indigent, which is being heavily managed. And guess what? The UNC officials are part of the system that has been elaborated to assist the residents in their locales. Grants to creative and artistes, support to the main health sector, because while we have the parallel health sector, which has been identified with respect to the supplemental funding, the mainstream health sector continues to rely on the public purse for procurement and for other areas of

financial support. Support for students with tablets and IT infrastructure, et cetera; support for businesses, which I have mentioned; credit union support; support for faith-based organizations. It really has been a broad-based effort and I want to state here, without fear of contradiction, that in this COVID-19 response, Trinidad and Tobago has been able to mobilize one of the widest and broadest support systems in this entire hemisphere.

12.30 p.m.

We say that without boasting; we say that without saying that mission is accomplished and there are no areas of burden. But we cannot sit here and pretend that we have it the worst or we have done the least. It is actually—that is not the case at all. So just to put some perspective. There was some talk of vaccines, Madam President, let us talk a little bit about vaccines because they identified payments to COVAX and other elements within this request from the Ministry of Finance.

Madam President, by the end of today and I say that specifically, by the end of today we would have had over 250,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines in our country. This is an ongoing and aggressive acquisition effort involving many persons, both in Trinidad and Tobago and outside of Trinidad and Tobago. I will tell you a little bit about the strategy behind that. The majority of these doses thus far have been acquired free of charge without burden on the public purse. So it is not reflected here, but you know how it is reflected here, because we have to pay the staff and the diplomats and the other officers that are working with the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, we have to pay the regional health authorities and all these health care workers who have been working tirelessly to also administer these vaccines. And of those doses that I have mentioned, over 130,000 of them are

already in the arms of nationals of Trinidad and Tobago. So this is very much a work in progress.

Just a quick breakdown. We have gotten 100,000 doses from China; 40,000 doses from India; 2,000 from Barbados; 16,000 from St. Vincent and the Grenadines; 9,000 from Bermuda; 10,000 from Grenada. We have purchased approximately 100,000 thus far in terms of receipts via COVAX; 200,000 from Sinopharm is due very early next week; 800,000 one dose Johnson & Johnson is scheduled and anticipated to arrive in August. But guess what? There is work going on right now, led by the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago to seek to advance the arrival of those doses.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: “Oh boy”—to seek to advance the arrival of those doses. We are working hard to set up a meeting between the President of South Africa, the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago to bring that arrival date to as soon as possible recognizing the need and also in recognition of our citizens who for various reasons, and I have my theories which I would not share here today, are among the most open and welcoming of COVID--19 vaccines. That is a good thing and we need to take advantage of that and not squander the potential that that offers to us. We need to take advantage of that.

So very quickly, that is through the African Medical Supplies Platform, and led by the Prime Minister. What is happening right now, today, I just stepped out to make some calls in this regard. We are working with our Caricom neighbours recognizing that many of us would have purchased COVAX AstraZeneca and due to the high levels of vaccines hesitancy in some of our neighbouring countries they are certain to end up, a number of them, with excess AstraZeneca that will expire.

Guess what, we have a different profile here, we have high vaccine acceptance, the need is here, we will not waste a single dose. There is an air guard aircraft in the air right now doing some collections from our generous neighbours. And we are working with our neighbours, and that is what diplomacy is about, to ensure that within the region nothing is wasted and Caricom citizens can be made as safe as possible.

And so, there is more vaccines coming in than even have been listed. And that does not even take into consideration the future profile; that does not take into consideration the US global programme which we are working very closely through the hon. Prime Minister and other senior officials in the US administration and elsewhere to make that a reality. So all of that will culminate, in my humble view, in Trinidad and Tobago becoming in this region one of the most vaccinated populations. And that is going to, not just assist us for today but also into the future. And the philosophy behind it has been made easy by the Prime Minister's strong advocacy with the WHO and meetings with the President of China; meetings with Vice President, Kamala Harris; the Director General of the World Health Organization; letters to global leaders across the board; our Embassy in Washington DC has been instrumental, as well as our team in Brussels, staff at our headquarters. I have been involved in meetings with the US, UK, Canada, the EU, Spain, France, Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, India, China, South Korea, Chile, and many others, in addition to contacts with all of our Caricom colleagues.

There are some exciting possibilities, I do not have time to go into any of them right now, but involving Mexico, Argentina, and some Latin American vaccines as well as the Cuban potential.

I cannot end without saluting the Ministry of Health, sometimes they come

Finance (Supplementation and Variation
Of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2021
Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne (cont'd)

under heavy attack but we have excellent staff there, the Chief Medical Officer, the PMO, the director of epidemiology and all the ground level folks, as well as the private sector that offers us another injection of hope that we can get this right, we can ensure that we do not have long lines or senior citizens in the sunlight, those are unfortunate scenes.

My anticipation is that by next week, the Ministry of Health has gone back to the drawing board, by next week with the arrival of these additional Sinopharm, Trinidad and Tobago is going to benefit from a much more organized, respectful to our senior citizens and a collaborative effort to ensure that these vaccines that we are acquiring are getting into the arms of the citizens who need them most. So all the woe is me and the negativity, fine, some of that is politically expected, in some cases appropriate, fine. Let us now move forward together.

I want to just maybe two minutes, Madam President? “Oh”, to offer a few key watch words in terms of as the COVID-19 response continues, humility is important, recognizing our limitations; collaboration, I mentioned TTMA, Supermarkets Association, these are points of hope, using the technology which we are doing and have to do more, communication, communication, communication and also listening to suggestions.

So the message through this contribution to citizens—

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you.

Madam President: Your time is—

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: More vaccines are coming in, the expenditure is being—

Madam President: Minister, your—

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—well done, congratulations to the Minister of Finance—

Madam President: Sen. John.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—for bringing this Bill. Thank you, Madam.

Sen. Jearlean John: Thank you, hon. Madam President, for the opportunity. Madam President, in—thank you for allowing me to join this debate which I think is a very important one given where we are today in Trinidad and Tobago under the stress of this never ending, unceasing, unrelenting pandemic.

Madam President, we are here to debate a supplemental appropriation Bill where the hon. Minister of Finance has asked for an additional \$2.9 billion. Madam President, just as my colleague on the Opposition Bench, Sen. Mark had observed, this when I looked at the figures, went through the figures, the majority of the request was really for recurrent expenditure; not only recurrent expenditure but predictable recurrent expenditure. Because in the context of a budget for the layman, really and truly it comes out of where you are going, your strategic plan as it were and that applies to whether it is household, whether it is a company, a corporate entity or whether it is a country. Where am I going? You have your—in the case of a country a government will have its policy and based on the policy the numerical expression of that is really this thing called a budget.

So, the recurrent expenditure when you look at the number of the line Items, these were items which were predictable and which perhaps would have been placed before the Minister of Finance and for one reason or the other they would have been pushed aside until at this point to be a part of the review at this time. Notwithstanding that, it gives a skewed approach to the budget because it means the Government for one reason or the other would have delayed payments that

really needed to be made, they would have pushed payments down the road and I do not know what the impact of that will be if it is for, whether it is for late payment, whether in a contract it will attract interest, higher rates of interest or any kind of penalties as it were. So these are things one has to look at, but it really skewed, it served to skew the review, at least the position at this time that the Ministry has been doing very well when in fact it is just that the pain was pushed into the future.

Madam President, as all of the speakers who preceded me, really their eyes were drawn to that Head 28, under the Ministry of Health. And I think rightly so given the moment that we are facing. I am very happy that all of the colleagues who preceded me saw the need to talk about it and with your leave, Madam President, and permission I too will want to put my own spin on this. Because in looking at the figure, I mean, 269 million, it is not that, I am looking closer at the figure of \$69,458,101 which are funds required to enable acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines. And this is the most precious thing, I mean, the most valuable resource that we can purchase at this time, but it seems as if with money in hand we are not able to access this precious vaccine, notwithstanding the overview just given to us by the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs.

Because the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs to me sounded as long time in Tobago when we said it is: “ring, ting, ting, my boyfriend promise to give me something”, because we are just hearing about these vaccines that are coming, so much so that our elderly, particularly and specifically, were encouraged to come out for a walk-in on Wednesday and when they responded they were told, come for a walk-in and they responded to that. Because, Madam President, people are scared. Yesterday the numbers reported by the Ministry of Health in terms of death

was 630 deaths at this time, well up to yesterday when they reported and 9,610 active cases. Even whilst I am sitting in the Senate here, I am just seeing on my telephone where a UNC appointed councillor, her husband just died. I do not think any of us have not been touched by this COVID. Yesterday afternoon my mother is telling me your uncle Vivian, is in the hospital, for what, for COVID. By 2.00 a.m. this morning he is dead, COVID.

So this is a very serious disease and when people are called to walk-in, come, they are going to come because people are scared, because COVID is not about the statistics, it is about the people. When we hear about two sisters died, they have names, they have relatives, they are aunts, they are sisters, they are daughters; a father and son died. These things are really very emotional and I think it has impacted and it must impact the psyche of the country. And it is not so much that people or I do not think at all, any right-thinking citizen wants this, the Government's approach to COVID to resolve in COVID to the extent that you can do so. There is no right-thinking citizen, Madam President, in this country who wants this to go wrong. Because when COVID goes wrong you die, all right. It is unforgiving, it is unrelentless, it is just there and basically I am repudiating this talk that the UNC is happy when something goes wrong.

No, the UNC wants things to go right because we are citizens of this country and we are as patriotic as everybody else in this country. But when you ask people to walk-in, to walk-in, that is deliberate, that is something you thought about. You know I do not know what the stock of vaccine is. I do not know what we have in hand, but the Minister of Health knows. I do not know if the Prime Minister knows, if he operates at that level, but there are operatives who know what they have in hand and when you tell all and sundry, the "marish" and the parish to just

come and walk in and then they do so because they are seeing, people are dying, 630 reported yesterday. And now they are being accused of coming when you told them to come. No, I did not tell you to come, come tomorrow, can A to E come. Okay, so A to E turns up and it is the same madness.

So the *Express*, I think one of the articles said, it is a hoax. And, Madam President, I want to say today it is a hoax; that is all it could be. Why are people being told to come for this vaccine when they are no real vaccine, we do not have stock of vaccine and each time the Government's spokesperson they come along they give you this very rosy story, a very promising story. COVID is not—yes, you have to be optimistic, but with COVID optimism does not have a big place and space. With COVID there is need for reality. This is what we have; this is what we can give out; this is how we will give it out and this is how we will give it out respectfully. And as the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs said, treat people with dignity. We have to be humble. If we do not have, we do not have. It is not good that we do not have and when you have high office you have to take responsibility for something. You cannot just have an office without accountability and take responsibility, you cannot only want it when it is nice and everybody bowing down but when things go wrong somebody must take responsibility.

And I am saying today, Madam President, if it is the Prime Minister who has led us down a garden path and it is a hoax, he needs to go, and if it is the Minister of Health, he needs to go. And the Minister of Health has blamed his CEOs in the various regional health authority; if it is them, well then they need to go. Somebody has to go because pain travels down. Because when they make this mistake people are dying, that is what is happening, people are dying [*Desk thumping*] and that is what this is about, people are dying. That is why people are

scared and people have to speak up and speak out because they will continue to be drawn in to this Government rosy picture that it coming today, not today, tomorrow, next week, whenever. Just tell the truth, just tell the truth and I think the people can handle the truth.

So, with respect to, I think the Minister of Finance said 70million has already been paid into some facility. I do not know if what we are getting from COVAX if that is now what we are receiving, that we are already receiving what we have paid for, but the \$69,458,101, I want to ask the Minister, is that for vaccines that we have received already, vaccines that is coming? We have somebody that we are going to pay this money to, because you are hearing there is some facility in Africa with 800,000 lovely Johnson & Johnson vaccines which we have access to and some money is already paid. I do not think we were told how much money is already paid, then we are told we have access to the Chinese, some Chinese facility and 15 per cent of something called Chinese, I think there is a particular term for it, which amounts to about US \$25 million, one can dip into that fund also.

So all we want to know is the truth, what is the true state of play so that our old people cannot do just what the virus wants. What the virus wants is not vaccine, you know, the virus want people to congregate and when people congregate it just feeds and have an “ole mas”. So we all have to now, I think pray that Wednesday and Thursday is not really something that turns out to be very disastrous for our very old and vulnerable people.

So, Madam President, I really am not happy about that vaccine fiasco. This morning the *Express* said, the front page said, F grade, and I think that is being very generous because after being told to come, A to E, they only have 50 shots and these things can be avoidable, these things are deliberate, they are dealing with

plans and ploys that are activated by people. But at that time, Madam President, as I have mentioned before it means, I read in the *Trinidad Guardian* on May 5th, a Siparia father and son both died, you know, 38 years old, 38 he is gone forever and never to come back. And that is why we are concerned and animated and some people are angry and depressed because of these pictures of two sisters dying, one sister nursing another one, Selena nursing him and then Selena will die.

So, Madam President, I am hoping that the Minister can have some firm facts for us. I mean, even today in this G7 conference that is taking—well they have begun to have the lead up to it in the UK over the weekend. One of the main items on that agenda is of course health and this COVID virus and how people are going to, how countries are going to recover. And I think yesterday President Biden made a big statement of giving out 500 million doses of Pfizer vaccine. So the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs he has been saying that there is a very diligent and urgent follow-up and we look forward to and hope and wish them well and hope that it bears fruit because when it comes to COVID, we are all in it together, they do not respect party lines, right, race or gender. So, as I said, one of the main topics of conversation will be COVID recovery to include a stronger global health system that can protect us all from future pandemic. And of course, they have on the agenda it also includes climate change.

So, Madam President, in the Minister's presentation this morning, I did not see your and neither in observing what came before us in the supplemental, nothing came with respect to the recovery. The Minister spoke briefly about small and medium size enterprises and he said it from the point of view that it was hard to really, probably approve or support their loan applications because these firms more or less they have no, their paper work, their financials were not in a good

place. They were not ready, they were not prepared, they were not in a space where you could really use them to approve any loan. I want to tell the hon. Minister that maybe people—and he said they probably will go back to a prior year, that probably is 2018 to 2019, Madam President.

Now, I think that makes perfect sense and it is something that we cannot sit down and dither about because it is not only small and medium, there are businesses in this country that you can define as large that are on the brink. They are really going to collapse, businesses that are hiring over 3,000 employees they are on the brink of collapse. So if it is that the small and medium size who are mainly sometime sole traders or they are family-owned, we know we have a whole plethora of family-owned businesses in Trinidad that is part of our corporate culture. If it is they have financials 2018/2019 or even prior to that and we can look at the stream of income and expenditure and as the Government you can support that. The Government owns banks, you know. I am not saying you have to be reckless and bankers have to understand that they operate in a particular environment. They are not sitting down in la-la land, they do not understand anything, calling up people where there are instalment and so on, that they must declare all these billion-dollar profits even when you are under such a squeeze. I am saying that the small and medium size sector, they are really where you get your growth. They are the engine, they hire people, whether it is the hairdresser with the two persons, the spa with the two persons, the vegetable stall, the plant shop and all of the electricity shop, the mechanic all of that, they hire people and they pay them fairly well.

So, these are businesses that we cannot sit back and wait. Just yesterday I was talking to somebody, as a matter of fact the person called me, who we look at as a

major business giant in this country and he said, Jearlean, I cannot go on like this, I cannot go on like this. We are seeing, I think last week it came out where a big fast food franchise they were actually giving their employees what was equivalent to a chubby and two pies to go home because they had to cut off the \$150 per week, \$150 per week that they were giving as a stipend to these employees. So we have to get busy and come up with a proper plan, one that we can roll out and people can understand and it is not in drips and drabs all over the world. That is a next thing they are doing all over the world. They are coming up with plans and these are well rolled out. I saw I mean, yes, the UK is a large economy but not withstanding that they have the UK roadmap just as we had a roadmap. Now, but what they have with their roadmap is that they actually working the roadmap and there is a short, medium and long-term approach to this.

As a matter of fact, they have actually put a Minister of I think COVID recovery or something like that. They have a whole Minister to treat with that. They called it the “Minister for the Reopening of the Economy”. A Minister for the Reopening of the Economy. They have focused on that because they understand that businesses have collapsed in their economy and the London roadmap, Madam President, if I might read from this document, which will continue to be developed by the London COVID Business Forum, London COVID Business Forum. Look at that. We do not have to reinvent anything, it is there, you just Google and you just reading in the comfort of your home if you so desire. But we are here and we are pushing away the business sector. The business sector say we can help you to get vaccines. All we want you to do, we do not want a tax write-off, you know, we just want it set off against the tax that we are owing. We do not want anything, but we are going to do everything. All we want is for you to make available to us the

forex. No, we do not want it, we want a tax write—what in that we cannot understand, Madam President.

So somehow the Government is asking people, telling us every now and again, we are in this together and we want your support but the Opposition is not supporters. But what is there to support? Because if it is businesses that are so important to the economy of this country you are pushing them aside. People are complaining, we are not hearing from the Government or if a few Ministers come to see us, they are not accompanied by the Prime Minister or even the Minister of Finance.

So, hon. Madam President, if it is we can have a clear idea of what the Government intentions are because, yes, I think the Minister just brushed through whatever the fact or just complained that the small and medium businesses were not quite ready, they are not ready because they were closed in 2020. Some of them had a hybrid of open and close; they are selling half way on the pavement and half way here and there. So the revenue stream will not be as a robust as it would have been maybe in prior years. So we have to look at prior years. You are the Government, come to the Parliament with a Bill. We are coming to the Parliament with all kinds of things but we cannot come to the Parliament with a Bill that will help businesses survive and will help people to keep their jobs and to keep their dignity. That is what we have to be looking at this point in time. How are people going to keep their jobs and their livelihood?

Madam President, I looked—in going through again and in all this talk of whether—I mean, there are some economists that are talking about diversification now imperative, particularly, we have seen where this one stream that we have, the COVID, would have—the Government is—in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund

and they asked where do you expect me to go. Well fine, but that stream of funding was created by what we had in terms of our source of revenue. And now particularly with the US indicated that by 2030 they are going to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half. You know, in all of these—whilst we are grappling with the COVID we have to learn how to live with the COVID because what is coming out because it is a novel coronavirus so it is something new. So these things are emerging. We all understand that. We are not criticizing the Government for not being able to deal with something that they do not know about. The whole world is seeing that it is new, but we are saying in managing this thing you are falling far short.

So basically, even within this coronavirus you are saying whatever money they are investing, for instance I think it was out there somewhere where US 75 million was invested in Atlantic LNG, a downstream part of some downstream project that is ongoing. And I am saying is this the best use for scarce resources when here is the President of the United States saying we are going to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half from the 2005 levels by the end of 2030.

Now what that, that is, I mean anybody could understand, it means demand is going to fall and when demand falls, the price that you will get on your main product is going to fall and now you would not be able to recover, because price is based on the supply and demand, where that curve meets. So, Madam President, we have to get busy.

Now in looking and scanning to see what are we doing even during this period that we are wringing our hands, I came across, I looked at in reviewing what we had—I am trying to make a link with this Head No. 39 with the Ministry of Public Utilities and a statement made by the Minister of Public Utilities where he

was speaking in another place.

1.00 p.m.

So that hon. Minister in talking, he said, Government to revisit rates that customers pay for electricity, and the hon. Minister went on to quote the rates from wherever in the Caribbean. And yes, Trinidad is paying 33 cents per kilowatt, but it is not like with light because we produce natural gas here. Now what was more interesting is that I think T&TEC owes NGC about \$2 billion, \$2.2 billion for natural gas, and that is a matter of grave concern. But, Madam President, in that Head some money is being allocated for T&TEC, specifically for I think street lightings to give as refund for some support—given 72 million for support—maybe to customers, those who are vulnerable, and then there as a list of some bonds that are coming due for payment sometime in September. But more importantly, the Minister is talking about raising the rates particularly again one has to say in these times.

Madam President, there is a project that had been approved by the Government and I think there was a tender, et cetera, and it got to the point with a company by the name of Lightsource, I think BP, and they are about to generate 92 kilowatts—it is more that—in Brechin Castle and 20 kilowatts in Orange Grove. I think it is 110 megawatts, sorry, in all. They are saying the equivalent is—there is a context to this, hon. Madam President. From the Brechin Castle's power plant, solar plant that is projected, it is projected that they are going to supply the equivalent of 31,500 homes and from Orange Grove about 7,000 homes. I am aware that the Government has already approved the lands for the plant to the site in Brechin Castle, but, Madam President, I will want the hon. Minister to please provide us with some answers with respect to how are we going— yes, we want

green energy, but Trinidad and Tobago right now has approximately 2,000 megawatts of installed power, and our average daily need is 1,000 megawatts and it peaks at 1,200.

We have some existing power purchase agreements with the various power generating companies and it has a lifespan of about 15 years left, and a lot of these contracts inherent in them is take-or-pay. So if you are generating 2,000 megawatts, you have to pay for that even if you are not using it because some of it there would have been an oversupply to go for big plants in Point Lisas, et cetera. So I will want to know—

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

Sen. J. John: Thank you, Madam President.—if there is a new power purchase agreement in place; and whether there is a take-or-pay—if there is a take-or-pay condition attached to these power purchase? If there is one, and if there is what you call a take-or-pay also. And why are we coming to generate this new power? As I said, yes we want new industries, we want new investment, but if it is at the cost of cannibalizing what is happening in T&TEC—because you are talking about the equivalent of 40,000 households which will be at a tremendous blow for T&TEC, which is currently owing NGC \$2.2 billion. So I think that will be very helpful because there will be probably more job loss from people who are our citizens, because right now I do not think we can afford that.

Madam President, I really wanted to talk a little more about some of the Minister's figures in terms of the releases, but knowing that our time is short, I think I am just going to urge the hon. Minister of Finance to really in his wrap-up—whatever brief time he has I think it will be well-served in helping us to hear his Government's plan for a post-COVID Trinidad and Tobago, because I really

would have been a lot happier coming here today to debate some of the measures for a post-COVID to help us in opening up because there is where we really—in the midst of all of this we really need to be pushing hard in terms of opening up because we have to walk and chew gum given that COVID is not going anywhere else. Best we can expect it to—we want to get to this herd immunity. At best it will alleviate some of the pain and the suffering, but it will not be all gone. Madam President, I want to thank you for this opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Before I call on Sen. Dillon-Remy, I just want to clarify how we are proceeding with the times. The remaining Members on the Government Bench and the Independent Bench have all committed to making a 20-minute contribution for the most. So, 15 minutes into the contribution is when I give that five-minute warning. For the Opposition Members who have not given that commitment, I will give the warning at 25 minutes into the contribution because they are expected to take 30 minutes. So that is how we will be proceeding and have been proceeding in the Chamber. Sen. Dillon-Remy.

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Madam President. I am humbled and appreciative of yet another opportunity to address this honourable House and contribute to the discussion on the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill which is before us. Let me first say, Madam President, that I am grateful to be in the presence of my colleagues here today. This season is one that has taught me to view life with a different sort of reverence not taking it for granted, neither mine nor those of my family, friends or colleagues. As Sen. John just said, people have been touched significantly by this pandemic, and therefore, being able to stand here and speak today I consider it a privilege.

It has been now 17 months since the pandemic became a live issue in Trinidad and Tobago. Since January last year we have been dealing with this and we are being called today by the Senate to approve a further \$2.9 billion for meeting the expenditure for the service of the financial year ending September 30, 2021. This approval is necessary for the Government to continue governing to the end of the fiscal year. It was clear in the minds of many during the presentation of the 2021 Budget that proper leadership was key in steering the ship in these uncertain times in which we live and with the limited resources which we have.

In my budget contribution on October 26, 2020, I declared that this was an era of responsibility; responsibility for self; responsibility for family, community, workplace and nation. Madam President, I still declare that because it is when we show responsibility at every level we are going to see things move differently. We will stop blaming, blaming, blaming and get on to taking responsibility for action at every level. I advocated in October. I also advocated that we must build on the strengths of our people, strengths such as generosity, resilience, creativity, and a strong faith in God. Madam President, I still advocate that and I encouraged all leaders at that time that they should have, that we should have, humility to acknowledge our need for others, to take off our party hats and work together, and to think country rather than party, and, Madam President, I am still advocating that especially when what I have observed is much to the contrary.

All leaders at every level are so focused on politicizing the pandemic and playing a blame game that no one is willing to accept personal or collective responsibility, or add to the suggestion box to make things better. Instead, many people are pointing fingers and blaming. There is an absence of teamwork towards a common purpose and a lack of focus on the bigger picture and attempting to find

meaningful solutions. What we do have is this constant competition among leaders of one-upmanship, insecurity that results in distrust and aggressive behaviour. We should not be wasting this crisis, Madam President. This crisis has given us some opportunities to grow and be better in the future. We should be encouraging a learning environment so that we could be better prepared for the next global health challenge which everyone is saying will be coming soon.

Madam President, I was privileged together with Sen. Wade Mark and Sen. Allyson West to attend the 142nd Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly where the theme was, “Overcoming the pandemic today and building a better tomorrow: the role of parliamentarians”, and as I reflect on that theme I considered the dual aim emanating from this statement itself, which must be achieved simultaneously, i.e., “Overcoming the pandemic today and building a better tomorrow”, and that is what we are looking at in terms of the moneys that are being allocated today. We are looking at that in the context of what we are doing in terms of overcoming the pandemic today while we build a better tomorrow. What will happen as Sen. John just said, what will happen in the next five, 10 years as a result of what we are doing now and it is key that we think of all at the same time.

A key aspect of the Union’s message was presented in the President’s summary, President Duarte Pacheco. This summary was dated 27th of May, 2021, and it offered a formula which I think is helpful in navigating from our current position to a better place. It was suggested on page 3 of the report:

“That Parliaments need to conduct strong and swift oversight of any emergency measure or restriction on fundamental freedoms and human rights. Measures must be taken democratically, be proportionate, time-limited, necessary and legal.”

And we know we are all living in a pandemic and we have come here to debate many issues in relation to these areas that they are mentioning here. And I continue:

“Parliaments must fight against conspiracy theories and misinformation, and confront hate, racism, xenophobia and nationalism, which have been on the rise. Decision-making and political dialogue in general need to be informed by facts and scientific evidence. Taken together, these steps can help build trust between governments and citizens.”

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

Mr. Vice-President, we need to have or trust between government and citizens being built even more now than it was before as we navigate the current scenario that we have, as we seek to overcome what we are doing here in terms of this pandemic and build for a better future. It is with this in mind that I contemplate the decisions we are making now to overcome this pandemic, where it has left us democratically and financially as a country and our way forward. I do understand the uncertainty of the pandemic that it brings with its distinct courses of actions and uncertain expenses, but we must ensure that our actions and spending will not only assist in managing the crisis now but also produce a better future as a nation.

It goes without saying, therefore, that our conversation at this time ought not to be about whether the spike occurred as a result of vigils held with Andrea Bharatt during the time of mourning for her gruesome death, or as a result of the Prime Minister's call to go to Tobago in April. Irrelevant in terms of our discussion, but what we should rather be doing as a nation and as leaders is sitting down and working out how we are going to deal with where we are at the present, and how we will get out of this in creating a better future. Mr. Vice-President,

there is too much bickering at the level of leadership. We are all aware of the devastating effects which the second wave is having on our people and the economy.

We tune in daily to the reality of the present pandemic position particularly since the start of May where you have the alarming increase in number of persons infected and in numbers of deaths. This has resulted in having our current state of emergency and the economic situation, and this is one where expenditure required to manage this pandemic is increasing while our revenue position is decreasing as the Minister has already said. It is apparent now more than ever that two things continue to be of paramount importance in navigating this crisis. The first is strong leadership and the second is proper stewardship concerning our nation's people's health and money.

We have been operating in a parallel health care system put in place by the Government last year, so that the provision of non-COVID related health care would remain relatively undisturbed while we go through the treating of person related with COVID-related illness. I applaud the solution crafted by the Government as well as all our health care workers who have served this country so selflessly over the last year and a half. I have congratulated the Government in previous contributions in this Parliament. I must admit that in the early days the parallel system seemed to be working and there seemed to be much coordination. We did very well up until a certain point, but I must say, Mr. Vice-President, we are now struggling. It is clear that we are struggling. Looking from my advantage point during the past month there are some significant gaps that have come up in our health care response, and I have no problem in saying and us acknowledging that this is not a gap—or gaps in the health care system is not something that we

should be, let us say, afraid to acknowledge.

The reason being, we have never had to navigate anything like this. And I remember sitting in front of my television in the early days of this pandemic and hearing the cries of Governor Cuomo of New York and many other leaders during their crisis. They were saying, “We need help. This thing is bigger than us, we need help.” So I have no problem in saying that where the gaps are they should be addressed. We are currently asked to allocate the Ministry of Health \$267,111,637, and as the Minister has already said lot of it is to be spent on things like vaccines, accessing vaccines, and also supporting the regional health authorities.

Mr. Vice-President, one of the gaps I think should be filled in going forward is what I consider, though the Minister of Health and the Ministry of Health has been doing extremely well in terms of their coordination at the level of the Ministry with the persons like the CMO and the Principal Medical Officer in institutions, et cetera, it is my understanding that we may need to beef that up where you have like an incident command centre that was advocated by the WHO in their pandemic response plan, where you— and if it exists already, the command centre, it needs to be strengthened because if that command centre at the level of the Ministry of Health was there and operating well, we would not have had the situation over the last two days where you have persons being called out to be vaccinated and then when they get to the place there are not enough vaccines. That showed so much of a lack of coordination. Creation of an incident command centre and operation from the Ministry of Health rather than from the regional health authorities would also result in more efficient and regulated rollout of vaccines, better planning and coordination of initiatives and also other non-medical areas relative to the domestic response, and more precise distribution of information

regarding all things, COVID-19.

We have situations where persons are getting mixed messages. And regarding this messaging, I would like to quote from a behavioural management consultant in a personal note to me where the person said and I think it is important and I quote here:

In this pandemic context it is urgent that we all seek first to understand beyond the lens of individual economic self-interest. There may be clues if we include in our frame social and behavioural contributors. There is a relentless wave of undocumented migrants who are integrated into different sections of the population by diverse employment and service relationships, who travel daily via public transport to destination sometimes geographically disbursed, who live in all ranges of Trinidad and Tobago. Access to health services is not easily available. Work and survival is their primary mission. This subpopulation and their behaviour and operations remains a mystery and not within any effective monitoring and control systems.

That is one part.

In other words, what is happening at the level of the community in terms of some of the reasons of the spread that we are having now. I continue to quote from the observation:

One observes the nature and content of verbalizations that display biases that appear to be associated with partisan, ethnic, unscientific interest and personality characteristics.

I continue:

Official prevention communications do not appear to be targeted to specific

audiences based on research and understanding of the kinds of messages and other reinforcement that are likely to result in the desired behavioural changes and outcomes. Clearly one size does not fit all.

And I think of that specifically as it relates to the messages we are sending. We are standing in the pulpit and preaching and there are not many people listening to us in the choir. And finally—

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

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy:—I would say the position here was that they would need to have this particular social science dimension in our behavioural communications element.

In terms of the further gaps that I have seen, I would think of what has happened in terms of the rollout of health care services in Trinidad where you have increased in Arima, Point Fortin, hospitals being opened in Trinidad, whereas in Tobago we have had to struggle with spaces for hospitalized patients. And I am also happy to hear from the Minister of the \$80 million being allocated for Tobago, that some of it is for the operationalization of the Roxborough Hospital because this is one of the areas that I thought that needs to be addressed as we roll out more funding to Tobago and as it relates to our ability to deal with the pandemic in Tobago.

Again, I celebrated when the field hospital was rolled out in Trinidad, but we do not have a field hospital in Tobago. I know there was a plan last year to get a field hospital. There was also a plan for increased testing in Tobago, but we do not see anything like that at this point in time. In addition, specifically as it relates to particular communication implementation plan that would involve community involvement, we have also talked about having an app for monitoring persons in

the community. That was mentioned by the Ministry of Health and that was also talked about in Tobago. I am talking about these things, Mr. Vice-President, because I think these are some of the gaps and some of the things that can be coordinated at the level of the Ministry to help with the rest of the programme as we continue to roll out.

I am hoping that we do not have anything like we had again over the last two days because initially we were talking about vaccine hesitancy. Here it is we see thousands of people turning up. In other words, they are not hesitant anymore and we are putting a block in terms of what happens to them because they will not necessarily want to come back and vaccinating people, we know is key. So we need to get the vaccines but we also need to manage that communication to make sure that it gets to the people in need so that we can open back the economy.

Mr. Vice-President, there are two other points I want to make. The Minister has talked about and Minister Amery Browne has talked about what has happened in terms of what the Ministry has put into place in terms of the spending to relieve the effects of the pandemic on people. I must quote that from the Auditor General's Report 2020 that was laid in Parliament in April, or that was dated in April, there were issues with oversight of the spending and I think we should just make sure that that is not an issue again, the same thing that happened in Tobago, oversight in terms of the spending. And specifically as it relates to Tobago, Mr. Vice-President, I am saying that a further \$80 million is going to be rolled out in Tobago in terms of the terms of the spending until the rest of the year. I note that Tobago still does not have an Assembly Legislature and I am asking the Minister of Finance to please try to put something in place where there maybe accountability on a more regular basis than we have right now. In other words, we should not be waiting on

the Auditor General's Report which comes after the fact. We should have an opportunity like other Ministries have here for monitoring of the spending.

And finally, I would just like to commend again our workers as to how they have contributed, particularly Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association and Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association where they were able to get 2,700 people vaccinated in one day, and I also congratulate the other private sector groups. I wish to close with a quote from the 142nd Parliamentary Union where the:

“...impacts of the pandemic on peace...security, sustainable development and democracy...”—was reflected upon and its expressed in the statements—“parliaments and decision-makers everywhere should retain one overarching lesson:...”—that—“there is...one humanity coexisting on one planet.”

There is one Trinidad and Tobago coexisting here and we need to do everything in the interest of Trinidad and Tobago in seeing our development as we seek to overcome this pandemic and build for our future. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Seepersad.

Sen. Charrise Seepersad: Mr. Vice-President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill, the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2021. The Bill seeks to authorize the Government to access 2.928 billion supplementary funds to urgent and critical recurrent and capital expenditure to September 30, 2021, in areas where insufficient or no allocation was provided in the budget and a variation of appropriation of \$107.31. It is abundantly clear that the hon. Minister of Finance and the country is faced with a situation which could not have been envisaged, and

therefore, can only be dealt with as the situations become evident. The task is even more difficult as economic factors deteriorate. Stagnant economic activity in many sectors, loss of jobs and livelihoods, and declining inflows of revenues challenged the immediate economic needs of the population.

The global economic difficulties along with increasing cost of production and distribution will only exacerbate on an already grim position. At the heart of the matter at the challenges posed by the COVID-19 world pandemic, the obligation to save lives and livelihoods is partly responsible for the need for supplemental funding. The significant decline in energy prices in the past eight months also impacted the availability of funds. It is also a safe assumption that the 2022 fiscal period will present even more economic and financially challenging situations for the country.

The supplemental appropriations of \$2.928 billion comprises COVID-19 related expenditure of 200.06 million, other recurring expenditure \$2.559 billion, *Public Sector Investment Programme* expenditure \$169.19 billion. I have gleaned from the date provided, Mr. Vice-President, that only approximately \$200 million or 7 per cent of the total funds requested is for COVID-19 pandemic expenditure. I am convinced it is crucial that the Government fund these COVID-19 measures to ensure the survival of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Under the circumstances the burning question is whether this allocation is adequate for survival. In other countries providing for business continuity and growth is an item already on the agenda.

1.30 p.m.

I assume that the hon. Minister of Finance will address this matter soon as the business community eagerly awaits his plans and measures. However most of

the appropriation, \$2.59 billion or 87 per cent is for recurrent expenditure which relate to operational cost. Mr. Vice-President, allocations to the Ministries of Public Utilities, National Security, and Works and Transport represent additional fund amounting to approximately \$1.965 billion or two-thirds of the total supplementary funds.

An analysis of the details reveals the main cost items are: salaries, wages, cost of living allowances and gratuities, contract employment payment, maintenance, insurance and rental cost for buildings, vehicles and equipment, janitorial and security services, loan repayments, office supplies. While I understand the importance of meeting the debt obligations to workers, contractors, suppliers and so on, I wonder why these operational expenditures classified as additional or unforeseen were not included in the initial budget for 2021 and whether the budgeting exercise is itself flawed.

Social impact of COVID-19. Across many communities in which sizeable proportions of the populace had stable jobs, such activity fed into those local economies and kept life going through the multiplier effect. However, the restrictions in place to manage the rate of infections and deaths have forced many businesses to close their doors and lay off or furlough employees. It is quite clear that the self-employed and hourly, daily and weekly paid employees are those most affected and struggling to make ends meet. While thousands have been clamouring for help from the Government and have received food relief hampers and employment relief cheques, thousands more have not been so fortunate. In desperation, persons have sought assistance from non-governmental organizations like Living Water Community, Kindness Makes a Difference and other groups helping the less fortunate across the country.

Mr. Vice-President, while the end of the pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago is not yet in clear view, the plan to vaccinate and operate is the scenario selected. At least one million people must be vaccinated in the shortest possible time, illegal immigrants included, and vaccines are now becoming available. I strongly recommend that everyone get fully vaccinated. Vaccines save lives.

The discussion on the future of the economy including stabilization and growth should already be in the pipeline. The recent energy conference may be the forerunner to these discussions. I look forward to participating when the time is right.

Mr. Vice-President, in closing, I sincerely hope that the measures being pursued by the Ministry of Health to save lives and reduce the spread of the virus in the communities are effective. The relief provided by the Ministry of Finance will alleviate some of the hardships of those worst affected through the loss of income and the September 2021 goalpost is realistic and achievable. Finally, I implore everyone to work and act as a team, to find solutions to make Trinidad and Tobago a great and viable country. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Damian Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. As I attempt to curtail my speaking time into 20 minutes, I would like to say that it is indeed a privilege to contribute here today to this mid-year review as we are called here to Parliament to consider the Government's proposed supplementations and variations for the remainder of the fiscal year 2021.

And, Mr. Vice-President, we listened to the presentation by the Minister of Finance where he outlined the state of the nation's finances and indicated an overall shortfall in as much as \$2.5 billion in revenues, and an expected fiscal

deficit that could eventually be as much as \$8 billion. And, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister was very detailed in outlining the shortfall of the energy sector revenue but the Minister was short on detail an explanation as to the decline of the non-energy sector.

In fact, Mr. Vice-President, in reading an article today in the *Guardian* we saw where an economist, Dr. Vanus James indicated in a presentation in another place where he did not see contributions or information coming about the non-energy sector. And, Mr. Vice-President, this is coming from a government and a Minister who went at length in his budget debate in 2021 to speak about the Government's plan to diversify the economy outside of energy sector and in particular targeting the areas of agriculture and manufacturing.

Mr. Vice-President, especially when we see a government that—so, Mr. Vice-President, we ask the question: Why did the Minister not make reference today to show the shortfall in these areas of agriculture and manufacturing in particular? Especially—now I understand the Minister said he did not have enough time but again, manufacturing and agriculture is touted to be that silver bullet of diversification of the economy when it was presented in the budget debate. So, we ask ourselves the question why he did not make this reference especially when we see a government that is spending higher sums on transfers and subsidies but not focusing on capital expenditure.

Under this Government, transfers and subsidies remain on average above \$25 billion per annum while we see capital expenditure declining below \$5 billion. And it is clear that the non-energy fiscal growth was in decline and that non-energy exports have declined from an excess of US \$2.6 billion in 2015 to now almost \$1.5 billion in 2020. And of course, we know we will hear about the pandemic and

we understand that but when we look at the years previous to the pandemic, Mr. Vice-President, 2016, 2017, 2018, in all of those years, we see a decline in export of under \$2 billion per annum. And of course, we have heard in many other presentations where the Minister and others in Government would have spoken about an increase in export of about 6 per cent but failed to explain that this meager growth is driven mainly by a dwindling energy sector whilst the non-energy sector continues to decline.

Mr. Vice-President, we see almost \$3 billion now being added in expenditure but what the Government has brought here again is largely transfers and subsidies and we ask ourselves the question: Is this why there was currently a decline in 2020 by 8 per cent? The Minister tells us today that the expectation is only a decline by 0.6 per cent but we will see what happens. We get many surprises at the end of each financial year.

Mr. Vice-President, while our debt to GDP was at 82.7 per cent at the end of 2020 and it is now rising closer now to 90 per cent with this Government having taken total borrowings in excess of \$133 billion and climbing. So, Mr. Vice-President, so at this rate in debt from a mid of 40 per cent in 2015, we are now at over 82.7 per cent and climbing and this presents a risk to our economy where we may end up facing challenges to be able to pay our foreign debt and this is when the IMF can come and take our wicket. Because when we look at a decline of foreign reserves from \$10.4 billion in 2015 to now \$6.76 billion six years, we see where the direction is going with foreign reserves and we may end up in a risky position. We may not be at the IMF now but we may soon be at the IMF.

Mr. Vice-President, what are we seeing? We are seeing economic stagnation with record low levels of growth. We are seeing low inflation led by low consumer

demand. We are seeing unemployment rising by the day estimated over 100,000 persons unemployed. We see this in the decline in the contributions to the NIS. We see a fiscal agenda that have been financed by budget deficits.

But specifically coming now to the manufacturing sector, Mr. Vice-President, when we look at that—I listened to the Minister attentively today and I heard him speak about some assistance they are attempting to give to the SMEs as it pertains to these loans and the main point that I took note of from the Minister regarding SMEs was that this loan facility via the commercial banking sector, the Minister is basically reported to saying that a significant amount of applicants could not qualify for these facilities, this zero-interest loan facility with a moratorium of interest for two years and government guarantee of 75 per cent on the loan. And whereas we could consider that this is a good initiative, let us look at the issues that prevent these SMEs from being to take up these loans.

Firstly, there are many that would not get access to the loans because as the Minister stated, their inability to produce audited financials and management accounts and so on. We also see that many of them are not up to date on VAT, NIS, income tax. These are all the necessary statutory clearances required in an effort to get these loans and we understand.

But the Government, Mr. Vice-President, should have a robust programme to work with these SME operators to guide them and not simply tell us that we are going to do an outreach programme, we are going to come to educate and so on. They need to get out there and work with these SMEs to help them, help them to fix their books, help them to fix their accounting. That is what they need to do. So we will see if the outreach programme materializes and it is successful. And I hope that it is because these SMEs are the backbone of our economy. They are

responsible for employing so many citizens in this country. They stimulate the economy. So we want to see this actually work, we want to see these loans actually be given to the SMEs. Because, Mr. Vice-President, also we have to look at the fact that this is an opportunity to bring them into this tax net by this olive branch that we are talking about. This approach will also benefit to increase the pool of taxpayers so that they can assist the Government here today on the shortfalls that we are hearing and could help to share the burden of this taxation.

But, Mr. Vice-President, I listened to the Minister speak about VAT refunds and I heard the Minister say that the Ministry of Finance is considering VAT refunds to companies in this country. Considering at this point. The Minister even went so far as to say that there is an understanding with the TTMA to pay some \$100 million to some select manufacturers in the country. But, Mr. Vice-President, this brings no comfort to the thousands of businesses in this country that are owed billions of dollars in VAT refunds. So a consideration is simply not enough. The business community would have hoped to have heard the Government address significantly this burning issue of VAT refunds. This is a matter that has been raised on numerous occasions.

As recent as the 10th of May, 2021, we see the Trinidad and Tobago Chambers of Commerce via a letter clamping for the Minister of Finance to keep VAT bonds current and consistent. The CEO of the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Commerce spoke at length regarding the lack of VAT refunds after they held out such great hope in the aftermath of the October 2020 Budget presentation. They said that the Government was speaking the right language but it seems now that the language of VAT refunds is foreign to this Government.

Because, today, we hear nothing about VAT returns that have now raised and climbing in the billions. This Government acts as though they were doing a favour to the business community to pay back these VAT refunds during this COVID pandemic. Mr. Vice-President, this is not a favour. VAT returns belong by law to the businesses in this country which the Government is obligated to pay. And what about the 1 per cent interest that is due to those that are outstanding for more than six months? Because when you look at the VAT Act, Chap. 75:06, section 5(3), it is clear the Government's obligation to pay 1 per cent per month interest on any outstanding VAT returns that have exceeded six months from the date of owing. There are a lot of companies today that are complaining that they are not even getting the 1 per cent back in interest to help offset those interests that they are paying while they live in an overdraft situation.

Mr. Vice-President, the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturing Association has countless times been sending plans and feedback to the Government which they would have hoped they would have heard today including the removal of VAT from the Consolidated Fund so that it is not muddled up with recurring expenditure and vanity projects. The VAT proceeding will be held in a separate fund to ensure speedy repayments on claims. Another recommendation by the TTMA and I am sure the Minister of Finance knows of this. These suggestions were made to remove the payment on VAT on raw materials for manufacturing when it arrives in the port and allow the manufacturers to clear it without paying the VAT, finish the product, sell the product domestically and pay the full VAT.

Why is that, Mr. Vice-President? Because if you are trying to expand export in this country and promote the expansion of export, many business people will know that when you export your products, you cannot charge VAT to international

companies in other countries, so this is where now these manufacturers are lining up waiting for their VAT refunds. So when you have a situation when this VAT is paid on raw materials upfront and if you expand your business in export, well basically you are punished by having more of your money, that VAT paid at the port tied up with the Government. So that is another suggestion that the Minister should consider. This works against incentivizing export growth.

There were further recommendations that the Government issue letters of comfort to those in the business sector who are awaiting these VAT returns serving in effect as a government guarantee to access bank loans at this time. But Mr. Vice-President, one is led to believe that they were not inclined to take these suggestions and recommendations as this may be for this Government a loss of an interest free loan of billions of VAT refunds being held, because that is what it is. I put it to you that our debt is actually not 133.7 billion but may actually be a lot more than 133 if you add the VAT that is owing from the Government to businesses in this country because the money is owed by this Government to the business community.

So, Mr. Vice-President, as I move on, you know I am not certain whether the Minister of Finance in his busy schedule found the time to consult with many in the business community but many businesses today they are struggling to pay their salaries, pay their bank loans, their overheads, to keep employment. They are struggling to keep their employees, struggling to keep their business afloat at this time. These businesses would have hoped to have heard a lot more coming to stimulate the non-energy sector coming from this almost \$3 billion. They may have hoped to have heard of ideas such as temporary waiving the Green Fund and Business Levy. They would have hoped to have heard from this Government about

employment incentives. Wage subsidies are the most ready example of an incentive, keeping more workers in the system so that they do not fall through the COVID cracks as their company struggles to keep them employed. But the Government would not even support them to give them “two beef pies and ah two litre Pepsi”, Mr. Vice-President.

And what about the construction sector? They are left in the cold. They are told not to go out and work, we understand, but there is no support for them. They do not qualify for the support. But apart from these giant countries like USA, Germany, France and the UK, the ILO notes that temporary wage subsidies programmes have been adopted by many other countries. Countries like Argentina, Botswana, Brazil, Malaysia and right to the west of us Aruba where the Government looked at these companies, looked at the decline in their businesses and assisted them with wage assistance to their employees to make up the difference of the decline in their business.

And, Mr. Vice-President, we would have thought we would have heard more about heavy export incentives. We would have thought we would have heard about research and development incentives, tax incentives on employee assistance programmes and we would have certainly want to have heard in this presentation today something that would give us hope about access to the United States dollars.

We have heard the Government on many times boasting about the assisting of manufacturers through the Exim Bank. And while I accept that this has helped, it is simply not sufficient to meet the shortfall in the requirements of the non-energy sector. Today, Mr. Vice-President, SMEs, service providers, importers are just some of the companies that are on the brink of extinction now because of this difficulty to access US dollars. And most of all, they would have wanted to hear

some promise, some investment coming in fostering and enabling an environment for businesses to catch themselves, invest, recover, grow, export, expand.

Business stakeholders saw no initiatives to improve the issue of the ease of doing business in this country which sees Trinidad ranking now at 105 in the world down from 66 in the world under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar-led administration in 2015. The ease of doing business continues to decline year on year, Mr. Vice-President. Through all the stakeholders in this Government that is responsible for improving on the ease of doing business, we see it continuing to decline. And foreign direct investment, we see that also declining. A staggering 929 million has left in FDI flows since from 2017 to 2019.

Mr. Vice-President, in the few minutes that I have left, or that I will take, I would like to touch very briefly on the Minister's statement on agriculture. You know, we were hopeful that we would have heard the Minister speak about the \$500 million that they boasted in 2021 Budget meant for the investment and stimulation and diversification of the agricultural industry. I am certain my good friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would have also hoped that himself. I know, he works hard, he works hard but he needs the support. But to date, not one single red dollar sent from the Ministry of Finance where that \$500 million is being held over to the agriculture to meet with these diversification programmes which I am sure these programmes exist and that need the funding.

However, Mr. Vice-President, under Head 77 in the variation, we got this \$57 million market box programme which really started off from what we saw as like almost a COVID relief to constituents throughout the 41 constituencies, to the 41 MPs and well some NGOs in Couva and other places. But, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance is giving these farmers in this programme, in layman's

terms, “ah little ca-ca-dah”, a few dollars in their pockets for a five-month period. And when the five-month period is over, what then? We did not hear anything else. You pull the rug from under “yuh” your feet in five months’ time. Where is the stability in this? How much money are the farmers going to make to be able to expand on their farms, bring in new equipment and so forth or is this going to make them money barely to survive and pay the bills that they struggle to pay today? We would have thought that 57 million along with the 443 million that was promised would be squarely placed in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and I say to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries I will support you with that. I want to see the 500 go across, let us help the farmers.

So, as I conclude, Mr. Vice-President, I will say to you that I am somewhat disappointed in this mid-year review. I am disappointed in how this almost \$3 billion is being allocated. I pray for this nation today that this Government may find the good sense to deliver on what was promised. Some of these promises—and I leave with these questions of promises. Where is the Roadmap to Recovery Programme that should have been presented today? Where is the Oxford Business Group in collaboration with InvesTT report? We were promised it at this time, we are not hearing anything of this presented today. Is the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance stating that it is no longer relevant?

Mr. Vice-President, I say to you as I close, I listened to this mid-year review and it lacks planning, it lacks vision and foresight and it reminds me of the lack of planning that we have witnessed in the last two days in a COVID vaccination rollout that appears to have no plan, no process and now puts thousands of our citizens at risk to their health and possibly death, Mr. Vice-President. With those few words, I thank you for the opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

2.00 p.m.

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2021.

Mr. Vice-President, in giving his review this morning the Minister basically indicated that the shortfall in revenue is almost entirely attributable to shortfalls from the oil and gas sector. We know this. We have heard it time and time again. We are suffering at this point in time as a result of low oil prices which are starting to rebound but also lower levels of production.

Unless we make significant and meaningful investments in the non-energy sector, particularly manufacturing and agriculture we will forever be at the mercy of oil prices and low production levels, matters over which we have very little control.

The Petrotrin refinery, a forex earner, has been closed for almost three years and now we are awaiting a new RFP and a marketing plan, we are told, because apparently nobody wants to purchase the scrap iron yard that has been created down at Pointe-a-Pierre. The most unpatriotic move of announcing a deal with the OWTU has now been exposed as nothing of substance. So we shut down a forex earner and we started spending forex to import fuel. That is where we are today as a country.

Mr. Vice-President, unless we boost our non-energy exports and cut our import food bill, a forex crisis will continue in this country. I have heard many people say that there is no forex crisis but that is not what persons in the SME sector are saying. Many, many, persons even in the supermarket sector who are now battling to stay afloat and to manage during this pandemic, because they are of

course essential services, they are all complaining about the availability of forex and this is something that must be addressed.

So today, in what we call the midterm review when the Government comes to ask for a further \$3 billion, given the state of affairs in this country we must ask the question: Are we getting value for money? What impact would these interventions and this further \$3 billion of spending have on our short to medium growth and long-term growth? It seems like there is no impact at all because what really you are doing here, what the Government is doing is asking for money to just pay bills and asking to pay for things that they ought to have known about when they presented the budget in October.

I cannot for the life of me understand how things like COLA, Wages and Salaries, NIS, and Gratuities for contract officers—the average contract in the public service is three years. There are three-month short-term contracts and there are—but those do not carry a gratuity. So the Gratuities to be paid for contracts that come to an end during this financial year would have been known for the last three years. What happened during the budgeting exercise that caused so many Ministries to have to come now today and ask for additional funds to pay gratuities that become due and owing now in this financial year? There is something terribly wrong and something terribly amiss with the budgeting process and the budgeting exercise if it is that these things were not catered for in October.

I cannot see any of this \$3 billion in spending having any real impact on unemployment, boosting confidence amongst the business community, or expanding our non-energy exports which is so critical at this time. The numbers presented today in terms of the amount of applications for social support coming from this second lockdown and even in the first lockdown last year, when we are

spending this \$3 billion it simply cannot be a matter of paying recurrent expenditure without some plan or programme to alleviate the poverty and the hardship being faced by the population today.

So, we cannot continue to operate in a perpetual state of borrowing or withdrawals from the HSF where a significant amount of the expenditure is shrouded in secrecy. The people of this country deserve transparency and accountability because the Government is spending the country's savings and they are burdening us, the citizens and the future generations of this country, with debt; debt that our children have to carry.

If we are spending a further \$3 billion, we must see some return on that investment and see value for that money. Value for money, in the context of public sector expenditure is sort of like the social contract that the people of this country have with the Government. They must justify their spending by showing us that we are being given a good return for that money and that we are being given value.

So let us look a little bit at how we are spending this money. From this \$3 billion I want to focus primarily on four Heads of Expenditure, Health, National Security, the TTPS, and the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

Mr. Vice-President, when we heard that the mother of all carnivals was coming, I did not realize it was two days of "ole mas" outside of every health centre in this country that we were being promised. But that is what we have gotten. Our most vulnerable citizens were subjected to state-sponsored super spreader events this week. Ten months after passing a law to make face masks mandatory the Minister announced today that face masks were distributed yesterday to the 41 MPs offices to distribute. I thought the Minister was trying to add some humour to this debate because I thought we were coming here today to

hear that vaccines were being sent out to every nook and cranny or that at least arrangements were being made that it would go to every nook and cranny, every corner, every community in this country, so that people could easily access the vaccination process. Instead, what we are witnessing is our elders lining up in hot sun and rain trying to get vaccines.

I call it “Deyalsingh disaster day one and day two”. Completely unnecessary because we have a network within this country, within the Ministry of Health called the offices of the Chief—CMOH, County Medical Officers for Health—not Chief, County—County Medical Officers for Health, who could have distributed vaccines to every health centre in this country in an equitable manner.

Persons who are attending various clinics could have been asked to register. The vaccines did not just—the issue of having to vaccinate the country did not come up last week. Since December, the Opposition raised the issue of having a national vaccination programme because the United Kingdom back then started their vaccine programme, and so it was raised in the Parliament. We knew for more than a year that the only way out of this pandemic would be vaccination and one year later, the vaccine programme has proven to be a complete disaster, from procurement to administering the vaccines.

And again, if we had utilized simple common sense and a little bit of technology all of this could have been avoided. Whenever we get the vaccines because they are coming as my grandparents used to say “Dey coming chirrup chirrup”. But albeit “chirrup chirrup” and through begging and re-gifting and whatever, regardless. Whenever they came, we would have had a register within the public health system of all of the persons who are interested and who are qualified, and who are prioritized for getting the vaccine, and it would have been a

simple matter of the CMOH distributing the vaccines to the relevant health centres. But no, we rather put people, tell everybody “come on down” like it is *The Price is Right*. And then the next day say, “No, hold up, only A to E come on down”, and then when you get there—

I witnessed the most atrocious thing at the La Romain Health Centre, my district, where a 90-year-old man was given number 51 that morning. He lined up from six o'clock in the morning in a wheelchair with his daughter, and after three to four hours he was told that they only have 40 vaccines at that health centre. Is that the value for money that we are spending 30 billion additional dollars to get in this country? I do not know how any government could encourage this type of mass chaos; it is completely irresponsible.

Our frontline workers are doing their best, but we are not getting value for money from the Ministry of Health in this vaccination process. Acquiring the vaccines is only one component of the vaccination process. And in that respect I think the question has already been asked about what is the price per vaccine from these different platforms from which we are acquiring them, and I would like to think that that information can be disclosed to the citizens of this country again. There is no need for these things to be shrouded in such secrecy.

For an additional \$267 million, \$5 million alone being allocated to operationalize mass vaccine sites, we should expect better than what we saw today, which is a good Samaritan with plastic chairs outside the St. Madeleine Health Centre, lining them up on the pavement for elderly persons waiting there since five o'clock this morning when the curfew was lifted to get their vaccines. A good Samaritan had to go and put out chairs for them to sit on the pavement in the hot sun. And I think he was also walking around with sanitizer and dispensing.

We also should expect to see better communications, better use of technology to manage not just vaccines but the whole of this pandemic. Many persons throughout Trinidad and Tobago have said to me personally—I know people who have tested positive for COVID and three, and four, and five days after they are tested, no one from the Ministry of Health contacts them. Meaning, there is a delay in terms of contact tracing and home care is perhaps not at the level at which it ought to be. And this is what is resulting, in my very limited medical knowledge, it results in increased hospitalization because people are not managing their homecare properly. They are not getting the guidance that they need, and therefore, their health deteriorates while they are at home and so they end up in the hospital. And that is what is contributing to the burden on our health care system and our health care workers.

Mr. Vice-President, this Government hired additional people on short-term contracts and so on, it is my information. They passed a law to allow people to come into your house to see how many bedrooms, and bathrooms, and fowl coop, and dog kennels that you have, so that they could come and tax your property, but they cannot have a large phone bank set up to monitor COVID positive patients in an effective manner and do timely contact tracing and to monitor persons who are in quarantine instead of having that burden placed on the TTPS.

In countries like Malaysia, they put a wrist band on you if they find out—from the minute they find out that you are a primary contact and they put you into quarantine and you are not allowed to remove that wrist band. The equivalent of the CMOH will keep in contact with you through the phone banks and so on. And then when the time is right, they will come and remove the wrist band. Something as simple as that could have alleviated a burden on our police officers and could

have also had a greater impact on the numbers of cases we are seeing because you would have a better containment of persons who are primary contacts and who are probably unbeknownst to them, you know, spreading the virus.

And as I said before, those bands are like the ones that you get when you go to a fete. It looks the same way and I think that large mas bands in Trinidad and Tobago do a better job with procurement and logistics than what we have witnessed this past year from the Ministry of Health. So maybe we should hand over the vaccination process to one of them.

Now, I mentioned TTPS and the police officers and the burden that they have to bear in terms of during this pandemic. They have shouldered just as much if not more burden than some of the other essential services in this country. And I really want to extend my condolences to some of the officers who have lost their lives and hundreds who have contracted the virus. The last time I checked the number was somewhere around 120 officers had contracted COVID. And from time to time, almost 2,500 officers were in and out of quarantine. Meaning that their exposure to the virus is very, very high.

Now, \$57-odd million requested for the TTPS in this supplementation Bill, but when you compare that to the \$181 million reduction in the allocation for Goods and Services that was presented back in October, and particularly in light of the amount of money that was owing by the TTPS from the previous financial year, this is really a drop in the bucket. So, I do not know how much will be accomplished with this \$57 million additional allocation to the TTPS. The Commissioner of Police is on record as saying that he is basically fighting off creditors and struggling to keep his head above water financially that is, because of the lack of resources for basic needs.

Now, I would also like to know if it is—and the Minister could probably shed some light on this but I noticed that \$4.5 million from this allocation, it says that it is to pay interest on a NIPDEC loan which I think is meant to deal with the expenditure from previous years Goods and Services that is outstanding. But the document provided to us states that the first payment is due on the 6th of October. As far as I am aware, the end of the financial year is September. So I just want some clarification as to why. Is it that we are prepaying interest on this loan that is coming up? Or what exactly is the reason for the allocation of \$4.5 million for interest on this loan when it states here, unless I misread it or if it is worded poorly, but from my understanding is that the first payment is due in October.

And when we talk about accountability and transparency, we must also look at the explanations given and how little we are being told. At a time when the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is in debt for Goods and Services, and I have personally, and I have spoken about this many times before, going to police stations all the time in the course of my work and seeing the conditions, I witnessed the very poor working conditions, very poor sanitization and lack of personal protective equipment at police stations for our hard-working officers. \$7.8 million is being requested in this Bill and being allocated for three months for the rest of the financial year for something called “covert operations”.

I have to ask again, is this value for money? You intend to spend \$7.8 million in three months for covert operations in a country where the Brazilian variant waltzed straight through the south-western border unchecked but in three months we need to rent vehicles to conduct covert operations at a cost of \$7.8 million to the taxpayer.

And tied in to the TTPS of course, is the Ministry of National Security. This

comes under Head 22, Mr. Vice-President, \$725 million. Again, included in this, Salaries, COLA, NIS, how was this not budgeted for in October? What happened? Explain it to the population.

I have an idea, you know, moneys were probably moved around from one Vote to the next or whatever it is but explain it to the population when you are coming here to ask for additional funds for these things that are predictable. COLA did not change. NIS as far as I am aware did not change. I do not know if there was a mass recruitment drive in the TTPS that warrants increased amounts of moneys like this. But a lot of it seems to be payments that are owed from previous time frames. So explain why this was not included in the October budget?

There is an allocation of \$4.7 million here for an arrears of travelling for immigration and the Forensic Science Centre. For the years 2018 to 2020, there is absolutely no reason why something from 2018, 2019, could not have been included in the October budget. There is something as I said, very much amiss in the budgeting exercise if this is what has occurred.

And under this Head we see another \$30million, covert operations, \$188 million to the SSA. So, in total, at a time in this country where everybody is looking at lining up for a hamper somewhere, children are without devices to attend online classes, everybody is struggling and grappling with trying to access a grant and getting their paperwork in order, even SMEs trying and struggling as we have heard to get their documentation in order so that they could access a little loan or something, this Government is allocating \$225 million in total for the next three months to spy—to spy, \$225 million between the TTPS allocation and the Ministry of National Security allocation to spy. And under the guise of covert and national security secrets, and confidentiality. The suffering citizens of this country do not

know exactly what this money is being spent on. And of course, it cannot be disclosed because it is national security.

And as we get into a lack of transparency and accountability, I must touch on the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. An additional \$118 million requested and allocated here, 51 million of which is to pay attorneys. Mr. Vice-President, it is an atrocity. It is nothing short of shameful and disgraceful that someone who spent five years here in this very said Senate, griping and complaining about legal fees paid under the previous government, would refuse to disclose how these millions of taxpayers' dollars are being spent. It is absolutely pathetic for an Attorney General to give no explanation to the public, save and except that he is being faced with litigation from UNC affiliated lawyers and that is what he is spending all this money on—or so he claims.

Because apparently when persons retain for example the Member from Port of Spain South to represent them in constitutional cases, it is okay. And when former PNM Attorneys General represent persons in the court that is fine, but spending an additional \$51 million in legal fees is justified once you can take a cheap shot at a political rival and hide behind an opinion paid for by you to say that you cannot say how much you are paying.

Well, I call upon the Attorney General to disclose that opinion without delay so that the people of Trinidad and Tobago could understand the justification for why it is the Attorney General cannot say how much legal fees he is paying to attorneys privately retained and handpicked by him.

In a country where the President, the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice and everybody down to the tea lady in the Ministry's salary is public information, there is absolutely no reason why the moneys paid to attorneys chosen by the Attorney

General to represent the State, being paid with taxpayers' dollars cannot be disclosed.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

And if the Attorney General does not want to disclose how much he is paying or how he is spending that money, well, I will give a couple of examples. The Attorney General recently lost a matter in the Privy Council. He fought a matter involving the illegal detention of children all the way to the Privy Council and lost. And he will have to pay damages but he will also have to pay legal cost. The Minister could perhaps look forward to—he might have to give him a next supplementation because by the time you tax a bill on cost for a matter that has gone through the High Court, the Court of Appeal with several interlocutory applications and all the way to the Privy Council and lose, the taxpayer stands to spend a lot of money on legal cost. And it is because the Attorney General insists on fighting these and defending the indefensible, that he has lost those matters and he would have to pay money.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, are you speaking about the matters that are currently before the courts?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, the matter was concluded and the judgment released by the Privy Council.

Madam President: Okay.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Another matter that has been concluded in the court and has not been appealed, is where a Muslim police officer asked to wear her hijab with her uniform and the Attorney General fought that matter. You see, you do not—

Madam President: But Sen. Lutchmedial, can you just tie this into the relevance to what we are dealing with here? Thank you.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Perhaps—I gave a little introduction before you returned to the Chair. I am speaking about the additional \$51 million requested to pay legal fees by the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

So when the Attorney General needs additional money to pay legal fees for cases one must understand the types of cases the Attorney General is defending in court. Because when one listens to what the Attorney General puts out into the public by way of his press conferences, one would be led to believe that the Attorney General is merely being hit with a barrage of litigation from you know, UNC lawyers. Although lawyers do not bring cases.

So I think that the public deserves to know how this \$51 million is being spent, because every single day there are cases and I am giving an example there of just two cases where there was no response to pre-action protocol correspondence, and these are matters well recited in the judgment which was delivered by the court and there was no effort to settle these matters. Some of them being fought all the way to the Privy Council.

So, again, are we getting value for money? Just because as the Attorney General likes to say UNC lawyers or UNC affiliated lawyers are involved in some of these matters, does it justify candles costing more than the funeral? Because sometimes I think the amount of money being spent to defend some of these matters is far more than the damages that are awarded, or the award of damages that sometimes is being appealed before the court.

So, one really has to understand when this additional \$51million is being allocated what it is being used for, how it is being used, and is it being used to seek the best interest of the people of this country, as the Government likes to come and say here that they are seeking the interest of all persons in this country. How does

it help the average citizen of this country to go to court and fight against a woman wearing her hijab with her police uniform? I would like to know that, and I would like the Attorney General to give us an answer to that.

I understand that a lot of the funds, it is stated in the document that it is to pay foreign attorneys and consultants and so on. Last year we heard it was carried in the media and I do not want to get too much into it, but we heard that you know, some of these—and in the AG's press conference he referred to I think he calls it “quasi civil criminal matters” that he is paying for.

Last year right before elections incidentally we heard charges are imminent. Well, a year later as I have called it the most expensive witch hunt in history, not one witch has been found as yet. Value for money.

Madam President, as I conclude, I would like to implore this Government: give people value for the money that you are coming here to spend today. In these economic times it is not a simple matter of another \$3 billion. That is \$3 billion of debt or \$3 billion from our savings. These times, I heard the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs compare all the economic statistics and so on with other countries; that takes us nowhere. That is like the hundred graphs that they pull out at the press conference to say, “Well, you know what? 15 people died today, you know but doh worry it could have been 100”.

There is no comfort in telling us that our debt to GDP ratio, “It bad, but it ain't really dat bad because plenty people worse off than us”. I do not know that that takes us anywhere and takes us forward.

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Thank you, Madam President. That comparison does not put food on the table. It does not put a laptop in the hand of a child to ensure that their

education is not compromised or drive them to a life of crime. And it certainly does not help us rebuild and boost our post-COVID economy. More than anything here, Madam President, the plans presented do not give confidence to the citizens, to the businesspeople, to the teachers, and the frontline workers, and the health workers, the police officers who are grappling every day and fighting this pandemic. And the Government owes it to the population if they want to spend another \$3 billion of our money, to give some better plans, policies, procedures, and meaningful contributions, and meaningful ideas that would allow for our economy to go forward and to rebuild post-COVID and also to get us out of this COVID crisis, and to have a better vaccination process deployed throughout this country. If they say the vaccines are coming, now is the time to have a much better process so that we do not see pandemonium and chaos plaguing this entire process going forward. Thank you, Madam President.

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, Madam President. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I wish to take this opportunity to applaud the hon. Minister of Finance for his astute management of the monetary and fiscal affairs of the national purse in these difficult and unprecedented times.

Madam President, we on this side are guided by the steady hand of a phenomenal leader who has proven time and time again to be the right person, at the right time for the job. [*Desk thumping*] Through his stewardship this Government has grown from strength to strength and our decisions are always based on what is best for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and not any sectarian

or partisan interest. As for this, Madam President, I wish to thank and applaud the hon. Prime Minister.

Since the onset of this pandemic in March 2020 to the present day, the recent statistics presented by the Ministry of Health and the state of emergency declared on May the 14th to reduce the spread of COVID-19, do not paint a happy picture at all. And there is however light at the end of the proverbial tunnel and a resurgence of hope occasioned by the recently announced national vaccination plan.

In addition, the impending removal of exemptions to enter the country, the managed opening of our borders, and the expectation that our country will be able to return to some semblance of normalcy in the near future, the first milestone being the reopening of our schools in September, are hopeful signs that we are heading in the right direction.

2.30 p.m.

Madam President, what shines through all of this is that as a Government, we have a plan, we know where we are going and we know that with God's grace, we will get there.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, as the lead social sector Ministry, with core responsibility for the delivery of social services and the maintenance of a robust safety net, guided by the tenets of the National Development Strategy, which is *Vision 2030*, ours was the task of ensuring that the most vulnerable sectors of our population are not disadvantaged but instead are able to benefit from a government and society that nurtures and cares about them. Madam President, it is no secret that the Ministry has continued to deliver on its mandate to make necessary interventions, both in response to those who were impacted by the measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and at the same time,

ensuring that the recipients of our core grants are still afforded the opportunity to engage in a decent quality of life.

In fiscal 2020, the Ministry provided assistance in the form of income, food and rental support to over 176,000 individuals and families who were impacted by the measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. And as we move into a new phase of social support, the sum of 40 million is required for the Ministry to alleviate the socioeconomic impact of the recently introduced COVID-19 protection measures on vulnerable households. Madam President, with the implementation of the Income Support Grant phase II initiative, vulnerable persons who are not in receipt of an NIS number and who lost their incomes with effect from May 01, 2021, in accordance with Public Health Regulations, Legal Notices 124 and 131, will be supported by a maximum of \$1,500, while those who lost their incomes with effect from May 08, 2021, will receive \$1,000 for the month of May only.

As of this morning, 4,778 applications have been received—actually, I just got some new figures. As at 2.08 today, 4,871 applications were received. For fiscal 2021, the Ministry was originally allocated the sum of 4.76 billion for current transfers and subsidies, of which 4.67 billion represents the three major grants of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services: senior citizens' pension, public assistance grants and disability assistance grant. And as at May 20, 2021, 151,415 persons would have benefited from these grants in the combined sum of \$3.47 billion. It is noteworthy that despite our dire economic situation, this Government has maintained its social safety net, and continues to pay benefits at the established levels to the individuals and families who receive senior citizens' pension, disability assistance grants, public assistance grants and food support.

As at May 2021, the Ministry provided support to 182,044 individuals and households through its various core social services programme. In short, as at May 2021, when considering the average household size in Trinidad and Tobago is three persons, this Government provided food, income and other support to more than one-third of the entire population of Trinidad and Tobago. Additionally, Madam President, as at May 31, 2021, the Ministry has spent in excess of \$2 million to assist persons with home repairs and others to set up small businesses.

What these figures demonstrate, in a very tangible manner, is that notwithstanding the stringent economic circumstances, and notwithstanding the erroneous claims by those who should know better, this Government has consistently delivered on its promise to govern on behalf of all the citizens ensuring that none is left behind. We will continue to ensure that anyone deserving of Government's assistance will receive such support. And that is not just my commitment, Madam President, but the commitment of all of us on this side, irrespective of the portfolio we currently hold.

Madam President, this Ministry was allocated the sum of 4.9 billion in recurrent expenditure and 13.6 million in capital expenditure in fiscal 2021. And as at May 20th —at May—the end of May 2021, eight months into the financial year, approximately 3.6 billion has been expended thus far, which represents 73 per cent of the overall allocation. This Government has maintained a secure social safety net and proposes to continue its support to vulnerable persons, including those who have lost their means of livelihood on or after May 01, 2021, in accordance with the Public Health Regulations. It is in this vein, Madam President, that supplementary funding in the sum of 40 million is necessary as we seek to deepen our commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Ministry is mindful of the number of challenges faced during the first phase of social support to persons impacted by this pandemic and some of these included some persons double-dipped and applied for both the Income Support Grants administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and the Salary Relief Grant which was administered by the Ministry of Finance when only one grant was intended. Others tried to receive grants by fraudulent means such as submitting false documents, misrepresenting the date of loss of income on their declarations, colluding with recommenders to submit false information, and misrepresenting the value of their incomes. Yet, others clogged the system by submitting incomplete applications, incorrect bank account numbers, addresses, phone numbers and forms of IDs, and this made it difficult to process some applications. It slowed down the system, it also held back bona fide applicants from receiving their grants on a timely basis. But having learned from our experience of this fraudulent practices of a small proportion of dishonest persons in the first place, we have taken steps to mitigate any attempt to beat this system this time around.

So clearly, Madam President, there is a lot we can learn from history and one of those lessons, as we enunciated many decades ago by former British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill, is we should never let a good crisis go to waste. So, as a consequence, and in effort to pivot the Ministry towards much needed technical advancement, the decision was taken to receive all applications online, thereby improving accessibility and efficiency of the business processes to mitigate the challenges identified above. And there are clear benefits to be derived by both the clients and the Ministry, and some include the prevention of double-dipping; utilizing a more efficient method of processing applications such as, the usage of

web forms that speed up the processes; allowing applicants a faster and cheaper means of submitting their applications directly into the system; facilitating picture uploads of supporting documents and proof of validity where required, and most importantly, reducing the need for movement and gathering of persons.

So, the Ministry remains ever mindful that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major effect on our lives. Many persons on a daily basis are facing challenges that can be stressful, overwhelming and cause strong emotions in both adults and children. The country's present state of emergency, including the curfew from 9.00 to 5.00 on weekdays, the recently announced restrictions on weekends and the public health safeguards are necessary to reduce the spread of the pandemic. In addition, due to the surge in infections and increase in persons managing the disease in home isolation, entire families are confined at homes and some without the much-needed support.

So in these situations, when the Ministry has been alerted to the plight of such families, we have been working with stakeholders throughout our various networks to bring some relief in the form of food support. We also know that there are persons who struggle emotionally on a daily basis and I am happy to report that as at May 2021, the National Family Services Division of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, counselled a total of 2,692 individuals. In addition to telephone counselling, the Ministry is also facilitating virtual counselling sessions, all in an attempt to provide much-needed psychosocial support.

As part of its outreach efforts, the National Family Services Division also produced its radio programme, "It's Family Time, Let's Talk!", addressing issues such as domestic violence, family values and family life, mental health and

wellness. And starting this month, the Ministry intends to expand this programme and also begin a number of virtual parenting workshops. Through its Corporate Communications and Education Unit and the Division of Ageing, the Ministry also provided and disseminated information on the types of support which could be provided to the family and especially older persons during this period. And speaking of older persons, Madam President, next Tuesday, June 15th, Trinidad and Tobago will join the rest of the world in observing World Elder Abuse Day.

I would like to highlight one form of elder abuse which caught my attention and that is financial abuse in the form of fraudulent activities related to the encashment of senior citizens' pension cheques. The Ministry is working with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to address matters of fraud, whereby our older persons are being deprived of their benefits. In this regard, Madam President, the Ministry's direct intervention strategy includes the reintroduction of a national campaign on the direct deposit initiative. We continue to receive numerous complaints from clients, particularly our senior citizens, pensioners of lost, stolen, damaged cheques.

With the introduction of the direct deposit system, clients who are in receipt of our senior citizens' pension, disability assistance and public assistance will be able to receive their funds directly through their personal bank accounts. And I intend to continue the dialogue with our stakeholders and partners on this initiative to ensure that there is significant compliance by all beneficiaries. Madam President, given the additional risks COVID-19 poses to older persons, every effort is being made by the Ministry to limit the possibility of exposure to the virus by our older population and a number of initiatives are in place that are meant to avoid them having to come to our offices. The Ministry has temporarily suspended the

need for pensioners to appear at our offices for the purpose of verifying that they are alive. Through our partnership with iGovTT, TTConnect, the Ministry recently launched an automated application process for those who qualify for senior citizens' pension where applications are available for completion online, so that we move our older persons from in line to online.

There is the intent to fully digitize our social services delivery system to make it more responsive and multifaceted, thereby creating a one door policy that will facilitate a substantial improved client experience all around. We have also reached out to the banks, TTPost and supermarkets to reserve the first one or two hours of opening, especially for senior citizens. And at present, we are reviewing the existing Senior Citizens' Pension Act that will seek to modernize this piece of legislation. The Ministry encourages all stakeholders—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: The Ministry continues to encourage all stakeholders to provide services to older persons to make special arrangements to relieve them of stress and exposure at this time. We would like to encourage caregivers, both in homes for older persons and in private residences, to get vaccinated to avoid infecting the elderly. At the same time, the Ministry will make every effort to ensure that necessary protocols are carried out at our local social welfare district offices and homes for older persons under our remit. And I just would like to say that I know that some persons spoke about older persons and I want to say, you know, and to confirm that the Government looks out and cares for our older persons. I just want to quote from Ignacio Apella, who is the pensions expert at the World Bank, who lorded Trinidad and Tobago's generous social pension programme. And he said:

Trinidad and Tobago has quite a generous social pension programme.

In a 2017 report titled, “Caribbean synthesis report on the”—implementation of the—“Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the San José Charter on the Rights of Older Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean”, ECLAC cited that:

Trinidad and Tobago has the most comprehensive, contributory and non-contributory pension scheme in Caricom.

The report also cited that:

Our pension scheme has evolved to be the highest per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean region.

So, Madam President, in conclusion, I just want to confirm that Trinidad and Tobago is a leader when it comes to dealing with elder persons. I want to remind everyone, I give the national community the assurance that this additional 40 million will allow the Ministry of Social Development and Family Service to significantly increase and improve its pandemic relief response, signalling our commitment to help empower and transform the lives of the vulnerable in our country ensuring that none is left behind. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Attorney General.

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi):

Thank you, Madam President, for this opportunity to make a very short intervention into this debate. Madam President, I have come to address some of the contribution offered by my learned colleague, Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial, specifically in relation to the matters before this honourable Chamber and that is the supplementation of appropriation under the Head of the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

Madam President, under the Head that we are looking at, Head 23, and in the various subcategories that we are examining and justifying, we are looking at a supplementation of appropriation for the Ministry of the Attorney General, Office of the Attorney General, Ministry of Legal Affairs of \$118,961,000. And in the contribution coming from Sen. Lutchmedial, a particular amount of focus was paid to the issue of legal fees, which stands in the sum of \$51 million. The hon. Senator took time to traverse a number of submissions, importantly in relation to disclosure of legal fees; secondly, in relation to value for money for legal fees under this particular Head, and thirdly, in relation to certain examples in litigation, which the hon. Member put onto the record and which I feel compelled to address in part.

Madam President, permit me to say that the justification for the \$51 million in legal fees is comprised of the very necessary purpose of paying for services rendered in the period of this financial year but very importantly, that includes the payment of arrears of legal fees outstanding, and let me be very specific about that. In the arrears category that will be in this current year, it is a matter of public record that the current administration received arrears of payments due and payable to attorneys at law in the sum of \$141,300,000. Let me repeat that, \$141 million-odd. That was left specifically after the handling of matters by Attorney General Ramlogan and Attorney General Garvin Nicholas. That is in addition to the \$444-odd million. Madam President, I am able to indicate now that as a result of the factoring down of bills that were left for payment by another government—this Government—that we are now paying arrears, part of the moneys of this \$51 million to settle moneys due and owing as a result of a previous Attorney General's experience, Mr. Ramlogan and Mr. Garvin Nicholas.

Madam President, permit me to say also, in relation to the general comparative value for money issue raised by Sen. Lutchmedial, that for the six years that this Government has been in office, the Ministry of the Attorney General, now Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, comprises three Ministries: Attorney General, Legal Affairs, and the absorbed aspects of the Ministry of Justice. In that period of six years, the quantum relevant to this debate today, the total amount of legal fees paid is \$387 million-odd. That is, Madam President, compared to the \$600 million incurred by Attorneys General Ramlogan and Nicholas.

Secondly, of that \$387 million incurred, 141 million of that money, Madam President, is for arrears and that is the amount that we are paying in this current final year, the breakdown of that. But of the 387 million—let me put on public record now that the legal fees include the payment of legal fees by the Director of Public Prosecutions and that stands at approximately 147 million. So let me put it in simple terms in value for money: \$387 million, spent under my watch for six years, of that, \$147 million is for the DPP's Office alone. Of that, a significant amount has gone to pay the \$141 million in arrears left by the UNC administration. Permit me to say this now in relation to disclosure. Madam President, this Government is in the course of full disclosure of every single penny for legal fees incurred, what—and spent. What we are obliged to do, in the process of continuing disclosure, is to do the following things before we make the full list available.

We have already provided the list of names of people retained by the Ministry. We have to disclose the list of names retained by the DPP's Office, the Board of Inland Revenue and certain state enterprises. And, Madam President, as Attorney General, I am obliged to have written to all of the lawyers whose

information will be disclosed to establish their position in relation to disclosure and also to consider their objection or non-objection. It is this Government's intention, having gone through that exercise, that we will of course be making disclosure, Madam President, in respect of every single person. The only caveat to that raised by Sen. Lutchmedial is simply the matters in respect of which there is significant risk to criminal prosecution, anti-terrorism work or matters that are civil in nature but that are used for the support of criminal prosecutions.

And in addressing value for money, Madam President, let me put on the record now. The civil asset forfeiture regime has born significant results. Up to this week alone, there were raids done by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, in relation to ongoing matters, millions of dollars in cash retrieved, et cetera, in matters which I will not speak of but just generally inform, and that that regime is working extremely well. In Sen. Lutchmedial's contribution of saying that there was an expensive witch hunt in relation to foreign attorneys acting for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Madam President, permit me to say, without going into those particulars, those matters now stand at the desk of the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions. Certain matters stand in other countries under the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Act. As Attorney General, I must obtain the consent of the Department of Justice, the National Crime Agency and other entities, so that I am permitted to make the disclosures. There will be a full disclosure within the parameters of the law and certainly it will go down to the process of saying exactly who received what. Madam President, I therefore wish to disabuse the country of listening to the rhetoric of my friends opposite because there is no attempt to hide anything inside of here. You just have to go with the process of disclosure, Madam President.

Permit me to wrap up quickly now by saying in relation to the matters raised—as specific matters raised by Sen. Lutchmedial. Sen. Lutchmedial raised the matter of COVID litigation. The COVID litigation included habeas corpus applications, judicial review applications and constitutional motions. And for Sen. Lutchmedial to tell the country that we should just simply, as a government, have capitulated and not defended those matters is the worst travesty of justice and let me explain why. In the world of the United National Congress, where a constitutional claim is brought to strike out the Public Health Regulations, to strike out the constitutional underpinning of these things, chaos would have prevailed in Trinidad and Tobago because the Public Health Regulations, which have defended this country from an overtaking by the pandemic, would have fallen to naught. And I cannot, as a responsible Attorney General, tolerate the conversation that we should just simply have capitulated and let them have their way and crash Trinidad and Tobago, because that is the world where you build a dome around Trinidad and Tobago, you pour sunlight into Trinidad and Tobago, you free Ian Alleyne, you open bars, you open borders and you strike out the very thing which the courts of this country have said have saved this country—the Court of Appeal in this country has already said that the Public Health Regulations were prudent and are constitutional.

I want to address one last matter, Madam President, with your leave, and that is in response to Sen. Lutchmedial's exhortation that a matter now concluded in the Privy Council, that matter which is properly concluded and which the State lost is one that should not have been pursued in the context of legal fees. How dare that submission be made?—I say quite simply and let me explain why. The facts of that matter, now in the public domain, are that Anand Ramlogan was the Attorney

General of Trinidad and Tobago and participated in amendments to the law which included looking at the amendments to the Children Act. Anand Ramlogan, as Attorney General, witnessed the fact that child rehabilitation centres had to be created for juvenile detention. Anand Ramlogan attended to the court in May 2015, if not June 2015, and sued the UNC government, brought pre-action protocols, brought litigation against the government; Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the head of that Government, who proclaimed law to ensure that child rehabilitation centres had to be there. They did not bother to put the child rehabilitation centres into actual operation. So Ramlogan, Attorney General for the UNC, left the UNC and promptly sued the UNC, brought pre-action protocols, et cetera, to tell you UNC and the government, I want damages for not having child rehabilitation centres.

If Sen. Lutchmedial is to be taken seriously today, then what the hon. Senator is really saying is that Mrs. Persad-Bissessar and Garvin Nicholas, as Attorney General should have simply capitulated and paid damages at that point. Well, if that is her complaint to her own colleagues, then I invite the hon. Senator to make that complaint to them. At the High Court, Madam President, the day I was being sworn in as Attorney General, the very day on the 9th of September, 2015, there was an injunctive proceeding brought involving that same matter, and whilst I was being sworn in, I was dealing with that matter. I will say very quickly, as I come to a close, Madam President, the State won in the Court of Appeal. In the Court of Appeal, we were victorious in upholding that there was no breach of constitutional rights effectively, such as to award damages and, Madam President, it was the petitioner's—it was the claimant's suit that went on appeal to the Privy Council.

At the Privy Council—the Privy Council had to watch Senior Counsel Anand Ramlogan, who was the Attorney General involved in the very government that he started suing, explain to the world why damages should be paid for the failure of Kamla Persad-Bissessar as Prime Minister that sat and proclaimed the law to make it mandatory that child rehabilitation centres had to be a feature of incarceration. Madam President, what I am explaining to the nation, through you, is nothing short of a livid scandal and no amount of fancy footwork to turn the facts upon its head will suffice today.

So I end, Madam President, by saying:

1. The process of disclosure for legal fees will be taken to completion and perfected and every scrap of information shall be provided.
2. The Auditor General has already audited the Office of the Attorney General up to September 2020, and there are no issues inside of that Ministry.
3. There is complete value for money.

And, Madam President, I will say that as that perfection of disclosure goes ahead, the only caveats to that will be where we are advised by the Director of Public Prosecutions or international agencies or other governments, that we ought not to risk criminal prosecution because we are not about to give get out of jail cards where people are looking for them in white collar matters. I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. David Nakhid: I can come in here?

Madam President: Yes, yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Okay. Thank you. In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful, Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this mid-year review, especially at a time when this Government seems to have completely lost the plot in all manner of governance but seems to want to maintain the objective of an unexplained, misinformed and misguided spending that in these austere times are direct results of their previous and existing failed policies, coupled with the worst implementers of those selfsame policies that our country has ever seen and unfortunately, now experience.

Now, I have to digress a bit after the latest, what can be only termed a “rant” from the hon. Attorney General who is normally clean in his contribution but seemed a bit emotional and upset. And all we can think about is any personal submission like that is not to call—as to quote one of the Senators on that side—not really senatorial, and all these personal conflicts should be left aside.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of Order, 46(4).

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, continue. But I would caution you as you continue and I would ask you please to— [*Motions to Sen. Nakhid to adjust his face mask*] Yeah.

Sen. D. Nakhid: But—

Madam President: The 46(4) has been invoked and while I will allow you to continue, I will ask you though to just be careful as you proceed with your contribution.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Yes. So to continue—because if one will consider as the hon. Attorney General tried to imply that had it not been for them, we would have seen chaos and they averted chaos, then one has to ask: What have we seen in the last two weeks, indeed, the last six years under this abject failure of a Government?

But then again, he left so much to be desired in his submission which turned out to be a rant against Sen. Lutchmedial, so I will continue.

Madam President, the latest newly minted mantra of this embarrassing—embarrassment of our Government, if one listens carefully to all their pronouncement is: hope is on the horizon. Vaccines are coming on the horizon. The arrival is soon due on the horizon. Have you paid? How much have you paid? What are the terms and conditions? When we sign an NDA, that is also on the horizon. So the barest minimum of transparency, accountability, clarity and assurance owed to the taxpayers remain somewhere on the horizon. As far as this vaccine rollout is concerned, complete and abject failure, as one of the dailies reported today, should be stamped on the foreheads of all those involved in that. Utter shame, our elderly were treated and disgraced without exception. And here you come asking for your opportunity to increase spending to have access to more of the taxpayers' money. And for most of the line Items that we have reviewed, with little clarification and sometimes without logic, is like a drug addict trying to explain to his family “where the money gone and he want more money and he have to borrow money”.

The problem first and foremost is that you are a drug addict and that is the problem inimical to this Government. They do not realize that they are policy lost. So do not come and pontificate the hon. Minister of Finance about simple Economics 101, we do not have money so we need to borrow. He would also have failed Economics 101.

It cannot be that you are asking taxpayers for more money to be placed in your care when you have shown yourself to be anything but careful, prudent, wise in the handling of the nation's affairs. An example, Madam President, of this

mismanagement, incompetence by this Rowley-led Government is a complete blackout of information concerning the 50 or 51 Israelis who flew into our nation covertly and until now, we have no idea to what their purpose is here. Everything is secret. And if they do not want to tell us under the guise of national security, which leads to speculation among the larger population, questions are being asked, people are left in the dark and our President of the Republic alluded to that. We need to know. Are they here to provide security for this Government, as this Government seems to decline in more autocratic measures?

Are they here to provide security for them? Is their stay in Trinidad and Tobago being paid for by the now improvised citizens of Trinidad and Tobago? Who is paying for their stay in this guava season? That is 50, 50 so-called security contracted. Does that have anything to do with the \$225 million that Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial spoke about now that goes under the guise of security matters? We need to know.

3.00 p.m.

There are people going without hampers, without grants. They talk all the time about Salary Relief Grants and Income Security Grants and this grant and nobody seems to know where these grants end up. And we just heard the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services, who last time in this Chamber spoke about Trinidad and Tobago having 400-odd homeless people. She said that in this Chamber when the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Clarence Rambharat, who walks regularly, well, before the SOE, around the Savannah and St. James could tell you that alone in that vicinity is easily over 700 or 800, in that vicinity alone, and we do not even reach down by Riverside Plaza yet. So, we need to know, where and who and what all this money now, where they

give no accounts before, no proper clarity, and they are coming now and asking for more and more money.

So, let us look, Madam President, at some of the LINE Items that are glaring when you provide some kind of forensic scrutiny to them. The Office of the Prime Minister has a desire to increase the allocation of the Children's Authority by TT \$60,520,000 from 64 million to about 84 million. We, as the Opposition, we have to ask, and so as one of our Senators previously, where is the value for money for the taxpayers of the country on that particular allocation or presumed allocation? My earlier investigations into the workings of the Children's Authority, upon the tragic deaths of Simeon Daniel and Antonio Francois while under the supposed care, protection and supervision of this said same Authority—

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, you are calling some names, and even though some matters may be on the public record, it may be more sensitive to simply talk about. Do not name the persons. It might be a little more sensitive to not do that please.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Madam President, I do not know if you are aware that those are the two boys that were under the care of this—

Madam President: And you see how you said “boys”, that is why I am saying to you, it might be more sensitive to simply speak to the event without calling the names.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Those boys—

Madam President: And I am saying to you, Sen. Nakhid, and I am trying to say it to give you some guidance. I am not saying to you do not say anything. I am just saying, it might be more sensitive to simply refer to the incident without naming the victims. That is what I mean. Yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Madam President, but the sensitivity—

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, if you are guided, then you can just move on, but do not be guided, and the next word out of your mouth is, “but”. Okay?

Sen. D. Nakhid: To be guided, Madam President, is to be guided by the same time to give my point of view and these two boys—

Madam President: You know, Sen. Nakhid, please take your seat. I have no intention of arguing with you. I am trying to steer you on a particular course. Okay? I have not said to you, do not speak about the incidents. I have not said that. Okay?

Sen. D. Nakhid: Yes. So under this selfsame Authority that those two boys were killed, showed that 957 children in the care of this Authority, given the figures that were proffered by the Director, Nichola Harvey-Mitchell and the Minister of woman and gender affairs, Ayanna Webster-Roy, after my analysis of those figures, yet to be disputed by any of them, the amount of money per child, after recurrent expenditure, security services, rent, et cetera, was close to about \$80,000 per child, \$80,000 per child per year. We would all be happy here, if this was the reality. But we know that it is not, with the revelation of children, under that Authority, sometimes barely being fed, clothed or secured properly, as happened with those two young boys. So that could never justify, that TT \$80,000, which even our most upper class, so-called upper class drug lords in Trinidad and Tobago, who operate with impunity in this country, would be happy to have as a budget for one of their children.

So, we have to ask, if by the numbers proffered by this Government, shows that there should be a budget of \$80,000 per child, and we know that that is not the case, where has this money gone? For them to now come and ask for a further \$43

million for the Children's Authority? Madam President, \$60 million. Sorry, \$16 million. So, we have to ask, without any in-depth investigation being launched, and we know the Children's Authority, they have their own investigative department, they have the ability to do that, we have no idea what came of an investigation, if one was launched. We are not privy to anything that happened. So then, what is the purpose of coming then and asking for a further \$16 million?

Now, when we heard the Minister of Gender Affairs, Ayanna Webster-Roy, in her submission in the other place, she talked about that being to fill positions. I think she gave the figure of 120. Now, you would think in these austere times, that you will want to streamline operations. You will want to put systems in place to account for moneys, and to make better use for that money. Nothing was proffered. So, we have incompetence asking for reward. We have young boys murdered, killed and no accountability whatsoever from this Government.

As a matter of fact, the Minister who this Children's Authority falls under their purview, the Prime Minister, Keith Rowley, Dr. Keith Rowley, never once deigned from his majestic approach to offer condolences, to empathize, sympathize with these two boys that were killed, and he is the Minister. He is responsible for that. No intervention, none whatsoever. But they are coming now, at a time when we should be trimming the fat, you come to ask for more money. Then, the only assumption we can make, when that money does not seem to be accountable, is that this is a PNM party group. This money is for what? So we reject this completely. Manage the affairs of Children's Authority as they should, and then come back and ask for money when you can prove that you can account for that money.

But what more can you say about a Government who does not seem that

they could walk and chew gum at the same time? All they could talk about, well, we have COVID-19, we have to handle lives and we have to save lives which, apparently, they are not doing a good job at. And we have to say that with all condolences to the families that have lost. In our opinion, if we were we managing the situation—they could talk all they want about dome and sunlight and all of that, you have botched your efforts. You have completely messed up and put the country as an international embarrassment in the handling of this. No more we are number one. You are at 200. As a matter of fact, you are lower than the Bahamas team that beat Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, as our people, more and more, by all accounts, get closer and closer to poverty, by all accounts if lockdowns are continued, the people below the poverty line will be almost 70 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago. We have to ask, what is the vision of this Government? Are they so bogged down with their incompetence of handling the vaccination programme that, at some point in time, we are not allowed to breathe, to see the sunlight, to see the daylight, to see that horizon that they continually refer to? And I would tell you why.

We had an event that take place, and I normally do not touch on sports—I think I served my country well—but I would touch on it today. Most of our sportsmen, our sports people, come from the so-called hot spot communities, most of them. As a matter of fact, almost 80 to 85 per cent of our football players. We just suffered an international embarrassment. I mean, it is the only thing that could possibly have eclipsed the embarrassment that this Government has put us through with the vaccination order. That is the only possible thing. I mean, international condemnation. And who has to take the blame for that?

We have, unfortunately, a Minister of Sport and Community Development,

who never fights for her constituents, Ms. Shamfa Cudjoe. In true Keith Rowley style, she blames her constituents for everything, and this is to quote her:

The pro-league sporting bodies must wean themselves off of the taxpayers' money.

Now, I might get a lil passionate about this one. So, who exactly should benefit from taxpayers' money? If not the people who come from these hot spot communities, who are responsible and tasked with bringing some measure of glory to Trinidad and Tobago? Because when they come home with the gold, when they come with their trophies, like I did, three times, they had a government delegation waiting for us at the airport, ready to shower you with all kinds of things. But now is the time, no help. So who exactly are the taxpayers' money for? The Attorney General and his family with rental buildings? Favoured contractors like Emile Elias, Sabga and friends, Mouttet and family? But the lil black boys struggling.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: On a point of order, 46(4).

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, if I could caution you again. Just try and be—the Standing Order has been invoked and I uphold it.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Thank you. But the lil black boys fighting, struggling to bring glory to Trinidad and Tobago, not a red cent for them. I looked through all the line Items, “all yuh could not find a red cent for black people?”

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, please take your seat. You are really taking this, the debate, down a particular path that you should not be going in this Chamber. Okay? And I am going to ask you to dial back on your rhetoric and come back to the matter at hand, which is this appropriation Bill.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Well, that is what I am coming to, Madam President, that the money that I looked for under all the line Items, nothing was appropriated for sport

and—

Madam President: And, therefore, Sen. Nakhid, if in this particular Bill—and you can take your seat while I am on my legs—there is no allocation for sport, then what does that tell you about your contribution right now? So, I am going to ask you, Sen. Nakhid, I am going to ask you to please, please, deal with the matter at hand.

Sen. D. Nakhid: The matter at hand, Madam President, is that there should be allocation for sports, because most of our stakeholders in the black communities, in the hot spot communities play sport. And my point is that the allocations have not been properly vetted and allocated for the people that deserve that money.

So we look at the embarrassment, scorn and shame heaped on the nation by our World Cup elimination and we wonder, does it extend only to the technical committee? No. The Government has a role to play in that. The Government cannot be so seriously disconnected with the ground.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: On a point of order, 46(4), please.

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, I have tried to talk to you and point out to you about relevance, because we are dealing with this particular appropriation Bill, and you are going way outside. I allowed you to make some of your comments, but you are way outside the remit of this Bill.

Sen. D. Nakhid: So while the Government, we know, has to be managing COVID, it does not mean that you have to neglect the people and the economies of those people, because it will come back to bite us in ways that we have examined before in this said same Chamber. So, all we can see, without the proper planning, without the proper allocation, is a vote for us and then we will ensure that you have a place in the penal system. Okay, but I would move on, but I would also offer solutions.

There could have been small programmes, Madam President, not big programmes, austere times, guava times, but there could have been some outreach into these communities to employ community monitors, small initiatives. Just show a modicum of care to some of these communities. But, what do I know? But what can we say, Madam President. And let me tell you why, and let me bring it back and link it.

We have the so-called economic recovery programme which did mention sport. But if that was the case, that it was mentioned, and we look forward to coming out of this COVID pandemic, we look forward to that, because that was the purpose of the economic recovery programme, then if they did mention sport and the importance of it in reviving the economy—and that is my point, Madam President—then there should have been some mention of that in one of the line items. That is my point only. So, it has to be commensurate with what the Government is saying on one hand and then they are not doing it on the next hand, and that is only my point.

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: So, Madam President, then I looked at line item that involved CEPEP. I think it was 42, I am not sure. The line item which involved CEPEP. Yes, line item 42. There is an increased allocation being asked to the tune of TT \$43,497,000 up from 400 million. And my question is, is this the same CEPEP that they cut the salary of workers by 33 per cent, almost 10,000 workers? So, we have 10,000 workers in CEPEP who now could barely make ends meet from some of the most disaffected communities, they are being asked to ban their belly now, do without—do not eat two bananas, share one—but who going and benefit from this \$43 million? Who is to benefit? Favoured contractors again? Getting ready for big

pay day. Okay?

So, Madam President, in closing, I have no choice after reading, going through what the Government has asked for, I have no choice but to grudgingly congratulate this PNM Government, because one of their promises has materialized. The population will suffer under this Government rather than prosper under the UNC. I thank you, Madam President.

Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to speak on the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2021. Madam President, this has been a very painful week for me. In fact, the month so far, and today is only the 11th. I have lost one of my classmates from law school and one of my classmates from Teachers' College to COVID, and my heart has been very pained, and I thought it could not get worse, but having heard some things that I heard hear this afternoon, my heart is pained.

I would speak on Head 13, Heads 22, 23 and 28. As it is, and I had thought we would be dealing more with COVID measures, but it is much more than that because it is supplementation of other moneys that have been paid. So that the COVID measures with the support for the fiscal incentives and the ecclesiastical bodies, subventions for farmers and Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, I can well understand and agree with. So, this Bill is to give effect to the Cabinet decision to increase budgetary allocation, first of all, to the Children's Authority, Head 13, to enable the provision of services by the Authority. And I cannot believe that someone could say that you should trim the fat from the Children's Authority. Madam President, this has been the most hurtful statement I have ever heard since I have been sitting in this Parliament. Because what the Children's Authority got first in

the budget is not what they asked for, and the supplementation of the \$16 million will still not put them for what they have asked for. And what one would have thought, is that anybody sitting here, in this place, would be fully au courant and aware of the work of the Children's Authority, what work is done with the Children's Authority. The moneys that are spent there will save what we have to spend in the Ministry of National Security.

And I would advise, as the Committee on the Rights of the Child has advised, that parliamentarians become fully aware of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child, and also read the reports that we have submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. We are in dereliction of our duty in not submitting reports in a timely fashion, since 2006 when Glenda Morean was Attorney General. So we are far behind. So, read the reports of also the Annual Reports of the Children's Authority that are laid in Parliament. We must know what we are doing.

I have said, since 2016, that the Ministry of the Prime Minister and Gender and Child Affairs should be a separate Ministry. I have been saying that since 2016, and I will say it again and again. The passion that the Minister brings to that Ministry cannot really be surpassed by anything I would hear from other Government Ministries. And I think also, what we should have in the Parliament, maybe is a women's caucus within the Cabinet, so that matters that need to be addressed, long-standing matters will be addressed.

The Children's Authority has had to rely on private institutions and NGOs. Thank God, thank God that we have more corporate responsibility in Trinidad coming out now, because we are in this together, and it must mean, we must care about our children. That is our future. We must not just say the words of Whitney

Houston. We must act on them.

So, we are asking the public sector, come on board. Maybe adopt a children's home, because a lot of children are suffering in this land, and when they leave the institutions, we know what is happening to some of them. St. Dominic's Home, when the budget was debated, I said and I spoke to the Minister of Finance, you took \$4 million. They have had to pay for psychiatric nurses. We know mental health is a big problem.

3.30 p.m.

We know that gender violence is called the shadow pandemic, a lot is happening in our homes. Read the newspaper, women are being killed. And I am not only concerned about the women who are being killed, I am also concerned about the men who are killing themselves. They are our people too and we ought to do what we can to, please, help them. They are not all monsters, men need help and we must have people come on board to help these men. The Gender-Based Violence Unit, they are doing their best but we need the pastors, we need the bosses, we need anyone who can influence the men to please try to help them. Do not bat in your crease, come out and do what we can.

I received a phone call a few weeks ago. I was told, "You have to talk to this man." I was home working on something else, I did not want to do anything in legal work. I had something urgent to deal with, and my daughter said, "Mummy, you have to talk to this man." And I spoke to this man, he was in the depths of despair and thank God I took that phone call because at the end of the day he felt that there was some hope. There was a woman who was killed not too far from where I live and a pastor came to me and he said, "I am so sorry I did not talk to that man." After he killed his wife, he went and killed himself. We have to have

time and make the opportunity to talk to the men who are suffering. And that gentleman who I spoke to a couple of weeks ago was advised by a senior police officer and I want to say very clearly to the police officers, “If yuh don’t know, yuh don’t know, don’t give bad advice because that man was at the lowest and we would have had to read the headlines the next morning about him and his children.” So police officers, senior, you do not know family law, keep away and send them—I advised him where to go to get advice in addition to what I spoke with him. So the men need help, let us save the men and the women, please.

So we have still the gender policy in Cabinet since 2016. We have the National Strategy and Action Plan for gender-based violence and sexual violence still in the Cabinet and I am calling on the women in the Cabinet, try and see what you can do about it. So we recognize there is a role for you, there is a role for the church; there is a role for lawyers to be responsible. Lawyers are not always responsible. There is a role for the NGOs and there is a role for teachers as well, helping the socialization of children because the men did not train themselves, women trained them as mothers and aunts and grandmothers.

The next Head I want to look at is the Ministry of National Security and I want to ask a question, how much money has been saved in transporting prisoners to and from court? What is happening with the 4.5 and the \$5 million that you are spending all the time now that prisoners are not being carried back and forth to court? What is happening now that the police are not providing moneys? What is happening to that money? What is happening with regard to the maintenance of the vehicles? We have seen in the press a graveyard of police vehicles. If we cannot fix the vehicles and we keep buying more of these vehicles, what about selling off those vehicles, the parts to the various garages? We have to look at see how best

we can save money.

You talk also about fixing vessels. The vessel, I understand, that transports officers, the prison officers to and from Carrera, that has been down. They are travelling by pirogue. What will happen if this pirogue sinks? Are we going to have a boat load of people showing up dead some part of Trinidad and Tobago? Are they insured, these prison officers? We have to take care of them as well. What are we doing?

Now we come to Head 23, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. Now, it is mainly to pay salaries and on contract, arrears of salaries and so on; 5 million in contract employment. I am appalled at the number of officers in the Attorney General's Office, lawyers and clerks that are telling me that some of them were on contract for three years and now working on three and six-month contracts. Is that right? Is that how we want to treat people? Do we not want to build a cadre of lawyers who are experienced, who feel confident in their jobs and who can go out and do the work and who would be trained by their senior lawyers so we do not have to be hiring all these private lawyers? And sometimes, sometimes, and I am not speaking idly, the work that we can hire, but we hire private lawyers for, can be done by the State lawyers and that is a fact. So we have to be very careful about what we do.

So we have gratuities and the people who are on the three and six-month contract, they are signing contracts and at the end of the day there is no gratuity. You cannot buy a car. You cannot buy a house. You cannot—is that how we train lawyers who have fought and passed their exams at law school, you know? So we are allocating 51 million for outstanding fees for local and foreign lawyers. We have heard nothing about the cost awarded. I have heard the Attorney General say

many-a-times he has won cases, what is happening with those costs, we would like to know?

I turn now to the Ministry of Health. What is happening in terms of—something that we have been talking about for so long—the mental health of our children? I speak to Dr. Shafe; I speak with Dr. Sharpe, they are just two child psychiatrists. I visit St. Jude's and they are telling me, “Oh, they tell me to throw away the medicine that Dr. Shafe ordered, the caregivers. That is madness because we are not really mad.” And Dr. Shafe assured me a lot that these children in institutions, they are mentally ill. So that is a priority that we have to work on. So when we are talking about the money for the Children's Authority to hire all of these staff, these, you know, the psychologists and so on, it is because they need the money to fix the children so that they do not become a statistic later on. So it is not about trimming the fat, there is no fat to trim. This is an urgent need for our children, our future that we have to work with. So get real and understand that these are urgent problems.

Madam President, on the third time I was able to get my COVID vaccination. First time they said, “No, no, no, you are coughing”, you know, come back and so on; second time, third time. And I remember walking into the centre at six o'clock and I asked the nurse, “What time do you finish?” She said, “I am supposed to finish at 4.00.”; it was six o'clock. When I left there, they were still there working. Talk about care, talk about love, talk about good treatment. The nurses have been poorly paid forever.

As you know my sister who was murdered was a nurse and I know about her fighting with the car and you cannot get this allowance and you cannot get this and you cannot get that. Nurses are not treated well in this country. They are poorly

paid and they work hard. What are we going to do for them? Are we still going to give them that meagre salary? We depend on them. We see their worth now and they are doing it so cheerfully. They are sacrificing so greatly and what do we do, very small salaries. People who work much less—but we do not value because most of the time the nurses are women. And historically professions in which women work are not valued highly. Is it not time we changed that? What are we going to do for our nurses now that we see how hard they work, how much sacrificing they are making? And I met the nurse who, you know, did such a wonderful job because I told her, you know, “You are going to have problems”, you know. I said, “I was at George Washington Memorial Hospital and they brought the doctor, the nurse, the consultant and nobody could find my veins, except when they brought Hamid who was the lab technician.” I say, “So how you are going to make out, my sister not here to help”, and the nurse put that needle in. I said, “Lord, you finish?” I did not feel a thing, not a thing. She was so wonderful. They were so caring and she said, “You know, your sister is my batch mate”. So that means she should have retired some time ago. She is in her 70s and she was there soldiering on. What are we doing—

Madam President: Sen. Thompson-Ahye, you have five more minutes.

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: Thank you, Madam President—for our nurses?

So we have come here today and we are asking for a number of payments to be made and we ask, is there a proper account of your stewardship? Has the money been used wisely? Have we cut costs as we could? Have your priorities been prudently allocated? Now that the Children’s Authority has moved from Wrightson Road, and we know how long that struggle has been going on since we had the Minister in another Government, the amount of money that was being paid and the

savings now is \$1.8 million a year. Verna St. Rose-Greaves, that is her name. So that struggle for so long. And I look at the list of properties rented by Government, 349 different offices, millions of dollars, and I ask myself, can we do better than we are doing now? You are building a Ministry of Health but all of these offices that are being rented at million and millions of dollars, you have one agency that has moved and you are saving 1.8 million a year. Now, what can we do about savings for all of the rent that we are paying for all the buildings so that we can have more money to service Trinidad and Tobago?

So let us think carefully about what we are doing, how we are doing it because we are in all of this together, not just some but all of us in it together. So as COVID has had us looking and thinking about how we can do things better, let us look at that avenue, Mr. Minister of Finance. I thank you, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Deyalsingh.

Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh: Madam President, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to make a contribution today. And I must say, we were asked here to give, you know, \$3 billion, to discuss \$3 billion more to be given to the Government in its effort to fight this COVID virus and the implications that it has brought to our country's health and social structure. So I am saying that the recommendation by the Standing Finance Committee brought about this amount and I must say, I was a little disappointed when I saw the discussions of this committee; what the nation saw in a public debate. Persons were saying they were not given the opportunity to get correct answers and the accountability that was needed in the expenditures. I think, you know, it is unfair at this time we have to go through that.

Government may have all good intentions but should also understand that

persons, you know, may be sceptical about spending, as we have heard persons say, both here and outside, and it is a right of persons to understand how taxpayers' money is being spent. In this light, you know, I think the duty of the Opposition is to keep the Government on its toes and, you know, the Government has to do, you know, what is best for the citizens. We have to trust the Government to do that, not just this generation but generations to come.

So COVID has shut down the country but it should not shut down public debate or freedoms or persons asking questions on accountability that is, you know, out there in the public domain. People want to know what is going on. Are they getting quality for the taxpayers' money? This is a difficult fight that this Government has and Governments worldwide but our main focus, you know, has to be on the main Ministries that will help us in this fight, which is the Ministry of Health, Social Services, National Security, Agriculture. And so far I am pleased to say, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, the input that she has made in giving out these grants and hampers and helping the population, it has come a long way. It has helped a lot.

Member here, Sen. Nakhid mentions the fact that, you know, persons could say it is politically manipulated, only party members may get certain grants and whatnot. And this is a fact that some persons may feel but it is a discussion, Madam President, that we have been hearing for years and I am thinking to put an end to this. We should have a way of transparency that if persons may feel somehow disenfranchised, they do not have a party card, be it because of their race, be it because of whatever; they do not know a family member in the party, they could have a transparent manner of venting this. And I think the Ministries should need to vent this, to have this so then in the end we would not have to have

the same discussion over and over again. So it will help the individuals who figure they are disenfranchised.

Madam, I want to say that, you know, the fact is we are in a blessed place, Trinidad and Tobago has reserves. Trinidad and Tobago, our oil and gas has put us in a position. We should have been like the shining star of the Caribbean to handle this crisis, but here we are taking vaccines from other countries. We are getting vaccines from the United States. We are in a position that, you know, somehow we were caught with our pants down, even though we had time to prepare, even though we had a lot of scenarios played out in the world stage where we could have learned from the mistakes, how we could line up, get vaccines, drive-in. We heard the last Senator mentioned her vaccine situation and whatnot. So what I am saying is that we know that we have to learn from mistakes but we have to get this on board, you know, and we are here taking loans, you know, not to fund infrastructure development but to mainly pay wages. So we have to have greater efficiency, not just with the vaccine rollout but how are we going to let the service providers be more efficient. Because post COVID we would have to get persons to come on board to do their duty, to do their diligence, to actually work hard to build back this nation.

I would like to express, Madam President, my sympathy for all the families who have died. I had a member who died in this COVID war. I know seven persons who actually passed on. And even the first case we had in this country, it was my neighbour and I had great discussions with him about the inefficiencies when he went to Caura, things that should have been ironed out. And I must say that, you know, even though we still have a way to go to get our population vaccinated, we have to realize that we have to not just vaccinate our country but it

is a global problem now because it can spread. It can come in in the borders. It can come in by persons coming into the country with illegitimate means too. And very early in the game, I think we had done well. We were one of the first countries—I think I was January 30, 2020—to actually, in the western hemisphere, where we actually had imposed restrictions on travellers from China and other at-risk countries. We did well. We had parallel health care system but, you know, when we are hearing now that we are now overwhelmed; Dr. Maryam Abdool-Richards claiming about the bed spaces and our overwhelmed—it is a setback. It is a setback in this war but we have to get together with all parties to see how we can get back on track.

You see, like how ANR Robinson had mentioned once, we have to attack with full force when Parliament was under attack, we need to attack this virus with any available methods, any available vaccine. We have to do all in our powers to attack this virus. So indeed, Trinidad and Tobago, I am saying, we are still in a good place and, you know, we have to realize though that even though we had those savings, even pre-COVID we were already experiencing a decline in the natural gas prices. We had weak prices. So we had increase in availability of natural gas from other traditional exporters. So even before that we were getting some problems to actually manage our economy. And one Government would blame the other one and blame the other one. We could go back to the days of Eric Williams, he can go back to the days of Gomes when they had corruption. The idea is, we all need to get together and band together to get us out of this.

The Ministry of Health, first I might say, there are some challenges but, you see, we have to say how it is going to spend. How is the money going to be spent? Now, I am suggesting, instead of all these lines that we are having in the hospitals,

we could have used the election areas where we went to vote and have those small areas. And those small areas—I had recommended catchment—carry the nurse there, proper storage of the vaccine and you could have rolled out that; people know where they go to vote. Also, mobile units. I have my father, 90-something years old, I would like if announcement is made, just as how people were vaccinated in school long ago with a mobile unit coming into school. Go into a community, announce we are coming in; have the proper storage in the mobile vaccinating units, come into an area, vaccinate all these elderly persons who cannot come out, who are at risk to come out. These are easy things to do.

The other thing I am looking at is the fact that—you know, one of our Senators mentioned about the regional health authorities and sometimes the Ministry might be the better one to handle that—we have to look at this stage, has the regional health authorities outlived its usefulness because, you know, when Minister Eckstein years ago brought it on it was supposed to bring some change but we have seen so much money spent, duplication of funds. I am thinking, we have to look to see, should we disband that and go back to the Ministry.

Vaccines, we have to thank the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs for his getting vaccines for us from America and other countries. We have to look at the Cuban source also. Cuba was 30 years in biotechnology; they made a drug for lung cancer; they made the meningitis B vaccine. They have their vaccine which has recently gotten permission from the world health authority that they can use. And you see, Madam, Cuba has the ability to make the vaccine but they need other countries. They are looking at Iran and Venezuela to produce the vaccine. We may have to let our Minister negotiate with the American Government to allow the embargo from Cuba to be lifted in this era because Cuba has the ability and

Venezuela has the ability to produce that vaccine and we can source that vaccine for our country also. So the geopolitics should not come into the way of persons who are dying with this COVID. So negotiations should be, you know, handled that way.

Ambulance services: The cost for ambulance services is horrendous. We have to negotiate and see if somehow we could renegotiate with the ambulance service to, you know, the private ambulance service to be able to reduce its fees or stop the monopoly. Madam, there are also lines in the UK. I saw a *Washington Post*, you know, newspaper, a photo and there were lines. The UK has now gotten—and I think it was on the 6th that picture came out in the *Washington Post*, people lining up just like us and I was amazed, they were not keeping their social distance. So worldwide we would have to, you know, remind the persons and the population where you can have hot spots. The UK is now frightened that the Delta Strain has reached there and soon they may see a reactivation of cases all over.

Madam President, we heard that there is a problem with getting staff and I am thinking the medical brigade from Cuba can help us. Havana has sent help to 70 nations, Italy, Mexico, Haiti, and even up Antigua and Barbuda. We can beg them to send some staff to help us in our fight if there is a paucity of doctors that, you know, is out there that we may need. Eighty million for the health authority, Madam, I think we have to see if this has to be revised. So indeed I must say that we have to appreciate that COVID—I was shocked that it is still here like a raging bush fire and, you know, after I thought we would have been able to handle it by now. I thought by now we would have started opening up the economy and, you know, more people have already died in 2021 than all of 2020. But, Madam President, looking at our National Security budget, you see, National Security is

also a factor we have to factor in, in our situation; people are dying from COVID and crime. I would honestly have hoped that the state of emergency could be expanded to go after gangs, to go after persons who—Minister of National Security, the AG, before said, we have limited amount of people causing this mischief. We can use this to tackle two birds and then we will now have a dip in our, you know, learn from the mistakes of the PP Government, you know, how to handle properly now if they are going after gangs. So at least people will get some relief, not just from the COVID but from the crime situation that is occurring.

We also need to look at the fact that, even the fact that you have the crowds that we saw, people lining up; we have to have the message out there, a better way of controlling that, lines. We have to look at the need that, you know, we are getting the excess vaccines available and let people know vaccines are there, just keep yourself locked down until, either the Ministry comes to you with mobile units or have we this state where we would allow you to come in a better manner. Madam, right now the Biden administration in the United States, they are paying roughly \$7 a dose for the Pfizer vaccine and there is a worldwide, you know, thrust now to say, let us go now to try and vaccinate the world because we realize it is not just individual nations. They are going to give 50 billion to 70 billion, United States, to see if we can vaccinate other countries. And in a speech in England yesterday, President Biden, when he was addressing G7 leaders, he said that this is a humanitarian obligation and hopefully, I am saying, we are getting and other countries could get from that.

The G7 leaders are right now meeting, looking also if they can donate 1 billion shots by the end of next year. So, because roughly 20 per cent of the world's people have been vaccinated so far, 80 per cent is still to be vaccinated. And the

companies who are producing the vaccine, say, right, they may have about, you know, they will be able by the end of next year to supply enough vaccines but that is a long way, more people will die. So we have to put things in place where we can protect the individuals. Madam, I want to agree with a newspaper report I saw where economist Roger Hosein cautioned about opening too soon. He said we have to be a little cautious but we have to have a parallel movement in plan to reopen slowly because we need to be cautious unless we get total vaccination or some sort of immunity. So even though we are getting beat up with restrictions, you know, I do not think we can take much beating up with increased taxation. So the cost of living, we see taxi fares are going up, we may have to think about giving them a grant again to see if we can help them, because, you see, taxi fares have gone up in certain areas. The costs of goods and services have gone up, so all that has to be taken into account. We have to use some of the funding to bridge that area.

I also support, as I am saying, the measures in the rollout that the Social Services have been given, but I am asking if that also could be waived in certain medical and emergency supplies. You see, people need to bring in oxygen tanks, oxygen concentrators which you do not really need to full up with oxygen. You could get oxygen from the air and actually create your own oxygen. So all those oxygen concentrators, tanks, gloves, pulse oximeters, please, let us bring in it VAT-free. Let us help the people to at least do some home management. I would also appeal that, you know, to the Minister of Finance to consider—

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

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam—VAT exemption for flood devices, you know, like for barriers for floods, for pumps because, you know, just recently we had a flood again in Valsayn and Bamboo and certain areas when the rain was

there. I would hate that if we have flood and members have to come out to sanitize and what after, they and all need to be able to be properly outfitted if they are going in the community to do any clean-ups after because we can have people spreading it. So VAT relief on flood, VAT relief on flood items, exemption from boxes, gates, pumps and also cameras.

Madam President, I am saying that right now if we cannot afford CCTV cameras, allow individuals to buy cameras, buy a good system, put it in and link it up to the Government service; it will help reduce crime. You see, if I am getting a VAT off for a good camera, I can have a camera, we can pick up number plates; that can help in our network of CCTV cameras and could also help in our whole situation of security. In terms of cameras again, Madam, we had instances recently where police were accused of going and shooting people, if we cannot afford body cams, allow police to use their phones. Before they go and search anyone, allow the police to use their phones before they can say they found an article on anyone that they need to seize. So at least it will protect the police officers from calls of abuse, protect also the individuals, and, I am thinking, we should have to make that a policy. Okay, we cannot afford cameras again, body cams for police, let us give them that.

Madam President, CEPEP, you know, there were some problems recently with the CEPEP and their salaries and whatnot, but, I mean, just recently in the budget CEPEP got an increase and now we are saying we have to cut down their days. But my issue with CEPEP, they are not provided with wash trucks. They have no wash trucks. They have no toilet facilities to come into my area and I do not know how they are going to clean themselves in this COVID time. Probably we need to go back with the days of standpipes and put standpipes that how you

had in certain areas in this time.

The idea I want to look at is also taxi owners, Madam, taxi owners are at a disadvantage because PH drivers are still there. They are still running beyond the law. I think we have to get some way to even give taxi owners—tell them do now pay for their badges this year; offer them, you know, again, grants to run themselves properly and let the Ministry organize proper replacement of the PH. There are rental companies who cannot rent cars, let the Government take it from them, hire persons, train them and get rid of this PH system.

I would like to think the Ministry of Education should really look at the online classes continuing. You see, you know, if streaming might be better than actually having actual classes. Let the PTA decide what is best for their schools and the area. It is fearful if we do not have proper air purification systems, filtration systems, which we could get VAT off also, in schools that we have to be very, very cautious doing things. So virtual classes, I think, may have to continue. I also would like to say that the Children's Fund is something we have to look at because the children's issue came up here recently, probably 100 per cent tax write-off for persons who contribute to this fund, just as how there is a write-off if you buy a piece of art. The Children's Authority and also child guidance unit, all these persons, you know, student support staff, they need to have virtual therapy which was started and they need help.

4.00 p.m.

Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, excellent initiative with the food boxes. I did not like the crab fiasco that occurred. Probably some way they can get this crab, sell it, make it, sell it, do something to help the crab vendors also, so we would not have to see these things going on at these times.

You see, Madam President, we are in this country and we are in this war together, and globally persons realize that this is so. The fact that we are fearing to go to the IMF is because the IMF will tell us our public service needs to be probably trimmed, but probably we need to hear that.

WASA again is a monster created by successive governments. We may have to see how we can cut that reoccurring cost and I do not envy the Minister who has to run that Ministry there. I want to say, Madam President, if we are going to give out dole, we have to make sure that persons can also give up some sort of assistance also to the country.

I am thinking that right now help may not be so forthcoming. We are all in this global fight together. We have to have a global rebuilding. The Minister of Finance, I do not envy him for these hard times. I do not envy the Government Ministers at this position. Our nation depends on you, our children depend on you, and I say God bless you and you do have—

Madam President: Sen. Deyalsingh.

Sen. Deyalsingh:—to help all citizens in this pandemic. Thank you.

Madam President: Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The good news is that in this proposal, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries benefits from an increase, and in the proposal to finish at 4.30, I as Minister benefit from a decrease in my time. I have nine minutes, because I stand in the way of the man who has actually made that additional 57 million available to us.

So, I will make seven points very quickly, that is to say, that I speak in respect of a variation that is proposed, and that is a variation within the current allocations, a move of 57 million from the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries currently has a 5 million allocation for COVID relief to households, and this 57 million will make it 62. So I have made two points.

The third point is there are four important dates, because there has been a lot of discussion by experts all over the country about these food boxes and veggie boxes and so on. There has been a lot of discussion on everything but the facts and the truth, but what is inescapable are these four dates. On May 03, 2021, the hon. Prime Minister announced that availability of this relief to 25,000 families across the country. It was intended that this be for the month of May only, in light of the restrictions imposed on that day, and the fact that those restrictions impacted a particular group of persons. On May 7th four days after, we began delivery of these boxes, and on the first day we delivered to 2,000 families.

There are people asking me for policy and policy. I would have been writing policy all now, while their constituents suffer. What they are not saying, they are quarrelling about 400 boxes, these boxes. What they are not saying is that the promise made to deliver to their constituents 600 boxes per MP, that was delivered. They are not saying that. [*Desk thumping*] And there are two persons who I would listen to, to say, “Ah did not get 600”. That is the hon. Leader of the Opposition, former Prime Minister, who could not submit 600 names, and she remains stuck at 400 in the month of May. So I would listen to her. The MP for Chaguanas East, Ms. Mohit, could not reach 600. So she is stuck at 400, but we managed, not only to deliver 600 to the MPs who provided the information, but beyond 600.

The third date is May 10th, and that is when the Minister of Finance announced that that one-month programme would run for three months to the end of July, and if required, to the end of September. This funding, the 57 million, is confirmation from him, the hon. Minister of Finance, and I am very thankful that it confirms the programme will run to the end of September 2021. The next important date is May 14th when the pool widened. So I am being told, and I am hearing but it is not for this, is not for that, what is the criteria. The pool widened because a broad cross section of persons was out of their jobs; persons who the Members of Parliament themselves could not reach. On my phone I have messages from people all over this country. A hearing-impaired man upstairs a building in Arima; I do not think the MP might reach that person. He reached to me, and through NAMDEVCO a package was delivered. Families with COVID positive people who could not be reached, maybe by the MP or anybody else, reached via social media.

The policy is very simple, that there are citizens of this country who because of the restrictions are going to go through a difficult period, and this relief via fresh fruit, vegetables and local chicken must get to them, and my responsibility is to make that happen. Why are you upset if you got your 600 boxes? I have said to you that the allocation estimates that a box with chicken and the package and so on, transportation and everything will cost \$573.10, based on the 25,000. If you look at your documents you would see the reference is to 20,000 families. The Prime Minister said 25,000. We have to take that same money and do 25,000 a month, and I have said the estimate is \$456 and I have also said, in the first month we have managed to do this at an average of \$406 a month, resulting in a saving. Why are you angry?

I listened to the Opposition Leader, an embarrassment really. To be honest, an embarrassment, because I had to waste my time to listen. The Opposition Leader talked about the missing \$11 million, and the missing \$11 million is missing from her head, because she is talking about 100,000 boxes. I am talking about 125,000. The hon. Opposition Leader is talking about 100,000. So the missing 11 million is in her head, because she is at 100,000, I am at 125,000, very simple. I do not want to waste my time doing the maths again.

Madam President, in the first month, which is between 7th May and July 2nd, when we did four weeks of deliveries, we delivered to over 25,000 families. We put \$7.1 million in the hands of farmers. I know why Sen. Nakhid did not mention anything today, because he ran in the constituency of Tunapuna, and he knows that 50 farmers from that area earned \$500,000 in that first month—500,000, 50 farmers. And in addition to the 25,000-plus deliveries, based on a donation made by Arawak Chicken Company of 20,000 chickens, my colleague the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, had an initiative to make that available to families across the country through the councillors. We have devised a programme where the 139 councillors and 12 Assemblymen will each receive 130 chickens that would go to 65 families in their district. That impacted 9,815 families, at no additional cost to the programme. So we did the 25,000, we did the 9,000.

Madam President, I estimate that at the end of the programme, we would have reached the 125 families with the boxes. We would have reached 50,000 with the chicken. It is not going to be donated anymore, we are going to pay for it. We are going to introduce, starting on Thursdays, so the councillors are going to deliver to each family, with the two chickens, they are going to deliver five pounds

of peeled and frozen provision, which is an addition, and at the end of it, we will reach 50,000 families through that measure, and then an additional 10,000 at least. So while the Minister gave us money for 125,000 families, under our astute management, we will reach 185,000 families. I am very optimistic that we will end up at 200,000 families. The fact that in the Lower House, apart from the aberrations of the Opposition Leader—

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:—and in this House, the fact that there were no complaints is because they understand that it is truth. Thank you.

Madam President: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam President. I wish to compliment Sen. Amrita Deonarine for her contribution. It was very useful and very thoughtful, and it was the kind of contribution I expect in this honourable place. I also compliment other Independent Senators. I cannot compliment the UNC.

When I looked at what Sen. Mark said, what that hon. Senator was doing was just perpetuating some mischief that is being promoted in the public domain by the UNC.

In the other place on Wednesday, I indicated that we had an unforeseen shortfall, made up of decline in revenue—a projected decline in revenue—of \$5 billion, and we were coming to the Parliament to seek approval for an additional appropriation of \$3 billion. So when you add the 5 billion projected shortfall in revenue, and the additional 3 billion in expenditure, we had an unforeseen additional situation amounting to \$8 billion.

It would be obvious to anybody, even at a primary school level, that the 8 billion I spoke about is in addition to the original fiscal deficit. [*Interruption*]

Sen. Mark: You did not say that.

Hon. C. Imbert: I do not have to say that. I do not think I am dealing with children, Madam President. But if I make it clear that there is an additional 8 billion, then certainly you have to add it to the original deficit. This campaign of the Opposition is just useless.

Let me move on to another bit of political mischief coming from Sen. Mark, quarrelling about the loans, donations and contributions made to Trinidad and Tobago in respect of COVID-19. Last year's budget deficit, Madam President, was of the order of 16 to \$17 billion. A deficit is financed in two ways. It is financed by borrowing and, in recent times, we have been financing the deficit by withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. To explain why withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund are counted as financing and counted towards the deficit, even though you do not have to borrow them, that is money already earned. So the way we account for income in Trinidad and Tobago, since that is not revenue that is being generated in this fiscal year, a withdrawal from the HSF counts as financing and goes towards the accounting deficit.

So our deficit is financed by borrowing and by withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, within the pandemic period. Since we had a deficit of 16 to \$17 billion, and since Sen. Mark was only able to add up about \$2 billion in loans and donations, even though his arithmetic was wrong, let us take it at face value. It means that that \$2 billion was only a small part of the borrowing programme necessary to service Trinidad and Tobago in fiscal 2020, and this is the political mischief that is outside there. We have inescapable expenses: Salaries and

Wages, Transfers and Subsidies, subsidies for the Water and Sewerage Authority, senior citizens grants—that is counted as a transfer and a subsidy. That is almost 4 billion. In fact, it is a little more than \$4 billion a year—social benefits. These are all inescapable expenses. We have Goods and Services, inescapable goods and services. We have expenses that are not appropriated, that are charges on the Consolidated Fund, such as the salaries of members of the Judiciary. All of these things have to be paid and, therefore, Madam President, if our revenue at this time is not matching our expenditure, then we have to borrow and finance it, and there will be a budget deficit.

After all, does the UNC want us, as was implied by a UNC Senator, to stop funding the Children's Authority? I heard a UNC Senator say that today, that the \$16 million that we are seeking an appropriation for, for the Children's Authority, we should forget that. Go and audit the Authority, and when we finish that then we could think about the \$16 million—disgraceful. Those are the kinds of ridiculous suggestions we are getting from people on the other side. Then Sen. Mark with his tired, old refrain, “forensic investigation”. That is all Sen. Mark says about anything, forensic investigation, always. Why did you not do that when you were in government for five years? What about the investigations? What happened? You did none. It was just “ol' talk”.

Well, let me go now to Sen. Deonarine.

The deficit is being financed by a combination of loans and drawdowns from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. We are still in a pandemic and, therefore, we are still authorized to drawdown from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, within limits, for financing the deficit.

In terms of debt to GDP, the Senator made the point that it is still a relevant benchmark, and I agree. Although international bodies have come to the conclusion that in 2020 and 2021, the usual metrics for debt to GDP have all gone out the window, because countries all over the world have had to incur significant budget deficits just to keep body and soul together, to save lives, to protect lives and livelihoods.

Our debt to GDP ratio in September—actually in October when the budget was read, it was 82.8 per cent. Our debt to GDP now is 85.5 per cent. So we have had a little less than a 3 per cent increase in our debt to GDP ratio over the last seven months or so and that is because we are managing our debt very prudently, Madam President. If you listen to Members opposite, and the screaming and the shouting, you would think that our debt to GDP ratio had crossed 100 per cent already, because that is the kind of thing they say in their Monday night forums. But it is not true. So that is the answer to the question posed by Sen. Deonarine. Our debt to GDP is now a little over 85 per cent.

In terms of the recovery from the current economic problems, we are in the same situation as the rest of the world. I have with me the April 2021 *Fiscal Monitor*, published by the International Monetary Fund, and the global deficit, taking into account all countries in the world, all economies in the world: advanced economies, emerging market economies, low income developing countries, oil producers, et cetera, the deficit on average for the whole world was minus 10.8 per cent in 2020. So that you take all the countries in the world, they suffered a budget deficit in 2020 of almost 11 per cent. It is projected by the IMF that the budget deficit worldwide in 2021, will be minus 9.2 per cent, going down to minus 5.4 per

cent in and 2022, and minus 4.4 per cent in 2023. This is the problem the entire world faces.

Members opposite on the Lower Bench would like us all to believe that we do not exist in the world, that Trinidad and Tobago is somewhere on its own, that it is not affected by world events. But I will read again from the International Monetary Fund, April 2021 monitor bulletin, that:

“...the amount of fiscal support in 2020 was much larger than the historical norm for business cycle fluctuations” and “that that was because” it “is a help emergency.

“...measures taken were” very “expensive and contributed to”—countries “reaching historically high debt levels.

“Going forward, rebuilding buffers and dealing with legacies is crucial for resilience in the event of further shocks.”

So the IMF is signalling that we may have further shocks as we go along.

So that, we at this time, Madam President, what we are seeking to do is to keep expenditure at a minimum but ensure that mandatory expenses are met. It is because we had done that in 2020 and 2021, that the economists in the Ministry are estimating that we have been able to reduce the GDP contraction from 8 per cent in 2020 down to just about 1 per cent in 2021. When the final figures come in, we will see what they are, but it is going to be a significant improvement in terms of GDP, significant.

As I had indicated earlier, I simply do not have the time, and certainly in my wrapping up—I am seeing I have about eight minutes left, so I will just deal with some of the other points. I wish I could have had more time to deal with the issues raised by Sen. Deonarine in particular, but unfortunately that will have to take

place on another day. What we are doing right now, we are trying to maintain economic momentum. That is what we are trying to do. We are trying to maintain economic momentum. As the pandemic wanes and leaves us, and you have a full opening of the economy, then we expect recovery. But at this point in time, we are trying to maintain economic momentum.

Sen. John, although I have been crystal clear, wanted information on how much money we have spent for vaccines. This would now be the third time I am saying this in a parliamentary Chamber, the third time. The Government has spent \$70, 7-0, million on vaccine purchases—\$70 million, and based on the vaccines that have been made available to Trinidad and Tobago, we expect to spend another \$37 million. We have made all of the payments we are required to make. We paid in full for the COVAX vaccines. We have paid in full for the Sinopharm vaccines, and we have made the necessary down payment for the vaccines—the Johnson & Johnson vaccines coming from the Africa Vaccine Acquisition Trust. All of that comes up to 70 million. Full payment for Sinopharm, full payment for COVAX and the down payment for the Johnson & Johnson. We have another \$37 million to spend. I do not see how I could be more precise than that.

So that was about all I could see to respond to, except to make the point that we have already paid this money, and it is not required for us to dip into any loan funds from any country to pay for vaccines. We are using our revenues because we consider this to be very, very important. We have already paid \$70 million. Even though we have not drawn down any funds from that China loan yet, we have taken our own revenues and we have used it to purchase vaccines because we consider this to be fundamental, crucial and important.

Sen. Dillon-Remy, I thank you for your comments, and I agree that we should all be about teamwork. That is the message I got from Sen. Dillon-Remy.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. Sen. Seepersad, we have, in fact, procured the ability to get sufficient vaccines to vaccinate 1.2 million people, and certainly I would think that would be all the adult population, and certainly those who wish to be vaccinated. That does not take into account the additional vaccines that will be coming because of the bilateral arrangements so well handled by our Minister of Caricom and Foreign Affairs, and our Prime Minister with the Biden administration in the USA. I have not factored those additional vaccines into the calculation, that we would have sufficient vaccines to vaccinate 1.2 million persons. Whatever we get from the US initiative will be extra to those 1.2 million persons.

With respect to what we are about, Madam President, the initial requirements from Ministries were much more than this. We spent a long time going through all the requests coming from various areas and came to the conclusion at the end of the day that the 2.9 billion that we are asking approval for was completely necessary. I would have been very happy if we could have maintained expenditure within the 48 and \$49 billion envelope, but if we were to do that, we would be effectively cutting off our nose to spite our face.

One of the problems I have with Members opposite, Sen. Mark tells us do not borrow, the deficit is uncontrollable, spend less. That is Sen. Mark's message. Then Sen. John and Sen. Lyder come and say spend more, and they are both in the same political party, and this is the problem we have to face all the time. One side of the UNC screaming about stop spending money, cut back on expenditure, "doh

borrow, doh withdraw from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund”. Of course, if I take that crazy advice, then we would have to retrench public servants, and we would not be able to pay senior citizens pensions, if I took that crazy advice. So one group saying, “doh spend, doh withdraw from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, doh borrow, cut expenditure, send everybody home”. One side saying that, and then a next side saying, “Give the business community more money, give out more grants, give out more this, give out more that. So half ah dem saying spend less, half ah dem saying spend more. Cyar take dem seriously.”

They pretend that they could run this country, but the population knows that only we on this side are the responsible, professional and committed and conscientious political party, that can run Trinidad and Tobago properly in the interest of everybody. They on that side on the Lower Bench, they just pretend that they could run the country, but everything they say is contradictory and foolish. I beg to move, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Sen. Mark: PNM must go!

Madam President: The Minister of Finance.

Hon. Imbert: Just one second, Madam Speaker.

Madam President: Sure.

Hon. Imbert: I am sorry, Madam President. I keep saying “Madam Speaker”. In accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that the Bill not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill be now read a third time.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Tuesday, June 15, 2021, at 10.00 a.m. On that day we propose to debate the Bill to amend the Sexual Offences Act.

Madam President, I just want to signal that Government intends to propose that we sit on Friday 18 June, 2021, at 10.00 a.m., and on that day we propose to deal with the gambling and gaming Bill. Thank you very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 4.32 p.m