

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Saturday, October 09, 2021*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

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

Value Added Tax (Amendment to Schedule 2) Order, 2021. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]

**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2022) BILL, 2021**

[Third Day]

*Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question* [October 08, 2021]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

*Question again proposed.*

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members are reminded that applicable speaking time is 45 minutes with no extension. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. the Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill, 2021. In so doing, I would like to offer congratulations to the hon. Minister of Finance, who in this his seventh budget presentation has continued to more than justify the confidence reposed in him by the hon. Prime Minister, a leader in whom we are well pleased. [*Desk thumping*] The budget presented on October the 4<sup>th</sup> was neither for the rich nor the poor but was designed to meet the aspirations of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago because, Madam Speaker, this is what the PNM is all about.

**UNREVISED**

Madam Speaker, neither myself nor the citizens of this great Republic, would have been surprised by the negative responses coming from the opposite side. The Opposition has yet again failed to convince the population that they could form a credible alternative to this PNM Government. When the Government can get the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association, the Confederation of Chambers of Commerce, the American Chamber, the San Juan Business Association, and a host of other organizations to all comment favourably on the measures outlined in the budget, some even calling it an election budget, then we must have done something right. [*Desk thumping*] And I am not surprised by the utterances but I am still a bit disappointed that not one day, not one day, not one of them has anything good to say about the budget. And their track record speaks volumes of an Opposition that is void of vision and bereft of ideas.

It was reported that one Member went so low to criticize the inclusion of pigtailed on the list of items to be zero rated and the Leader of the Opposition describe the budget as a biscuit and cheese budget. But what is wrong with eating biscuit and cheese? I eat biscuit and cheese, I have it for breakfast, I have it for dinner at times. Thousands of Trinbagonians know what is biscuit and cheese and what is a biscuit and cheese breakfast or dinner. We also know about pigtail to flavour our callaloo, [*Desk thumping*] to also to put in oil down and now barbecue pigtail is, you know, a delicacy. The 2021 budget in its entirety offers hope to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, and ensures that adequate provisions are made through multiple Ministries for those who are most in need of help. Since the budget presentation on Monday, I have been asked: how does this budget help the poor? And as a matter of fact, the Member for Chaguanas East yesterday said that there is nothing in the budget for persons who are vulnerable. I would like to outline some of these measures that are particularly for the vulnerable.

The Government has not reduced the dollar value of a single grant disbursed by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, thus ensuring that every single person who is eligible for Senior Citizens Grant, a Public Assistance Grant, Disability Grant or any other grant will continue to receive it, as they have done in the past in the same amount and on time. I am extremely pleased to inform this House that notwithstanding our challenging economic times, this Government has maintained its commitment to the vulnerable people of Trinidad and Tobago.

At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services we remain committed to providing the necessary support to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, as we seek to strengthen the safety net for the most vulnerable and take our country forward through a path of full recovery. The Food Support Programme, also known as the food card or debit card, is a short term food assistance and development programme, aimed at providing social protection by promoting nutritional and food security in vulnerable households; \$173,551,740 was expended to provide food support to 31,547 persons. [*Desk thumping*] The General Assistance Grant offers a range of grants to citizens who are in dire need of temporary assistance.

As at September 30, 2021, a total of \$5,429,184.36 was spent to assist 1,057 clients with household items, and \$407,150 for rental assistance. The Public Assistance Grant is an essential social safety net, providing financial aid to the nation's vulnerable citizens. It is provided to meet the needs of persons where the household income is deemed inadequate. As of September the 30<sup>th</sup>, 18,938 persons benefited from this grant amounting to \$335,692,321 and then we are hearing that this is not for the vulnerable. The Government has remained committed to ensuring the well-being of our elderly. The Ministry's Senior Citizens Pension provides financial assistance to persons aged 65 and over who meet the qualifying income.

As at September the 30<sup>th</sup>, 109,004 persons have received grants totalling \$353,296,000. And during fiscal 2021, 664 new elderly persons were approved for pension.

Disability Assistance Grant. This grant provides financial assistance to persons who have been medically certified as being permanently disabled from earnings and cannot be employed. Similarly, the Disability Assistance Grant for minors is accessible, where a child is deemed to be either severely or completely disabled, and where the disability is permanent in nature. As of September 2021, 22,933 persons received grants amounting to \$575,223,930. Additionally, 2,611 accessed the Disability Assistance Grant for minors amounting to \$49,823,435. And I had to take my time to call this out, Madam Speaker, because you are hearing persons saying that the budget is not for the vulnerable, it is not for those in need and so I outline these grants. I will speak about the T&TEC Bill Rebate Programme which is also for persons, vulnerable persons. This rebate will be increased from 25 to 35 percent on electricity bills that are \$300 or lower, and impact approximately 210,000 households. This grant impacts on the vulnerable, many of our clients will be able to access this grant. This measure, Madam Speaker, has to be seen as well in the context of the provision of LED bulbs to households, all designed to reduce the burden both on the national electricity grid and the average household.

The Cash Card Programme for low income and vulnerable groups: these two cards, one is the Utility Cash Card, would be made available also to low income and vulnerable groups to access subsidies for electricity and water and once the prices of these services are regularized. Fuel Cash Card, which will be made available to vulnerable groups to offset the cost of increases in the price of fuel, this too, is for the vulnerable. The removal of VAT on basic food items, the list of

basic food items that are exempted from VAT will be further expanded and we are happy to hear this, those on the lower end of the socio-economic scale are better able to afford their basket of goods. And some of these items which will cost less include vegetable soybean oil, olive oil, ghee, peanut butter, cereal, milk, coffee, tea, water, roti skin, famous pigtail, biscuits, cheese slices, soya, ketchup, geera, and these are commonly used foods. So we consulted of course, you will have heard the Minister of Finance say that he consulted to check on the items that are most commonly used so that they are the ones that would have this—the removal of VAT would take place with these items.

There is also the removal of VAT and custom duties on specified therapy equipment for those with disability; hearing impaired, visually impaired, physical mobility disabilities, disability safety peripherals, and communication devices, assisting persons with disabilities to purchase much needed peripherals and equipment at subsequently reduced costs. Approximately 52,000 persons are expected to benefit from this initiative, and we are indeed very happy at the Ministry of Social Development about this initiative because the disability unit is under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And this was a request that many organizations made, so I am happy that we listened and now they can purchase their items at a significantly cheaper rate.

Removal out of all import duties and all taxes on computer hardware, software and peripherals—those that are not yet tax free thus, ensuring that the purchase cost of these items is made more affordable to the average man on the street. Who is the average man on the street? Many of them are in need and this is what is going to help them. Increase in the Relief Grant for annual contributions for pension funds, approved deferred annuities and national insurance payment from \$50,000 to \$60,000. This will effectively increase the non-taxable income of

persons. So, Madam Speaker, some 100,000 persons are expected to benefit from this measure.

The Government continues to fund the Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development Initiative. And this programme aims to provide a mechanism to empower lower income citizens, who are desirous of starting or improving their own business but are unable to access funding on their own. It also seeks to provide an opportunity for existing welfare recipients of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to start micro/small enterprise and become more independent and self-sufficient.

I have taken the time to highlight these initiatives demonstrating that there is a whole of Government approach to the eradication of poverty in this country. But more so, to indicate that this Government is mindful of the extent of the problem and is prepared to do whatever it takes and whatever is necessary to ensure that the most vulnerable among us are treated with respect and dignity. We will not achieve this by denigrating what they eat or the choices they have made, but simply because we are unaware of the options that are available to them.

Our role, Madam Speaker, as a caring Government is to ensure that going forward, they are helped, they are empowered and their lives are transformed. The ultimate effect of these measures outlined in the 2021 fiscal package, is the immediate alleviation of the hardship being experienced by our citizens and the laying of the groundwork to eventually wean them off Government assistance. Because, Madam Speaker, we on this side, do not believe that the poor should always be with us. It is important that we break the cycle dependence on grants and our aim is to empower them. What we have found at the Ministry of Social Development is that there is a cycle of families on grants. The grandmother would be on grant, the mother on grant and the children. Okay? This is something that we

are addressing, because once we empower them, we will be able to wean them off grants.

I want to speak about the COVID-19 assistance measures and also because the Member for Chaguanas East spoke about the fact that people were unable to get grants. And I want to go into details as to the amount of money that we have spent with regard to COVID-19 relief measures at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and other Ministers will speak about their areas.

As the nation continues to cope with the effects of the pandemic, the Ministry continues to deliver social support measures to cushion the repercussions of the restrictive measures, given the number of persons who were retrenched, terminated or experienced a reduced income. In both fiscal 2020 and '21, affected persons were able to receive grant through the Government programmes. Of course, through the Ministry of Finance Salary Relief Programme, and through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Income Support Grant.

In COVID phase one, which we speak about last year, the Government spent at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services \$347 million, and about 178,000 individuals and families who required food, rental and income support benefited from this initiative. And I would like to say that the Member for Chaguanas East yesterday spoke about the fact that, no one—there are a lot of persons coming and they are—they cannot receive their grants and so on. I want to say, if to repeat 2020, 178,000 individuals and families received grants for COVID-19 and that is in 2020. In 2021, income support phase two project in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, 1,158 applicants were processed as of September the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at a cost of just over \$3 million. And the persons who received this were in the categories: bar industry; construction;

entertainment; gaming; persons who sell or offer food for sale or drink as a street vendor; restaurants; retail establishments in accordance with the Public Health Ordinance; spa industry, persons who work in the spa industries; the tourism industries; workers in the gym and fitness industries, and they are the ones who received this.

I also want to note that it was also said that we advertised for persons to collect their cheques two days after the budget and if that had something to do with the budget. The Member for Chaguanas East mentioned that it was because of the budget measures we advertised. I just want to say that she sounded upset that we were calling people for their cheques. As a Member of Parliament, I would think that all Members of Parliament would be very happy when they see us advertise for persons to collect their cheque because I am aware that persons come into your offices and ask about cheques. Okay? And therefore, if we advertise for persons to come for that cheque, most times it is a last resort. It is because we have cheques that are uncollected and this is not the only time that we have advertised for cheques. In July, Madam Speaker, July the 17<sup>th</sup> exactly, we advertised for cheques for persons to come and collect cheques, because there were many cheques that persons did not collect. And we still have many cheques that are uncollected at our offices. And I just want to state that we also use Facebook, we use the press media, the radio, the television to ensure that persons are aware that there are cheques that they are supposed to collect. So therefore, we did not have an election in July, so I do not—a budget statement read in July. So I do not understand what the Member was really saying. Just as how I did not understand how a man in a wheelchair could have walked to her in her constituency. [*Desk thumping*]

I want to tell the Member for Chaguanas East when you are speaking about these things please remember to put once upon a time in the front of it. Because



that is clearly a made up story that a man in a wheelchair, I mean, I believe in miracles but I do not know how a man in a wheelchair could walk to you in your constituency to speak about social development.

I wish to continue concerning other supports because we are hearing that—

**Ms. Ameen:** Madam Speaker, 53(1)(e), the Ministers on the other side they are making noise. I would like to hear the contribution of the Minister Social Welfare.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, remember we have microphones and so on. And I will ask all Members to please abide by the Standing Orders but, you know, there must be some give and take. Continue.

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** Thank you. I want to continue with food support for vulnerable persons. Through faith-based organizations also, the Government also partnered with faith-based organizations to provide additional food support, aimed at assisting families in providing the nutritional requirements for their dependents. In June of 2020, 30 million was provided for over a three-month period and in March 2021, and additional 10 million was provided to assist with providing food to vulnerable individuals and families within various communities. This was also over a three-month period. 134 faith-based organizations participated in the distribution, issuing 81,000 hampers and impacting over 45,000 families. So again, we are hearing that the Government does not care about the vulnerable, does not care about the needy. I want to continue.

The Ministry also collaborated in 2020 with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries on the Market Box Initiative to provide emergency food hampers to families in need during the stay at home period. Starting in May 2020 for a period of three months, local food baskets were distributed across the country. And recipients received a \$250 voucher from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and added to that was the food basket. At this point in time,

25,999 families under this initiative at a cost of approximately \$15 million was used in that project. And this was very, you know, a welcome initiative by constituents as you would see that at this point during May to August 2021, the Government through the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries again and NAMDEVCO has delivered market boxes valued at \$581 each to 139,906 families to date, totaling \$81,300,000. And these were distributed through Members of Parliament, all 41 Members of Parliament, in constituencies, local government representatives and NGOs who are on the ground in their constituencies.

So, Madam Speaker, I outlined all of this information to show that the Government cares about the persons who are in need and the Government has used every effort to try to reach the vulnerable. And we continue to do so. It is precisely in this context that I wish to contextualize the critical role being played by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in ensuring that those who are more marginalized and those who are most deserving, and those who are the most economically and socially vulnerable in our society, are in receipt of goods and services, which will only impact significantly on their daily lives, but ultimately move them to a place of empowerment and a place of self-sufficiency.

We have identified the most vulnerable segments of the population among us as, senior citizens, at risk youth, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, street dwellers, single parents, single income households, and we recently added widows and those families now placed on the poverty line due to COVID-19. More focus is being placed on identifying those who are in need of our support, and working closely with non-governmental organizations, civil society, faith-based organizations and other Ministries and agencies and private partnerships to fulfil the needs of the vulnerable. And we recently partnered with some business organizations to assist us, for example, we provided hampers to

persons in quarantine because of the fact we understood that there were persons who were in quarantine and stated that they needed to get groceries and we were able to go to their homes to deliver it, we were able to assist the regional health authorities and delivered hampers to them to deliver to the persons.

I want to speak and touch a bit on the Road Map to Recovery because at the Ministry, we have taken on board the recommendations of the Road Map to Recovery Committee, which was established to chart the way forward in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The committee recommended six strategies—six strategic areas that are most directly related to the Ministry under the pillar, “social protection: leave no one behind”. And the core objective identified was that of like, quote, “protecting the vulnerable and the displaced, and using the social safety net to build a stronger Trinidad and Tobago”.

The Ministry has already begun implementation of the recommended strategies, and some of which were already in train before COVID-19. The Ministry undertook to reengineer its work processes, concentrating on specific areas, which would help in meeting its new and existing mandate of empowering and transforming lives in keeping, with the recommendations of the Road Map to Recovery Committee. And some of the various initiatives undertaken include the advancing of our digitalization agenda. We have launched developmental programmes including the establishment of a Social Services and Empowerment Unit to provide greater support to the vulnerable. We are currently assessing the civil society sector and engaging entities and other partner agencies in relation to providing support to the vulnerable. We are engaging Ministers of Government and Members of Parliament in support of the vulnerable, conducting active review of policies and legislation relevant to the Ministry’s operations and work programme.

Madam Speaker, all of us in this Chamber are acutely aware of the challenges faced by Ministries in the implementation of new policies and reengineering of existing policies and procedures, while simultaneously attending to the day to day needs of the wider public. There is no denial, though, that the Ministry's ability to effectively deliver the suite of programmes available to the public is sometimes compromised by the bureaucracy involved, by the amount of manual processes still embedded in the system and unfortunately, by the seeming inflexibility of our approach, on occasions. There is an inability to move at times with the agility and immediacy that most situations demand.

To this end, a major thrust of the Ministry over the next fiscal year will be the continued digitalization of our service offerings. Indeed, as the Government advances its digitalization programme for the country, and in particular, the public sector, so the Ministry has identified as a priority—has been identified as a priority for digitalization. And the digitalization of our social services therefore, forms a major strategy to enhance, access and create greater efficiency in the delivery of our social services.

In this regard, the following have been pursued. We establish the implementation of an integrated social enterprise management system. It is the single most important digitalization project which will allow for the consolidation of the major programmes and delivery units in the Ministry. The Ministry's clients will benefit from 24-hour access to services, improved efficiency, and more user friendly services.

**10.30 a.m.**

We recommissioned the Ministry's website in fiscal 2021, and launched a micro site specific to persons with disability. The micro site ensures that persons who are visually impaired could now feel included on the website, and this is in

direct support of the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities which speaks to Government's intent to establish an inclusive and nurturing environment for all. We signed a memorandum of understanding with iGovTT to utilize its call centre and chat robot to assist with queries about the Ministry's grants and services.

Additionally, the Ministry has engaged some Ministries and agencies and intends to engage others for sharing of data via a memorandum of understanding, and those we have already approached are: The Ministry of Finance, Immigration Division, the Child Affairs Division Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs. This will have a positive impact on all our clients by reducing their interaction time and will save them the trouble of going from office to office to complete their paperwork.

We launched an online Senior Citizens Pension application through TTConnect, which will allow persons who qualify for Senior Citizens Pension to apply for this service without leaving the comfort of their homes. And as of August the 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, there were 308 new applications via this new online system. Further to this, the Ministry has embarked on a data migration project, which seeks to have a reliable client data in the system that can be accessed in real time allowing for ease of access for active decision-making and allowing a holistic view of clients and services provided. This will be supported by a stronger business continuity system.

Now digitalization alone, though, will not secure the increased efficiency demanded by our clients and so, the Ministry also expanded and will continue to expend considerable resources in the coming fiscal to ensure that our policies and procedures are reengineered to the greater benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We propose to disaggregate the larger boards to facilitate better management of clients. Based on the population increases and shifts within the

country since 2002, and the increased workload of the current local boards over the years, the Ministry is giving active consideration to the boundaries of the local board coverage in an effort to better serve the communities. The Ministry is giving careful consideration to the sub-division of the following boards: The San Juan/Laventille, Tunapuna/Piarco and Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo.

The Ministry is in the process of establishing an investigation and compliance unit to support the challenges associated with irregular applications and payments. The Ministry is unique in terms of the timeliness of its payments as it services the vulnerable groups in society, which is now estimated to be 215,000, including approximately 30,000 temporary clients since COVID-19. Therefore, it is important that an investigative and compliance function is deployed at all levels, to ensure adherence to public service and accounting regulations at the highest level.

There are several core divisions which are required to undertake complex investigations into the financial and personal circumstances of clients so that the Ministry can base its decision on correct information. Prolonged investigation retards the decision-making process, causing delays and increasing hardships for applicants. Applicants who may be attempting to defraud the State may make it extremely difficult for others to do their work or may collude with others to obscure the truth and submit false documents and the like. But, moreover, there is also no doubt that bureaucratic inefficiency and a multiplicity of manual processes can provide the feeding ground for corruption and unethical practices. And, of course, we know that corruption is a two-way process, Madam Speaker. Someone must be willing to pay a bribe in whatever form and someone must be willing to accept it. The greater the inefficiency, the lengthier the bureaucracy, the greater the opportunity for corruption.

Madam Speaker, allow me to turn my attention to investigations within the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Where fraudulent practices have been engaging the attention of the Financial Investigations Bureau, the Anti-Corruption Investigations Bureau and the Fraud Squad of Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, in the last 12 months an astounding increase in the number of clients affected by malicious subculture behaviour has been observed. In this period, there was a 241 per cent increase in the number of reports to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service with the majority of cases, 151 per cent, involving Senior Citizens Pension.

Madam Speaker, while on one hand the Government is taking care of its senior citizens and adequately providing for them, there are others in society who see this as an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of our older persons. But rest assured, Madam Speaker, and I want every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago to know that every effort is being made to ensure that the nation's resources intended to support the vulnerable will reach them, and that any and all nefarious activity will be halted, investigated, and where possible, prosecuted.

Madam Speaker, for the year 2020, 68 such cases have engaged the attention of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. It does not stop there. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services database was triangulated against data from the Elections and Boundaries Commission and the Death Registry of the Registrar General's Department and found that 1,995 persons to whom cheques were issued, as recently as August 2021, were confirmed dead. Madam Speaker, some of the disability and pension cheques belonging to those 1,955 individuals are being cashed. The most significant, 81 per cent, being Senior Citizens Pension. A further 3,902 grants were identified for investigation, and this represents a marked increase in fraudulent activities across all grants and 165 cases are under

review by the Fraud Squad.

A large number of grant recipients are residing abroad and are ineligible for support from the State. However, many are attempting to defraud this good country through amendments that I heard—amendments that I heard were made under the UNC administration to receive social support when they do not qualify. These individuals live outside of the country and do not meet the residential eligibility. They are making claims for social support, and we are aware of this, and a heightened sense of vigilance now abounds. We at the Ministry are moving with haste to ensure that incidents of irregularities, where ever they may be, are thoroughly investigated internally to determine if human error is the root cause of some of the irregularities that exist and to mitigate the occurrence of such. When instances of fraud, corruption and collusion is suspected or apparent, we have and will continue to move with haste to hand these over to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

So, Madam Speaker, in light of this, the need for an internal investigation and compliance unit is clear. A strong investigative and compliance function will have several positive consequences for this Ministry: Reducing the bottlenecks and delays caused by protracted investigations and the consequential deferral of decisions and productivity lags which can cause significant hardships for clients who really need the support. We hope to enhance the system which may have motivated fraudsters to challenge the system. We are trying to create efficiency in the public spend and halting the loss of scarce public funds. We are promoting confidence in the system of payments being made for over 18 grants. We are enhancing and expediting the problem solving capability and capacity of the Ministry in all matters prompted by recent account and audit enquiries and the Auditor General's Reports to name a few.



The Ministry has received approval to proceed with this unit and intends to implement by the first quarter of **2020**. We have a few ongoing initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and one of them is the Direct Deposit initiative which, this is ongoing. The Ministry continues to protect the most vulnerable and we have recognized the prevalence of financial abuse, as I spoke about before, in the form of fraudulent activities, particularly relating to Senior Citizens Pension where their pensions are being lost, stolen and some ending up being cashed at supermarkets. So, as part of the thrust to reduce fraudulent conversion of pensioners' cheques, the Ministry will streamline its efforts to make direct payments into our client's bank accounts as much as possible. The initiative aims to bring the remaining 63,000 individuals or 61 per cent of the pensioners onto our Direct Deposit system.

Madam Speaker, as we look ahead, a critical element in understanding the needs of the vulnerable is identifying the levels of vulnerability amongst those deemed as such. And, with this in mind, the Ministry is pursuing the development of a national register for vulnerable persons, which is an essential element in the overall strategy to address poverty and vulnerability in Trinidad and Tobago. In fiscal 2021, the Ministry developed a brief document for the introduction of this register.

Engagement of civil society: The Ministry has recognized, and I am sure that my colleagues will agree, that collaboration with civil society is crucial to sustainable development. So, during fiscal 2021, the Ministry has been more intentional in establishing partnerships with NGOs, CBOs, faith-based organizations, which are dedicated to ensuring that our vulnerable populations are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. To this end, initiatives were undertaken to support social sector NGOs through capacity building partnerships

and collaboration with the Ministry.

The raising Grandparents' Programme is another new initiative of the Ministry, and this is guided by the approach to national parenting and family policies of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Its introduction within the Ministry has become necessary at this time because we need to recognize grandparents' critical role within the family and their contribution to the stability of a wider society. In fiscal 2021, the Ministry inducted with those as a recognized vulnerable group, and committed to ensuring that they receive their full rights in society. This was established in commemoration of the United Nations International Widows' Day 2021, and the Ministry will extend its resources and programmes to provide an enabling environment to facilitate their empowerment and will explore further partnerships to ensure that the fraternity is afforded a comfortable standard of living and an enhanced quality of life.

We also want to have a centenarian programme, which is designed to ensure all of our centenarians and plus, who are desirous of participating in this initiative, are celebrated and honoured. So, this will take place. It is supposed to start from January.

Citizens Engagement and Outreach Unit: This is well on its way. We are well on our way to establishing this unit. The unit will build more positive working relations between the public and the Ministry at a higher level. Because many times we have persons who would call—Ministers of Government, councillors and Members of Parliament—and they all would like us to assist them in some way. So, we are launching this unit and this unit will assist them. So, therefore, you will have greater access to any information that you need about the grants, how to access the grants and even how to do the means test. So, as you do that, you will be able to be fully served.

Madam Speaker, through you, I have outlined for this House and the wider national community the work of the Government and the work the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, both entities working in tandem with each other to achieve the enhancement in the quality of life available to our citizens. I hold firm to the view that through the underlying philosophy and the measures articulated in the Appropriation Bill, 2021, this Government has pointed this country towards a path of recovery after the socioeconomic challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our focus in the next year is on building resilience among the citizenry, while simultaneously strengthening the safety net for the most vulnerable in our midst. There is a lot more that I would like to say, Madam Speaker, but, of course, time is against me. So, I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their hard work, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic. I also wish to thank you and this House for the opportunity to make this contribution in support of this remarkable budget. I also thank God, because he is the one worthy to be praised. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Dr. Rishad Seecheran** (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute on this year's budget. Before I begin the substantive part of my contribution, I would just like to set the record straight on some of the issues that the Member for Chaguanas West raised yesterday. I was here in the Chamber while she spoke, and what the Member said and what was the focus of her contribution was on land tenure, and it is big issue for people about the regularization of land, sorry. It was a slip of the tongue by the Member of Parliament and she corrected herself soon after where she said that a walker came up to here in her constituency, not someone in a wheelchair. We all make mistakes, Madam Speaker, with the limited amount of time that we have to speak.

So, moving on to my contribution, I would like to begin by thanking all of our health care workers and frontline personnel for their professionalism and dedication under extreme pressure in what has been a most difficulty year in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, a pandemic that most expected to last a few months is now well into its second year and, sadly, we have lost 1,500 of our nationals to the Coronavirus and its variants. My condolences to all those who have lost their loved ones.

Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my political leader for a brilliant and comprehensive reply [*Desk thumping*] to a budget that inspired no one. How will we achieve any growth in the next fiscal year after six PNM budgets, Madam Speaker? We heard a playlist of their golden oldies and their misrepresentation of comments made, at the start of the pandemic, when little was known about the Coronavirus. Never once, Madam Speaker, have they said thank you for the state-of-the-art billion dollar health facility known as the Couva Hospital [*Desk thumping*] which they said was too remote in a location to be of any value to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, too remote, perhaps, only if it were to be used for a highly infectious and deadly virus. Madam Speaker, the Couva Hospital is the product of disciplined leadership, performance and delivery that were the hallmarks of the People's Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, we must now focus on recovery, and it is strong leadership that we need to deliver it. But instead, Madam Speaker, we have a Minister of Health that is appearing on US comedy programmes, and he will tell you that they were laughing with him and not at him. Madam Speaker, this is not the time of leadership we need currently in Trinidad and Tobago, and I said it during my Motion of no confidence against the Minister of Health and I will say it again. He continues to be negligent and grossly negligent in his duties as the Minister of

Health.

So, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, he spoke about the COVID pandemic has exposed cracks in our health system. So what exactly are these cracks and please allow me to present this timeline? In February 2021, Minister Deyalsingh said that the focus of the response of COVID-19 was being moved from managing the virus to one of controlling it. In March of 2021, Tobago had zero cases of COVID-19. Trinidad, the island of Trinidad, had 97 cases of COVID-19. We had less than 100 people infected within Trinidad and Tobago, and our death toll stood at 139. But, unfortunately, Madam Speaker, we had 1 per cent—less than 1 per cent, in fact, of our population fully vaccinated and these were mainly the health workers that were vaccinated by the donation of Oxford AstraZeneca vaccines from the Government of Barbados.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2021, Dr. Avery Hinds said:

“We’re now seeing the effects as this week’s figures...”—of the—“...two-week gap between Easter...now being followed by”—a—“large surge”.

Madam Speaker, during the height of this surge, Bloomberg ranked Trinidad and Tobago in the top five worst hit countries in the world. So, Madam Speaker, during the height of the surge, we lost 23 persons in one day. That was just under one person dying every hour of that day in this country, and may they rest in peace. Tobago which had zero cases in March of 2021 had 132 active cases by May of 2021. We lost 327 citizens in June of 2021, one more than in May of 2021, when we lost 326. The country’s death toll continued to rise to 822 by the end of 2021.

Madam Speaker, this administration invited all and sundry to visit Tobago over the Easter weekend when less than 1 per cent of our population was fully vaccinated against the Coronavirus. Why would you allow persons from pockets of increasing COVID-19 infection in Trinidad to board a plane and go to COVID-free

Tobago without a negative PCR test or a negative rapid antigen test? They allowed the virus to outrun the vaccines that we had in arms at the time with the mixing of this population. The blame falls solely upon this administration for creating the worst public health crisis in our country's history. Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago now must be resilient against this PNM administration.

So, Madam Speaker, I would like to move on to three topics the Minister of Health spoke about. He spoke about herd immunity and achieving a WHO target of 70 per cent. Okay. He spoke about—the Minister of Finance spoke about achieving a WHO target of 70 per cent immunization. He spoke about safe zones and he spoke about getting vaccines into arms as quickly as possible. This is on page 22 of the budget report.

Madam Speaker, earlier in this pandemic, herd immunity came to signify the end game of closing this pandemic when enough persons in this population would be vaccinated to stop the transmission of the virus, but this was based on the original Coronavirus and not its subsequent variants. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top advisor to the Biden administration, had said people were getting confused in thinking that you are ever going to reach this mystical level of herd immunity.

In fact, Madam Speaker, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, 2021, Minister Deyalsingh acknowledged Dr. John Campbell's announcement that herd immunity may not be a reachable goal. And why is this, Madam Speaker? Herd immunity threshold is starting to look unlikely as new variants of the Coronavirus emerge, and those that are fully effected are now becoming—sorry those that are fully vaccinated are now becoming infected with the Coronavirus. So what has happened now is there is no longer a break in transmission, even if you are fully vaccinated. I would not refer to anyone in this Chamber, but I would refer to the US Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh who is fully vaccinated, two doses of a WHO approved vaccine, plus

14 days, and he contracted COVID-19 just last week and is in quarantine right now because he can spread it to the other Supreme Court Justices.

So, Madam Speaker, what this means is there is no longer a break in transmission with the current vaccines that we have against the Coronavirus variants. [*Desk thumping*] So, we have vaccinated lives—to protect lives, not necessarily with the aim to achieve herd immunity. So the long-term prospects of the pandemic with regards to COVID-19 is that it may become an endemic disease such as influenza. So, Madam Speaker, this brings me now to the issue of safe zones and the Government's attempt to get persons vaccinated so that they can enjoy bars, theatres, gyms, restaurants, et cetera.

Now, my political leader is on record saying that safe zones would not work and I agree with her. Now, the issue is how safe will be safe zones? Now, this entire project is most likely modelled on the EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate. Now, the first problem we have here is that our pass is not digital. It is very, very easy to forge, Madam Speaker. It is a piece of white paper with black ink. You can simply scan it. Right? You could produce your own document if you so wish, and there is no way for someone in that workplace to authenticate if that is a correct document from the Government or not. That is the first issue.

The second problem we have, Madam Speaker, is in the reduction of business. Would businesses be able to even make break even if they open under these safe zones conditions? And what we have seen in France, where they introduced their health pass which is what we are doing here, calling it a safe zone, is that businesses have complained that they are not able to survive after one or two months of them instituting their health pass.

The third problem we have, Madam Speaker, is that according to the Public Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus No. 20 Regulations of 2021, an employee who is

not vaccinated must provide a negative PCR test every 14 days which must be kept by the owner or operator of that establishment. Now, this is not what they are doing in Europe. In France, for example, the health pass, employees must, if they are not vaccinated, have a negative test within the last 48 hours to work in that facility, and it does not have to be a PCR test. It could be a rapid antigen test which is given out free in France or they must have recent recovery from COVID-19, a positive test older than 11 days but less than six months. So, Madam Speaker, let me explain to you.

You know, I searched the Internet last night to see where the Ministry of Health could have possibly gotten this figure of you must have a PCR test every 14 days, and the only place that had that was in Qatar. So, basically, what they are saying is that an employee who is not vaccinated must have to submit to a negative PCR test every 14 days. So, have you ever wondered why a PCR test is only valid for 72 hours or three days before you get on a plane? And just allow me a minute to explain why.

So, let us say you take a PCR test, right now, and as you walk out the lab you get infected by COVID-19—somebody coughs in your face or sneezes or whatever. Right? You get infected by COVID-19 right after you take your test. So, we call that day one. It takes on average, 90 per cent of the cases, the mean incubation period is six days, 5.5 but below six. So on day six, you will get symptoms if you are symptomatic. So, from the time that you get symptoms, six days after you have experienced symptoms, so that you will think that you need PCR, another test, but you are infective for 48 hours before. So, for two days before day six you are infective. So, from day four, after you have contracted the Coronavirus, you are infective. So, what is happening now is that if you are safe zone, an employee that is not vaccinated, you could be infective from day four to



14 until your next PCR test. Right? And that is the issue. You could have infected persons working in these establishments and they would have a false sense of security and they could be infecting others, Madam Speaker.

So, my question is, should an asymptomatic vaccinated person who is COVID-19 positive enter a safe zones, how will anyone know that they are in danger from that person? Everyone's guard would be down because as far as everyone is concerned, this is a Ministry of Health approved area and facility. So, Madam Speaker, it is a super-spreader scenario, in addition to being discriminatory. In fact, Madam Speaker, in England, France introduced a system like this and it was scrapped and Minister Sajid Javid said he never liked the idea of someone having to show papers just to do an everyday activity. A vaccinated person can become infected and easily spread the virus to another vaccinated or non-vaccinated person. So it does not make sense. The two-week gap is a false sense of security.

**11.00 a.m.**

Madam Speaker, moving on to what the Minister of Health said that they were trying to immunize the population as quickly as possible and even with, more specifically, to the Minister of Education where she stated that they were going to try to vaccinate children between the ages of 12 to 15. My leader is on record of saying, children ages 12 to 18, the parents to go out and vaccinate your children, but what we are saying is that it should be an offer and not a mandate. And the reason we are saying that—you know, we actually had that very unfortunate comment by the TTPS, Child Protection Unit, where the officer said that a parent's refusal to get vaccinated could be likened to a form of child abuse and that was a very unfortunate comment. Firstly, Madam Speaker, in UK law if your child is under the age of 16 and can consent to their own treatment, if they believe that they

are intelligent enough, competent enough and fully understand and to appreciate what is involved in their treatment, they can ask for the vaccine. This is known as being Gillick competent. I am not sure if that would pertain here in Trinidad but I just wanted to put that in.

Secondly, Madam Speaker, a child's risk of becoming ill with COVID-19 is extremely low and in very rare cases they need hospitalization. The great majority of children between the ages of three to 18 that have passed are those with pre-existing medical complications and that is a fact. In fact, Madam Speaker, in the United Kingdom, and this is the policy of the United Kingdom, you know, which many of the Ministry of Health's team proudly say they have graduate, postgraduate training in the United Kingdom; in the United Kingdom children ages 12 to 15 are only asked to take one shot of the Pfizer vaccine and not two which will be required here in Trinidad and Tobago soon.

The reason for that is because of the risk of a condition called myocarditis or inflammation of the heart muscle. And what this causes, it causes chest pain; it causes heart palpitations, and what the UK has said is that the risk is small after one dose of the Pfizer vaccine and is much higher after two in ages 12 to 15 and the benefits gained from one vaccine are very similar to the benefits of if they would have two. But you see this Minister of Health, he knows more than the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation in the United Kingdom, you know, you cannot tell him anything.

Thirdly, Madam Speaker, vaccinated and non-vaccinated children or students are allowed to attend school in England with guidance given that no pupil or student should be denied education on the grounds of whether they are vaccinated or not. Professor Chris Whitty who is the lead CMO for the UK said that:

Vaccination should not be seen as a silver bullet to allow children to go back to school. It is not the solution to school disruption.

What Professor Whitty has said, that:

Vaccination should be an offer and there should be no stigma attached to the parents or the children's choice of being vaccinated or not vaccinated.

And even more importantly than this, Madam Speaker, because this was in the context of the United Kingdom, I am now going to the WHO and the WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization, the SAGE group, in a protocol document dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2021, one month ago, has advised:

“...that countries should consider using the vaccine in children aged 12 to 15 only when high vaccine coverage with 2 doses has been achieved in the...”—adult population and—“...high priority groups...”

So this is what the WHO is saying and what the WHO has said is that children ages 12 to 15 with comorbidities or pre-existing medical conditions who are at a higher risk of complications due to COVID-19 may be offered the vaccine but not the entire student population and definitely not as a prerequisite to attend school.

So I am asking for the Minister of Health, I am asking for the Prime Minister to give me some clarity on this administration's policy because you are going against WHO policy. I mean, I have been an advocate for vaccine procurement since last year and, you know, one of the stumbling blocks I had was that it was not WHO approved. It was not WHO approved, that is why we did not order vaccines and we are going to do every single thing the WHO says to do. The WHO says do not vaccinate everyone between the ages of 12 to 15 right now. They need more data. They need to figure out if this is safe for children. That is what the WHO is saying, Madam Speaker. So why are we not following WHO approval? Now, everyone here has CNN and you see what is going on in America and that is the

American protocol or position. That is the FDA and the CDC that is a totally different branch of science to the WHO.

So, Madam Speaker, I would like to move on now. Our current epidemiological situation is such that we are currently under a surge of cases. As the Minister said last day, you know, we are currently under another surge with the Delta variant up and coming so the acute phase of this pandemic is far from over. It has impacted our nation's health and our health system and eroded our human capital and this Minister has constantly failed in every single task given to him. So I would like now to assess this budget under eight parameters, once I have enough time: coordination and planning; risk communication and community engagement; surveillance, investigation and contact tracing; points of entry, infection, prevention and control; case management and clinical operations; strengthening essential health services; and, lastly, vaccines.

So, Madam Speaker, on page 96 of the budget speech the Minister of Finance has said:

“...prevention is better than cure.”

—and I could not be in more agreement with him. The Ministry of Health during this Delta wave that we are going to experience or are experiencing, we will be required to perform widespread and rapid testing, contact tracing and quarantine measures in order to suppress COVID-19 below a threshold in which our health system would be able to function properly. So I am asking again to the Minister of Health to allow for WHO-approved rapid antigen test kits to be allowed for importation and sale by licensed pharmacists, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, Minister Deyalsingh is on record of saying that there is an existing penalty if someone is caught doing that. Right now the fine is several hundreds of thousands of dollars, plus six months in jail, and he said that on the

20<sup>th</sup> of May, 2021. He went on to say:

“‘We’re taking this very seriously,’...”—if someone brings down a rapid antigen WHO-approved test.

So, Madam Speaker, with the Delta variant in our midst he is taking it very seriously that a man on the street cannot go into a pharmacy and buy an item which is over the counter in every other country in the world. Madam Speaker, with our fully vaccinated level below 40 per cent and in the absence of effective therapeutics we will have to adopt nationwide non-pharmaceutical interventions and that would include, Madam Speaker, obviously, testing.

It makes no sense to withhold this simple and effective testing kit from the public and allowing non-symptomatic carriers who do not even know they need a PCR test to be moving freely in the communities. You know, the Minister said we had a case of Delta in Tobago and the person who has contracted the Delta variant is vaccinated but they are infected with the virus and they said they have no symptoms. They did not even know that they were sick and that person could be moving around like normal, going to the supermarket, going to the safe zones or the not-so-safe zones and infecting everyone because they are asymptomatic. They have no idea that they are COVID-19 positive. Who is going to just go and pay \$1,200 for a PCR test when you “doh” even think you need it. It is cost prohibitive. Madam Speaker, had we used these test kits in March and April of this year, right before the Easter surge, we most likely would not have seen the large number of cases and deaths that we had post-Easter.

Madam Speaker, in Europe, as I told you just before, it is given out free by the Government. It is given out free to residents. My cousin in England has 16 boxes of WHO rapid antigen tests in her home; 112 tests she has in her home. And her son’s school is offering to give her more and she says, “No, I do not have any

more space”, and every single one in England has dozens of these test kits home by them. So that if you wake up in the morning and you have the influenza virus, you have a sore throat and you have a slight fever, you could figure out very quickly if you have the influenza virus or if you have COVID-19. Madam Speaker, the parents know the results in 10 minutes and they are able to isolate themselves or their child.

So, Madam Speaker, at a time when the WHO and the CDC in America and every major health authority around the world are asking people to use the WHO test kits, we here in Trinidad and Tobago we have it almost as illegal. You cannot bring it in. I do not know how to access a rapid antigen test. Madam Speaker, we are on the brink of another surge that will be caused by the Delta virus. Our sister isle in Tobago, they are almost at 89 or 90 deaths and may those persons rest in peace; and in Tobago the number of cases, it hovers right now between 400 and 500 active cases which is a very large number for that population. So we must test, we must test and we must test again. Madam Speaker, the Abbott rapid antigen test has a 99 per cent sensitivity and a 97 per cent specificity rating, both vaccinated and non-vaccinated persons can transmit this virus, and since March of 2020 the FDA has authorized over 400 COVID-19 tests, Madam Speaker, as well as these tests have been authorized by the WHO since December, 2020. And what the FDA has said, it considers these at-home COVID-19 test kits to be high priority and of public importance.

Madam Speaker, for example, President Joe Biden’s strategy to expand COVID-19 tests in the United States of America, he is spending US \$2 billion to procure 280 million additional rapid tests for the US population and they are going to give these out to community health centres and food banks. What could possibly be the reason why the rapid test kits are not legally allowed for importation and

sale here in Trinidad and Tobago? And the question must be asked, are we going to make the same mistake twice? We had that mistake with the Easter surge, are we going to make the mistake with the Delta variant? The Delta variant is so contagious it will literally hunt you down. You will almost be at no fault if you get the Delta variant. It is that contagious, Madam Speaker.

So I would like to move on now to something more positive. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health said on page 9, you know, with further vaccines on order he will order more vaccines if required. So I am calling on the Minister of Health to consider a third booster shot to the most vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago as has been approved by the FDA and the CDC. Now, this has not been approved by the WHO as yet but it has been approved by the FDA and the CDC and provision should be made within our existing vaccine inventory as well as future supplies to allocate for this, because what has happened in America is that they are going to give this third booster shot to everyone over the age of 65 and all those who are at high risk no matter what age you are. And what that study has shown with the Pfizer vaccine is that the effectiveness of the Pfizer vaccine falls from 96 per cent to 84 per cent after four months and with the third booster shot it bumps you back up to 95 per cent.

So that is why they are giving the third booster shot in the United States to help reduce the hospitalization in the States while there is the Delta variant. So at least over 2.5 million people in the United States have already gotten the third booster shot, Madam Speaker. And there is a study from Israel and what it has shown is that fully vaccinated persons in January of 2020 had a two-times increased risk of breakthrough infections as compared to those that got their vaccines in April of 2021. So it shows a gradual decrease of the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines over time. So that you may need a booster shot, especially if

you have a very, very highly transmissible and deadly variant in your population.

So, Madam Speaker, the United Kingdom is giving boosters to everyone over the age of 50. Germany, France and the Czech Republic have also announced similar plans and President Biden has received his third booster shot a couple of weeks ago. This policy has not been approved by the WHO as yet but it is FDA-approved. And as I told you before, we are following the FDA in terms of vaccinating children when the WHO has said not to do so at this point in time.

So I would also like to move on, Madam Speaker, to another consideration I would like the Minister of Health to look at and it is in terms of antivirals because vaccines are not the only consideration moving forward. There has been good news on the horizon and there has been a breakthrough therapeutic for COVID-19 and I am asking him to secure funding for this. It is a new antiviral drug. It is made by Merck and it is a pill to treat COVID-19. So if you are not vaccinated for COVID-19 and you get the Coronavirus, this pill, which has now finished phase three trials has been shown to decrease hospitalization and death by 50 per cent. So this is the first time in terms of the global landscape we have a drug that you could actually use to treat COVID-19; before we did not have that and the name of the drug is molnupiravir. It is a very long word and it is named after Thor's hammer, and it is made to knock down the Coronavirus.

So the Pfizer has also two antivirals that are in late-stage trials as well as the Swiss company Roche. And, Madam Speaker, the US Government has made a pre-order of US \$1.2billion worth of this drug pending FDA approval and they are expecting it to get FDA approval before the end of year. And what Professor Penny Ward of King's College in London has said, and she is saying this about the UK Antivirals Taskforce is that she is saying that she hopes that this task force has pre-ordered doses of this medication for the United Kingdom. Because what she is



saying is that:

Finally we will be able to last and properly manage COVID-19 in the NHS system.

So, Madam Speaker, I am asking the Minister of Health to set up a drug evaluation team in order to consider pre-ordering this drug pending WHO approval. You know, we have to keep saying, “pending WHO approval” because when the supply is done it will be done and that is what happened with vaccines this year; in the last part of last year and earlier this year. We would be left in the lurch, Madam Speaker, in asking the US for a donation but what we have seen is that the US will not release any of their supplies unless they are sure that they could look after their own population, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, I would also like to move on to the placement of vaccine centres and more consideration needs to be made for the specific needs of certain population groups in this budget and we saw that with the ill-fated vaccine roll-out where the elderly stood in line for a day and they were then told there were only 15 vaccines at that health centre. They stood in rain. I saw pictures of them sitting in the rain, some sit in mud, no consideration for their well-being. It was a slap in the face, Madam Speaker, for those who relied on this administration to protect them from the virus. And, Madam Speaker, what I would like to tell the Minister of Health is that some of these vaccines centres that we have, some of them have outlived their usefulness and I am calling on the Minister of Health to place these vaccination centres along routes that are easily accessible to the travelling public. Put them, for example, along the maxi and taxi routes with clear signage advertising that someone could get a vaccine there, Madam Speaker. It would allow persons without vehicular transport—

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Would you give way?

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** No. It would allow persons without vehicular transport and who routinely traverse these roads to have easier access, Madam Speaker, to these vaccines. And the placement of some of these vaccine centres, Madam Speaker, speaks of a consistent disregard to those in the rural communities.

Madam Speaker, I would also like to make mention of the fact that many of the volunteers that assisted in the initial phase of this vaccination programme are still awaiting payment for all the number of days and hours that they put in for vaccinating the public and doing a humanitarian good for the country, but many of them have been misled and many of them are still waiting on payment for the amount of time that they spent vaccinating persons. So I would like the Minister to please address that at some point as well. So, Madam Speaker, just to quickly recap on what I have said—Madam Speaker, how much more time I have? [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Hon.Member, your time ends at 11.30.

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** Thirty? Wow. Okay. I did not even start. All right.

Madam Speaker, quickly, I would just like to speak about vaccine hesitancy and, you know, we are a country right now, we are very, very vaccine hesitant and I would like to, you know, it is a big joke on the other side, “hydroxychloroquine, hydroxychloroquine”, but I would like to tell the other side that you have aided and abetted in vaccine hesitancy in Trinidad and Tobago and the reason I said that—I am saying that, is hydroxychloroquine, Madam Speaker, was an emergency use authorization drug by the FDA in March of 2020. The reason why the doctors on this side—[*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I get the gist. Remember, this is not a COVID debate and while you are dealing with the Ministry of Health, and I guess the COVID response continues to be important, you know, this is not a COVID debate and I would ask you to please wrap up this and deal with another segment of the budget.

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** Yes, of course. Wrap up vaccine hesitancy or wrap up?

**Madam Speaker:** No, no, no, you have time. [*Laughter*]

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** Right. Right. Right. So could I talk about PCR testing?  
 [*Crosstalk*] Right. Right. Right. So, Madam Speaker, you know, at our surge we  
 needed to increase our—

**Mr. Young:** Madam Speaker, to help the Chair, 55(1)(b)—[*Crosstalk*] “Duppy”,  
 hush—persistent in irrelevant or tedious repetition, tedious repetition. If I hear  
 anything more about test, “I will think I in school”. [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Okay.

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** Madam Speaker, Madam Speaker—

**Madam Speaker:** One minute. Overruled. Thanks for the assistance but I will  
 decide when there is tedious repetition.

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** So—

**Madam Speaker:** One minute. You have a point of order? You have a point of  
 order?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Madam Speaker, all I want is—

**Madam Speaker:** Do you have a point of order?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** The Member for Port of Spain—

**Madam Speaker:** Member, Member—

**Mr. Indarsingh:**—North/St. Ann’s West to withdraw—

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Couva South—

**Mr. Indarsingh:**—his comment about my colleague from Naparima.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Couva South, we are both standing. We are both  
 standing. Do you have a point of order? Let me hear the order you are quoting.  
 Right. Please continue.

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. So, I mean, I got through most of

what I wanted to say. I only got through two of my points out of eight points on COVID management but I guess I will do that through statements instead.

Moving on to Caroni East, Madam Speaker, flooding has been a perennial problem in Caroni East. In 2018 the Minister of Works and Transport has said that, you know, they did a survey of the 40-kilometre stretch of the Caroni River; some parts of the river were one foot deep, other parts were 16 feet deep and Minister Sinanan said that extensive work would be done to raise the banks and de-silt the Caroni River in tandem with clearing tributaries that lead into the Caroni River. He also said that there would be an upgrading of pumps. There are 14 pumping stations in Trinidad and Tobago with 23 pumps, most of them are outdated since the 1950s and '60s. He went on to say that they were purchasing more pumps, five automatic pumps have been ordered and three mobile pumps. They would be placed in Bamboo Settlement, Felicity and Port of Spain at a cost of \$18million, Madam Speaker.

In March of 2019 he went on to say that the Caroni River has been extended by three kilometres and twice its original width and would significantly improve its capacity. He said that they were in talks with consultants from the Netherlands as well as the CAF Development Bank in terms of technical visits to diagnose the cause of problems for persons around the Caroni River bank. In 2020 he went on to say that there was a national plan to deal with funding and that CAF was giving a non-repayable grant of US \$495,000 in order to develop this plan and the Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, signed that agreement with the representatives from CAF.

Madam Speaker, the Minister has failed to solve this problem of flooding in Caroni East. We had extensive flooding on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July, 2021, and the 19<sup>th</sup> of August of 2021, and this is after all of this big song and dance that he made here

that he was doing with the Caroni River. Persons have suffered great losses in their homes and it is a great injustice to those that have lost jobs and are economically challenged. It is a double hit, Madam Speaker; the inability to immediately restore your surroundings to a proper level of sanitation raises the risk of diseases as well as COVID-19, as well as leptospirosis. Any fever, Madam Speaker, could well be a sign of COVID-19 and then you have to add further confusion with the health system.

So, Madam Speaker, the regional corporations need more funding in flood alleviation. We need better management and support from the ODPM, St. Helena, Madras Road, Kelly Village; these are areas that are constantly under flood waters, Madam Speaker, and it is, you know, we need some relief. The Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation only has one mini excavator and one large excavator for 14 councillors to use, Madam Speaker, and this is the second largest regional corporation in the country. And quickly, Madam Speaker, I am running out of time, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 2020, I asked the Minister of Works and Transport to help us with a bridge at Lalloo Trace. At the time it was just a small hole that had developed in the bridge, the bridge has now caved in and fallen almost into the river and this is on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 2021, due to heavy rains. It is now impassible to vehicular and pedestrian traffic. It affects over 50 residents, many of them farmers; many of them who supply produce for NAMDEVCO and the COVID-19 relief hampers.

So, Madam Speaker, I am asking for the Minister of Works and Transport to please address the situation with Lalloo Trace, the residents have the use the adjacent David Toby Road which is in a great state of disrepair as well as it is not lit. So those that travel have to then walk this long road in darkness if it is after six. It is very dangerous for the women as well as the pregnant women. Madam

Speaker, we have numerous landslips in Fletcher Road that we are asking for some help with.

Madam Speaker, Caroni East, we have a lot of crime, I am asking for the Minister of National Security to please help us with this. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September we had five murders in Caroni East, Madam Speaker. We had three in Kelly Village and two in Enterprise. Even previously safe areas, such as Chin Chin Road, Cunupia, Solomon Street, there was recently in the last month a murder there. An employee of Kiss Bakery was shot and killed by an unknown assailant; gun crime continues to plague Caroni East, Madam Speaker. I am asking for the Minister of National Security to please help us in this situation. CCTV cameras, Madam Speaker, community policing, neighbourhood watch groups; we also have the issue of praedial larceny for our farmers and I know another speaker spoke about that before. As well as, Madam Speaker, in terms of education, you know, we are asking for help with devices; GATE funding should be expanded and not reduced and dropouts, Madam Speaker, will plague society in years to come. With those few words, Madam Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**11.30 a.m.**

**Madam Speaker:** The Minister of Trade and Industry.

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] It is always a pleasure to come to this very beautiful and honourable place, and I want to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the 2022 fiscal Appropriation Bill.

As I am here, I recognize the good and decent citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I also recognize the private sector which has collaborated with this Government in maintaining a resilient economy, despite the unenviable challenges inherited from the ravages of the pandemic.

I wish to thank the hon. Minister of Finance and his team for their immense hard work in putting together this budget. I also commend the work of the Minister of Planning and Development, and I also, more than ever, thank the hon. Prime Minister for his wisdom and his guidance always, and his hard work in guiding us through these very difficult times.

Madam Speaker, I only go to the very encouraging responses from the business community, as I speak to how good this budget is. From the Confederation of Regional Business Chambers:

“...a people-friendly budget.”

From the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers’ Association:

“A Budget to support Exports”.

TTMA is in favour of the:

“...provisions outlined that would assist...SMEs...”

To the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce:

The TTCIC recognizes—“...the government’s attempt to address the numerous social and economic challenges...”

And:

“We are pleased that many of our recommendations were included in this year’s presentation.”

To the San Juan Business Association:

The budget was—“Comprehensive, detailed, and well-informed”.

“...the budget was good and...”—we—“would give a score rating of 8 out of 10.”

To the Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago: welcomes the list of food items that would be exempt from VAT. It shows that the Government is paying attention to SATT and various quarters who have been calling for some

relief on the high food prices.

To the American Chamber of Commerce of Trinidad and Tobago: the budget contains commendable initiatives and:

“...tax incentives...clearly designed to encourage”—and stimulate—  
 “business activity.”

And to the Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce: they are pleased with the presentation.

“The Chamber welcomes the initiatives for SMEs to list their companies on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange.”

And:

They are—“...glad that the Government...placed more attention through incentives and initiatives on SMEs, ICT and the tourism sectors...”

These comments, Madam Speaker, it says it all.

Again, we recognize all of the business houses, their business interests for their resilience in these very testing times, for collaborating with the Government, going the distance with the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago, all in support of our country and, of course, our economy. At the same time, we commiserate with the particular sectors which were particularly hard hit. And, of course, as we go forward, a large number of these sectors will reopen on Monday coming and, as we go forward again, the rest of the sectors, and pretty soon, as the pandemic allows, the entire economy will be opened in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I hasten to go to this whole question of food prices, and I context this in the whole discussion of inflation; global inflation. Of course, I think the population is an educated one and they understand what inflation is. This is the measure of the rate of rising prices and, of course, you would understand the main benchmarks of inflation: headline inflation showing the overall change in the price



of goods and services over a period of time; food price inflation, showing the change in the price of a basket of food products over a period of time; and the core inflation, showing the change in prices, but excluding food and energy prices.

And globally, we understand that prices have been rising since the emergence of the pandemic on account of a myriad of factors, including the disruption in supply chains. Of course, that is on account of early quarantine and lockdown measures across the globe during the pandemic. Then, of course, the shortage of shipping containers which has caused a rise in freight and shipping rates and transportation costs and, in fact, we understand that freight prices have increased. In fact, they have tripled almost 300 per cent when one compares the prices now with December 2020.

Also, a cause would have been the adverse weather conditions, floods and wild fires in major agriculture and food producing countries: the US, Canada, Australia, some of the European countries as well. And all of these conditions have negatively affected prices across the globe. Also, the decline in industrial output in leading economies, in China and Europe. Some countries, indeed, have been hoarding and holding back food items that they normally would have exported for their population to ensure that there is food supply.

But to illustrate the inflationary effect globally, the inflation rate for the US as of August 2021 would have been 5.3 per cent, which is the biggest surge in inflation in nearly 13 years. For Canada, it was 4.1 per cent. This is in August which is the highest monthly inflation rate since March of 2003; unbelievable. And in the UK, it was 3.2 per cent, which is the biggest jump that they have had since 1997. And, of course, looking closer within the Caribbean region, you realize that in May 2021, Barbados, the food inflation rate would have been 5.88 per cent, and in Jamaica, 4.3 per cent, and that is in June 2021.

So looking internationally, when we have looked at the FAO, Food Price Index, it would have revealed that globally the monthly food price inflation was something like 4.37 per cent, and they were speaking directly to particular foods like oil and sugar. Sugar went up 10 per cent, oil went up 10 per cent as well. Cereals, meat, all of these would have gone up across the globe. That is according to the Food Price Index. So when compared globally, the food prices would have shot up something like 33 per cent in September 2021, as against September 2020, and reaching levels that were not seen for a very long time.

Looking at home, and according to Central Bank's July 2021 Economic Bulletin, headline inflation would have averaged 0.6 per cent, and food price inflation, 2.8 per cent. However, by September—in the September 2021 Monetary Policy Announcement, food price inflation had shot up to 4.9 per cent.

In the Ministry, the Consumer Affairs Division would have been looking very closely at the prices that have gone up, those that would have remained stable, those that would have remained decrease. Indeed, we are reporting these on a monthly basis on social media, so that customers—the consumers can, in fact, understand where they should shop; which ones are going up; how they should change their food basket; how they should prioritize; what they should grow at home; the fact that they should use chicken produced locally, as against imported beef, and that kind of thing. So it is a good guidance, but we are going to have to look very closely as we go forward.

But as a responsible Government, the Government has put in a number of inflation containment measures, and that is just not about zero-rating basic food items, because as a PNM Government, we have been doing that since 2004. That is not a product of the UNC Government. We have always been giving attention to basic food items. And, of course, with regard to the suspension of the CET on

basic food items, that is ongoing. And for 20 food items we would have been reducing the duties to zero to ensure that for the basic food items, they were at a reasonable cost to the consumer.

And, of course, with our increased allocation, the foreign exchange to the EximBank, again ensuring that there was the availability of foreign exchange for the basic items as well. We have continued to strengthen the linkages as a government between industry and agriculture and, of course, implementing this huge agriculture stimulus package to ensure that there is locally grown food in Trinidad and Tobago. And, of course, we continue to monitor these prices.

But I want to speak directly to this whole question of the zero-rating of basic food items, which has attracted a lot of attention and so on. I want the public to understand that this—and I am referring to this Schedule II of the value added tax—that under Legal Notice 17 of 2016, there were already a range of basic food items. And I am talking about zero-rated items, rice and wheat flour, milk, margarine, et cetera, and a number of items. But if I go back to the VAT Act in 2014, I want to talk to the truth about the zero-rating of these basic food items because the UNC continues to perpetuate, and quite erroneously so, that they removed VAT on some 7,000 items, and they are, indeed, mistaken and it is quite inaccurate.

And I want to let the population know that, that they did not remove VAT on 7,000 items. And I said it before, since 2004, because you could go to the various amended zero-rating Schedules—it is under a PNM Government in as far down as 2004 that over 50 basic food items were already zero-rated. And it is so that when the UNC government added via Legal Notice 176 of 2012, 68 items were already zero-rated then; already. And I am talking about very basic items. In fact, when they came into office, what they did was to add a few items. I can tell you this,

they are not responsible for the 7,000 items. What they are confusing the population with are items and stock keeping units, SKUs. So they are detailing all the various types of milk, all the various types of cereal, but all of those are already zero-rated under items, and they are just trying to confuse the population.

What they did, in fact, when they came in, and in fact in 2014, at a time when the economy was already shrinking on account of the low energy prices, they went in and they zero-rated things like cake mix—when they should have been conserving foreign exchange—cake mix and waffles and foreign crab— not local crab—foreign crab and pink salmon and prawns and apricots, strawberries, maraschino cherries. Those are the items that they sought to zero-rate, because the PNM had already zero-rated many of the basic food items. I mean, they are telling an untruth to the population when they repeat that they have zero-rated 7,000 items. It is far from the truth.

So the Ministry of Finance has this week indicated that more than 45 new basic items would now be zero-rated and I want to reiterate, as I close off on this topic, that it has always been PNM's policy to keep basic food prices reasonable, particularly for the vulnerable. And I could tell you, every year we go to the COTED and we remove the duty from these 20 basic items and the revenue foregone is something in the vicinity of more than \$160 million annually, and that is a time of restricted revenues. This is what we continue to do for the population, again to ensure food prices are kept low.

I want to repeat because it is an extremely good measure by the Ministry of Finance. They have supported EximBank with something like US \$650 million, and that is both for the forex facility for our manufacturers to ensure that they have the raw materials that are required, but also to assist with the basic food items over this very difficult period to ensure, again, that the country had very basic food

items, pharmaceuticals, et cetera. We never ran out in this country, during this COVID crisis, of food and pharmaceuticals and so on. Good planning and great effort by the Ministry of Finance. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will speak more to the availability of local foods when the Minister comes to this House.

I go directly to speak to trade performance. According to the 2021 *Review of the Economy*, Trinidad and Tobago registered a \$36 billion in total exports for the nine-month period, October 20 to June 2021, which is 7.3 billion or 25 per cent more than the corresponding period in 2020.

Madam Speaker, our local exports have further improved, because I have gone to the TTBizLink data to look at what has happened between the period July to August 2021. So that there is a further \$6.1 billion increase in revenue, showing a much stronger export base of both energy and non-energy products. As a matter of fact, when I look at the export levels for fiscal '21 for the 11-month period ending in August 2021, I can tell you that we are trending upwards in our exports, going back almost to the \$48 billion figure in **2029**.

Looking at the non-energy exports, Madam Speaker, according to the *Review of the Economy*, during the first quarter of calendar 2021, the manufacturing sector would have contracted by 10.5 per cent. We know that is on account of COVID-related issues affecting general trade, particularly to some of our markets in the region who have really suffered on account of their declining tourism sectors. But I hasten to say that we have seen a rebound in our non-energy exports as well. I can say and, again, using data from both the CSO and from TTBizLink, during the period January to August 2021, total non-energy exports averaged approximately \$1.3 billion per month, which is an estimated 43 per cent higher compared to 2020, when on the average we were doing about \$873 million.

[*Desk thumping*] Furthermore, I can tell you with the trend that we are seeing, this average has surpassed that for the same period in 2019, which on average was \$1.1 billion. As I said now, we are seeing \$1.3 billion.

I am making it very clear to the UNC, in particular, and to the speaker who would speak after me, that these figures I am speaking about exclude the petrochemicals such as ammonia and methanol and urea and ammonia nitrogen and so on. So I am not buffing the figures at all with the petrochemicals figure, and I am saying that from now because we have seen the increase on TTBizLink.

Looking in particular at those products that have been doing well, Madam Speaker, our iron and steel products, our waste; our waste and our scrap iron exports have gone up exponentially, 102 per cent compared with 2020, and another 35 per cent when we look at 2019. Our food and beverage subsector as well has registered an overall 36 per cent increase over 2020. We look at the particular products that are doing well, our cereals, our aromatic bitters, our non-alcoholic beverages. Our alcoholic beverages, again, we have seen recovery with those products and we have seen an increase of about 24 per cent compared to last year.

And what is particularly—again, before I go on to the other point, our plastic and rubber products have gone up 52 per cent; our glass products, 149 per cent; our electrical equipment, machinery and parts, all our insulated copper conductors, which we are now producing in this country, have gone up 110 per cent. [*Desk thumping*]

I am telling you, apart from the region, which is our second highest export destination, our high-performing products have gone to the USA, to Australia, to Brazil, to Netherlands, to Canada, to Puerto Rico, to the Dominican Republic, to Mexico, and, Madam Speaker, that is the kind of trend that we want, not depending on the Caribbean region— still depending on them but, of course, moving in the

direction extra-regionally as well.

I want to say that we have been really, in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, doing our part to accelerate the economic recovery of our nation, and by taking responsibility for particular initiatives which are highlighted in the Road Map to Recovery Committee, our medium-term road map, and in particular to that referred to in Phase 2 of the Report of the Road Map to Recovery. And again— so we have a mandate to create this enabling environment to grow and to reposition the manufacturing sector in a post-COVID environment as a viable catalyst by making it more globally competitive, innovative and productive. And as such, we are working on a series of initiatives that will improve the competitiveness of our goods and our services as well, and also improve the ease of doing business.

So that the focus in growing the manufacturing sector and ensuring that we are competitive in the products that we export and produce, and so on, some of the areas that we are focusing on is deepening and expanding our Trinidad and Tobago trading relationship by improving our market access with existing and with new trading partners; implementing this export booster initiative, which we have done in fiscal 2021; promoting economic integration among our colleagues; and enhancing the competitiveness of the private sector by improving our national quality infrastructure; combating illicit trade and, of course, the establishment of this new trade and investment promotion agency; the SEZ initiative, which the Leader of the Opposition said we are just calling again—well, Madam, we are ready with it and, of course the apprenticeship programme for the non-energy manufacturing sector, which we will begin in fiscal 2022. I list them all because I am not sure that I would have the time to cover all, but whatever I do not do now, I certainly will expand on in the Upper House.

So much work continues with deepening the relationship within the

Caribbean region, but outside of that, we have really been working on all of our agreements, in particular in this last fiscal. So with regard to—and, of course, I say the negative with the positive, and I can tell you that our Caricom trade is down, our Caribbean trade is down. Again, I had indicated that that is on account of their weakening tourism sectors, and at this time we really commiserate with them, and we look for the improvements in their countries, because if they do well, we do well, Madam Speaker.

So, again, with regard to the US, which is our number one trading partner, in this fiscal year, in October 2020, the Caribbean Basin Initiative between the Caribbean and the United States was renewed. This noted success is on account of our foreign and commercial diplomacy efforts led by the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley. With the US, we would have recorded a trade surplus of something like \$1.9 billion in the 2021 period, [*Desk thumping*] and this is a mix of both energy products and iron ore—so your ammonia, your methanol, your urea, your iron ore, and also the food and beverages.

And I was quite delighted to note that the US, according to their Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act: Impact on US Industries and Consumers and Beneficiary Countries Report, the 25<sup>th</sup> report for 2019/2020 which was released about a week ago or 10 days ago, September 2021, Trinidad and Tobago's export to the United States, it was noted, have become more diversified, that is, we began exporting a greater number of products to the US, and became less reliant on exports of just a few products, and that is what we have been working on. [*Desk thumping*] So this arrangement has really worked well for us and, indeed, I met with the chargé d'affaires for the US only in July of this year, and requested and encouraging that they look at opportunities under this preferential arrangement, including the promotion of Trinidad and Tobago as a site for possibly non-energy



FDI, so that we can improve the supply chain resilience to the US actually.

Again, during this fiscal, before we had signed on in 2019 to the Cariforum United Kingdom Economic Partnership Agreement, the Act to give effect to that agreement domestically was proclaimed during this fiscal in March 2021. Our exports in 2020 went down to 735 million compared with 809 million, but again this is a good market for both our goods and services, and we continue to use this agreement wisely. We had exported our aromatic bitters, our aerated waters, our Shandy, our curry, our rum and, of course, some of the other alcoholic beverages, sauces, condiments and so on, to the UK market. [*Desk thumping*]

Again, during this fiscal, we began in October—we began discussions towards achieving a partial scope agreement with Chile, so that Trinidad and Tobago would have signed a general framework agreement with the negotiation of a partial scope agreement with Chile in October. This is a market that we are opening for our goods to the extent of 18million people, so that we are exporting as it is an average of \$1.78 billion to Chile as it is, a combination of largely energy but some non-energy products. So at this stage, we have completed the first round negotiation in August2021, and both sides would have reviewed the draft-negotiated text. We would have dealt with the non-tariff issues. So we are going to the second round of negotiations in December 2021, when we would have exchanged the list of products to be covered by the agreement. And, of course, this is after going to Cabinet, and this after recognizing and having deliberations with the private sector, and recognizing our sensitive products as well.

We are continuing to work on the Caricom-Columbia Trade and Economic Agreement as well, Madam Speaker, and I will tell you why, because we are looking at an extension of products. This is also a good market for us, as our exports have averaged in the vicinity of \$1.1 billion.

And again, we continue to work. I had a meeting with the Minister of Trade in Panama, and we continue to work on that particular agreement as well, and to improve our export opportunities there, also in the Dom Rep. We are even looking at increasing our export opportunity in China with particular products, and I am talking about the non-energy ones which we are doing now, iron ore, ferrous waste, scrap metal, aromatic bitters, frozen fish, asphalt as well. And, of course, we do some non-energy products as well, methanol and LNG, and we want to increase our exports to China. There are participating firms at a China conference—in a China exports show in November of this year, and some of our firms which will be participating will be Angostura, Vemco, HADCO, Trinidad and Tobago Fine Cocoa, Twigs teas, Chief Brand Products, CGA and a number of them as well.

We continue as well to increase our exports to Europe. We are entering now what is the “Fit 4 Europe Project”. Madam Speaker, I think that is going to be excellent for our particular niche products. ExporTT continues with its Export Booster Initiative which they started. An additional 33 million has been allocated in the recurrent for this export promotion product, and this is to assist us with conducting our virtual trade missions, for strengthening our market intelligence, for strengthening in-market support services, for producing and establishing a virtual expo platform, so that we are continuing immense work to increase our exports.

Even during the COVID pandemic, I can tell you that our virtual trade missions continued with missions to Panama, Jamaica and Guyana, and as we begin to ease out of the more difficult part of the COVID crisis, we continue with a fashion virtual trade mission in November to Miami, and then other trade missions in fiscal 2022 to Antigua, Colombia, Canada, Curaçao, Dominican Republic, Miami, New York and United Kingdom.

Madam Speaker, you would have heard me talk about this international certification fund programme for which we have put an amount of 20million in. I want to tell you that that is proving to be quite a success. The objective is to ensure that these firms can achieve the necessary international certification in food and beverage and other product compliance, so that they can again enter into new markets, and that they can comply with the standard audits and inspections and implementations, and they can ready themselves with the infrastructural modifications to enter all of these new markets.

So far we have approved six applications, I could tell you, for SCL Trinidad Limited. I pay our respects to Stuart Dalglish, manufacturing stalwart who would have died in Grenada only about a week ago. But, again, SCL Trinidad has benefited, Imanex Limited has benefited, Kamri Investments Limited, Stuart Brothers, and Habanero peppers, Rockland Limited, all of them would have benefited under this programme, particularly some of these smaller ones: Habanero, because it is going to allow a small manufacturer, like Habanero, to comply with federal regulations in terms of certification for low acidity canned foods, and allow them to expand into the USA market, for instance. We have given them more than \$300,000, and this would see them being able to earn foreign exchange.

Another one, Rockland, we assisted them with the British Retail Consortium standard audit, and what that is allowing them to do is import substitution. So that formerly, products for franchisees in Trinidad and Tobago which would have been imported, Rockland is now going to provide these frozen pastries and so on, and save us close to US 1 million annually. Of course, they are soon going to be exporting to the other franchisees within the region, again now earning valuable foreign exchange.

**12.00 noon**

And in addition we are soon to launch under that export-boosting initiative, these innovations vouchers and some \$3million, close to \$4million has been put aside for and that is going to assist these, at least, 20 firms with product development and allow them to have relationships with research and development institutions, the academic community and so on and more exporters so that they can drive innovation. And I will speak to more of this when I go down—when I go up to the House, Madam Speaker.

So we continue, as I said, to improve and enhance the competitiveness of the private sector. Again, we have talked about the Trinidad and Tobago Accreditation Service for Conformity Assessment, that independent accreditation body for the manufacturing sector. We have talked about implementing the national quality policy. And I am pleased for the assistance through the PSIP towards this national quality policy, it is \$9million. And all of this is towards enhancing the competitiveness of firms, Madam Speaker, and to ensure that we have an independent accreditation body in Trinidad and Tobago to be able to test all of our new food products, medical products and our medical testing.

And you know that again, Madam, we continue with our national quality initiatives as well. And in another area the national action plan to combat illicit trade in consumer goods. Again, this is now in place and that action plan is to work on some 26 measures. Again, that is strengthening the legal framework to combat illicit trade and to strengthen the capacity of Ministries and enforcement agencies to combat illicit trade and again to enhance the collaboration between all of the regulatory and the enforcement agencies. That task force is in place and they are doing their necessary work and already we are seeing the efforts of increased enforcement by the multi-agency task force as several illicit items including

tobacco, alcoholic beverages were recently seized in an anti-crime exercise campaign. This is working again to support our manufacturers.

When I go down to the Lower House, Madam Speaker, I am going to have a lot more time to speak about this new trade and investment promotion agency for Trinidad and Tobago which is another effort at improving our institutions, improving our competitiveness so that we can export more and we have greater inward investments. So in furtherance again of this improving the competitiveness of the Trinidad and Tobago's business environment and to modernize our export and investment promotion, this new institutional arrangement would be put in place in fiscal 2022 and that includes, Madam Speaker, the establishment of trade and facilitation and commercial offices and where necessary, the necessary commercial officers with responsibility for trade and investment promotion located within our embassies in key areas in Jamaica and Guyana, in the UK, the US and even in China.

In the first instance, Madam Speaker, we are going to start with exporTT and InvesTT but we have spanned some 13 agencies and other agencies would be included. I want to tell you that we have conducted a readiness exercise with both InvesTT and exporTT as to their readiness to demonstrate their good standing and for coming together under this one umbrella organization and we are satisfied that this will give us this renewed effort in the international marketplace and we could be recognized for as a stellar country for producing niche products and services which can be exported towards the globe.

Madam Speaker, as time does not permit me, I am going to go straight to our 2021 investment performance. And I could tell you that despite the pandemic, I could speak to those local investments in particular that were operationalised and that were facilitated by us. Half a billion dollars' worth of inward investment was

accommodated. Again, demonstrating the confidence in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and in the economy and that half a billion dollars of investment, Madam Speaker, created 1,000 more than 1,000 jobs across the manufacturing the BPO, the agro-processing sectors. I can tell you—I can name some of these: John Dickinson & Company Limited did a \$50million expansion. So there were large expansions, as well as small ones. They as well went into the manufacturing of yogurt. RHS would have done a \$2 million, close to a \$5million expansion. iQor would have spent \$13million in expanding its operations in Trinidad and Tobago. CGA would have spent another amount. West Indian Tobacco spent \$85million in their plant as well. Blue Waters would have spent \$70 million on their new machinery and equipment. Carib Brewery, again another \$21million. Carib Glassworks another \$47million. Novo, and the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will speak to that, Madam Speaker, another \$50million. At least during the pandemic some 400 to 500, close to half a billion dollars in investment.

I could tell you in 2022 we already have in the pipeline in terms of committed investments in distribution, manufacturing, agro-processing, food and beverage, business process outsourcing, ICT, agriculture, hotel and tourism. Already in the pipeline we have more than \$1 billion in committed activities [*Desk thumping*] with the potential to create 1,800 jobs, Madam Speaker.

And let me just go directly as time does not permit. I can tell you that PriceSmart is our anchor tenant at the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. They will be establishing on 10 acres, Madam Speaker. Their regional distribution centre which will include all of their warehousing, manufacturing and free trade zones. They are spending \$52million on this project and it will create 60 jobs.

In addition to that, PriceSmart is also doing another facility in addition to the

regional distribution centres, a plastics packaging PET plant—polyethylene terephthalate plant—for packing and food and beverages. That plant will be in Point Lisas, is another \$22million providing employment for 30 persons.

PriceSmart is also doing on the site in Phoenix Park a fresh produce distribution centre and estimating investment of \$17million creating 20 new jobs. And, of course, working with our local farmer to increase their supply of these commodities and, of course, which PriceSmart will distribute to all of their clubs in Panama and Colombia, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. The Phoenix Park Industrial Estate, Madam Speaker, will be finished in 2022. I think certainly by April or May 2022. In addition to the anchor tenant with PriceSmart, there are three Chinese investors in the areas of logistics and distributing, manufacturing that are at the stage of finalizing their investments. They are another potential 11 investors, Madam Speaker.

We continue to do work on the Factory Road Industrial Estate, Madam Speaker. Within Factory Road alone there are about \$890 million worth of investments creating an additional 622 jobs. Madam, and of course as I must highlight InvesTT will not allow me to do that. The virtual investment forum which we are doing jointly with the Caribbean Export Development Agency, there are expected to be 200 attendees at this virtual programme in November of this year.

I forgot, the Moruga agro-processing and which came on board only in April 2021 because we waited a long time to get the completion certificate from Princes Town Regional Corporation. I can tell you that four companies have accepted letters of offers for three factory shells and one landlord and this is for agro-processing, food production, pepper sauces, chocolate and root products. An investment of \$12 million and 339 jobs in Moruga. Another 10—there are another

10 investors in the pipeline. This park is a true success for the people of Moruga.

Just as I have a little bit more time I want to again, again, again congratulate the Minister of Finance. The number of incentives and programmes that he has introduced in this budget. And what we are doing, Madam Speaker, is really strengthening this country's entrepreneurial ecosystem in terms of access to finance, capacity building and market access. And I have the time to, again—and I have the time to speak a little bit about these. What we have in Trinidad and Tobago, as I said before, is an entrepreneurial ecosystem that caters to start-ups, to early stage businesses and to mature firms. And for four start-ups and this is just not about just the Government. This is about other institutions, Unit Trust, this is about UWI and a number—and hopefully this is about the banks in Trinidad and Tobago. But the kind of products and incentives that you have within the system now, in this ecosystem is, for example, the research for start-ups, the research and development facility created at exporTT, the innovation envelope and export-booster initiative which will start in this fiscal 2021/2022. Business incubators at CARIRI, at UWI inventors and at the new manufacturing innovation incubator project to be introduced in this fiscal. There is also start-up incentives for start-ups. Tax incentives for start-ups announced by the Ministry of Finance. And for the early stage firms, access to finance at NEDCO. There is the new SME capacity building enhancement newly announced \$50 million for training, for new entrants, for existing entrants, Madam Speaker.

There is the scale-up Trinidad and Tobago projects which is going to be done between the Unit Trust and the Ministry of Trade and Industry which I will address when I go to the Lower House. There is the introduction of the credit union soft loans, \$100 million in soft loans. There is the junior Stock Exchange facility which again includes a mentorship programme. There is existing grant fund facility



in the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Existing e-commerce, a new commerce initiative. There is SheTrades Hub in the Ministry of Trade and Industry for women and entrepreneurs. There is the steel pan grant manufacturing facility in the Ministry of Trade and Industry and this is now to be further extended by another \$2million. For the mature firms there is the expansion of government guaranteed loan programme. There is the research and development capital allowance. There are VAT refunds to be accelerated via cash and via bonds. There is the Export Booster Initiative by exporTT. There is the National Quality Infrastructure Programme and there is the EximBank facility. There is the new manufacturing sector allowances of 5 per cent reduction in tax. There is the corporation tax reduction for significant exports, Madam Speaker. All many incentives and programmes offered by this Government [*Desk Thumping*] by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, by the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Youth, Development and National Service, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Digital Transformation and a number of programmes and incentives which would shape and define this country's economic growth through the creation and sustainability and stability of businesses, micro, small and large.

And in this regard again, I wish to thank the TTMA, the TT Chamber, AMCHAM, the confederation of Chambers. And I call on all of the commercial banks in supporting this entrepreneurial ecosystem that is strengthened in Trinidad and Tobago and ensuring its success and which, of course, will create jobs in Trinidad and Tobago.

And as I begin to close and I want to call on all of the supermarket of owners, we are watching you. And I know that you will not realize the reduction in food prices immediately because you have your current stock. But I will give you the assurance that the Consumer Affairs Division will be monitoring prices and

will be looking for the reduction in food prices for the benefit of our consumers particularly the vulnerable ones, Madam Speaker.

When I go to the Lower House, Madam Speaker, I will update the population on the Ministry of Trade and Industry's digital projects include all of its business reforms in trading across borders. There is much going on in terms of our implementation of our business process reengineering recommendations, our e-payments in all border agencies, as well. So—and, of course, I will speak more about the DevelopTT platform that is a true success so that for construction permits you are no longer applying by paper. You are doing all of this online. I will speak to the enhancements of the TTBizLink software and all of the automation that will allow for improvements in trading across borders.

I will also speak to the—expand on the new SEZ legislation, the Special Economic Zones legislation which will come to the House, to the both Houses before the end of this calendar year so that we will be in conformity with Global Forum and which will cause to happen several incentives for our businesses as well. I will also expand on the services industry and the growth in that industry. I wish to thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Mayaro.

**Mr. Rushton Paray** (*Mayaro*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, after listening to the Minister of Trade and Industry I have to wonder if the hon. Minister lives in Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] because the Minister has failed, after that exhaustive list of data that she has presented, how is it affecting the lives of the ordinary man on the street, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I am concerned about the Minister as well. Clearly, if the Minister cannot consciously acknowledge which House the hon. Minister is standing in today [*Desk thumping*] I am concerned about her governance at her

Ministry. But, Madam Speaker, nonetheless I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the 2021/2022 national budget, this the seventh in this era of a stalled PNM-style management and stagnant economy.

I first want to acknowledge the inspired and visionary contribution of the hon. Member for Siparia, the Leader of the Opposition. [*Desk thumping*] Her shrewd analysis and prescribed resolutions to the burning economic and social crisis set a high watermark for this debate and set apart the Opposition from this useless and weak Government, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]. Madam Speaker, in congratulating my honourable political leader, I wish also to commend all of my colleagues for their sharp scrutiny [*Desk thumping*] in the budget and their solution-based addresses.

Whatever the Government, Madam Speaker, may think about the Opposition's examination of the budget and our workable proposals, we are gratified that the country is aware that there is still leadership in this Parliament and all is not lost. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, in about the time it takes to fly to Miami, the Minister of Finance delivered a drawn out and tortuous presentation to the point where it looked like even the hon. Minister was exasperated and in serious danger of collapsing on the lectern. [*Desk thumping*] However, we are all relieved that he managed to survive his self-inflicted anguish, Madam Speaker. But all of Trinidad and Tobago is asking, how would this budget improve the quality of life of all of our citizens? Not a select few but all of our citizens. How would it kick start a waning economy? What are the planned new revenue streams? What are the Governments goals and targets? However, how would the budget help the elderly, single mothers, students and the ailing who still have to wait for long agonizing hours at our public hospitals?

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member—Minister, sorry, of Social Development and Family Services spoke earlier today and gave quite an impressive report on all the sums being spent, afforded to our citizens. But, Madam Speaker, many of those who spoke on the other side, they all have listed spending but nobody has said a word on how are we generating new revenue streams to spend that money [*Desk thumping*] outside of borrowing.

Madam Speaker, not only was the budget chock-full of raw politics and little economics but it also revealed the huge danger to a young developing island state like ours when a Minister of Finance doubles as a chairman of a ruling political party. The Minister presented his measures through narrow political blinkers designed to score cheap partisan points to browbeat to the nation. Madam Speaker, so while the budget was bare of comprehensive economic solutions, it was laden with pigtail proposals and sausage solutions [*Desk thumping*] that the Minister expected to resonate with a society that is enduring the worse economic and social crisis in a generation, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the budget did not even address, much more seek to solve, the worse unemployment rate since the early 1980s under another hapless PNM Government, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in the Minister's 164-page speech there was not a single proposal to put the country back to work and to ease the awful suffering amongst [*Desk thumping*] thousands of nationals. It is all and well and fine to list all the spending opportunities but no mention on how money is coming in outside of borrowing, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Minister also did not make a purposeful effort to deal with the crippling problems of food prices which is making more and more working class people unable to feed and nourish their families. And by the way, zero-rating a few food items on the list, that will not offset, Madam Speaker, the

enormous shipping charges that are going to be brutalizing our importers, our systems over the coming months, Madam Speaker. Whatever savings we will receive from that will be obliterated by shipping charges, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, our country and more so our citizens who are living in rural communities like those in Mayaro, they are on the throes of a severe nutritional crisis as well. Many of our children and senior citizens go to bed hungry each night, while Government Ministers gleefully count their luxury vehicles and high-rise apartments. Madam Speaker, there are people in Mayaro and throughout the country as well who do not know how they will be feeding their respective families tomorrow. The budget that was presented in this House, Madam Speaker, failed to address the alarming reality of homeowners and small and medium-sized entrepreneurs losing their properties while commercial banks are raking in billions of dollars in profits in this country, Madam Speaker.

Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, may be the only country in the world where financial institutions have increased profits while tens of thousands of struggling clients are unable to service their loans with some of them having to hand over their keys to commercial banks, Madam Speaker. And this Government could not care less. [*Desk thumping*] It was not displayed in the heart and the soul of the budget presentation, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in Britain and several other European countries, banks were mandated and I use the word mandated, not encouraged, but instructed to provide specific stimulus benefits such as revised interest rates, corporate and individual clients for identified periods, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the budget sidestepped the critical shortage and inequitable distribution of foreign exchange which is a primary factor in the increasing cost of living in this country today, Madam Speaker.

Importers of food and other essentials are being rationed while there are no complaints from those who are bringing in luxury items, Madam Speaker. The thriving black market for forex is a major reason why the poor man can barely afford to put food on their tables, Madam Speaker.

The Minister in presenting his budget whitewashed the fact that Trinidad and Tobago is still unable to attract any new foreign direct investments under this PNM administration. He did not address the painful truth that our country sits almost at the bottom of the ease of doing business matrix although last year in his budget last year he identified that that was unacceptable. But you know what the hon. Minister did this year, Madam Speaker? He recklessly threw blame at the World Bank claiming that data from that reputable international institution is now tainted because of one event concerning China or something to that effect. But just two months ago, Madam Speaker, the well-regarded United Nations conference on trade and development revealed that Trinidad and Tobago was the worst foreign direct investment position in the Caribbean. The worst, Madam Speaker. In this very same report it said that this country was at a negative TT \$3 billion. You know what that means, Madam Speaker? It means that investors were sprinting out faster than Jamaican Olympic runners in this country. They are leaving and none coming in. That is a problem that must be addressed at a policy level which should have been stated in the budget of 2021/2022.

Madam Speaker, every Tom, Dick and Unilever wants to bail out of this country. That is not good for our international reputation, Madam Speaker. In contrast, investments to this country from 2012 to 2015 under the stewardship of the Member for Siparia, hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, were worth US \$1.5 billion for each year. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the ease of doing business has to do with regulatory

systems and the environment for a country under focus. The World Bank said that in Haiti it is extremely difficult to register property, get construction permits, obtain electricity, et cetera. In Trinidad and Tobago under this administration it is even a more wretched condition than that. According to the very same report, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago is in a more backward state than Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere. How do you move, Madam Speaker, from a description of being a tiger in a sea of pussycats to what we have become today? All because of a failed PNM administration, Madam Speaker, [*Desk thumping*] and we must ponder that. We must ponder that, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, by the Minister's own admission there are 13 government agencies involved in trade and investment promotion, 13. That is the state of affairs that exists while the Minister boast of improving efficiency and digitizing the public service. Just what do these agencies do, Madam Speaker? What is your yardstick for performance? What have they achieved for taxpayers who fund them? Nothing has been presented so far.

I wish to remind the nation that under the leadership of the Member for Siparia our country reached its highest ever position, 62, in the ease of doing business index [*Desk thumping*] and was heralded by the World Bank as one of the top 10 reformers. Six years later, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has become more discredited than Nicki Minaj's cousin friend. Perhaps suffering the same ailment after six years of constant blows to the midsection by this Rowley-led administration, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, while the Minister did not announce a single measure to put people back to work, he repeated tired old, outdated PNM promises. One was the setting up of a shipbuilding industry which he first promised in the 2020 budget. But, Madam Speaker, if I were to ask you to flash back to September 2009,

the then Prime Minister Patrick Manning said, the Government was introducing shipbuilding and marine repairs as a means of economic diversification. And Mr. Manning said at that time, the Government is looking at the potential of the sector. He said that the sector represents a new direction that is labour intensive and which has the potential of creating a new industry. Twelve years later, today this finance Minister shamelessly dusted off the promise like an old vinyl record and starts humming the same familiar lyrics, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, then we have a gentleman who poses himself as the greatest salesman in this country. But yet this salesman allows Azimut yachts to bypass Chaguaramas, the safest sheltered port in the Caribbean and they run to Guyana and set up shop, Madam Speaker, a shipbuilding company.

This Rowley-led administration is on the fast lane to destroying our international image as each painful day goes by.

**12.30 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, on the issue of employment, an unknown amount of Venezuelan migrants are eking out a living in the informal sector, and they need to feed their children, and they are repatriating money to their suffering families back in Venezuela. These immigrants are not absorbed into the productive capacity sector, Madam Speaker. At the same time while we have them in the informal sector, the agricultural sector remains afflicted by worker shortage. Some manufacturers require shop floor factory workers. Surely, Madam Speaker, these workers could be put to more beneficial and efficient use under a creative formularized employment programme.

Madam Speaker, the Minister is back with his old refrain of setting up a statistical institute, improving food production, diversifying the economy and assisting the manufacturing sector. He talked again, Madam Speaker, of merging



the Mortgage Finance Company and the Home Mortgage Bank, a matter that he discussed in length last year. Does the linking of these financial accounts of both institutions mean that the Government has forsaken a plan for secondary mortgage markets?

Madam Speaker, the Minister in his presentation did not account for the TT 1 billion raised in the housing bond of 2020. Was this money utilized to construct houses, and if so how much? And where were these houses built? Or was it placed in the Consolidated Fund where it was disbursed to family and friends and financiers of the ruling Government? Madam Speaker, the Minister spoke of making tourism economically viable, while the sector's contribution to GDP remains negligible even as every other Caricom tourism destination is again attracting visitors up to today. For example, Madam Speaker, St. Kitts and Nevis, the smallest state in the western hemisphere, is welcoming the large sea bond Odyssey cruise ship every week. Trinidad and Tobago has not seen a cruise ship in, well, I do not know how long, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Minister in his presentation, he serenaded us once again with the talk of food sovereignty, and then he assigned a little over \$1 billion TT of which 80 per cent goes to salaries and wages in the agricultural sector. More talk. Despite what the Minister casually said, a harsh state of affairs is projected by international experts, and this is going to last for many, many months to come.

Madam Speaker, the working class must continue to band their bellies with high food prices while the Government has still not indicated any targets for food production and any feasible plan to get there. The *Express* newspaper, Madam Speaker, is correct in stating that agriculture, just like culture, received flimsy treatment. The newspaper called for a complete rethink, but we should not hold our breaths. The Minister rehashed a babble on economic zones, housing, creative

industries, security measures and a troubled health sector, and “doh” talk about construction projects. All this talk, Madam Speaker, while the leaders of Guyana and Barbados and their line Ministers were agreeing on a dynamic package of economic cooperation, senior Cabinet Members of this administration were launching a standpipe. Madam Speaker, it shows the priority of this Government. [*Desk thumping*] While the Caribbean Development Bank was working with regional leaders on job creation projects, our Minister of Finance was boasting of the price of cheese, and even that he got it wrong.

Madam Speaker, these and other repeated failed or stalled economic promises are chronic, and disturbing symptoms of an endemic problem which is synonymous with successive PNM governments. Madam Speaker, the Government has not presented a macro-economic transformational plan, because it lacks the competence and is devoid of vision and applicable modern ideas. Unfortunately, the world view of this Government is limited by its focus on retaining political power. This is a stillborn Government, a barren administration and a fruitless regime. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance is more focused on speaking to his political constituency than placing the economy on a path towards growth, reviving businesses and getting workers back on the job. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, while the world is embracing the fourth industrial revolution, the Minister and his hollow Government have not implemented the national quality policy to ensure international technical standards and accreditation. Like an anxious school boy, the Minister talked glibly of supporting the manufacturing sector to double its exports by 2025, and the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry made reference to that as well. But, the Minister of Trade and Industry issued some nice statistics there at a portion of time to tell a story, but let

me complete the story for this honourable House and the people of this country. Between 2015 to 2020, under this administration the sector exports declined in total by 37 per cent. That is the truth. That is from the CSO. That is from the books that were given to us. Manufacturing output fell by 16 per cent during the very same period. Non-energy exports shrunk by \$14 billion over five years.

Madam Speaker, if you look at the budget that has been expended in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, what have we got to show for it? Decline, decline, decline. But manufacturers—and you know I am amazed that the hon. Minister is thanking all these agencies and thanking all these business associations, but that is not what they tell us, you know. They tell us a different story. Because manufacturers they continue to appeal for institutional strengthening and trade facilitation measures. Madam Speaker, they require partnerships to expand their workforce of 53,000 workers and to navigate the turbulent export waters.

Madam Speaker, you know what they want? They want longer term leases for land spaces in industrial parks so they could grow their operations and create better revenue generation opportunities. We are expending money in this Phoenix Park zone, but yet we cannot maintain the existing 24 e-TecK parks that we have, poor power, poor water. The roads are in a terrible condition, but we are going to expend more money on another facility. Madam Speaker, coming out of the manufacturers association and the industrial entrepreneurs in this country, they are asking the Minister to consider removing the property tax—the pending property tax on plant and equipment for non-energy manufacturing. They are asking that he should allow the Green Fund Levy deductions for approved green projects, and provide incentives to encourage angel investments to start-up companies. That is what they are telling us.

Madam Speaker, to further our trade efforts, our diplomatic missions around

the world must have capable trade facilitation officers, not retired PNM hacks that are sent to pasture, or in some cases just to keep them out of the political ring. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, as for small and medium size enterprises they remain tormented by a lack of foreign exchange, by high freight cost, by difficulties in securing loans, regulatory bugbears and by the non-implementation or selective application of incentives which the Minister has repeatedly promised. But before the PNM's economic mismanagement of this country, there were almost 20,000 thriving SMEs representing about 90 per cent of all registered businesses in Trinidad and Tobago. And those businesses were employing more than 200,000 workers, and their contribution to GDP was a little over 30 per cent.

As a result of this Government's ineptitude the sector is now a shell of itself that it used to be, with more than 6,000 SMEs having shut their doors permanently, each throwing dedicated workers onto the breadline, more SMEs are in danger. Madam Speaker, without a purposeful and urgent intervention there would be further closures during the upcoming fiscal year. Meanwhile, certain large corporations are reporting increased profits, and monopolies are quietly being established, including, in my observation, the all-important pharmaceutical sector. I have to ask this question, Madam Speaker, is the Fair Trade Commission asleep? Because I have not heard a word from them. The Government remains mired in a swamp of mediocrity, without innovation, creativity and the resourcefulness to develop Trinidad and Tobago to compete in this fast evolving, modern, digital world of new industries, trade alliances and learned professionals. So each year the Minister comes and regurgitates his tired phrases, presents old promise with a straight face, castigate patriots who present fresh ideas and solemnly pledges to diversify the economy.

For example, Madam Speaker, the Minister talks of re-capitalizing the

EximBank to drive exports, but has he examined why only a minority of exporters—I think it is about 90 out of 600—are able to access that facility? Does it have to do with the limited amount of foreign exchange that he provides? The Minister must also reveal the share of the \$100 million facility that goes to bona fide exporters. He must tell the nation who are the food and pharmaceutical exporters who benefit from access to the EximBank for forex. The Minister must set aside a stipulated sum at the EximBank to food processors and manufacturers who are supplying the local market, and who have the effect of reducing the food import bill and thus reducing the foreign exchange demand as well, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, Dr. Terrence Farrell a noted economist and former head of the Economic Advisory Board, he said it very eloquently, that we have run out of time. A lot of things that the Minister has been presenting should have been done years ago. In all, the Minister's futile promises and stalled projects, the most disturbing to his Government's determination, is to hold on to the declining energy sector until the last well runs dry, or until the world fully signs off on fossil fuels. Madam Speaker, the Minister made it clear where his narrow economic strategies continue to lie. While the *Titanic* is sinking the Minister comes and says, we envisage a rebound in the oil and gas prices. We are hedging and hooking on to energy. While it is important—I will not say the energy sector is not important put we continue to hedge too much on it.

Madam Speaker, Dr. Farrell is again correct, that Trinidad and Tobago has run out of time for energy transition and that we not only need a plan, but we must urgently implement that plan now. For the past six years we in the Opposition have been issuing the same advice to Government with increasing stridency and growing concern, but as the saying goes, there is none so blind as those who will

not see. Apart from not leading the process for diversification, the budget offers nothing, nada, through policy measures, fiscal and other incentives for private sector investments in renewable and non-energy sectors. [*Desk thumping*]

Once again, Madam Speaker, leadership is painfully absent in this administration. It is fair to conclude, Madam Speaker, that this Government does not have the will nor the capacity to broaden and deepen the economy away from a sector that has served us for generations, but is now in a matured and terminal decline. The Minister's outlook is that the country would eventually return to financial equilibrium and all will be well. Madam Speaker, that is like a heartbroken lover sitting at a window each evening patiently awaiting the return of his sweetheart that may never come, unfortunately, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in the meantime our debt to GDP ratio is heading to the nervous 90s, which means that the cost of borrowing would eventually rise and the financial yoke on our children will be getting heavier and tighter on their necks. If the scenario I have presented is not disturbing enough, we have the troubling state of affairs in which the Government is engaging in public/private partnerships without regulatory procurement oversight.

Madam Speaker, the Government is planning to parcel off and divest taxpayers' assets in the dark without transparent public scrutiny. In the budget presentation, Madam Speaker, the Minister spoke of divestment of non-strategic assets, but he did not identify which assets of which companies. But he confirmed the open secret that the priced Phoenix Park Industrial Estate is being handed over to the Chinese authorities under the road and belt—the Belt and Road Initiative, and that would provide a large strategic gateway to Latin America.

Madam Speaker, there is also a serious issue of the divestment of taxpayers' owned assets without that very same transparency in the procurement measures to

ensure that we receive the best value for money. Madam Speaker, you would recall that this Government withdrew PPPs and several other transactions from the remit of the independent procurement regulator. The Prime Minister himself argued for the amendments that weakened the legislation to exempt PPPs from the procurement supervisor. The effect, Madam Speaker, is an opaque system which could easily facilitate nepotism, bid rigging, bribery, favouritism and other corrupt practices. The very same thing that we wanted the procurement legislation to avoid. Madam Speaker, the Opposition stood firmly against those amendments, and we restate our strong disagreement at this time when the Minister is talking about deepening PPPs for large scale development projects in this country. In other words, a lot of taxpayers' resources would be involved as the Government launches its fire sale to seek to balance yet another deficit budget.

Madam Speaker, several world organizations have pronounced on these matters. For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has said:

“The political leadership should ensure public awareness of the relative costs, benefits and risk of Public-Private Partnerships and conventional procurement.”

They further said that:

“Key institutional roles and responsibilities should be maintained.”

Madam Speaker, we utilize this Parliament to publicly urge the Government to tread carefully in divesting the people's assets. Failing that, this Opposition under the leadership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar will be vigilant and aggressive in ensuring value for money and integrity in the process. [*Desk thumping*] We will take the taxpayers message to the entire world.

Madam Speaker, I wish to talk quickly about our digitization process in this

country. The Minister was ponderous in speaking about digitization of the state sector, and again a lot of talk with little action. As with other matters it is clear that the Government has no clear objectives that it sees digitization as an ending itself. Instead, Madam Speaker, the objective of our digitization policy should be to create a technological hub built on innovation and entrepreneurship, and designed to attract large global brands such as Amazon, Apple, Samsung, Google, all of them to set up shop here in Trinidad and Tobago. And, we have a valuable asset that all ICT companies worldwide want, natural gas. Natural gas can support cheap cooling for mega data centres. Companies are spending large sums of money to set up shop in very cold climates to cut the cost of their operations. We have that here.

Madam Speaker, I have taken notes of the several tax credits that are being offered to text start-up companies to encourage more investments in ICT. Unfortunately, all of these incentives are the same unimaginative ideas of years gone by. Madam Speaker, I looked at the yellow books under this new Ministry of Digital Transformation, and under its developmental budget there is a \$27 million allocation for a few projects. But what is amazing to me, Madam Speaker, the cost to operationalize \$27 million in projects is how much? Two hundred and seventy-seven million dollars in recurrent expenditure. How in the world can we justify three projects for \$27 million but it is going and cost the taxpayers \$277 million to execute it? Madam Speaker, that makes no sense. Madam Speaker, to top it off, there is also in the IDF a \$60 million allocation for something called, "Digital Government Programme." I have read all the books that came in the nice black market bag that we got to find out what this project is about. There is no information on what this project is about. I hope if the hon. Minister of Digital Transformation comes to this House, he can explain what that is about. Madam Speaker, digitization should create a good working electronic identity system with



strong data privacy framework, and to ensure that all Government agencies could use the same platform to conduct business.

Madam Speaker, in the few remaining minutes that I have left, I just want to just talk quickly about my constituency, and some key issues that have been troubling over the last couple years. Madam Speaker, infrastructure throughout Trinidad and Tobago is crumbling under this administration, but the conditions are even more urgent and critical in rural communities like Mayaro. Madam Speaker, we in the Opposition have been pleading for infrastructural improvements to be made a national priority. It seems that not even the sight of the Minister of Works and Transport being chased out by frustrated residents in Tableland, in Moruga, would impact on this callous administration. Madam Speaker, the state of infrastructure is not a politically partisan issue. Here is what the *Express* had to say recently:

“The Government should be embarrassed by the sight of frustrated citizens pooling their own resources to patch treacherously deep and wide potholes.”

The Member for Siparia highlighted the pothole national movement. Madam Speaker, the *Express* editorial of November 20<sup>th</sup> also wrote:

“Massive life-threatening landslides have also compromised living conditions for many families. Lives have been distressed, livelihoods are being destroyed...”

—and homes are in a chaotic state.

Madam Speaker, you have would expected that the Minister of Finance would have allocated time during his address to adequately provide resources towards this national emergency. However, the Minister talks about the Sir Solomon Highway, San Fernando Waterfront, Diego Martin overpass, but he failed to mention one word on roads and bridges and other areas of infrastructure that are

falling apart, more so during the rainy season in this country.

Madam Speaker, under this administration, as Member of Parliament for Mayaro, I have seen the continued collapse of infrastructure, and overall neglect of all our communities. In Mayaro there are 74 major landslips in the constituency; 74. Several roads and bridges throughout the constituency are either closed or limited to weight-restricted traffic. This constrains economic activities when farmers cannot get their goods to market. Buses cannot traverse certain areas and pensioners are forced to walk for miles to get to transport. Madam Speaker, let us not talk about the Naparima Mayaro Road, it is in a most deplorable condition, and itself is a national emergency.

Madam Speaker, inadequate funding to the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation. They have been unable to maintain and repair secondary roads and bridges as well. Agricultural access roads in areas of my constituency like Navet, Mahabarsingh, **Lejon**, other Bangladesh and other areas are all in major disrepair.

In fiscal 2020 the Minister said 80 kilometres of access road would be repaired to benefit 400 farmers. In typical PNM manner, this was not done. There are serious praedial larceny problems in our farmlands. Agriculturists regularly lose the fruit of their labour causing serious disinterest in the sector. If these things are not addressed, Madam Speaker, how are we going to move forward with our diversification drive? How are we going to respond to the road map to recovery team if these basic items are not addressed at the very lowest level? Madam Speaker, the water supply crisis has become endemic more so in Mayaro.

Madam Speaker, during the tenure of the Member for Siparia water barrels along the sides of the road were banished to the realms of fairy tale in Mayaro. Madam Speaker, there was a time when you drove along the road in Mayaro, you would see armies of babies from ankle height to knee height with yellow Sizzola

oil bottles heading to wherever water source was. During the term of the People's Partnership that disappeared. Today, under this administration water barrels have returned like a nightmare to the constituents of Mayaro. They have now become permanent fixtures once again as WASA's portable supply has deteriorated to its worst state in living memory, Madam Speaker. While the Minister, hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, has assured myself and the people of Mayaro that there are plans to improve, I must remind him that while the grass is growing the horse must never starve.

I urge the hon. Minister to pay the water truck contractors, get them back out on the road, stand by your words to execute the projects in this next fiscal year, and demand that WASA get a proper scheduling going. It amazes me how as a people we accept such low standards from WASA and willing to be contended with water once or twice per month. That must change. We must demand more and not accept mediocrity. Madam Speaker, on top of that, there are thousands of underprivileged citizens who continue to be denied access to public assistance, grants, food cards, disability assistance, et cetera. Madam Speaker, if I can highlight one incident where a woman came to my office and she was wheeled in on a wheelchair, just to be correct, with one leg, and she claimed and she said, and I verified it, that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services denied her disability grant because having one leg was not a permanent disability. Well, Madam Speaker, that created almost riot in Rio Claro. Thankfully we were able to solve that problem, but it shows the disconnect at times, how sometimes our servants do not understand the cries of our people. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam Speaker, as I close I want to thank the people of Mayaro for continuing to express their satisfaction in my representation. I want to give them the assurance that I will continue to serve, serve without fear or favour, and I will

continue to represent their interests in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

**1.00 p.m.**

**Mr. Keith Scotland** (*Port of Spain South*): [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Mayaro just stated that the Opposition will be strident and vigilant in monitoring the Government's handling of the public purse.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

I ask them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when they were in government in 2010—2015, why were they not vigilant with the handling of the public purse with respect to LifeSport, [*Desk thumping*] 400 million; with respect to EMBD, 70 million and with respect to NGC, \$16billion. [*Desk thumping*] Why were they not vigilant then? But they are vigilant now.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I listened with astonishment when the hon. Minister of Finance was able to deliver a budget of this quality, nature and import, with such calm, because of the benefits that are contained in this budget I got excited. And then I listened after to the hon. Members of the other side starting with the hon. Leader of the Opposition and hon. Member for Siparia and then I got scared. I got scared because after listening to the hon. Members of the Opposition I realized that although they are vying for leadership of this country they have no plan. They have no plan to govern Trinidad and Tobago in normal circumstances far less in a circumstance of a full blown pandemic. So I want to advise Trinidad and Tobago be scared, when they come to you, say to them, “nobody lives here”. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, after the hon. Leader of the Opposition had done and had completed her speech I realized that the speech was a speech of criticizing the hon. Attorney General and Member for San Fernando West. And why was he

criticized? He was criticized because he recused himself from matters where he had a potential conflict of interest or in matters where he was a witness. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the law is that once there is a potential conflict of interest in order to nullify the effects of same one must recuse oneself from the decision-making process. Any first year law student would know that. You recuse yourself in order to avoid the spectre or accusation of actual or apparent bias. So by reusing himself the hon. Attorney General, 39 times, he adhered to the campaign logo of the PNM and he made the right choice, he did the right thing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, secondly, how could the hon. Attorney General be accused for being a witness? How is crime to be detected without witnesses? Without a witness the police and the judicial system cannot detect and prosecute criminal activity. Is it that the hon. Members on the other side are saying that they want criminal activity to go unprosecuted? Then they criticized and then the hon. Leader of the Opposition and the Members that followed criticized the hon. Stuart Young because he had a relation as a brother to someone call Angus Young.

When I look at this sometimes I wonder if he is just being criticized because he is young. [*Desk thumping*] And then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they went on to be critical of the hon. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. And up to now I have not seen the factual foundation and basis for this criticism. To the Members on the other side I cannot fathom the reason for the criticism. I cannot do it and then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I came to a conclusion which I want to put on the record in this debate 2021—2022, I want to put it on record in the *Hansard*.

I am of the respectful opinion that the hon. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago as an individual, who served in this Parliament has been the most attacked, criticized in the most vilest, putrid and nasty manner, unjustified in this Parliament.

He has thick skin and forgive him if ever so often he gets fed up, and even when you examine the criticism there is no basis. So for example, I want to give one example, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Couva North unveiled a scandal in the food basket project. He stated that each box, according to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Minister of Finance, cost \$581; a total of 81 million. But he sent his secretary to purchase the items contained in the box and it turned up to be \$263. So therefore he is asking, how do you account for the other 49million? Scandal.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what he did not tell the country is that apart from the actual simple cost of the item, what about the fees for storage of the items; what about the cost of labour in packaging the items; what about the cost of delivery to those food boxes to all 41 constituencies in Trinidad and Tobago, all. It means that that was not factored in and this Government in this project did not discriminate. These were not delivered to only PNM constituencies or PNM controlled constituencies, they were delivered throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. Yet, there is a criticism.

And I want to say this in ending on this aspect, I feel that the hon. Member for Couva got robbed, you know. When they said they were giving him a pound they gave him a half pound, because those hampers cannot be \$263. Anybody who has received them and has gone to the market will know that they are more costly. [*Crosstalk*] The chicken alone is about 175—he got robbed. You know you used to go—when you go to the shop they tell you well, look, you are getting a pound but it is a half-pound, he got robbed.

That being said I would say to you that even in their criticisms the hon. Members on the other side have no plan to govern this country, but the PNM has a plan and this plan has a potential to positively impact every segment of Trinidad

and Tobago society. And I would explain so, so that everyone can understand the positive impact and the segments that this plan will affect. The business sector. For the business sector, for the small and medium enterprises there is 100 per cent guarantee for loans that you would take. That is a positive. For the construction sector, look forward to the completion of the first phase of the Sangre Grande highway in 2022; look forward to the commencement of the Macoya Interchange and look forward for the Point Fortin highway construction project to continue. That is construction.

In tourism I have heard that nothing was done and which cruise ship is coming. I say to the hon. Member for Mayaro look and raise your eyes to the hills because from the hills cometh KLM airlines. [*Desk thumping*] From the end of 2022, KLM airlines, the cruise ship will come but we are bringing in new airlines. So raise your eyes, take your eyes off the ground and look up and you will see the positive aspects in Trinidad and Tobago. That is the tourism sector. And by the way, in Tobago look for the Marriott to begin construction in 2022, [*Desk thumping*] 500 jobs to be created and then permanent jobs throughout in that industry.

In agriculture \$300million has been allocated for the agricultural stimulus package fund. And, yes, it is down from 500million but, duh, we are in the state of a pandemic. Do you expect it to stay at the same level?—300 million has been allocated. What is the big “hoorah” that 200 million was taken out. We are in the throes of a pandemic. And even in the throes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have remained—

**Mr. Lee:** Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. K. Scotland:** I withdraw the word “duh”.

**Mr. Lee:** Standing Order—

**Mr. K. Scotland:** I withdraw, I withdraw.

**Mr. Lee:**—8, Standing Order 8 the language is English in this Parliament, “duh” is not a word.

**Mr. K. Scotland:** Sorry, sorry. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“duh”- used to comment on foolish or stupid action, especially—

**Hon. Member:** Oh no!

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Crosstalk*]—could the Leader of Government Business tell us—

**Mr. Hosein:** Standing Order! What is the Member’s Standing Order? There is no Standing Order! [*Continuous crosstalk*]

**Mr. Indarsingh:**—what Standing Order she has risen on?

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:**—8, I am on Standing Order 8. “Duh” is an English word. [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Excuse, I am on my legs, I am on my legs, right, I am on my legs. Chief Whip, what word you actually referring to?

**Mr. Lee:** “Duh.”

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Overruled, overruled.

**Mr. Lee:** The hon. Member—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Overruled. Proceed.

**Mr. K. Scotland:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want back my time please, eh.

**Mr. Charles:** Standing Order—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed.

**Mr. Charles:**—we speak English here and we—[*Crosstalk*]



**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member for Naparima, can you take your seat, please.

**Mr. K. Scotland:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I understand why the hon. Members on the other side will understand the word “duh”.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, I overruled, proceed.

**Mr. K. Scotland:** Thank you. Now, in the energy sector it is anticipated that natural gas and oil production will increase by the end of 2022. There was a hue and cry, well, why are you holding on to it? Because it exists and what was not said by the speaker that went before me is that the production level will increase in the next fiscal year and that is the fact.

Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this budget should excite the entire of Trinidad and Tobago, including, generation Z. Here is why, because as of the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 2022, there will be no more duties and taxes on remaining computer hardware, software or peripherals. So generation Z after you do your classes and your homework you will be gaming and streaming without having to pay for peripherals. So in this budget there are benefits for the youngest to the aged and all segments and that is why the hon. Minister of Finance and the hon. Minister of Planning and Development came up with the theme of this budget: Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you are to give Jack and Jane their jackets the hon. Minister of Planning and Development and the hon. Minister of Finance will go down as being two of the most hard-working, prolific and astute Ministers that Trinidad and Tobago has ever seen in their sphere. Their stewardship over the last six years has enabled this country, Trinidad and Tobago in the face of a global pandemic to say we are resilient. The management of this country over the past six years has led us and brought us to a point where we demonstrate that we are resilient and we can be resilient. And this did not happen overnight. I want to put it

into the context that it must be placed in.

In 2020/2021 the budgetary theme was Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. And in the face of a global decline economically, in the face of being adversely impacted by a third spike in COVID cases, a state of emergency and curfew, strides were made in the area of the private sector support, agriculture, construction and digital Trinidad and Tobago. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, these strides despite what the speakers have said, did not go unnoticed by the international investment credit rating agencies. So much so that Standard & Poor's were able to reaffirm the investment great credit rating of Trinidad and Tobago at BBB as recently as August 2021.

So to this country and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know what that means, that means that we, Trinidad and Tobago received in August the highest rating of all Caribbean countries, the highest rating. [*Desk thumping*] So then the hon. Minister of Finance and he—you call his name and he appears and the hon. Minister of Planning and Development can say we are resilient in the face of a global pandemic. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I understand why my speech is creating all the excitement on the other side, you know. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the meaning, before I proceed, I looked at the meaning of the word, “resilient”. And according to the Oxford dictionary, “resilient” is defined as being:

“...able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions.” [*Desk thumping*]

What more difficult conditions could Trinidad and Tobago face other than a global economic decline coupled with a deadly pandemic? Thank God for good management of this Government over this period. Because by this budget this Government is saying and demonstrating its commitment and focus and belief in

the future and in building Trinidad and Tobago as a prosperous nation. On the future, and I will go particularly now to the future and this budget.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you speak of the future of a country what do you speak of, not the young people? And when you speak of the future of the young people, what do you speak of, not their education? Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, look at the allocation in the budget. The largest share in the allocation of the budget was put in education, \$6.886 billion. By this allocation of the lion's share to education, this Government is signalling to the world and to the young people we continue to place the hope, future and aspirations of this country in your hands. The Government is ensuring that the young people of Trinidad and Tobago have the opportunity to develop and obtain skills that enable them to go in and enter the world of employment or establish their own businesses. By this allocation the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is keeping—is saying to the young people, you are being provided with an opportunity to keep pace with a world that is advancing technologically at a rapid pace. This is an investment in the future, this is an investment in resilience.

The second largest or the second share of the budget was allocated to health, \$6.395 billion. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what more can I say about this Government's commitment to the health and well-being of the citizenry. In the face of a global pandemic and economic challenges this Government continues to provide to its citizens a free health care system which I dare say is second to none and remains comparable to systems in developed countries. The third highest allocation was national security, \$5.664billion. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this allocation and this focus says that the concerns of the people of Trinidad and Tobago about their crime and their safety, these concerns have not fallen on deaf ears. This allocation demonstrates that this Government will continue to develop and implement plans

and put resources in place to combat crime and to create a more secure society.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, agriculture, \$1.249 billion. We heard a hue and cry about agriculture, but I say that the ongoing plan of this Government to create a more technologically driven farmer in order to solidify the country's food security continues and it could not have been more opportune in 2020/2021. This allocation and this focus on agriculture enabled the Government in partnership with the farmers to provide fresh produce in the form of food boxes from local farmers to bring relief to all vulnerable constituents in Trinidad and Tobago. And this had a triple benefit. The first benefit was that it stabilized or the stabilization of the agricultural sector. The second benefit was the stimulation of the agricultural industry, and the third benefit was that the recipients of these food boxes had a choice and an ability to eat in a healthy and helpful manner.

In Port of Spain South, I want to report to this Parliament that we were able to stretch what we received to touch over 2,884 household and over 17,153 persons. Just like other constituencies, Chaguanas, we also work miracles in Port of Spain South. We are unable to make someone in a wheelchair walk, but we can turn five barley loaves and two fishes and feed 17,000 persons. This is what and this is the impact that these food boxes had in Port of Spain South.

So I reject outright and out of hand anyone who attempts to devalue the impact of this programme on the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago and I reject anyone who will attempt to make this into something that is not good, because it was good and it was well received by the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] So what happens now, Mr. Deputy Speaker? I would now wish to turn to constituency issues.

In 2020, in the delivery of my first budget speech and the debate, I asked the hon. Ministers of Finance and Planning and Development to remember the capital

city of Port of Spain and to inject life into the capital city of Port of Spain. Mr. Deputy Speaker, forgive me, I must get my papers. What happened after that budget debate? Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what happened was that immediately thereafter or almost, in November of 2020, none other than the hon. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago launched the Port of Spain redevelopment project. This project that was launched in November 2020, includes the Salvatori Development Project. That project, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you know Port of Spain, is that old Salvatori building site at the bottom of Fredrick Street, opposite the Cipriani Statue. And what we intend to do there is that we intend to have the construction of a multipurpose residential and commercial complex.

As part of this project, which is the Port of Spain redevelopment project there is the PowerGen development project. That involves, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you know the old PowerGen towers that were up, there are about six of them, they are being taken down and in the space that will be left there, there will be the construction of commercial and residential building, including parking for those who live or work in the Port of Spain area and environs. And then there was the redevelopment of City Gate. The main purpose for the redevelopment of City Gate was to provide and improve our transit hub. As part of the redevelopment of Port of Spain project there is the creation of the Foreshore Green space. Over 100 to 150 acres will be used in order to create green spaces along with a boardwalk at the Foreshore.

And then there is the East Port of Spain regeneration project. In the East Port of Spain regeneration project I say to the residents of Piccadilly and Besson Streets, get excited, because what is going to happen in this project is that there will be an upgrade and improvement in the infrastructure and in the actual units in these areas. Then came, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in train the revitalization of Ariapita

Avenue. We have been in constant communication with the stakeholders, including, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the residents of Ariapita Avenue who we polled house to house and we have their input.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I report to this Parliament I say that the hon. Minister of Planning and Development has my memo and outline of the concerns and we are scheduled to meet with the residents as soon as we are completed with the process that we are about here. The Ariapita Avenue revitalization project will transform Ariapita Avenue by providing greater security and safety for its residents along with being a tourist attraction. Hand in hand we will work. And then the one closest to my heart, not in terms of the steel band itself but in terms of the project, the construction of the new Desperados pan theater at a cost of \$14 million. The naysayers and the critics and the uninitiated and those who do not understand the importance of culture may say well, how come 14million in these times for Desperados? Here is my answer to you.

In the darkness of this pandemic when persons are not assured of their healthiness, of their livelihood of their lives, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago says let the music play, let the music play. [*Desk thumping*] We will be a multifaceted government, we will get you vaccinated and we have faith in the resilience that at some point in time we will come back out and we will all be able to take in amongst others the sweet sound of the tassa, the sweet sound of the steelpan. And that is the investment and that brought about the investment in the construction of the new Desperados pan theater.

Then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you look to my left, the Judiciary. There has been an allocation for the Judiciary of at least \$15 million for the upgrade on the court facilities including the rehabilitation of the Hall of Justice which you know has been there for some three decades. But most importantly the project or the

move of removing the Civil Division from the Hall of Justice down to the centre, the Waterfront Centre, has a serious effect, because the exclusive use of the Hall of Justice for criminal trials means that the Hall of Justice, criminal and civil matters will not be competing. It means that there will be more courtrooms for trials and that will go a long way in reducing the backlog of criminal cases that are in the system. Because there will be at least 12 courtrooms available at one time for trials at the Hall of Justice when the civil department moves out and goes down to the Waterfront.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I say that this is resilience. The budgetary theme is: Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. Mr. Deputy Speaker, who and which constituency can boast that they are more resilient than the constituency of Port of Spain South. We are and have been resilient in the face of life. In August—I give you an example. In August 2021, there was a massive flood that came as about a deluge, rainfall, and it affected from Nelson Street, Duncan Street, across the Dry River, Piccadilly Street, but with the help of the agencies—I see hon. Minister Beckles, I am just seeing her, I am seeing hon. Minister Hinds, we went out with the people and the agencies, and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 48 hours, in 48 hours we were able to clean up the debris in 48 hours.

### **1.30 p.m.**

So to the people of Port of Spain South, all my colleagues and to those who assisted, I salute you. Keep the comradery. And it showed the ability to clean-up in that short space of time, showed the commitment, and the resilience, and the spirit of the people of Port of Spain South. From the top of the hill in John John, right down to the end of Jeffers Lane in St. James, across Ariapita Avenue and Belle Smythe Street, there was resilience all around. So where are we now?

The hon. Minister of Finance and the hon. Minister of Planning and

Development have allocated resources. I say to the people of Port of Spain South, let us grasp these allocations and opportunities with both hands. Let us take advantage of these opportunities. So meet the Government halfway. For of us who are not vaccinated, get vaccinated. That is the first step to come out. Get your children vaccinated so that they can benefit from the in-person learning and the allocation in the budget. Meet us halfway. As you continue to be resilient you would be resilient in the context of opportunities that have been created for you by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on this budget, I look to the future with hope. On this budget, I look to the future with resilience. And to the naysayers, I say to you, what are your plans? What are your alternative plans for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and for the country of Trinidad and Tobago? I do not know who the other speaker will be next on the other side but what are your plans? Look at this budget, harken to what is contained therein, and Port of Spain South, I know that together we will continue to be resilient. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Jah bless. [*Desk thumping*]

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

**Mr. Arnold Ram** (*Caroni Central*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity here this afternoon [*Desk thumping*] to add my voice to the budget debate for the financial year 2022. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I intend today to concentrate my contribution on the Ministry of Sport and Community Development as well as the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. Additionally, I intend to touch on a couple line items which are outside those areas which have been drawn to my attention and, finally, two issues that affect the constituency of Caroni Central, which if not addressed by this Government, will severely impact their lives and livelihoods, Mr. Deputy Speaker.



Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to rebut some of the points made by the Member for Port of Spain South, I am happy that when flooding takes place in Port of Spain South that he and the citizenry of Port of Spain South have access within and basically have state resources to assist them within 48 hours. Because in many parts of Caroni Central and other areas in this country persons have to wait days and weeks for a response from this Government and, in particular, the ODPM. [*Desk thumping*]

Additionally, the Member for Port of Spain South was of great assistance in prosecuting the Opposition's case and some of the things that we have been telling this nation. For example, we have been telling this nation that we are grappled with high food prices. The Member admitted that it is more than \$300 for the items in that food basket. So he has been assisting us.

He has also assisted us by telling us and confirming that the hon. Attorney General had to recuse himself 39 times. We thank him for that. [*Desk humping*] He has confirmed that today. He has also confirmed that the honourable brother—the brother of the hon. Member for Port of Spain South/St. Ann's East has received handsome amounts of taxpayers' dollars because he is the brother of the Member. Additionally, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Standing Order 48(4), 48(6), 48(1).

**Mr. A. Ram:** I am responding, please.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, I will give a little leeway, right? Because I know it has been identified. So again—but tread carefully. I will give you a little leeway.

**Mr. A. Ram:** And the hon. Member for St. Joseph was not in the House when these things were stated, please. I just—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I ruled. I ruled, Member. I ruled.

**Mr. A. Ram:** [*Inaudible*]—please, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The only thing that the

Member for Port of Spain South did not tell us, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was whether the Nelson agreement exists or not, and I move on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, “Vision without execution is hallucination,” and this is a quote that is widely attributed to the creative genius, Thomas Edison. Today, we can all say that this quote embodies this Government’s strategy for national development and economic diversification.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the budget presentation of the hon. Finance Minister on Monday, and what transpired in the years previously, it is clear that this Government’s vision for Trinidad and Tobago is like looking into the blind spot on your rear-view mirror. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the so-called Government policy for these things is a vision, but as I say it is like looking into the blind spot of a rear-view mirror.

Now, according to the Minister of Finance, nobody has rioted yet, so I am thinking that gives him the green light to continue to short-change the country because “nobody ain’t riot yet”. I say to my fellow parliamentarian, a man who has been serving many years in this Parliament, be careful what you wish for. Just because “nobody ain’t riot yet” means that this nation and this country is not under siege; that the citizenry is unhappy with this Government’s plans and policies.

The hon. Member for Siparia indicated that it is a war. This budget is a war on citizens. [*Desk thumping*] The tension is a ground is such that I can feel that one is imminent, and had it not been for the state of emergency, he might not have been able to say, “Nobody ain’t riot yet.” A word of advice for him, please, if before November 30<sup>th</sup>, he is in the role of Acting Prime Minister once again—I mean, always the bridesmaid never the bride—he can do the needful and end the state of emergency. Only then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will be truly able to test his theory that “nobody ain’t riot yet”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now turn to the area of sports. With the greatest of respect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know what I actually saw when I looked at this Government's blind spot vision for sport, community development, youth and national service in this budget? You know what I saw, Mr. Deputy Speaker? I saw an often used—another expression—I saw a pie in the sky. Mr. Deputy Speaker, last year in the budget, there was a proposal to increase the tax allowance from 6 million to 12 million, and the hon. Minister gave the impression that there were a number of companies knocking on that ceiling of \$6 million so that he was going to increase it to \$12 million. We have not heard how many companies have accessed this tax allowance and how many are above 6 million.

I want to remind the hon. Minister of Finance, under the People's Partnership Government, the tax allowance for all sport—all sponsorship of sport was 150 per cent; 150 per cent. The Minister is free to implement this strategy like he is doing with zero-rated VAT items. He is free to implement that strategy. It might work. It will work better than this increase from 6 million to 12 million in the last year's budget. Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am seeing a line item of 292,500 in this year's budget attributed to the anti-doping organization. Now, last year I made the call that this organization was not given any allocation. So when the Minister of Sport and Community Development, the Member for Tobago West, when she provides her debate to this Parliament, her contribution, maybe she can tell us what will the 292,500 be used for in respect of the anti-doping agency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in his budget statement, the Minister of Finance, he congratulated—he said:

I—“...take this opportunity to thank and congratulate all our athletes who completed at the recent concluded Tokyo Olympic Games. They made us very proud and we wish them great success in Paris in 2024.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are wishing them great success in 2024, but in order for success to come, there must be support; not in 2024, but previous, there must be a development plan. There must be strategies aimed at enhancing the athleticism of our boys and girls, of our men and women who are competing at these Olympics.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I read from an article dated the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 2021, where the Minister of Sport and Community Development, Shamfa Cudjoe, said that:

“...the Elite Athlete Assistant Programme...remains in place to assist national athletes, but some Olympians did not apply for it.”

Did not apply for it. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are known ahead of time who are qualified for our Olympic games and she is saying it is a handful of persons. Why not reach out to them? Why not reach out to them? In this same article dated the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, she also indicated:

At—“...the beginning of the fiscal year, I instructed the sport division to reach out to...”—them.

And then, thereafter in March, she posted it on the social media platforms. If you are saying it is just a couple persons, why did you not spend some of that roaming money by placing a call which will not cost you 59,000, but will cost you \$59 and less? Place a call to these people.

So we can wish them well in 2024 to represent this country, but if we do not put the support systems in place, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are doomed to also record zero, zero, zero, zero—like the hon. Minister of Finance said, “Zero, zero, zero for back pay,” zero Olympic medals. T&T ended the Tokyo Games without a medal for the first time since the 1992 Games in Barcelona—20-something years. First time in 20-something, we have not had and brought back to this country a medal after an Olympic Games.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, also in the Minister's presentation—in the Minister of Finance's presentation last Monday, he identified and reported:

“I am pleased to report that despite the delays in government construction as a result of lock-down measures, we have constructed the Moruga Sport and Youth Multi-Purpose Facility, the Laventille Community Swimming Pool...”

Until this presentation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was always of the opinion that a budget presentation was futuristic, tell you what your plans are for the next year, until this presentation on Monday.

Because according to all the newspaper reports that I have read, the Laventille Community Swimming Pool was completed in June or July 2019 and was opened to the public, according to this *Guardian* newspaper report, on Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, 2019. So I am confused about what lockdown measures halted construction of this pool in 2019 because our country went into lockdown in March 2020. So maybe the Minister in his wind up could cast some light on what lockdown measures resulted in this pool, that was already opened, being delayed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I see here, as I read on his policies, I see here that the hon. Minister, his policy is that we will be hosting the ICC Men's Under-19 Cricket World Cup and the England tour of the West Indies in February 2022. That is the plan for sport, hosting these two games. There is nothing more coming out. When you look at the expenditure, you look at some of the things that have been pumped into sport, there is little or no planning, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that is the plan of this Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I looked at an article—and I will tell you the date shortly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I looked at an article, it would have been on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, 2021, and it says the Sport Ministry hands out over 3.3 million in

grants; over 3.3 million in grants days before the end of the financial year. I am happy. I am happy that these organizations were allowed to get their grants because I am sure they would have applied quite a number of months and even at the beginning of the financial year. So Government has given a total of over 3.3 million in sport grants to national athletes, national governing bodies, et cetera.

Now, if you look at the names of these national governing bodies and sport groups, you have Black Panthers Women Sports Club, you have Eagles Sports Club, you have Special Olympics TT, TT Chess Association, TT Hockey Board, and one other sport group call VJ Sports and Cultural Club. VJ Sports and Cultural Club, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that seems like a one-man sport club, VJ Sports and Cultural Club. When I looked at the Companies Registry online—this is unlike the Ministry of digitization, their online registry exists. This VJ Sports and Cultural Club was established in January 2021; in January 2021. Now, I cast no aspersions on anyone. I am just saying it seems on the superficial and the surface that VJ Sports and Cultural Club is a one-man show. That seems on the surface, and I am also saying that there are many other clubs which are in establishment in Trinidad for many years. Why a club established in 2021 is getting preferential treatment? And I ask that question, please, of the Minister of Sport and Community Development.

As I move on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and looking at these books—these yellow books that were provided to us, there is a report on page 61 of the *State Enterprises Investment Programme 2022* and under the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited, it says to the bottom:

“Development and Upgrade of Grounds, Parks and Spaces: This project...”—and I read, please, with your permission—“consists of six regional grounds and three sub-regional grounds throughout Trinidad and

was expanded to include Sangre Grande Multi Facility, National Aquatic Centre, National Racquet Sports Centre...National Cycling Velodrome.”

It goes on to say:

“The estimated expenditure for the period April to September 2021 is \$26.8 million...”

And more importantly, it says:

“...\$40.0 million for fiscal year 2022...”—40 million for fiscal year 2022.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the developmental programme, the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* for the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, it is 25 million. So where is this 40 million for the Sports Company for development of parks and grounds coming from? The entire amount allocated to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development is 25 million or thereabout. But they are saying, according to this book, the *State Enterprises Investment Programme* book, 40 million will be spent by the Sports Company. This book, it looks nice, it is colourful, it is glossy. I am sure it was not written by somebody in the Ministry of Finance because had that been the case, they would have known that the maximum allocation to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development was 25 million. And it goes to show, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing and they continue to govern that way. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Indarsingh:** The “maths not mathsing”.

**Mr. A. Ram:** The “maths not mathsing”, as the hon. Member said. It is just not “mathsing”.

So, as I move along, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know my time is limited, this is what this Government has been selling to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, broken dreams, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is what we can say. We have been given

by this Government, six years, broken dreams and it is a total collapse. Sports have collapsed, like this Government, long before COVID. Now, during COVID, our national athletes are on bended knees, praying and begging for Government to spare a thought, throw them a line, even a 2.5 million zip line, anything they will take. Existing facilities are dilapidated, ghost towns are standing as a visual reminder of the callous disregard shown by this PNM Government over the last six years to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. [*Desk thumping*]

What about sports tourism? What about sports tourism? They talk a lot about sports tourism, where are we with that? Sports medical development, coaching, coaching caravan, talent identification, Mr. Deputy Speaker, sports marketing, sports festivals. It is under the stewardship of Kamla Persad-Bissessar that we had a number of sporting facilities, international venues being constructed. National cycling velodrome, aquatic centre, racquet centre, all these under the stewardship of the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. [*Desk thumping*] And even as well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, during the former UNC Prime Minister's reign, that is the hon. Basdeo Panday, we had four stadia being constructed. So the UNC has a track record, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of constructing world-class facilities for this nation [*Desk thumping*] and the PNM has a history of leaving them as ghost towns.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the People's Partnership government approved a Cabinet Note to hire several Chinese diving coaches to identify, enhance, and to develop our children's national ability. Under this PNM that coaching programme remained just as deep as all the empty promises and also reminiscent of how they are leaving our Treasury, please, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remind this nation in 2012, under the stewardship of Kamla Persad-Bissessar, at the Olympics of London 2012, this country was able to bring home one gold, three bronze medals, and we had 11 finalists. [*Desk thumping*] Under this Government,



there were no medals at Tokyo 2022 which was staged this year, please.

Additionally, under People's Partnership government, the East-West Corridor communities, who are historically deprived by the PNM, were lifted in several areas of sports. These same communities who support the PNM are responsible for between 75 per cent to 80 per cent of our national footballers and athletes, we must pay conscious to this, pay attention to these communities in the area of sports, not token gestures or hollow promises. Real financial assistance and innovative programmes. And I ask the Minister of Sport and Community Development to please bring your plans to this Parliament, make a plan that will take Trinidad and Tobago forward in the area of sport.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the budget, in these books here, there is a desired feature of sports for Tobago in the development of the artificial turf facility. I am sure we will all remember the recent AstroTurf "comess" that the hon. Prime Minister himself rejected as a foolish idea. He rejected it. This is what the hon. Prime Minister had to say request. He said—in a social media post, the Prime Minister said:

“Replacing the natural environment at Mandela Park with artificial turf is a salesman’s foolish idea that ought not to waste the time or...resources of the Port of Spain Corporation.”

He continued.

“The Government is sure the Corporation can put...”—this idea— “and money to much better use and spare us all this unnecessary aggravation.”

And I am seeing in this development programme here, please, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 500,000 towards an AstroTurf to be constructed in Tobago. I am sure that the Prime Minister—I am not sure whether the Prime Minister’s thoughts have changed, but he has called it a foolish idea just earlier this year. So I cannot say for

certain whether he is apprised that this project will now be taking place in Tobago—well, what seems as a foolish project, according to Prime Minister's standard for Trinidad, seems as sense for Tobago. I hope the good people of Tobago are listening. The AstroTurf project that is a foolish idea for Trinidad makes perfect sense for Tobago. It is right there in the draft estimates, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the things that arose when this issue of the AstroTurf came to light was that there was a public/private partnership that the City Corporation was about to enter and they said that they wanted to hand it over to a preferred private partner. I ask the question here today, Mr. Deputy Speaker: Has that private partner who could not have instituted his plans at the Mandela Park is now the same private partner who will institute and who will execute this project in Tobago? I ask that question, please, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now turn my attention to the area of youth development and national service. When I say “turn my attention”, I mean grapple with. Let me now grapple with youth development. Apart from the 500 per cent increase in this budget—in the budgetary allocation to this Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, again, where is the plan? This Ministry—new Ministry, which was established last year, moved its expenditure from 13.3 million—a draft expenditure, please, Mr. Deputy Speaker—from 13.3 million to 282.3 million. I am left to wonder whether the reduction of over \$400 million in housing—now, when I looked at the figures for 2019, the allocation for housing was \$1 billion or thereabouts; 2020 was \$1 billion; 2021 was \$1 billion.

**2.00p.m.**

In the 2022 budget, the allocation to housing is \$600 million. And I am wondering whether this over \$250million increase to this Ministry, Youth

Development and National Service, has anything to do with the future leadership of the PNM. I ask that question. By the way, and I leave that there.

Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$218 million allocated to this brand new Ministry, under a brand new Minister. What is the desired state for youth development and national service in Trinidad and Tobago? I ask. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also ask: What is the timeframe, any timeframe, to achieve any of these desired states? What are the policies to achieve this? What institutions are being used to achieve this? What resources other than the whopping \$280-plus million have been provided and how are they being utilized?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I looked also at the draft estimates, I am seeing where the National Training Agency has received a reduction in its budget of 43 million or thereabout. Now when one looks at this other book here it is called the Social Sector Investment Programme, and so forth, there are quite a number of programmes that are proposed to be done by the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, throughout the existence of all these programmes there is one agency that is responsible for certification and that is the National Training Agency.

Now, according to the *Gazette*, that remains under the purview of the Ministry of Education. However, we have all these programmes here, MiLAT, MYPART, barbering, amplified. Everything is spelt out there, but again, if you are having so many programmes or you are proposing so many programmes, then why is the NTA not involved? Or why are you decreasing the allocation to NTA, National Training Agency, when you know that will open up the floodgates and the number of persons requiring certification will increase. So if the number of persons requiring certification increases, you will have more work to do. There would have to be more work assessment centers, and so forth, to provide the

certification. But again, the National Training Agency has a reduction of \$43 million in its allocation for this financial year.

Now, something had come to our attention, please, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I must raise that in this Parliament. We are being told of certain actions being taken at the National Training Agency. And I read for you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, into the record of this Parliament, a letter written by Dr. Patrice Parris-Searles and it was written on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, 2021, and it says—[*Interruption*—]—why do you not recuse yourself from here?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please, please. No.

**Mr. A. Ram:** It says—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hello, Members. One second, one second, one second Members. Please, that will not be tolerated, Member.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, he is harassing—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hold on one second. Still, that will not be tolerated in the Chamber. Right? There is a certain way in order that we do business in this Chamber.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hold on. Hold on. Right there is no response needed. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's East, please. I am on my legs, please. Please Member, continue. Proceed.

**Mr. A. Ram:** All ask, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** No, no. You do not ask anything. Proceed.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I continue, the Member was heckling me and I responded in kind. So I read this letter here now, dated the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, 2021, and it says:

Changes to the National Training Agency Retirees Health Plan

As a result of the National Training Agency's precarious financial position the agency has been compelled to critically examine its core structure and explore all avenues to reduce expenditure as much as possible. Thus, attention is now focused on the expenditure related to NTA's retirees health plan.

These are persons who would have provided their human capital to this nation and have reached the retirement age. And what is the NTA doing? The National Training Agency is reducing their, according to this, core structure with respect to the retirees plan. And it goes on to say:

Based upon the current arrangement the company—

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, respectfully, this is a budget debate, Standing Order 48(1), please.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** So again, Member, tie in your point.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I said that this is a line Item under the Ministry of Education. If the Member was not listening, it is not my fault. This is a line Item under the Ministry of Education, the National Training Agency and there is a reduction of 43million to the National Training Agency. Am I clear, 48(1)? Thank you.

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** It has nothing to do with pensions.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move on.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** One second.

**Mr. A. Ram:** As I move on, as I move on.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please, please, Members. Member for Tabaquite, hold on. Hold on. Hold on. Again, Member for Caroni Central, I ruled and the ruling was in your favour.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Thank you.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** So please, please, please.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Thank you.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Right? Kindly proceed. Kindly proceed.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for that ruling. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now move on to one of the items recognized in this budget under “Fiscal and Other Measures”. For the Member for St. Joseph, it is a page 147. It says: electric vehicles. Last year, in the budget, this is the 2021 budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance said as a country we spent 2.5 billion per year or US 400 million per year importing an average of 25,000 motor vehicles per year, at least two-thirds of which relates to private motor vehicles which has created a serious foreign leakage.

So this was last year, 12 months ago, the Minister of Finance saying that this has caused a leakage because we are importing 25,000 new vehicles and he used that excuse, Mr. Deputy Speaker to justify the imposition of taxation on hybrid cars, electric cars and CNG vehicles. The taxation, according to my notes and my research, was effected on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2021. Ten months later, only 10 months later, we are faced with an announcement that all custom duties, motor vehicle tax and Value Added Tax would be removed on electric vehicles and will revert to the pre-January 01, 2021 position. This is a total absence of cognitive thought and long-term planning in this current administration. It is.

What about CNG? We had a new NP station, which was dubbed the according to the Minister, or according to this article and this article is dated the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2021, and it says:

The long-awaited NP flagship...service station near the Preysal flyover...has been dubbed another milestone by the Energy and Energy Industries Minister Stuart Young.

He said it was:

“a significant achievement in developing the compressed natural gas... industry since the Government approved the introduction of CNG”—plants—“as part of the transportation fuel mix”.

So I ask: Are we throwing away all our infrastructure and our development in the CNG field for electric vehicles? Because this country has been spending millions of dollars in infrastructure since the late 1980s/early 1990s in CNG infrastructure. And therefore, are we abandoning our position with respect to the CNG programme? Because nothing was mentioned by the hon. Minister of Finance with respect to Custom duties, motor vehicle tax and Value Added Tax on CNG vehicles. Nothing was said about that.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is the situation. We are offering tax breaks on electric vehicles and the importation of the battery powered electric vehicles. But what about, similarly what about the battery packs? What about the traction electric motors? The battery packs are quite expensive and they are required to be replaced every year, according to my research. So you are giving contradicting—  
[Crosstalk]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Silence.

**Mr. A. Ram:**—signals, because you are opening a brand new service station with 10 CNG pumps, one electric pump and the regular other pumps and you are now saying you are moving in the direction that we are going to encourage electric vehicles in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it does not make sense, because on one hand you are opening a service station with all these CNG pumps, and the next hand you are saying we are moving away from CNG, we are not allowing similar tax concessions to encourage the CNG market, and that happens when the right hand

does not know what the left hand is doing. [*Desk thumping*] That also happens when someone is involved in every other thing besides what is under their house. [*Desk thumping*] That happens.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move on, and I realize I have just a couple minutes again, I want to raise an issue that came to my attention, and this has to do with one of the units under the Office of the Prime Minister; it is the Children's Authority unit. Now, it has been brought to my attention that there were some children who have been removed from the care and protection of their parents on or about August 20<sup>th</sup>. Up until today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, according to the Children's Authority Act, Chap. 46:10, the Children's Authority is required, and it says at section 22:

“Where the Authority is of the view that a child is in need of care and protection and that its intervention is necessary in the best interest of the child, it shall investigate the matter and shall be lawful where appropriate, for the Authority to receive the child into its care.”

And it goes on to say what are some of the considerations of a child needing care and protection at section 22. But most importantly, please, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is section 23:

“Where the Authority receives a child into its care under section 22, it shall immediately make an application to the Court for—

- (a) a Wardship Order under the Family Law (Guardianship of Minors, Domicile and Maintenance) Act to be made in respect of the child and other Order;
- (b) ...under section 25.”

So it shall make it immediately.

A child taken from its parents on August 20<sup>th</sup> and no application to this date



has been made in the Family Court in respect of these children. And it says in this Act, it shall be made immediately. When I investigated the reason why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was told that the office of the Children's Authority is not sufficiently staffed. They do not have the staff to do the needful to bring the proper applications before the court. And this is a Ministry under the purview of the Office of the Prime Minister. I ask for those involved in this House, who work in the Office of the Prime Minister with that ministerial portfolio, to please look into this because it is causing great distress, anxiety, and emotional distress to parents who have to wait until the Children's Authority in their own timing, without being properly resourced, brings the proper application before the Family Court.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in my couple minutes remaining, I want to just touch on a critical, critical, critical issue in the constituency of Caroni Central and that deals, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with the Preysal Government Primary School. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this school commenced operation in 1947/1948. The school, over the years, has produced outstanding citizens in various fields. For example, there were two former Members of Parliament who attended the Preysal Government Primary School, one being the late Kelvin Ramnath and the other being Dr. Hamza Rafeeq.

This school has also produced quite a number our national cricketers who have gone on to excel, some being Inshan Ali, Rangy Nanan, Theo Cuffy, Eugene Antoine, Giles Antoine, Gopaul Sahadeo, Ravi Rampaul, Denesh Ramdin. Now what is happening with this school, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2015, at the end of the stewardship of Kamla Persad-Bissessar, this school was 80 per cent completed, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Now, since then, as a temporary measure, persons were being housed at another facility, which was also under the stewardship of Kamla Persad-Bissessar in the place of the Preysal Community Centre. So they have been

housed there on a temporary basis and the students and parents were all too happy to have a new school. Since then, since then, six years and counting the school has been left abandoned by this Government, abandoned, forsaken, deserted by this PNM Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The school, before the COVID-19 mandatory lockdown, being housed at the Preysal Community Centre it was insufficient. As you would imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a community Center is not equipped as a school. So there were some classes being undertaken in the schoolyard under tents, under regular tents and the students were also cramped into desks and chairs because—for example, when one desk would normally hold in it—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Yes. Thank you, please. Will hold three students is now holding five, allowing five students. This was pre-COVID measures, please. So now, when the Minister is saying that school will open soon, I mean, they are using their science whatever science they are using, I do not want to get into that, but when schools eventually open, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what will be the situation for persons at the Preysal Government Primary School? Because we are all here practising social distancing. We have eight Members on that side, six on this side, even though I am sure most Members are vaccinated, and so forth. Right? When school eventually opens there will be no way and no place for these students to attend and then they will be crowded in those desks with five. Five of them would be crowded. They would practise no social distancing. This is something that we have to live with. And I make the plea to the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance for some resources to be made available to the Preysal Government Primary School. They have been left abandoned. [*Desk thumping*]

Because when I look under the MTS, again a nice yellow book, the State

Enterprises Investment Programme, they have listed 27 priority schools, and I do not see the Preysal Government Primary School as one of those schools listed there, and I am deeply troubled and concerned about that because it will mean that we will disenfranchise these students from obtaining their education when the school reopens. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, with my couple minutes remaining, I want to congratulate the Opposition Leader and the Member of Parliament for Siparia on a sterling contribution yesterday, to the debate. In many respects, it was well measured, timely and touched and concerned many pertinent issues [*Desk thumping*] to this budget and nationally facing our twin-island Republic. One in particular—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, I told you two minutes, two minutes ago.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Two nineteen.

**Mr. Imbert:** Sit down.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Minister of Finance, I need no assistance. I will now recognize the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. [*Crosstalk*] Please, please. Hon. Member, you have 45 minutes, no extensions.

**The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne):** Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am honoured to join you here in this House today, the House of Representatives, the people's Chamber, to share a few perspectives on this budget debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a budget speech is a prime opportunity to provide your nation with a clear sense of economic direction and confidence. And it is my respectful view that the Minister of Finance achieved exactly that when he spoke to the nation on Monday. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have followed my fair share of budget debates, but I

have never seen such a claim from so many sectors of society for the fiscal measures announced by a Minister of Finance across many sectors that can create jobs and impact lives of citizens throughout Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce, normally very conservative in their acclamation after the speech of a Minister of Finance; the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association; the Confederation of Regional Business Chambers; the Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce; the Greater San Fernando Chamber of Commerce, and some of these Chambers have within them enterprises that deal with the sale of motor vehicles.

I listened to the hon. Member who spoke just before me. I heard him say that the batteries in an electric vehicle need to be changed every year, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My, my, my. It appears that the last speaker was confusing the batteries of an electric vehicle with the batteries of his air condition remote. I want to tell him these are two very different advances and phases of technology.

So, there was tremendous acclaim for the fiscal measures announced by the Minister of Finance. Mr. Deputy Speaker, even former PP Minister of Government, Winston Dookeran, for whom I have the greatest respect, an absolute gentleman, could not help but share some words of salutation.

I also listened, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to many of our people, especially our young people who have been striving to get into business, to start businesses and they recognize, in this budget, the Minister of Finance has presented an unprecedented suite of initiatives for our young people to get involved in business. And I want to tell them, [*Desk thumping*] I want to tell them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the road to success is paved not just with salary, but with entrepreneurship. It is not just I want a “wuk”, but I want to create a work. I want to create work for others. And this budget shows them the way.

Also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, many bright young people, we do not hear enough about them, who wanted to be involved in technology and digital enterprises, do those opposite talk to those young people, to that type of young people? Because they know, those young people know their time is now. Their time is now. [*Desk thumping*] This budget and this Government are offering the best platform they have ever had to launch their business, to launch their ideas, to step forward, to take that bold step that will build a future for themselves, their family, their community and for their country, our country. They, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are the future.

The Government is doing its job. It is doing its job, creating a nurturing and facilitating environment in which they can invest, they can create. They can develop jobs. They can make money and do something for their country, as opposed to just demanding that their country do things for them. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this message goes out to every community, every neighbourhood, every village.

Do not look down on our graphic designers, our programmers, our coders, our small business persons, many of whom now are women, are young women. Do not look down on them because they are the vanguard of the future. That techy little kid, that bright little kid in the neighbourhood, that little nerd is going to help lift Trinidad and Tobago and Caricom into the new economy. That is where our foreign exchange is going to come from. I am hearing the rhetorical questions over there. That is where it is going to come from. Where else? It is not going to come from the sky. It is going to come from their minds and the Government is facilitating and nurturing and giving them the opportunity, via these fiscal measures, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So community, take care of that child. Encourage her. Encourage him.

Nurture and protect her, protect him and this budget will show us the way. It is not going to—the future is not just about a WASA work or a URP work, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Aim for the stars and if you miss, well maybe you will land on the moon.

Just look at the measures announced in this budget. For the first time in this country ever, new tech companies whose core business focuses on digitization and technology will get a 50 per cent tax exemption, 50. This is brand new and I hear Members on the other side saying biscuit and cheese, and nothing new. I know they can read. They have proven that several times during the debate. So how could they miss this? [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, in a rich developed country, do you know what this would be called? A stimulus package. And many on them will be on their computers praising it, wonderful, wonderful, because it is happening abroad. It is happening here and we should be willing to praise it as well.

For the first time our local businesses involved in research and development will benefit from a research and development capital allowance of up to 40 per cent of expenditure. In a rich developed country, you know what that is called? A stimulus package. We will go on our computers and praise it. It is happening right here.

And then I heard the MP for Mayaro, a very distinguished gentleman, complaining that the world is embracing the fourth industrial revolution and Trinidad and Tobago is being left behind. He did not read the budget speech, I am certain of it. Small and medium enterprises that list on the local stock exchange for the first time will get a five-year full tax holiday, five years and the next five years a 50 per cent tax holiday. In a rich developed country they will package that and call it a stimulus package. We have it right here in little Trinidad and Tobago.

And it goes on. For the first time, a new incentive for manufacturers that

focus on information technology of up to \$500,000. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you find a common thread in what I am saying, it is focus not on the past, but on the future, not on the old economy, on the new economy. A full-fledged stimulus package targeting jobs, harnessing our brilliance, harnessing our creativity, not just for the 1 per cent they like to talk about but for the 99 per cent, exactly what this nation needs to rebuild our economic strength coming out of the pandemic.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, my message to our young people, ignore the naysayers. Ignore them. Take advantage of this comprehensive suite of incentives and interventions that have been opened up for you. Let us make Trinidad and Tobago the technology and digital powerhouse that we know we can be. The budget shows us the way. It opens the door. It opens the window. It rolls out the carpet. It reaches out a hand for those young people. This is how you can lift your family legitimately. This is how you can transform your community that needs transformation.

And parents that child, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who is playing Roblox and Minecraft, guess what? That child can be the future as well. That can be the next Bill Gates. She, he can be the next Mark Zuckerberg with an address that is not Los Angeles or Silicon Valley, but Petit Valley, Chase Village or San Fernando or Roxborough or Rio Claro. That is what I see in this budget, not biscuit and Crix, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

### **2.30 p.m.**

Albert Einstein was working as a junior public servant while he was developing his special theory of relativity. Now we have young people that could be in their jobs because now you do not have to rent a building, or buy a building to start a business. This can be done in your home, this can be done at your desk. And that is what this budget is showing you. The new economy. The new digital

age. The Government is doing its job, nurturing, facilitating, and creating opportunities. The signal is clear.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, now is the time because our nation has been fighting and is still fighting one of the most devastating—well the most devastating pandemic of our lifetime. No one has been spared from its impact. No nation has been spared from its impact. This pandemic has defined and will continue to define our lives. This pandemic defines our times. This microorganism has put all our systems to the test. Our immune systems have been put to the test. Our health system has been put to the test. Our justice system has been put to the test. Our economic and social systems. We have all been tested. The world is seeking to emerge from the worst global recession since World War II.

When you listen to some of those on the other side, they want to pretend this is just about Trinidad and Tobago. This is a global crisis. The world is seeking to emerge from the worst global recession since the Second World War, and I have to listen to people trying to say that it is the Government at war against the citizens. A bizarre line of rhetoric, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have given my utmost to do my part within team Trinidad and Tobago in the best interest of this country. Of all the people of this country, through it all it has been my distinct honour to serve with a Prime Minister who has led our national COVID-19 response with great courage and conviction. [*Desk thumping*].

Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been working, but I have also been observing. I can say without fear of anyone contradicting me that no leader on this planet has engaged more with their population than the Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, the Member for Diego Martin West; [*Desk thumping*] without fear of anyone contradicting me. Day after day, week after week, month after



month, for two years and counting, always relying on the science, making tough decisions, negotiating for the people of our country, standing his ground when principle demands it, being resolute whenever it is needed and being flexible whenever it is required.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have seen our Prime Minister, yes, the same man those cowardly fake profiles love to ridicule, I have seen him with eyes red from lack of sleep, reading the reports, studying the global developments, listening to recommendations, sifting through the noise. I was there when the calls came in about vaccine links. Everybody has a vaccine link, everybody has a friend, an ally, a partner, vaccine links, from middlemen, agents. A family member of a popular Bajan singer had vaccine links for us. Rich businessman who had a special connection. Those were heady days; the pressure was on. No one legitimately wanted to sell vaccines to a small market like ours, but many wanted to exploit our sense of urgency. This Prime Minister, our Prime Minister, stood his ground on behalf of this nation and we did not fall victim to the predators. [*Desk thumping*] We can look back now and see other countries, some countries with fake vaccines, fake deals, middlemen on the run and we can say, there but for the grace of God could have been us. There but for good, sober leadership could have been Trinidad and Tobago.

The same applies to our robust, resolute, completely correct and principle stance not just on the supplier of the vaccines but also the source to put into the arms of our precious citizens. Only WHO approved vaccines. It seems normal now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was ridiculed by some but now in hindsight it is appreciated by many, authentic, certified, and safe. Anyone vaccinated here can now travel to the United States of America. Not all countries can say the same thing. And we are working assiduously to ensure that our excellent standards are

recognized and accepted everywhere from the UK to Canada and everywhere else. We are working at it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a child growing up, I always wondered, I speculated, what if an alien species were to invade earth? Would that do the trick? Would that bring the nations of the world together? Would that bring humanity together with that common enemy? I got the answer in my adulthood because we have an invasion of a small alien, microscopic, that threatens the entire world. And guess what? The world did not come together, and we saw the inequity, we saw the vaccine apartheid, we saw the hoarding. We stood up against it.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one thing the Prime Minister taught me—I have learnt from many—one thing this Prime Minister taught me that I will never forget. He said, “Amery, when you stand on principle history will see you through. When you stand on principle history will see you.” [*Desk thumping*]

Mandatory masking, where he would we be today without it? Was not popular, no one wanted to wear a mask in the society. They were flaunting it. Mandatory masking, it became the law. Where would we be today without it? Closure of our borders until sufficient vaccines were available. We are seeing other countries paying a higher price today.

**Mr. Rambally:** I rise on 48(1). This is a debate on the fiscal package not COVID-19.

**Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:** What?

**Mr. Rambally:** I do not see the relevance of this please.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, hon. Members, as previously dictated in this Chamber, again, we have identified that COVID-19 is not what we are debating, but again, each Member has already brought it up in the system. So again, Member, I give you some more leeway in order to—

**Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:** Well, absolutely I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and it is very clear. There is significant expenditure in this budget on COVID-19 vaccines and measures. Now, Member, you should not be complaining. You have a Minister of Government standing and accounting to the House. That is what we are here to do. So, I thank you for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Curtailling liming and fêting with a curfew. We take it for granted now. And then I hear a Member standing up in this debate and asking: Where is the sport tourism? Where is the sport tourism in the middle of a deadly pandemic? We have to respond to that.

And this Prime Minister stood side by side with the Director of the World Health Organization—the Prime Minister of a tiny twin-island State—initiating and maintaining a parallel health care system funded by this budget that you did not listen to and that we are proudly here to proclaim. This parallel health care system, Mr. Deputy Speaker, not cheap, very expensive, is now looked upon and is being emulated by other countries because it was designed to keep the regular hospital wards somewhat insulated, to keep the patients in our mainstream health sector somewhat insulated, and to allow progress where progress was required and is required.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, listening to our health care experts, and I listened to the Minister of Health in this budget debate, the tireless, indefatigable Terrence Deyalsingh who seemed to have been born and designed and raised to lead the health sector at such a challenging time as this. And then our Chief Medical Officer who is the custodian of many of the resources that we would be putting into the health sector through this budget, a thankless job. I consider Dr. Parasram a national hero in Trinidad and Tobago today. [*Desk thumping*]

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to also thank the staff of the Ministry of

Foreign and Caricom Affairs and those in the Office of the Prime Minister. We might be the face and the voice but there are many behind the scenes, honest loyal citizens who have been working very hard for this country. And we have worked hard. Our efforts were tireless, resilient, consistent. We ignored the mocking and the ranting and so on.

**Mr. Rambally:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is relevance of this here.

**Hon. Member:** What is the Standing Order?

**Mr. Rambally:** Standing Order 48(1).

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, Member, I have ruled and Member, a ruling has already been laid down. The Member is giving an update with regard to COVID. Earlier when this came up as an issue it was with regard to the actual health issues with relevance to the particulars that deals with the actual situation. So it is not along those lines that this Member is moving. Right, proceed.

**Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and in case the Member did not—I thank you for your ruling of course—in case Members do not recognize it, the budget debate is an opportunity to give an account for the Government's stewardship of the country's resources during the previous fiscal year. You may not recognize when that is occurring because you have never done that when you were in office.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I proceed because again, they do not like to hear anything good about the Prime Minister. And I think that is why they are raising Standing Orders, otherwise they would not. This same Prime Minister, Mr. Deputy Speaker, corresponded with all the global leaders seeking vaccines for our people. President Joseph Biden, President Xi, Prime Minister Trudeau, Prime Minister Johnson, Chancellor Angela Merkel, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Ramaphosa, President Kenyatta, Dr. Tedros, each and every one. And then met

with Members of Congress, all seeking to save money for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago: Bennie Thompson; James Clyburn; Maxine Waters; Gregory Meeks; called with the Vice-President of the United States Kamala Harris, went to Caricom.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, 12 days after Trinidad and Tobago became the Chair of Caricom, we convened a special emergency meeting of Caricom on vaccine access and equity. Twelve days. That is immediate action and leadership. Went to the Atlantic Council, the Prime Minister went to the World Health Organization, at every level. No stone was left unturned.

And with the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, provided the requisite support to enable us to stand here today and talk about the next phase of our response. I would not go into the extensive list of the meetings that I as Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs had on these matters seeking to best interest of Trinidad and Tobago. I will give just a few: the Minister of Foreign Affairs of—I met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China; the Minister of External Affairs of India; Secretary of State of the United States; Foreign Secretary of the UK; EU Commissioner; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Argentina; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Croatia; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Panama; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ireland; Minister of Foreign Affairs—the Ambassador of the Netherlands, Mr. Strive Masios; African Special Envoy.

And there are citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to add to this list of contributors, people like Angela Lee Loy, Nigel Salina, Amjad Ali, Gervase Warner, others, who ask not for a cent. These were not mercenaries. They did not ask for a contract or a favour, they just wanted to help us make contact to secure

the future of our citizens to get these vaccine contacts going. High Commissioner of India; High Commissioner of Canada; High Commissioner of Germany, the Ambassador of China, the *Chargé* of the US Embassy. What were the results, Mr. Deputy, Speaker of those efforts to acquire vaccines? To this date we have fully vaccinated 536,817 people in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

In contribution to this we have acquired 581,219 doses of WHO approved vaccines free of charge; [*Desk thumping*] 581,219 doses. That is what happens when you cut out the shouting and the naysayers and the insulters and you focus on the mission via our diplomatic efforts, our interventions in the bilateral and multilateral fora and by the generosity and responsibility of our friends. I give some examples: Barbados, 2,000 doses, February 2021; India 40,000 doses, April 2021; St. Vincent and the Grenadines 20,000 doses, May and June. Coming through the fiscal year, China 100,000 doses, May 2021; Bermuda 9,000 doses, May 2021; Grenada 17, 800 doses, May and June 2021.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Antigua, 5,000 doses, June 2021; Canada 82,000 doses, August 2021, and we heard some ridiculous theories about the genesis of that Canadian donation, oh my goodness. And then the United States of America 305,370 doses of the popular Pfizer vaccine, August 2021, with many more to come from that particular source, Madam Speaker.

And our overseas Missions were heavily involved in this process. Our High Commission in Delhi, our Embassy in Beijing, China, our Embassy in Washington DC. Madam Speaker, as we stand here in this budget debate, we have many vaccines in stock. Some with a nice long expiry horizon like Sinopharm. The nation is well catered for, better than most, better than most. To the extent where we can now share, as the Prime Minister committed to the world, we can now

share a few of our AstraZeneca vaccines that are closer to expiry with our neighbours and other countries. We have sent 2,500 to the Bahamas already. They were gracious and happy to accept and utilize; 2,000 to St. Kitts and Nevis, 4,500 to Dominica and the bulk—we do not want to waste one vial—the bulk will be going to some other countries. Nicaragua stands to be a beneficiary as well, Madam Speaker.

In addition to supporting the Prime Minister in acquisition of vaccines, we were involved with other Ministries, particularly the Ministry of Health, to acquire much needed resources for the citizens of this country: thermal scanners; test kits; personal protective equipment; ventilators from The People's Republic of China; medication, a range of medication and personal protective equipment from India; personal protective equipment and oximeters from Israel; a modular hospital with ancillary equipment and supplies from Japan, from that government; personal protective equipment and sanitizing equipment from the Republic of Korea; test kits and personal protective equipment from the United Arab Emirates; field hospitals from the Government of the United States of America; four ventilators from the Government of Mexico.

Madam Speaker, these things did not fall from the sky. It was not an air drop with a parachute just flying over Trinidad and Tobago. It involved work, it involved effort, it involved diplomacy, it involved follow-up, and these achievements were made on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] That is how our resources are being expended, bringing value to the citizens every day.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the significant challenges faced during this pandemic by our diaspora abroad, Madam Speaker. And many of them rose to the occasion and are still rising to the occasion, helping each other,

helping their country at this time. We have some heroes in the diaspora. Not all are fans of this Government, not all of them are fans of this Government, but they are heroes all the same. It does not stop me from appreciating their efforts and telling them thank you once again. And I do so sincerely.

In this context, Madam Speaker, it would be remiss of me not to record my appreciation for the staff of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs for their sterling efforts to maintain our country's commendable track record of participation in regional, hemispheric, and international organizations and fora during a pandemic.

I also want to pay tribute to the staff of our overseas missions who have rendered yeoman service against the backdrop of this pandemic, sometimes in extremely dangerous circumstances all across the world assisting the diaspora, assisting travelling members of the national community, particularly as the borders have been opened, and the situation has been dramatically worse with the Delta variant as well. I thank them and their families for their continued sacrifice and service. It has not always been perfect. I have had to apologize on some occasions when the service was not at its optimum. And I have encouraged the staff, we need to raise it to the highest level because that is what the citizens deserve.

The Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs in conjunction with the Ministry of Finance in this fiscal year, also provided humanitarian assistance via cash grants to nationals abroad who were experiencing harsh financial challenges. And the staff of our Consular Division provided particular service as well to nationals at home and abroad, including some of the family members and the Members opposite who have been well served when they have called upon us to assist, because we are here for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago notwithstanding your political allegiance.



Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs is the official external arm of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and we serve as the primary interlocutor between this country and other States and entities. We take our role very, very seriously to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago always has a seat at the table at the appropriate fora and at the appropriate levels.

We have had some achievements in addition to what I have described because we take our roles seriously. And I see people searching for negative comparisons of Trinidad and Tobago and hitching their political wagon to negativity, strolling the Internet, searching, scouring the world to find a negative comparison or two. But there are many positive comparisons that they will not share, and they will not showcase. So, guess who has to do it, Madam Speaker? The Government has to do it. The Government has to do it. [*Desk thumping*]

As an independent nation we have always distinguished ourselves by our engagement in the global community of nations. In terms of our multilateral activities, I want to salute the facilitation through extensive lobbying and campaigning for the election, the successful election of Madam Justice Althea Alexis-Windsor, distinguished Judge of the Supreme Court of Trinidad and Tobago as a judge of the International Criminal Court during this fiscal year. She was endorsed by the Member States of the Caribbean Community and was elected on December 23, 2020, to serve a nine-year term. Achieved.

Facilitation through extensive lobbying and campaigning activities for the successful reelection of Trinidad and Tobago to Group E of the Council of the International Seabed Authority for a four-year period from January 01, 2021, to December 31, 2024. Achieved.

Successfully coordinated the execution of the promotion campaign that led to the successful election of Trinidad and Tobago as a member of the Commission

on Narcotic Drugs. And I heard that being referenced by my good, good, friend opposite at one point. Thank you for the admonition. Guess what? We worked at it, we achieved it [*Desk thumping*] for the 2022—2025 term elections held in April 2021. Achieved.

Yes, Madam Speaker, we are receiving, and we are reviewing and retooling our missions with new leadership in some cases, and I want to signal and salute his Excellency Dennis Francis who is now a virtual dean as it were in leading our permanent mission to the United Nations. We have always had a record of excellence at that level and it continues with this very senior and experienced diplomat at the helm in New York.

Madam Speaker, a perennial feature of the Ministry's work and using the resources provided in the budget has not just been work with our foreign partners but also with local stakeholders. Yes, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs working with local stakeholders as well. And during this fiscal year there have been many, many successes to report. During the fiscal year the Governments of Malaysia, India, China, Singapore, offered short term online training courses that we took advantage of for our public officers in this Ministry, including under the Singapore Corporation Programme, the Indian Technical and Economic Corporation Programme, the Multilateral Training Seminars, and the Malaysia Technical Cooperation Programme.

Twenty-one public officers in the Data Analytics for Beginners course; public officers in the International Training Programme on Solar Technologies; other officers in Gender Inclusive Governance for Policy Makers. Five public officers in courses offered by the Malaysian Government, and 17 officers in courses offered by the Singaporean Government.

In addition, we worked closely with the Government of Colombia to ensure

that over 183 officers within our public service completed programmes with respect to Spanish language training for diplomats and our public servants across a wide suite of government Ministries. All of this during a pandemic because the development of Trinidad and Tobago depends on the activities and performances of all of us.

Madam Speaker, we also got involved during this fiscal year in the La Soufrière response, heavily involved. And this Ministry stood side by side with the Ministry of National Security to ensure the safe repatriation of 75 nationals of our country from St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It is recalled that that eruption affected our citizens not just in St. Vincent and the Grenadines but also in the Bahamas. We also have been coordinating the voluntary repatriation of hundreds of Venezuelan nationals back to Venezuela from Trinidad and Tobago. Again, this is the kind of determined resolute work that the Ministry continues to provide during a pandemic.

In keeping with the theme of this year's budget—Madam Speaker, how much more time do I have?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, you end at 3.05, 3.05.

**Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:** Oh, perfect. Thank you, Madam Speaker. In keeping with the theme of this year's budget, I am very pleased to report that the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs has already embarked on phases two and three of our modernization plan for the Caricom Single Market and Economy Unit of the Ministry. We have launched the e-appointment and live chat platforms through which members of the public can access information on and make appointments to apply for CSME skills certificates, and the right of establishment under the provisions of the Caricom Single Market and the Economy. Again, the Ministry doing its part in collaboration with the Ministry of Digital Transformation

to take not just our public service, but also all our stakeholders forward into the digital age. Further phases of this modernization plan will not only fully automate the CSME application process but would also migrate other services offered by the Ministry to the public via this online platform.

Madam Speaker, that again is a sign of the Government recognizing its role and responsibility in taking this nation forward into the digital economy, in keeping with the Road Map to Recovery. Madam Speaker, there is a lot more to say and I may have the opportunity in another place during that chapter of the debate. But I want to end the perspectives I was able to share today with a word to the wise. Many of those ranting on social media and raving and discouraging you the citizens from being vaccinated, many of them are already vaccinated, or will soon wish they were as Delta spreads across the world. And my message is whenever you are ready—I am speaking to citizens who are not yet vaccinated and I am putting on my old public health hat here—whenever you are ready, we have caring and considerate and willing public health practitioners. Some of them are tired but they are waiting for you and are willing to assist you and your family as you make that right decision.

**3.00 p.m.**

Again, I want to thank the Minister of Finance for what I view as a visionary budget that has all the stimuli that our economy needs. We did not dress it up and call it a stimulus package like in a rich developed nation, but that is exactly what it is to move this country forward.

Madam Speaker, in my last minute, this Minister of Finance has also been a keen ally of our vaccine acquisition efforts. He has helped the Ministry that I am honoured to lead to meet our financial commitments to regional and international organizations wherever possible within our resources. And I will never forget that

when in this fiscal year I came to him asking for funding to contribute to the regional Haiti relief effort. This Minister of Finance provided more than I had even asked for. [*Desk thumping*] I shall never forget that.

Madam Speaker, I appreciate this opportunity to share some perspectives with the House of Representatives. And, Madam Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

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

**Mr. Rodney Charles** (*Naparima*): Thank you, thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am pleased to follow in the footsteps of my esteemed political leader, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar for her intellect, vision, erudition and her perspicacity in her seminal response. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] Madam Speaker, as I join this debate, I must express my profound disappointment in this Government's callous disregard for strategic thinking and its manifest obliviousness, disconnect, and lack of visionary thinking in its low level bookkeeping, transactional plans that this Minister of Finance has announced in this year's budget. But before I go into the details of my budget contribution, may I clarify a piece of mischief, calumny, and misinformation by the hon. Attorney General, when he labored to say that we on this side had reason to fear the courts.

**Madam Speaker:** One minute, one minute. I would like to hear the Member for Naparima and I would like to hear him with a certain level of volume. The more noise in the Chamber, the louder he would have to speak. Please continue.

**Mr. R. Charles:** You see, you see, Madam Speaker, misery likes comfort. The hon. Attorney General, no doubt, feeling "tizik" with the blows he received from the political leader's response brought up to the time warn issue of investigations into the acquisition of Damen vessels by the Government of the Republic of

Trinidad and Tobago during the last People's Partnership Government. But let me put that issue to rest, Madam Speaker, by making five points very quickly:

1. The Dutch Government has ongoing investigations into Damen for possible breaches under Dutch law.
2. Four years on, they have found no actionable evidence of wrongdoing or corruption, none whatsoever.
3. There has been no evidence of wrongdoing in any Caribbean deals much less Trinidad and Tobago.

And may I make the point the Dutch are not like Trinidad and Tobago. Four years is enough for them to do their investigations. And:

4. The deals for the Damen vessels were done in accordance with all required procurement procedures; and
5. The whole issue is being raised to distract from the fundamental failure of the Government to secure our maritime borders by failing to utilize the modern fleet of coastal patrol vessels bequeathed to them by the Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*]

And I want to make the point we have been clean, we are clean and so it shall be notwithstanding the false and mischievous utterances of the hon. Attorney General. [*Desk thumping*] But this Attorney General likes to raise red herrings to distract from his greed and incompetence. It will not work. [*Desk thumping*]

But, Madam Speaker, let me deal with the gross incompetence, gross incompetence of both the Minister of Finance, the hon. Attorney "Generally" and sadly, I have to bring in the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs into this. You see, Madam Speaker, we have no objection—

**Mr. Young:** Madam Speaker, 55(1)(a). It is abusive what is happening to the English language here this afternoon. What is an "Attorney Generally"? [*Laughter*]

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, now, Members, I know some Members excite the Chamber, all right? I would like to hear the contribution of the hon. Member for Naparima. [*Crosstalk*] And I want—Minister of Finance, I am on my legs. And I want to assure every Member who has not yet joined the debate, they will certainly have an opportunity the next couple of days to raise any issue on any contribution. Continue please, Member for Naparima.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. You see, Madam Speaker, we have no objections to the incentives offered to the SMEs on pages 86 and pages 151 of this budget. I would read from page—

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. R. Charles:** Yes, I will read from page 151. The Minister of Finance says:

“...I propose a full-tax holiday for the first 5-year period to new SMEs listing on the...”—stock exchange—“...by granting tax exemption on the Business Levy and the Green Fund Levy to”—those—“new listings in addition to tax incentives in the...”—fiscal—“...Act 2020...”

But while the Finance Minister is busy giving incentives, they and all, the SMEs and all businesses in Trinidad and Tobago will suffer because Trinidad and Tobago has been blacklisted by the European Union. We are witness now to FDIs in negative territory, and maybe we are beginning to see the beginning of defensive actions taken by businesses proposing to invest in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, it is disgraceful, an official report, it is the Meaner Report dated April 22, 2021, indicated that double tax agreement between Trinidad and Tobago and Denmark has been terminated. That official document describes Trinidad and Tobago as a corner of shame. They could jump high, they could jump low, they could laugh at language, the foreign authorities are describing our government as a corner of shame, Madam Speaker. I quote from the Minister of Taxation of

Denmark, Morten Bødskov, Minister of Taxation of Denmark; let them laugh. I quote:

It is of course problematic to have a double taxation agreement with countries that end up on the EU's blacklist of tax havens and refuse to change.

We refuse to change. He continues:

On the contrary, it must be cumbersome to end up on the list. That is why I am glad—he says—I am glad that today we have received the support from the Folketing—that is their Parliament—to terminate the agreement with Trinidad and Tobago.

And he ends by saying:

They belong to a rock of shame.

Madam Speaker, this is a Minister of an EU Government describing my Government, my Government as a—and my country as a nook of shame. And they go and talk about how they discuss and they get vaccines and what not. The EU operates on the assumption of one member, what happens in one country could affect others in the European Commission. So we are talking about 26 countries in the EU potentially cutting relations with Trinidad and Tobago; 26 countries. We have been on the EU blacklist of tax havens and they say we have made no effort to change. This hurts, Madam Speaker, because they laugh. That is what they good about, laugh, ha, ha, ha. But at the end of the day, other countries are looking at our economy and we are going nowhere.

Madam Speaker, my political leader instructed us—MP Saddam Hosein, former MP Fazal Karim, we sat on the joint select committee with the Minister of Finance and the Attorney General—he is laughing, he is good for that, laughing and driving big cars—and the leader instructed us to support the tax legislation so



that we will get off the blacklist. I told the Minister of Finance, tell us what is necessary to get off the blacklist. I told him, I begged him, we are willing to help. He said we need three pieces of legislation, the Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, we supported that. [*Desk thumping*] He said we needed the income tax laws, we supported that. [*Desk thumping*] He said we needed the double taxation agreements, we supported that. [*Desk thumping*] We needed, he said, we needed the Tax Information Exchange Agreements Bill, we supported that. [*Desk thumping*] Lo and behold, lo and behold, we have the EU telling Trinidad and Tobago and telling the hon. Attorney General and the Minister of Finance, they belong to a nook of shame. And I say that is disgraceful. You laugh, laugh, but you are taking our country down a road of Haiti.

Madam Speaker, I asked, what about the base erosion and profit sharing legislation? The EU in a report said we have done very little to nothing on it. Oh Lord, what do you want us to do? We are willing to help you but you have to not laugh but listen, listen for God's sake.

The EU GDP was estimated to be \$15 trillion in 2020, representing around one sixth of the global economy and it is—they are talking about incentives, they are talking about incentives in the budget. And it will come to naught because of their inaction, their sloth, their laziness, their incompetence, and their ability only to laugh. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the Euro is the second largest reserve currency, and the second most traded currency in the world after the US dollar. And I ask the question—last week Anguilla got off the list, last week Dominica got off the list. What is wrong with the leadership of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago? Why can they not lead us to the promised land flowing with—a land flowing with milk and honey. They come with a set of make-believed nonsense in the budget

and meanwhile we are getting licks left, right and center. So, despite statements in this House by—and I asked the Prime Minister, at a question, why are we on the list? And he said we are taking action and we will come off the list soon, only to realize that we have been insulted by the European Union. So I ask the question, why is—what is it that Jamaica is doing, Dominica is doing, Grenada is doing, St. Vincent is doing, Jamaica is doing, Anguilla is doing, that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago cannot? But under the leadership of the Member of Siparia, if we had her as Prime Minister, no doubt Trinidad and Tobago would be the envy of countries in the region. [*Desk thumping*] Kamla Persad-Bissessar and Mia Mottley would be the envy of the region and the world. You know, sometimes I read a lot, I read a lot, and I would not detain, but I commend to this House, *Harvard Business Review* on August 22, 2013. “Leadership: Why do so many incompetent men become leaders?” I commend that article to this—to our government. Why, and they say because—it says here:

“That is, because we...commonly misinterpret displays of confidence as a sign of competence, we are fooled into believing that men are better leaders than women. In other words, when it comes to leadership, the only advantage men have over women...is the fact that manifestations of hubris—often masked as charisma or charm—are commonly mistaken for leadership potential, and...these occur much more frequently in men than in women.”

Madam Speaker, so we have a group opposite, they are in charge. Somebody said, we are in charge now, deal with it. And all they could do is, you know, they get carried away with a miniscule piece of idiocy and stupidity, so they laugh ha, ha, ha, even for a pronunciation. Great deal. So deal with the EU, deal with your international colleagues. [*Desk thumping*]

The hon. Member for Siparia in her contribution—before I make that point—so Prime Minister Mottley is now President of UNCTAD and hosting a major symposium on global trade and making a strong case for Barbados to be a regional venue for manufacturing vaccines. So while we heard the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs “gallerying” that we were able to locate—you see, Barbados has gone beyond that. Barbados wants to manufacture. That is visionary leadership that we lack in Trinidad and Tobago.

So the budget is about bookkeeping, borrowing heavily, selling our crown jewels, reducing VAT on pigtailed sausages, geerah, cooking oil, while “bussing we throat” with property tax, increases in utility bills and ever increasing fines for minor infractions, as exemplified by the fact that yesterday, in today’s *Guardian*, 65 traffic tickets were given within six hours in Couva. Sometimes you have to wonder whether these fines are revenue-generating activities and whether this is their idea of diversification of revenue streams, sometimes you get the idea. That is the level of thinking we have.

By contrast, by contrast, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar forcefully articulated in her seminal response, the UNC’s master plan for economic transformation, complete with a comprehensive suite of policy initiatives and programmes to steer our economy towards a more sustainable development path. The Member for Siparia also highlighted that our Standard & Poor’s rating had steadily declined year on year until this hapless, some would say wicked government, under this wicked government, from grade A in 2015, to BBB negative with unstable outlook.

Madam Speaker, when I looked at what is the reading, what is the judgment based on a BBB negative with an unstable outlook? It said, “junk bond investment status”. That is where we are, that is where we are, junk bond investment status under this hapless Minister of Finance, led by a clueless Prime Minister who

avoids the world stage. Facts are stubborn things, Madam Speaker. How could the Minister of Finance tell us with a straight face that this budget is about Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. Meanwhile, Standard & Poor's and Moody's are telling global investors to run from Trinidad and Tobago. We are selling junk. Reminds me of *Sanford and Son*, we specialize in junk, we have to say, "Elizabeth, ah coming to meet you, I am coming to meet you", Madam Speaker. "I am coming to meet you, is a big one, it is a big one". We specialize in junk.

This is my seventh budget address and this budget is just another exercise in my view of intellectual sophistry, an attack on the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, a budget of scraps, lacking transformative direction for the economy.

Prof. Emeritus Bruce Scott of Harvard University, described a national economic strategy and hear him—teaching a little bit, as:

"...a vision of a desired future state of the economy..."

Where in this do we see, this budget, do we see a desired future state for our economy? He says it has:

"...a timeframe within which that state is to be achieved..."

So if we are going to the promised land, the Minister of Finance should be telling us, if we sacrifice now, if we follow his plan, his roadmap by year X Trinidad and Tobago would be, A, B, C or D. And Prof. Scott says:

"...and a set of policies and institutions for influencing the mobilisation and allocation of resources...for promoting the efficient utilisation."

If we used Prof. Scott's definition, this budget would get an F grade. It is cut and paste, bookkeeping, primary school budget that was presented on Monday. What is worse, Madam Speaker, we will spend a week and we go through line by line items, for another week it will go to the Senate and not one item will change, not one item. They will be giving excuses that the figures can be changed during the

year. They will tell us do not worry, we will “vire” monies as required. We will change everything in the mid-year review, these figures mean nothing. We were told written answers will be provided, only to arrive long after the debate ends.

Madam Speaker, the Minister spoke for four long hours, four long hours. Sometimes we feel that he feels that verbosity, garrulousness and tedious repetition trumps intellect, substance and vision. We will be told for four hours, 27,000 words, 500 paragraphs, to tell us that all he could recommend for an economic crisis, are tax, tax, tax, increase penalties, borrow, draw down from savings and spend our hard-earned money on wasted items, like paying \$1.6 million per month rent to a well-known PNM family.

Today we are here therefore, to legitimize stupidity, a budget, sorry—a budget conceived in stupidity, born in idiocy and baptized in arrogance, [*Desk thumping*] but they would not want me to talk about that. They want to say the country is safe and secure, that citizens are happy and contented in this PNM paradise, that we are not a dystopia. Madam Speaker, hear the Minister of Finance in his budget speech, hear madness, Madam Speaker, I quote:

“We have been able to establish a secure Trinidad and Tobago in which our citizens can enjoy their fundamental rights and freedoms and participate actively in nation-building activities.”

I have to read that again:

“We have been able to establish a secure Trinidad and Tobago...”

I will stop there, I will stop there, I will “stick a pin”, to use my—the phrase of my colleague, my friend from—well, person from San Fernando West, the honourable. And I have to ask the question, in which country is this Minister of Finance living?

But, Madam Speaker, that is their intellect, that is sum total of the intellect of the Minister of our Attorney General. But Madam Speaker, if everybody is safe,

why does the—why does the Minister of Works and Transport have to be accompanied by security whenever he goes to Moruga? Madam Speaker, and I would advise our loquacious sometimes Minister of National Security not to “take basket” from the Minister of Finance that Trinidad is now safe and take it upon himself to visit the Beetham without maximum security. Do not do it. Who feels safe in Trinidad and Tobago, the victims of home invasions? The citizens traumatized by execution-style killings of their families and neighbours? The hundreds of citizens and businesses robbed daily? Where is this secure Trinidad and Tobago of which the Minister boasted in this budget? Tell that, tell that, Minister of Finance, to the widow of Ramnarace Nandoo who was shot and killed minutes before closing his restaurant; or the family of the murdered coconut vendor who was shot multiple times in head and chest; or the wife of my constituent whose husband was shot dead in Irie Village days ago. What about the 72-year-old honey vendor who was assaulted and robbed in broad daylight? This is what life is in Trinidad and Tobago now, you are not safe on the streets, in your homes and in your business places. It is sad, it is sad that this is where it has come to: the Minister claims that we are safe and secure. He is delusional.

Madam Speaker, what would we have hoped for? What would we have done in this budget? One, more focus on substantially reforming our national security, not just empty promises. Let us take border security. The Finance Minister said, Madam Speaker, he said:

“We have made our nationals safe and going forward we will set aside continuous resources to build the capacity of all the units in our”—national— “security sector...”

He said that, the Minister of Finance said that. He boasted that the two new cape patrol vessels they acquired earlier this year will:

“...secure our borders and enhance our national security landscape;”

Two new vessels to protect our borders, when we have a modern specialized fleet of 12 Damen coastal patrol and interceptors and a non-functional helicopter, all sitting idle in Staubles Bay for want of fuel, lubricants, spare parts and scheduled maintenance. They cannot tell us the true status of our coastal borders because that is a monumental PNM shameless disaster. [*Desk thumping*] In the 2022 PSIP, they have plans to allocate 11 million for the procurement of four high speed interceptors. What about the six we already have that are not being used, Madam Speaker. They have no shame. [*Desk thumping*]

I have been advised by fishermen and residents from Cedros that illegal immigrants are entering our waters daily, undetected by the authorities. This seven-mile strip between Cedros and Venezuela is like a virtual Solomon Hochoy Highway with PH and regular marine taxi service. Earlier this year, I heard a marine expert say that the coastal radar system could not detect wooden vehicles, and at slow speeds the propeller sounds like ocean waves on the sonar. When I heard this, I was shocked, shocked. Is this why so many illegal pirogues carrying guns, drugs and people go undetected?

What has the Government done with the millions spent yearly to upgrade our radar system? But the Minister tells us in this budget that they are going to upgrade the coastal radar system but puts no allocation in the budget to complete the upgrade. Madam Speaker, what a joke.

**3.30 p.m.**

You are talking about a coastal upgrade and you put no allocation in the budget. How will it be done, Minister of Finance? By “douens”? Why do we put up with this Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker? In Singapore, he and all his illustrious hon. Ministers would be fired; all, all, all. Every single year we hear

about upgrades to our coastal radar system. Let me give you a lil chronology—budget chronology and end by what he said this year—by what the Minister said this year.

Madam Speaker, 2018, during a post-Cab briefing, August 09, 2018, former National Security Minister Stuart Young indicated that 50.25 million would be spent to upgrade the Israeli radar system, that is 2018; 2019, they reported, upgrades ongoing; 2020, 23 million to upgrade radar system and other items, and this budget, quote:

“...upgrade of our coastal radar system...”—with—“improved surveillance equipment...”

Over \$73 million spent and 14 dead bodies arrived in Tobago undetected. “Lord lend ah hand.” Lord help us. Lord graciously help us from this band of incompetent leaders that we have. [*Laughter*] All they could do is laugh. That is what they are specialized in. Compound our radar issues with a coast guard fleet that runs on fumes. *Express* September 30, 2021, and I will tie it in with the budget, quote:

“Fishermen posted a video of what they believed was...”—a—“body on the beach, saying they had reported it to Coast Guard officers who said they had no vessels available because there was ‘insufficient gas.’”

Not Rodney Charles talking.

Four months ago when a fisherman was attacked at gunpoint by pirates and thrown overboard, the coast guard was contacted for immediate assistance, but they have no vessels available. Relatives had to find a boat to assist in the search. *Express* June 13, 2021. Imagine that! Imagine that! Yet, this year’s budget, hear this. Trinidad and Tobago listen. Listen to “dotishness”. This year’s budget for fuel and lubricants for the coast guard has been decreased by \$6 million, from 14



million last year to 8 million this year. “Lord, lend ah hand, nah Lord.” Why are we suffering so? Boats did not have fuel last year and they decreased the last year’s budget by \$6 million. Imagine the coast guard is struggling for fuel but they cut this year’s budget by 6 million. We have two expensive vessels and plans to buy more, but they cut funding for fuel. That is PNM bookkeeping for you.

You know what is even worse? Two new vessels, but they give the coast guard a measly 250,000 for training. No wonder we cannot maintain the vessels. We do not have a plan. They do not have an idea that if you do this, if you buy vessels, you need to increase training and you need to increase fuel so that we could operate optimally. That is too much for them. All they are good to do is laugh if you make a little word you did not pronounce and whatnot. I bright. I could pronounce. I do not need you to acclaim me. No wonder, no wonder, and we do not blame the officers of the coast guard. We blame the Cabinet. They are not giving policy guidance to the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard, [*Desk thumping*] just like the inter-island ferry and the water taxi that sank at the San Fernando Wharf. [*Desk thumping*] Total chaos, anything goes.

Madam Speaker, they put aside money to build an army base in La Romain, 5 million, and let me read from the budget:

“...5.0 million...to complete phase one (1)”—this is the army base in La Romain—“which entailed the construction of living accommodations for the two (2) companies of the Second Infantry Battalion and to initiate phase two (2) works which will entail the construction of a multipurpose facility, installation of military grade perimeter fencing with security lighting and the construction of a carpark.”

That is in the PSIP 2022. What is the sense in that? There is no logical reason behind it. Is it that they are so detached from reality, they do not know geography,

that they thought La Romain was close to Cedros? Circumstances today demand that the base be located in Cedros to enhance patrols and ensure that there is a heavy presence on land and sea, especially as our borders are never truly locked down, and a base in Cedros could easily serve the La Romain community. No rhyme, no reason, no logic.

Madam Speaker, after all that has been said concerning our migrant situation and border security, I want to reiterate that the UNC has consistently called for a comprehensive refugee migrant policy that is humane, well-thought out, is not unmindful of our international treaty obligations, is cognizant of our absorptive capacity, and serves the mutual interest of the refugees and Trinidad and Tobago citizens.

We have children of refugees born in Trinidad and Tobago and, therefore, citizens who are entitled to equal treatment under the law. Are our educational institutions catering for these citizens? Are they to grow up as second class Trinidad and Tobago citizens and, therefore, possible recruits for future gangs? You see, we cannot get a problem 10 years down the line and not understand that we are—the genesis of it started with a bad budget. Madam Speaker, could I ask how much time I have, please?

**Madam Speaker:** Your time expires at 3:46:35.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Thank you very much. Okay. I will go to the international image, foreign affairs. The Minister just spoke before me. The failure of this Government—and we talked about EU, et cetera—has overflowed into our international image. Now, the recurrent budget for the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs for 2022 was 249 million, which was less than 282 million in 2020 and the Development Programme estimates a measly 400,000 in 2022; 400,000. Nothing was spent in this area in 2021. While all of this is going on, that

measly budget—and the Minister articulated the number of things he proposes to do, but the budget is simply not there. All major countries warned their travellers, they should operate with extreme caution while in Trinidad and Tobago due to crime levels. Bad image outside that we need to correct.

Madam Speaker, for the first time in two decades, a Trinidad and Tobago citizen is not one of the eminent judges on the United Nations acclaimed International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, ITLOS, so started by Lennox Ballah—conceptualized. He was one of the first judges. It was followed by Justice Anthony Lucky. When Justice Anthony Luck resigned, have retired, we did not even put up a candidate.

The Minister spoke about the International Criminal Court. We always—because of what former President ANR Robinson did—were elected on the first ballot. We were so powerful in the UN that when we put forward a candidate, every other country—France, Russia, Germany—withdrew their candidates, so we ended up unopposed in the ICC. It was Justice Anthony Carmona—I was at the UN then—it was Justice Jeffery Henderson, both elected unopposed. You know, the election that was held last year or this year—I stand to be corrected—we were elected on the eighth ballot. We are an unopposed area. We went up first ballot, Trinidad. We had to bid eight times before Trinidad got elected. We are in trouble.

Our Prime Minister has attended one United Nations General Assembly meeting in person and one virtually. He seems—our Prime Minister seems to be scared to speak in the global fora among peers who he cannot “bouf up” or he cannot laugh at as they do here. He is unable to recognize, unlike Barbados’s Mia Mottley, St. Lucia’s Philip Joseph Pierre and Jamaica’s Andrew Holness, the importance of such meetings in furthering the interest of Trinidad and Tobago. Instead, we send a reserved bench to the UNGA this year, a reserved bench. Good

people, but there are only such jobs that a Prime Minister can do for a country.

In 2019, Trinidad was delinquent in paying its mandatory annual contribution to the UN regular budget and working capital fund. Madam Speaker, if you did not know it, Trinidad and Tobago was the sole GRULAC candidate for the presidency of the 78<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly beginning in 2023 and also the rotating non-permanent seat on the Security Council in 2027. It is GRULAC's turn to fill those positions.

So, we are assured of two high-profile positions at the UN, yet it seems that Dr. Rowley is doing his utmost to scuttle them. Why? Because both these candidacies were announced in 2013 when the hon. Member for Siparia was Prime Minister. And I ask the Prime Minister today to tell us: are you downplaying our presence at the UN merely to spite the Member for Siparia so that we do not get the two candidacies, two positions at the United Nations? There is no other reason.

I could ask: Why has Trinidad and Tobago not improve relations with Guyana, the energy hub of the region? The Finance Minister states on page 88:

“We will also establish trade facilitation offices in selected overseas markets including Jamaica; Guyana with responsibility for Suriname and Belize; England...”—in respect of the EU.

You see how they treat the EU? England is outside the EU, but they are having a trade facilitation office in England for the EU. “Oh Lord Father.” This budget states one line about Guyana.

Just months ago, the Government engaged in a tit for tat, unnecessary tit for tat, over discourteous remarks by Dr. Rowley concerning Guyana's use of non-approved WHO vaccines. And if we continue on this path, any chance of strengthening relations with Guyana will be non-existent. When we should be using our best endeavours to improve relations with energy-rich Guyana, our

fellow Caricom state, we seem to be on a collision course given our border restriction policies and not well-thought out border policy on vaccinations and offensive statements directed at decision makers in Guyana. We ask: Are Guyanese who received Sputnik vaccines banned from Trinidad and Tobago? Open question. Second question: Will Guyanese who are in transit at Piarco be allowed to disembark and, if not, will this work against CAL's effort to become solvent? Are our border policies inconsistent with our economic interest given that the world is beating a path to Georgetown? Companies like ExxonMobil are relocating from Port of Spain to Georgetown. Everybody is going to Guyana. We gave one line in the budget; one line.

Guyana and Barbados are in talks for a joint effort to tackle regional food import bills and enhance food security plans. So Barbados is using Rupununi and the land in Guyana to grow food to cut down their food import bill. That is strategic thinking. Where is that in the budget? Where is that strategic thinking in our budget? I cry because we major in minors, major in laughing, crosstalk but the ideas, the brain power, the intellect is not there. We are in trouble.

I now in the last minute talk about Naparima. Madam Speaker, I cannot speak without mentioning my constituency. Friends on the other side see releases begging for roads to be fixed, landslips to be checked. We are treated like an outside child. They have forgotten we exist. Only when we start to make noise and burn tyres then they remember that we are there. Naparima was once a pivotal constituency. We provided food in Barrackpore, oil with Apex and forest reserve and whatnot. We provided the oil. Our sugar factory was the largest in the world, the Ste. Madeleine Sugar Factory at one time, and in Barrackpore we produced oil that fuelled the British Empire. Now we stand distress, downtrodden and broken. Ste. Madeleine Sugar Factory, Caroni Limited was closed in 2003, and last year in

2018, when Petrotrin was closed, it served the death knell to whatever manner came our way.

Naparima could win an award for the best and deepest potholes, for the most creative landslips and for not having one drop of water or for getting one drop of water every three weeks. That is our legacy under this Government. We are Trinidad and Tobago's Third World. Unemployment rates are at an all-time high. Meetings with constituents reported—and I am only reporting what they tell me—that unemployment is 60 per cent in some areas, and then of the 40 per cent who are employed, about 20 per cent are underemployed and working below their qualification levels.

We have pervasive and persistent poverty. People are begging via any avenue they can get for food hampers, for some form of help because their children are hungry. They have no jobs, they have no way to support themselves. We cannot even get water in our pipes—Ste. Madeleine; Hope Road; Kanhai Road North; St. Charles Village; Realize Road; Reform; Harmony Hall; Mount Stewart Road; St. Croix Extension; Barrackpore; Matabar Trace, Barrackpore—all these are littered with potholes, Madam Speaker. Praedial larcenies are on the rise. Every year the situation is the same, no improvement.

Ladies and gentlemen, they tell us that prayers can work wonders. It seems that both Trinidad and Tobago and the constituents of Naparima are in need of prayers. We need divine intervention to help us from the cruel, wicked, incompetent, slothful, lazy Government that was elected. Thank you very much.

*[Desk thumping]*

**Mr. Kennedy Richards** (*Point Fortin*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, as I contribute to this fiscal Appropriation Bill, 2022. Thank you for recognizing me, as I rise on behalf of the people of Point Fortin to contribute. Madam Speaker,

before I delve into my contribution, I must commend the hon. Minister of Finance [*Desk thumping*] for his continuous erudite management of our economy and for presenting a budget that was wholesome, stable and futuristic. To the Minister of Planning and Development, for ensuring that policies are in line with *Vision 2030* and the Road Map to Recovery Report, all of which under the sober leadership of our hon. Prime Minister, [*Desk thumping*] Dr. the hon. Keith Rowley.

Madam Speaker, after listening to this comprehensive budget presentation, with the theme: Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic, I read it twice. So, once is nice, you do it twice. It resonates with me, Madam Speaker, because the people who I represent, all 27,000 strong, have made this country economically resilient from the inception. The literal definition of “resilience”, Madam Speaker, is “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties” and this budget is certainly a testament to that.

This pandemic has caused economic, social and health crisis across the globe. However, our continued response to it has been done in a way to protect lives and livelihoods, and to set our nation on a progressive path for recovery. But, Madam Speaker, there exists an Opposition, Madam Speaker, who would want people in this country to believe that is not so.

Madam Speaker, my contribution would be centred around the people I represent, and I will show how this forward-thinking budget will promote their standard of living and contribute to the community and the people development from education to agriculture, youth development to digital transformation, infrastructure and sport has nestled itself into major pillars of this budget and puts Point Fortin on the pedestal for growth and development. I will also provide updates and reports on the work started and completed within the last fiscal year for my representation as a Member utilizing the policies put in place by this

Government.

Madam Speaker, I turn to education. I start off with education. Even before Independence, the People's National Movement has placed education at the crux of nation building. Dr. Williams underscored that the future of the nation belongs in the book bags of our children. Now more than ever, education is critical in a post-COVID-19 environment and that is why, Madam Speaker, 6.886 billion has been allocated towards education and training, the largest pie of this budget.

I am pleased to report that the educational infrastructure of the south-west has been prioritized and realized by this administration. Within the last fiscal year, Madam Speaker, the Chatham Government Primary School was commissioned in August by the Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, and by the end of 2021, we will have St. Peter's Anglican Primary School in Bonasse, Cedros. In 2022, Madam Speaker, we will have Southern, Central Anglican Primary School and completion of the Fanny Village Government Primary School in the first quarter of 2022. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, as a Member of Parliament, I take great pride in contributing and witnessing the development of our educational infrastructure, so that the quality of teaching and learning can be conducted in a progressive manner. Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to thank the Minister of Education and Member for St. Ann's East, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly and the Minister in the Ministry and Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara the hon. Lisa Morris-Julian for their steadfastness [*Desk thumping*] and commitment and supporting the Point Fortin cause.

One of the projects that we have undertaken at the Member of Parliament Office in Point Fortin was the adopt-a-child initiative. We coordinated with members of the local community, a back-to-school drive, Madam Speaker, and we



donated books, school bags, stationery, filled entire book lists for more than 100 children in Point Fortin. [*Desk thumping*]

Works and transport: Madam Speaker, we continue to endeavour for a quality way of life to be enjoyed by all our people while remaining cognizant of our limited resources and, indeed, parts of Point Fortin were affected by the dilapidated road conditions. However, we had to bear with that inconvenience for a while because we had to change out a few decade-old pipelines that have been causing major water woes within the communities. To remove waste and duplication, we decided to have all the work completed by WASA before engaging our paving efforts. Upon the completion of the pipeline project, we were able to rehabilitate the Guapo/Cap-de-Ville Main Road and that took centre stage, and today I need to say thanks to all those involved for ensuring its completion. Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report that the action taken by the Ministry of Works and Transport to have several road segments repaired within our constituency has led to an improved quality of life. However, the physical infrastructure of the constituency would be continued with full speed in this next fiscal year.

In the last fiscal year, with the coordination from the Member of Parliament, Ministry of Works and Transport and rural development, the following projects have either been completed or are currently underway: the Jackson Trace Bridge, Buenos Ayres, completed; Chin Yuen Kee Street, bailey bridge is completed; the Chatham to Cedros Road reclamation project is well underway, and phase two of the WASA pipeline laying project, during the next fiscal period.

Madam Speaker, I also know that the people of Icacos have been engaging me for a road improvement project on the Southern Main Road. However, with a further 3.577 billion allocated to the Ministry of Works and Transport, the coordinated efforts between my office and the Minister of Works and Transport

will continue into the fiscal year to provide much needed relief. And while we put our focus on areas for improvement, it is an indisputable fact that the overall transportation infrastructure is going full speed ahead. The Point Fortin Highway is now a reality in the south-west.

Members on the other side, Madam Speaker, would say and would lay claim that they would have started the highway to Point Fortin but, today, I say that the People's National Movement-led Government started the highway from Point Fortin and that is the only way [*Desk thumping*] that the people of Point Fortin was assured that the highway would have ended in Point Fortin. And this million-dollar investment, Madam Speaker, is now in the hands of local contractors, local content, building Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. And, I must say that the project is well underway and going very well.

This billion-dollar investment, endeavoured by this PNM administration, is near to completion with the Dumfries to Dunlop segment, scheduled to be completed in fiscal 2022. This highway project that was made a corrupted political football by the administration led by the Member for Siparia has been given a complete turnaround.

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6). He is imputing improper motives on the Member for Siparia. He cannot—[*Inaudible*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member, please continue.

**Mr. K. Richards:** Thank you, thank you, Madam Speaker. The truth sometimes offends, but that is okay. And this project, Madam Speaker, has been given a complete turnaround and is now the beacon of lucrative success for the people of Point Fortin [*Desk thumping*] and that is achieved by our Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*] The anticipated opening of the highway extension means more than just ease of access for commuters. What this means for all of us is an ease of access of

opportunities, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we have a lot of people who rise up at 4.00 in the morning and head into Port of Spain, and what this will do for them is, one, it will give them additional time to sleep on the morning, which is an important thing, and two, it will bring them back home earlier so that they could spend time with their family, Madam Speaker, increasing family time. Just this one highway, Madam Speaker.

Increased investments, expansion of our human resource capacity, a larger market for our entrepreneurs and innovators, and a full utilization of the Point Fortin product. And there is this narrative, Madam Speaker, that Point Fortin is too far and too far for a lot of things. This highway is going to change that. While it may not change the physical distance of Point Fortin, it gives easier access to Point Fortin for the people outside of Point Fortin and within Point Fortin.

Public utilities: Madam Speaker, under the stewardship of my colleague, the Minister of Public Utilities and Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, massive improvements of our water system within the constituency of Point Fortin are being conducted and more projects are on stream to be completed in the next fiscal year. [*Desk thumping*]

**4.00 p.m.**

In addressing water issues faced in Point Fortin, Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report to this House that a site visit by Minister Gonzales and his team was conducted where we investigated the La Fortune Water Treatment Plant that was down and caused major water disruptions within the constituency. With the hands-on approach by the Acting CEO of WASA and members of the technical team after the visit, the treatment plant is now 95 per cent completed. [*Desk thumping*] And that is no small feat, Madam Speaker, the communities that stand to benefit from this are Southern Gardens, E Street, New Village and environs

which encompasses over 5,000 people stand to gain daily access of water by this improvement. And the saying that “love does not cost a thing” applies to this project; labour of love, Madam Speaker. This project only costed the people of Trinidad and Tobago material and supplies because all the labour on this project was free. The CEO and his team came in on weekends and public holidays and not a cent was asked for either in overtime or in regular time, Madam Speaker, and today we can see the great progress. So whatever Minister Gonzales is doing in the Ministry of Public Utilities, I say to you, Sir, continue. [*Desk thumping*]

Further to this a booster station in Icacos that would bring decades of water woes to an end in that community has been placed on the Ministry’s development agenda in the next fiscal year. Madam Speaker, our farmers in Jackson Trace, Buenos Ayres and Chatham will be elated to hear that I have sought their representation and met with the Minister to install lighting and water channels for the farmlands in those communities to advance their contribution in agriculture. To be installed in the next fiscal year is lighting at secluded beaches, Chatham Road South, Fullerton and a few other areas. All of that is also on the agenda. At this point I must thank Minister Gonzales once more for his commitment to improve the standard of living of our communities and our country.

Water is life, Madam Speaker. “The people want water” is a phrase coined by a famous son of the soil of Point Fortin while he soaks the crowd with a small bottle of water, and our Minister of Public Utilities, Madam Speaker, is ensuring that he resurrects our water infrastructure, enabling a regular supply of water to people who have not received a regular supply of water for the longest while. Minister, we thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Housing: Madam Speaker, as I move on to housing, the hon. Minister of Finance in his presentation announced some bold moves to alleviate the current

housing crisis we face. With the creation of the Trinidad and Tobago Home Mortgage Bank alongside the Urban Upgrading and Revitalization Programme and affordable housing programme come with an ease accessibility for new homeowners as espoused by the Minister will continue to create opportunities to access housing and balance housing needs and availability. As the Member of Parliament for Point Fortin, I had the pleasure of inviting the Minister of Housing and Urban Development and her team to Point Fortin on multiple occasions to survey and access the proposed HDC sites in Buenos Ayres, Gonzales, Chatham, as well as to look after the existing sites in Strikers Village, Southern Gardens, Lake View, Filtration Plant, Madam Speaker. And these visits will yield positive results and I anticipate in the next financial year that the results of our labour will manifest itself and strike a balance of the high housing demand. I would like to thank my colleagues for the continued support and coordination as we maintain Point Fortin as the preferred place to live, work, invest and recreate.

Youth Development: Madam Speaker, our new housing policies as mentioned earlier are youth-centric and gives our youth an opportunity to establish themselves. The youth development agenda of our Government had been bolstered in this year's budget with the establishment of a Ministry to oversee the development of our young people, international service. Our goals as policymakers is to provide an avenue, the resources and the opportunity for young people to learn and explore and expand their talents as well as to provide the stimulus to achieve their fullest potential. Madam Speaker, one of the challenges that we have in this country is that young people between the ages of 12 to 18, they need direction. They need guidance. A lot of them do not understand what comes next or where do they go next and that is the corridor of uncertainty in their lives, Madam Speaker, and we have a Prime Minister in this country who would have

dedicated a Ministry, wholly and solely, to young people to assist them to get by this corridor of uncertainty and to create a better life for themselves and their families in the future, Madam Speaker, and that is proper leadership PNM-style.  
*[Desk thumping]*

One of the very first site visits done by the former Minister of Youth Development and National Service, the hon. Fitzgerald Hinds and his team was at the Chatham youth centre which we would have identified the areas that needed repurposing and restructuring to appropriately serve the youth of the south-western region. The current Minister, hon. Foster Cummings, had then returned to the centre for our final analysis of the structure and reaffirmed the commitment to return this mainstay to the people of Chatham, Cedros and Point Fortin. Madam Speaker, actions speak louder than words and in the next fiscal year \$60 million has been allocated to the refurbishment of youth apprenticeship and training centres across the country for which I am pleased to say that Chatham youth centre would finally see its return to the grand style in short order.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Youth Development and National Service who I know will give better insight to the new homestead programme which intends to encourage youth into agriculture would be of extreme benefit to the people of Point Fortin and the south-western peninsula. After discussions with the hon. Minister we would expect in this programme, we would be able to access over 400 acres of land in Chatham for this programme and we are creating opportunities for our youth at every corner. And I would therefore like to encourage youth who may be interested in agriculture and other areas to engage the Ministry or engage the MP for Point Fortin as we look to guide you towards your next steps in life. Madam Speaker, building an entrepreneurial nation will certainly provide economic recovery among our people. As MP I take great interest in supporting

and encouraging young entrepreneurs to establish themselves and sell their product.

Only last month I would have partnered with Business Lifeline Limited and hosted a two-day workshop entitled their business starter and business booster where we would have provided the technical advice on building a business and creating business people rather than hustlers, Madam Speaker. This two-day series was well received by the constituents and over 270 participants registered and attended this educational forum. What we had essentially done was build the capacity of our new and upcoming entrepreneurs and provided the tools and the know-how to be established. However, it does not end here, our youth need capital resources, investment to start and boost and the Government being cognizant of that created NIDCO to facilitate just that.

Madam Speaker, however in this incarnation our young people would apply their knowledge with the investment that the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service plans to deliver and be viable and competitive creators and owners in this country. We often laud when foreign franchises come to our shores and indeed jobs are created, however this is not a quantitative representation of development. What we are seeking to do is develop a generation that will create self-reliant franchises and branch off into the international market of which will create careers and sustainable growth.

Agriculture: Madam Speaker, agriculture has been a lucrative industry under this administration. It has been established that agriculture would achieve a resilient food security system that would safely transition our economy into recovery by utilizing local agriculture sector to act as a buffer to provide support during COVID-19 families, instead of utilizing heavily imported goods. We saw an inverted—created an increased competitive local market. All of us in this House

can attest to the thousands of pounds of food produced locally and that came through our offices on a weekly basis. Those bags have received praises from almost every recipient that encountered. The planning from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, alongside the coordination from NAMDEVCO has exposed our farmers and producers to the national community and has inculcated a culture for us to support local and be involved in a very rewarding industry. I would like to laud the hon. Minister for managing the industry with vision and foresight.

Digital Transformation: This Government position on creating a digital economy is clear and well-articulated. With the creation of the digital developer hub that will see platforms being created to transition into industrious men and women digitized their marketing and products that will in itself lend to greater efficiency and effectiveness. It would also reduce the cost of capital expenditure by the business lender and therefore developing new digital market with economic fruit to bear. Madam Speaker, the digital world is a world in which you can access from your mobile device and in the digital world inclusion of the average man is very evident. It creates an ease of access to solutions and services. If you want to order food, pick up your cell phone in the digital and you order food.

One of the great things that has already started is our Attorney General created CourtPay and that happened some time in 2019 or 2020. And with CourtPay, Madam Speaker, those who do not have bank accounts and during the pandemic when the bank was closed a couple of days and the court was closed, those who had to collect their payments in the court was not able to do so, but with CourtPay, it operates as a tool and it allows you to receive, send, verify, check, spend money utilizing your cell phone, Madam Speaker. And this is the type of digital development that we are talking about, Madam Speaker. Government



services can be accessed from home in this new digitally era. You can apply with the advent of the new e-ID, one day you can maybe apply for the passport and a driver's licence from your home.

Over the last 20 years the most amount of billionaires were created in this world and most of it was technology-driven and the average man, Madam Speaker, has the opportunity to do just that. And most of the billionaires that were created were not generational millionaires or billionaires, they were average men from simple homes with great ideas. Some of the examples are Apple, Yahoo, Tesla, Facebook. Those are people with great ideas and they were able to turn their ideas with the opportunity into cash and that is what this Government is pushing. So young people with opportunity, medium-age people with opportunity to be able to turn their ideas into money for themselves. With a shift towards technology, Madam Speaker, we would have a lot of room for growth and development of everyone and on page 65 of the budget, Madam Speaker, it speaks to ICT access centres for those who do not have access. It also speaks to digital skills training and it reads:

Digital skills training would be added to the in-person information, technology training provided at access centres; 10,000 persons will be provided with digital skills training, followed by another 2,000.

Now, we understand that in the digital world there are some who are very capable and there are some who are not capable at all but the Government has provided or will be providing the digital skills for everyone to be capable, Madam Speaker. And if there is no broadband service, Madam Speaker, it will be provided, even in the under-served communities. So this is definitely a budget for all. This is definitely for all and sundry to be a part of, Madam Speaker, and this is exciting times in this digital world that we live in.

Local Government: Madam Speaker, as a former longstanding local Government representative, I first-handedly speak towards the constraints local government corporations face in serving their burgesses. The property tax system is there to address this problem, it is there to contribute to the developmental agenda of all 14 corporations, Madam Speaker. The only reason that this tax is up for debate is because the failed UNC has made it into a political football, Madam Speaker. The Opposition Leader made a “ring-around-ah-rosie” speech and gave no valid or succinct point to buttress her opposition towards the property tax in lieu of local government reform.

Madam Speaker, as a former local government representative, a lot of people within communities, a lot of people on the ground, as we say, need basic things. They need water, good roads, people want drains, people want their land tenure and with the property tax, Madam Speaker, and paying your property tax which is more, much more than the old land and building tax. They can have all of that, Madam Speaker, all of that is right there and we can assist in developing local communities just by doing it simple, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I turn my attention now to the Mahaica Oval and later down I will address one of the questions asked by an opposing Member of sports tourism. The upgrade works in Mahaica Oval are nearing completion and, Madam Speaker, this is no small feat because what Wembley is to London, Mahaica is to the people of Point Fortin. Madam Speaker, everyone who played football in Mahaica yearned to touch the grass of Mahaica—yearned to touch the turf. Just a few of the greats who played in Mahaica are people like Warren Archibald; Leroy DeLeon, he was once regarded as one of the greatest, even as great as Pelé or even better than Pelé himself, Madam Speaker. Delbert Charleau, Doyle Griffith, Steve David, Henry Quian-Vie, Cax Baptiste, Sean Baptiste, four Douglas brothers and

Watty Douglas, Madam Speaker. And Watty Douglas, Madam Speaker, was the first professional player in this country. All these gentlemen here, Madam Speaker, played football at the highest level and all from Point Fortin developed right in that Mahaica Oval, Madam Speaker.

In 2012, as a very young councillor, serving my first term in the Borough of Point Fortin, I was the chairman of sports and the then mayor, Clyde Paul, would have called and said that we need to do something with Mahaica Oval so we developed a plan for Mahaica Oval, Madam Speaker. We fixed the playing field, we restored the drainage, you know, everything was going good and in 2013 we approached the then People's Partnership Minister of Sports with the plan. Money was flowing in the country, Madam Speaker, so we expected that they would have finished where we left off. We spent upwards of \$9million on the facility. We needed approximately 10 to finish the stands and to do the beautification works around the Mahaica Oval, Madam Speaker, but because of our political history in Point Fortin, the people of Point Fortin were denied that opportunity to have a good Mahaica Oval, and it took a PNM Government, Madam Speaker, to inject sporting life back into Mahaica Oval. And Mahaica Oval means everything and I would break down shortly what a vibrant Mahaica Oval means to the people of Point Fortin in two ways, in development and sports tourism.

One of the Members asked about sports tourism and I think he did not listen to the budget well or he did not read the document because if you read the document sports tourism was right in there. And you know, Madam Speaker, they always say, vision precedes strategy, and budget is a visionary budget but before you go all the way into strategy you must have that vision. So in order for him to— because he came and asked that question today I am certain that he paid no attention on Monday and he did not go home and do his homework of reading the

budget all the days before today, Saturday, Madam Speaker.

Development: Some of the football greats are still alive and kicking and this facility would be used to create nostalgia and bring those greats back to pass on the knowledge that they would have gained to the young people, Madam Speaker; succession planning, so that we could recreate that type of success once more in Mahaica, once more in Point Fortin. Football buzzing, everybody wants to go up and see the new stars, the Aubrey Davids, Madam Speaker, from Point Fortin.

Sport Tourism: Madam Speaker, there exists a Pro League team in Point Fortin, Point Fortin Civic F.C. and this team placed third in the last Pro League outing. And what does that mean, that means that they are on the cusp of receiving an opportunity to play in the CONCACAF Champions League. And the CONCACAF Champions League is a league with teams from the Caribbean, Central America, South America, Canada and I believe North America as well is in that, Madam Speaker. And some of the teams that play is Pachuca; you have Club América, Achievers, Guadalajara, C.F. Monterrey, Cruz Azul, Club León, Deportivo, Toluca; all those people would be coming to Point Fortin and when they come to Point Fortin, Madam Speaker, the benefit to the community and the people of Point Fortin, it is not just 150 coming off a plane, coming to Point Fortin, they would be coming with their foreign exchange; they would be coming with their money, Madam Speaker.

They would be coming with their technical expertise. They expose also our players to a higher level of football; expose our players to different teams who may be able to buy a player in the transfer window so our players now could be exported into other leagues throughout this world, Madam Speaker. And for the community, simple, the man who selling the t-shirts and printing and selling, “Welcome to Point Fortin”, could make money. The woman selling the corn on the

corner; the person who is selling the pholourie, it is going to generate income, Madam Speaker. It is going to generate wealth right in Point Fortin and when this happens on a sustained period, what is going to take place is that you are going to need either a bed and breakfast or a 50-room hotel, 100-room hotel and you are going to generate that interest in the deep south-west and this is what the People's National Movement is about. And if the hon.Member for—I think it is Caroni, wherever he represents, Madam Speaker, did not read his budget statement, then he cannot come to the House to ask, where is the sports tourism? And it is not just Mahaica Oval the Government is refurbishing, Madam Speaker—I would leave that for the Minister of Sports to deal with. But sports tourism is well and alive in the budget so he needs to, you know, get up to scratch and read what is taking place and next time, you know, ask better questions.

As a pilot, Madam Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I do not lend some support to the development of the ANR Robinson International Airport in Tobago and while I am not from Tobago, and I leave the Tobago matters for the MPs from Tobago, as a pilot I know firsthand what an airport development means to the users, the employees, the pilots, the cabin crew, everybody. So, Madam Speaker, before you even land at an airport there is navigational equipment and the navigational equipment is what takes you from the sky all the way to landing safely. And with an airport development, Madam Speaker, you upgrade your navigational equipment, you upgrade your runway, you put in lights in the runway, Madam Speaker; you put in threshold lights, you put in centre line lights, you put in taxiway light; you put in a taxiway, all of this would be done in the development of the ANR Robinson International Airport—a taxiway. So it takes a little bit of strain off the physically paved strip which we know as the runway and this is not just for the people of Tobago, Madam Speaker, this is for every single airline that

wants to come in the country.

When you improve your infrastructure, people see it viable to come there and that is what the PNM is doing. [*Desk thumping*] The first—you never get a second chance, Madam Speaker, you do not get a second chance at a first impression so when you touch down in the airport and somebody comes to Tobago for the first time and they see a brand spanking new facility, well equipped and well catered for all citizens, they are going to do one thing; first thing they are going to decide, “Listen, I coming back here again”, and the next thing is they are going to tell a friend and then it is going to be more viable to come to Tobago. And that is why we are building the hotels too but I will leave that for the other Members, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, while we are on that and we are speaking airlines, I listened to some of the contributions of the opposing Members and it seems as though they want to give the impression to the people of this country that Trinidad and Tobago is in some sort of rut and the PNM is driving the final nail through the coffin of this country and nobody “doh” want to come here and everybody want to go, and that is false you know, Madam Speaker.

**4.30 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, the *Newsday* report, Monday 23rd of August 2021:

Headline:

“Airlines return to Trinidad and Tobago airports”

It states:

“The Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago... says all airlines which operated out of the Piarco and ANR Robinson airports before the closure of the TT’s borders in March 2020 have returned.”

And they say, “have returned”. So that means to me, Madam Speaker, that they

have already signaled their intention to return:

“The authority, on its website, said the airlines operating...”

Some of the airlines are:

“American Airlines, Air Canada Rouge, Venezolana, JetBlue, British Airways, Copa Airways, Suriname Airways, Turpial Airlines, United Airlines, West Jet, Rutaca, Trans Guyana Airways,...”—and the best airline in the world, Caribbean Airlines. [*Desk thumping*]

All of them—all of them have returned. So that means to me that there is something about Trinidad and Tobago that is going right, because if something was not going right they would not have come back to this country, because there is a worldwide downturn, and they would not come to somewhere that they would not make a profit. I assure you that.

Madam Speaker, I will use my final minutes here to talk one minute about Caribbean Airlines and make my closing statement.

Under this Government, worldwide, we have seen downturns in a lot of airlines. A lot of airlines have gone belly up, meaning that they have gone into receivership, and this Government was able to save thousands of jobs by the saving of Caribbean Airlines, our national airline, and that speaks to the testament of the greatness of this Government. [*Desk thumping*]

A question was raised: What does Antigua, Anguilla, Jamaica and all the other islands have over Trinidad? That answer is simple; the answer is very simple. What they do not have is an Opposition who is trying to damage the image of their country. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, it is unprecedented in a budget debate, where an entire Opposition will not respond to the budget, Madam Speaker—

[*Madam Speaker rises*]

**Mr. K. Richards:**—but utilize parliamentary time and privilege to put piccong and misinformation into the public.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, your speaking time is now spent. Member for St. Augustine.

**Ms. Khadijah Ameen** (*St. Augustine*): Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the people of St. Augustine constituency and the wider region at this debate on budget 2022.

Madam Speaker, I like to see local government people come up, get the opportunity to speak in the House of Representatives, but I feel sorry for the Member for Point Fortin who spoke just now. As a former local government representative, like myself, coming from a region that is plagued with neglect, having to mention a highway, the highway to Point Fortin that the very PNM that he represents abandoned, I feel sorry for him. Because Cedros is also part of Point Fortin constituency and that, in fact, that entire southwest peninsula is in such a state of neglect. I really feel do sorry for him. I feel sorry that he could not take this opportunity in the House to request more security for that Venezuela to Cedros water taxi that has been going on, the informal water taxi. I feel sorry for him too—I am not sure if to feel sorry for him though on his utterances about property tax.

He is a smart “fella”, so I do not think he is misinformed. I want to believe that he is not—I am not sure if to believe he is misinformed or he is misleading the public. But for persons like him, or people who may tend to believe that philosophy he shared about property tax, property tax should go to regional corporations and local authorities, as it goes to in other jurisdictions, other countries, to improve local infrastructure. But in TrinidadandTobago, Mr.Member for Point Fortin, I want to advise you that your Minister of Finance and your



Government want property tax to go from the pockets of the citizens straight to the Consolidated Fund, not to local government bodies. It will go to buy paintings, it will go to buy boats, it will go to pay rentals, not to improve infrastructure. [*Desk thumping*] So while many noteworthy Trinidadians have their roots in Point Fortin, and I know Point Fortin are a proud people, please do not let them down, stay true.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance spoke for three hours and 38 minutes. The Leader of the Opposition, in a few minutes less, had far more substance and was far more people-centred in her contribution in this budget. [*Desk thumping*] From the contributions of the Members on the other side so far, I feel that the Government is very detached from reality, or that they live in a different—an alternative reality.

The Minister of Finance, of course, led the way. I heard the Member for—MP Scotland, mentioning how quickly agencies responded in Port of Spain, and I want to tell you in other parts of the country it is very different. We wait for days before agencies respond. I do not know if it is because one is represented by the PNM and one is represented by the UNC, but perhaps the Members on the other side who have responsibilities could fix that. Because the people in St. Augustine and Caroni East and Penal, when we get flood we wait for days before social welfare could come, before any agency could come. I am still waiting for a lady in Oropune, HDC Madam Minister, whose roof was partially blown off, for it to be fixed. So we live in a different reality.

But the Member for San Fernando East, I felt that he really captured something. He said the Minister of Finance has ignored many. I agree with him. The Minister of Finance, and the Government on a whole, has ignored the working class. They have ignored the business class. They have ignored the poor, the unemployed. They have ignored the schoolchildren. They have ignored maxi and

taxi drivers. They ignore those in need of basic water and electricity. They ignore investors. They ignore the tourism sector. They ignore health sector. They ignore teachers, police officers, labour and unions. They ignore the housing sector and they ignore local government.

Madam Speaker, what is conveyed by the Government sentiment is not only in today's debate. Language is an everyday element of life, but for leaders, language is a vehicle for making decisions, for measuring results and sharing innovation and creativity. Like any other language, the language of leadership has to be learnt, honed and practised. As the leader of any country, a Prime Minister, any country, and a government Minister, you are given a precious and honourable position to lead with your words and your action. Your authenticity and integrity come from your heart and should be reflected in your words.

Madam Speaker, sadly, the words of our hon. Prime Minister in Trinidad and Tobago, and the words of his Government Ministers fall woefully short, and is often in the realm of vulgar. I want to take this opportunity to appeal to our hon. Prime Minister and other leaders in society, even outside of politics and Parliament, to be mindful that their words have the power to shape our nation. The words of the PNM, the words of this budget, have failed to inspire and bring hope to our nation, just as the PNM has failed in its leadership.

When I speak of this alternative reality that they live in, I listened to the Minister of social welfare earlier today, criticizing members of the public and Members on the Opposition for knocking the Government removing VAT off pigtailed. So while VAT remains on the rest of the pig, "dey gone with de whole hog and leave you with de tail alone, and you must clap for dat". Trinidad and Tobago, to me this is a metaphor of what this Government—how this Government treats people.

So while you want to “bouff up de nation”, and instruct them to clap for you, I think the Leader of the Opposition, in having to capture—Crix and cheese really does capture the budget. But the Leader of the Opposition was well structured, she was inspiring, she was people-centred, and she was visionary, and I think that was the difference. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I was nominated as a local government councillor in my area at the age of 21 because of my community activism. I served as a councillor for 10 years, three of which were as the Chairman of Tunapuna/Piarco Corporation, and I thank the Leader of Opposition for having faith, not only in me, but other young people, to give us that opportunity to serve our nation. So if I do have a passion and a bias for local government, and I really do believe in the role that local government must play in national development and improving the lives of citizens, and while the PNM barely ever sees local government as important to mention in a budget, the UNC has been always people-centred in our policies, in and out of government.

You know, when you get elected, you are a government Minister, people see you as a big boy having to deal with macroeconomic plans with fiscal policies. But our national development agenda must always take the small man and everyday life into consideration. The PNM has failed to do this. They are very disconnected from the average citizen. But the citizens must measure good governance by the quality of their life, safety, security and happiness.

Citizens of this country are paying customers, they are paying taxes, and the Government must be reminded that it is a servant of the people. But you know this Government has a very wrong side view, it is like Massa days come again, big boy looking down on the small man, and we as citizens must remind those in Government that they are servants of the people.

Madam Speaker, the speaker before me criticized the Opposition for doing our job, which is opposing and putting an Opposition view. That is our job, we are called the Opposition, and if you would want us to shut up, it means you will get a free pass to do everything you want, including abuse the people of this country. [*Desk thumping*] The UNC and the Opposition in this debate did not only object to the Government's harsh policies, we also put alternative plans to the nation and to the population.

The UNC's economic develop plan, the prosperity engines mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition, incorporates local government regions in a meaningful way. So when the Member for Point Fortin could speak of Cedros and those local tourism initiatives and so on, it must tie into a national development agenda. People from every region must be able to identify how local government could play a role in the national agenda.

So, Madam Speaker, the UNC's plan speaks about elements such as the Brechin Castle agro processing complex in Couva. There is a lot more to agriculture than planting cassava and having a goat farm in Tobago. The UNC's plan speaks to rehabilitating the Carlsen Field dairy farm, and that will have a real impact on the lives of the people there. Arts and culture, local tourism, again local government.

Madam Speaker, when we speak of—a former speaker mentioned the highway to Point Fortin. When the UNC plans to build a highway system to link economic zones and growth poles, this also links local communities. It was the UNC who delivered the Diego Martin Highway in the constituency of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, not a PNM Government. They neglected their own constituencies. The UNC's new highway will be the San Fernando to Mayaro highway, because the Point Fortin Highway will extend to Cedros, and the

Manzanilla to Mayaro road also needs to be upgraded to support the development of the south east economic development zones.

The roads there presently, Madam Speaker—I mean you could see why you call them the “pothole national movement”. If you cannot reach to a community, how will you bring new opportunities to the people? So while the PNM continues to speak on their platform in one manner, their actions seem different. The only time the PNM knows local government exists is when there is a local government election due. They rush to do superficial things to call achievement. I remember in the Sangre Grande region, last local government election, no money whole year, whole term. Terry Rondon, their own PNM councillor was the Chairman there. When it was local election, it was a marginal battle. They were paving over mud in Sangre Grande northwest to appease the people, after months and years of neglect.

In the upcoming year, this time in 2020, they are talking about renaming two regional corporations into boroughs. Renaming you know, not upgrading into borough, but again this is all part of the deception.

The very name, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, to me is a deception. The PNM has constantly disrespected and strangled rural districts. There is no rural development in Trinidad and Tobago, ask any person who lives in a rural community. In fact, there are Members on the other side who represent rural districts who know for a fact that that is true. This Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government should be renamed, “the Ministry of Rural Neglect”. That would more accurately describe the policy of the People’s National Movement.

The PNM has been promising to amend the Municipal Corporations Act to give local government what they call “a level of autonomy”, but to me that is just a

buzzword now. They promised to give responsibilities and authority to municipal police, we are still waiting. They promised to focus on rural areas. That has to be a joke.

The UNC utilized the detailed regional development plans that were prepared for the 14 municipal corporations, and those plans were actually commissioned by the previous PNM Government, and were updated and adopted by the UNC in 2010, and is the basis for future developments. Have they thrown their own plan in the dustbin? You want to reject the UNC's plan, what about your own plan? You are not even working with that.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas West mentioned the Latrine Eradication Programme. In 2018, the Government allocated an estimated 2.6million to this programme. Like the Member for Chaguanas East, the citizens of St. Augustine have also been waiting for phase two to come to Tunapuna/Piarco region. There are quite a few deserving members. I have to ask: Is this another plan that has gone in the dustbin or gone in the latrine?

Madam Speaker, the difference with the People's Partnership and the UNC's approach in government was political will. The Government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar truly uplifted councillors. There was no distinction PNM or UNC. Even PNM councillors will tell you that the UNC local government performed better than this PNM and treated them better. Councillors were empowered through training. For the first time offices were provided for councillors, secretaries for councillors. The travelling allowances were increased.

The Minister of Finance spoke about digitization, but at present there are quite a number of regional corporations where the councillors and the senior officers have no laptops, no cell phones, no Internet, and they are trying to keep digital meetings, virtual council meetings in the COVID pandemic.

During our time in government as well, they were provided with exemptions for VAT on vehicles. It is almost impossible to do your duties as a councillor without a vehicle. You really have to be in touch with people and on the move. While this PNM Government has had numerous issues surrounding Ministers' vehicle tax exemptions, involving family and friends, I want to ask a question. Has the Attorney General ever advised the Cabinet on how they could make provisions for councillors to get VAT or motor vehicle tax removed for our councillors to perform their duties? Perhaps the Member for Point Fortin, the Member for Arima and other Members who came out of local government, can advocate for this within their own party.

Again, the devolution of authority and resources from every Ministry can be delivered in better collaboration with our local government bodies. Better financial allocation to every region—of course everybody would say they want more money, but having a more decentralized model of governance and having coordination in the delivery of water, electricity, telephones, basic infrastructure and facilities, so that—Minister of Public Utilities, WASA will not come and dig up the road right after it is paved.

Many of the pipelines, as I mention public utilities, laid in rural communities under the UNC-led Government, are now dry under the PNM. I see somebody open a standpipe. When you are a Minister of National Security and you do not have a police station to open because you built none, you go and open a standpipe. But we have to go further than that. The burden when there is no water in the taps falls on local government. Corporations have to provide truck borne water. It is not always safest, but there is also a cost that drains the corporation. So Minister of Public Utilities, you too, your performance is having an impact on local government.

They used to call us the “box drain government”. They called the UNC the “box drain government”, as if that is an insult. But under this PNM, you cannot get a box drain. “Yuh cyar get roads paved”, you cannot get potholes fixed, you cannot get latrines eradicated. You have zero accountability, zero in terms of high performance, zero in terms of real delivery.

But under the former Government, I remember there was one year, in my last year in my term as Chairman of that corporation, in our report, local government corporations delivered 1,150 roads paved, 37 kilometres of box drains, 31 pavilions, 60 bridges. In one year, 969 projects were completed. We had 50 scholarships in public health awarded to employees in local government to train as public health inspectors. We had 145 litter prevention wardens being selected, trained and appointed. When the PNM came into government, you know what they did? They fired every one of those litter wardens, and then come to blame citizens about littering when the litter wardens we had to help with that, you PNM fired them.

Under the UNC there was a dramatic shift in local government performance, and it was the first time in local government history that so many projects were completed, and it did not take new legislation. It takes political will and it seems that the PNM only has political will when there is a local government election. So your failure towards local government continues to know no bound.

Madam Speaker, I became a councillor in the year 2003, and I had been participating in local government consultations by the PNM since that term. Mrs. Hazel Manning was the Minister at that time. It is very clear that local government reform is a mamaguy by the PNM, and it continues still. The PNM did not even have local government elections in 2003 to 2010, seven years without election, but in every year that there were elections, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019, in every single one



the PNM promised local government reform. It seems that it is easier to get VAT off pigtail than to see local government reform happen from this PNM. Again promises never materialized.

I just want to share a quote from then Prime Minister, hon. Patrick Manning, in that debate on the Municipal Corporations (Amdt.) Bill. He said:

When—“we can fix it so that strong local leadership can work in partnership with a range of stakeholders and with the people themselves to transform our communities...”

Well, Madam Speaker, clearly the PNM has been lacking leadership since 2009.

We do not need new laws to have proper disaster management, to release moneys on time, to treat councillors with respect and dignity, to give councillors tax exemptions on their vehicles. What you require is policies and initiatives and the political fortitude, which the PNM clearly lacks, to get local government alive and kicking again.

The time has can come for our local government councillors to be lifted. You know, somebody earlier referred to the “piper budget”, a “piper type budget”. This Government, this PNM, has reduced our councillors to fighting over a backhoe. I am talking about 16 councillors sitting around a council, fighting for the one backhoe that the corporation has to clean the drains in their area. So that they have no time to focus on things like local economic development, local tourism, improved security within their region, and the social well-being of their people. You are reducing our councillors to scrambling for crumbs.

Local government bodies should be assisting in creating an environment that is secure and stable to facilitate local economic development, and to create a better quality of life and wellbeing for their burgesses. They are supposed to provide physical infrastructure such as proper roads and drainage and so on, but PNM,

“allyuh” really strangling local government.

The PNM is also a disaster in disaster management. I want to talk about this, because there are 14 Disaster Management Units, one in each regional corporation, and they have really supposed to ensure that the emergency response plans and so on are in place, that they mitigate and prepare for to respond to hazard impacts, whether it is—and we are most commonly affected by widespread flooding, but we do have instances of high wind when people lose roofs. We may have fires within the region, so flooding, fires and strong winds are the most often encountered disasters.

**5.00 p.m.**

The DMUs are supposed to help restore communities and livelihoods after a disaster. The ODPM which falls under the Ministry of National Security also plays a role with the various stakeholders including the disaster management units of the regional corporations. But what I have seen is that there seems to be no leadership and no coordination and no plans. So everybody, all of the stakeholders who are involved in disaster management seem to be on their own.

There is an all-round failure of the Ministry of National Security when it comes to ODPM; of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government when it comes to disaster management units; of the Ministry of social welfare in administering the disaster grants in doing their assessments after a disaster. There is a failure of the Ministry of Sport and Community Development when it comes to the National Self-Help Commission with the minor repairs and refurbishment grants to restore homes that are damaged in disasters. There is a failure to provide materials for these victims of natural disasters.

But I also want to ask, apart from lack of resources, “we eh have money, we waiting for releases”. Is there a political bias in giving grants for disaster? I ask

because there were seven—out in St. Augustine we had some high winds hitting us and we had about 30 applicants whose homes were damaged. Seven of those 30 persons received the minor repairs grant for disasters. But I saw a newspaper article where 100 grants were distributed in Tobago. Is it because there is an election in Tobago that the THA election, that this Government is using taxpayers' dollars to campaign in Tobago? Let us not play with people's lives when it comes to disasters. There are several Opposition MPs who have made representations for victims of natural disaster and I am calling on the Government to ensure that there is no bias with awarding grants and relief and any sort of assistance to victims of natural disasters in Trinidad, as well as in Tobago.

The social welfare assistance for victims of natural disaster also seems to be a wall we are hitting whereas we—recipients and victims can get—are supposed to get assistance for household items, clothing, even uniforms and so on, what I find is that the Ministry of social welfare seems to have, again, lack of leadership, incompetence, lack of coordination. When our constituents lose a refrigerator, a stove, wardrobe, living room set, they lose everything. In fact, today, this very moment in the St. Augustine constituency I am in touch with constituents whose homes are flooded and their items are being damaged.

When we report this to the Disaster Management Unit sometimes it takes weeks before anyone visits. Two weeks ago in Parakeet Street in Trincity, not in no “back-a-yard, rural, up no hill, down no coast area” you know, right in Trincity, Parakeet Street. They took two weeks before they could visit our victims. Even social welfare and this where—“ah” calling them every day, eh. Even social welfare, they tell our victims, our disaster victims, do not throw away the old couch. It is soaked in floodwater, it is filthy, it is smelly and they have to keep it for social welfare to visit and they do not seem to have the manpower to do the

assessment.

And I suspect that the Government's "headlessness" in disaster management has a lot to do with the dismantling of the National Operations Centre because in 2016 the PNM fired the executive director and other senior executives of the NOC. They placed all the assets of the NOC under the SSA. And to this day it remains a mystery why the sudden decision to dismantle the NOC which played such a critical role in operational control and optimizing interagency coordination within the Ministry of National Security, something that was very critical to the ODPM during a time of disaster.

Madam Speaker, I now want to move to an area that I have spoken about before in other places that I will continue to talk about, the disparity in funding for local government when it comes to regional corporations based on their population size and the number of burgesses that they service.

So, in Port of Spain you have roughly \$6,000 per burgess, per year. But in Tunapuna/Piarco where the St. Augustine constituency sits, Princes Town, Penal/Debe, Couva is about \$700 per day, per burgess. And in addition to that disparity the timing of the releases is another thing I want to talk about. So while the PNM speaks of regional corporations following the THA model where they have approximately \$34,000 per burgess per year, clearly the PNM is not following that model when it comes to the funding you are giving to the regional corporations. But you do not need legislation to increase the funding to regional corporations. If you say you want to do it, you have the power, you can do it. You do not need additional laws to give corporations more money.

Additionally, Madam Speaker, what we have recently was our Minister of Rural Development and Local Government asking all corporations, in his usual nice way, you know, he said, "Fellas, allyuh know things tight. We need allyuh to

cut allyuh request for funds by about 4 per cent”. But I want to tell you that there has been a constant erosion in the funding for all regional corporations from since this Government came into office. So the Minister’s request—and when I looked at the Chaguanas borough, Chaguanas is one of the fastest developing regions in the country and in 2012—in 2013, sorry, they had \$65million, about \$65million in their allocation.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

It was seriously eroded and in fact they have had their allocation cut by about 40million between 2014 and 2022. So the request of the Minister to say, well, it is just a 4 per cent, to me, it is an insult.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you had boy days. “You ever fall down and get a cut inside your cut?” That is what the Minister is doing to local government. So you have constantly been undermining local government and the reduction in funding for regional corporations from 2015 to present is almost 25 per cent. So you can look at the figures for yourself but this is another thing that I find a little deceptive of the Government, of the Minister of Finance when it comes to funding for local government.

I want to touch very quickly on a proposal to create two new boroughs in Trinidad. Last year in the local government election in November of 2019, the leader of the People’s National Movement found his way to the very marginal region of Siparia to campaign and made a promise to make Siparia a borough. We heard nothing of it until November 2020 at the opening of a community centre in Diego Martin when the Prime Minister announced to the media that the Cabinet will approve two new boroughs, Diego Martin and Siparia. Well, two weeks ago the Ministry Rural Development and Local Government rushed to keep a meeting with the Siparia council. In the 2022 budget Siparia has received \$2million less

than last year. Diego Martin only received \$1million more. But I want to tell you that our position whether it is a UNC-led or a PNM-led corporation, the UNC will not accept superficial and cosmetic change. The development objectives of a borough must be clear. It must not be a simple renaming of a borough. You must have meaningful change of status.

So this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to put people on alert, is pure mamaguy. Why not make Tunapuna/Piarco with a population of a quarter million people into a borough? Why not go to Couva where they have the largest geographic region. We in Tunapuna/Piarco, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you yourself in your previous capacity would have advocated for Tunapuna to become a borough. But I also—I really want to urge the Government to make this change meaningful rather than superficial.

I want to move, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the thing that is most dear to me in this debate, the constituency issues of St. Augustine. While we have had mention of the pothole national movement, there have been numerous roads in the St. Augustine constituency that are in a state of disrepair. Last week a project started, a road paving project started in Evans Street in Curepe. On Republic Day I saw some photos and videos circulating where some people planted some balisier in the potholes in Evans Street. Two weeks after that road paving started. So there might—you might be giving people some encouragement to plant balisier in some more potholes across Trinidad and Tobago if that is how you have to get roads paved.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are two bridges that are collapsing in St. Augustine, Dry River bridge and Blackman Ravine bridge. Those are—the Dry River bridge is an alternative to the highway and it is critical. And I want to place a warning that that bridge could collapse at any time. And we have been writing and

begging for it to be repaired and replaced. We have floodgates at the Wirebal river, in Real Spring Valsayn south, in Caroni river by Sheldon Trace, in Bamboo No. 2 as well. We have our water courses in Curepe. The Blackman ravine is causing tremendous flooding in the entire Curepe area since the construction of the interchange. And I have been pleading with the Minister of Works and Transport to visit and let his engineers make a recommendation to save the people of Curepe the distress that they have been enduring for the past year or, in fact, more than that.

We have some areas with low water pressure. I trust that the Minister of Public Utilities will look kindly upon the letters that I sent to him on behalf of the constituents of St. Augustine. We have a number of areas where we want—where we are ready to work with regard to land regularization.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the regularization of the squatter settlement at Dookiesingh Extension started when the UNC was in government. It was abandoned when the PNM came in. And I am pleading with the Government, we need to have containment, law and order, public health issues addressed there and I am asking for the land regularization process to restart. We have land regularization also pending for the Pasea Estate which is not a squatter issue, it is a matter of leases being treated with, as well as in Bamboo.

In Oropune in the HDC housing there are a number of residents who have not gotten their document for their house. All they have is a letter where they signed to receive the key. They do not have a deed and this was since the reconstruction of the airport where those people were relocated. So I want to plead with the Minister of Housing and Urban Development for us to address that matter.

I also have numerous farmers who are waiting for renewal of agricultural leases and this is affecting how they conduct their business and how they feed the

nation. They are also plagued by praedial larceny, and not only their produce, eh. We had farmers who were chopped and beaten in their own home when bandits came to steal their vehicles and equipment and so on in St. Augustine.

In Oropune, that big development that you see from the highway, you have one entrance and one exit, one road. It is unsafe to say the least. The condition of that road, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is another issue. So I want to plead with the Minister of—this again falls under HDC. We have residents who have bushes as tall as the second floor in Oropune. Residents who are unable to get water in the upper parts of their building, as well as issues with maintenance of the general area.

We have no school. We have the space but we have no public facility, community facility in Oropune to conduct any sort of community business. So I want to ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to—you yourself, you are a Member of the Government and you came from local government. How much time do I have?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please. Please, Member, do not bring the Speaker into—I am in the Speaker's chair today. So do not bring me into the debate, please.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Thank you. How many more minutes?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** You roughly have just over two minutes, just about two minutes.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** All right. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to call on this Government to have a little more accountability when it comes to local government. During the mid-year review I asked the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to tell this nation how many CEPEP contractors were in every constituency. The UNC-led constituencies, the Opposition constituencies are unfairly treated and in St. Augustine there are about 15 contractors, while the neighbouring constituencies have 40 and 45 contractors working. So the areas—so



when we need assistance in terms of flooding and flood relieve, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government is yet to give an answer.

I want to say—I want to thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for contributing to this debate. And I also want to put on record that the UNC will continue to be people-centred and people-driven, unlike the PNM who is very detached from the real world and the real people in this country. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian):** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am very happy to come after the Member for St. Augustine and I would like to say, yes, the PNM, we are detached from nonsense. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have listened to this debate for the past two days and I keep hearing Members on the other side say facts are stubborn things. But I realize, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that they do not understand it is an entire quote by John Adams the second President of the United States of America:

“Facts are things stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

In other words, the fact that the PNM is the Government will not change. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they often like to remind me that I am school teacher and it is true, that is where I come from. I am very proud of the fact. As a school teacher when I hear words like vulgar and I hear language coming across from the other side, I wonder if they understand what is irony, because nothing could be more vulgar than a Monday night forum. [*Desk thumping*] And, Mr. Deputy

Speaker, as we are sharing facts, it is “the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services” not “social welfare”. [*Desk thumping*] Because the PNM, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are not about welfare. We are about promoting, encouraging—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Silence, please.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move on. Perhaps the Member for St. Augustine missed this little part. The Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020 the provisions:

“Clause 10 of the Bill would seek to amend the Property Taxes Act, Chap. 76:04. Paragraph (a) would insert after section 9 a new section 9A that would require the Board of Inland Revenue to forward the tax information to the Corporation...”—[*Desk thumping*]—“...that would require the residential taxes be paid to the Municipal Corporation in which the residential land is located.”

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I pay attention. [*Desk thumping*] The Member’s contribution, like many of the box drains from 2010 to 2015, simply went nowhere. [*Desk thumping*]

Regarding the hysteria of the Member for Naparima, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to say several things. We, Trinidad and Tobago, we are not junk. Do not project your feelings of inadequacy upon the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Denmark has a history of cancelling double-taxation agreements with other countries. There is nothing unique or unusual about the recent action with Trinidad and Tobago. To illustrate this, in January 2009, Denmark terminated long-standing double-taxation agreements with Spain and France simply because it wished to tax Danish pensioners residing in these two European nation countries—European Union.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I looked and I did my research because unlike the Member for St. Augustine, I have the privilege of working under the hon. Minister of Finance so he has the facts. That same Minister that they use to laud was forced to step down for lying in the Parliament. [*Desk thumping*] He is now—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member. Please use another word.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Sorry. For telling untruths. [*Desk thumping*] No wonder the MP for Naparima was so excited, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, he resigned based on the untruths, something that the UNC would be unfamiliar with. But despite that deviant behaviour, he turned to Parliament which you would say is something that the UNC would be very with familiar with; simple look at the Senate where the leader of LifeSport is currently a Senator. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am proud to stand in this honourable House, again, a debate that involves the issues impacting all our beloved Trinidad and Tobago. I am appreciative, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of my constituents of D'Abadie/O'Meara for affording me the privilege to once more represent them as their Member of Parliament. I also stand before you as Minister in the Ministry of Education. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is my second year before you in my contribution to the debate.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** One second. Members, please, on both sides, I do not want Members talking to each other over the floor, please. Thank you. Proceed.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I would like to thank, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Prime Minister and political leader of the People's National Movement; the hon. Minister Camille Robinson-Regis, Minister of Planning and Development; the hon. Minister of Finance, the masterful Colm Imbert. [*Desk thumping*] I also pay tribute to all arms of the Ministry of Education and the amazing team within the Ministry. And I

want to express deep thanks to the hon. Minister of Education, woman extraordinaire, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly [*Desk thumping*] because what she is doing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, no man could do. She is guiding us as the mother of the education Ministry, because like me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, she believes that our children must come first. [*Desk thumping*]

I am grateful as I watch her lead us through the transition of the online-learning environment to hybrid blended-learning environment and now as we approach we are coming back out to the physical environment. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government takes education seriously. According to our *Vision 2030* policy document, Theme I is:

“Putting people first: nurturing our greatest asset.”

And Goal No. 5 is:

“Trinidad and Tobago will have a seamless, reformed, high-quality education

and training...”

This Government is committed to directing education as the major pillar carrying the country forward to *Vision 2030*.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had to listen as the Member for Siparia spoke about shirking our duties. Again, I go back to irony. The irony of someone who barely comes to Parliament speaking of the PNM shirking our duties. [*Desk thumping*] We are always present and we are always willing and we are more than able. Education has received nearly \$7 billion, receiving the largest allocation for yet another year. That is commitment, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We see the need to ensure that the nation’s children continue not only receive quality education but a quality education that would prepare them for the future. The past 19 months, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have been difficult, it has been challenging. I would like to thank

the hon. Prime Minister once more for his guidance during these difficult times and ensuring that a social safety net was put in place for those most impacted by the pandemic. So we thank the ground troops on the frontline.

Gratitude also goes out to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for the arduous task of processing thousands of relief grants and rental assistance to persons and families in times of distress. The Minister of Health Mr. Terrence Deyalsingh working far beyond any man should be expected to work. And in my own constituency the Larry Gomes Stadium became a vaccination centre, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am proud to say that many of my constituents volunteered and are still working there to this day because they believe that vaccination is the key.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, like my colleague the Minister of Education, I have worn and will continue to wear many hats. I am a Minister in the Ministry of Education. In years past I was a secondary school teacher, a councillor, a deputy mayor, mayor, and I am primarily a mother, therefore I have a deep understanding and deep appreciation for all the hard work that is generated and shared on a daily basis by parents, caregivers, teachers, staff. You see, in case the nation forgets, it was not a PNM government that called teachers criminals. In case they forgot, it is not a PNM government that refused to give the respect due. On that note, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on October the 5<sup>th</sup> was World Teachers' Day and I wish to tell all teachers who nurture and assist in the growing of our nation's young minds that I know all too well it is not an easy task but we can do this together.

As Minister Gadsby-Dolly noted, teachers and education stakeholders had to jump to emergency hotline learning in March 2020 educators. I think every Member of Parliament owes you a debt of gratitude. I say to you heartfelt thanks for making your homes classrooms. Many of you have been using your own

devices and resources. This is why the Ministry of Education sprang into action to procure laptops for our hard-working teachers, as well as our students. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Education shared in her contribution that 9,023 laptops were distributed to date, to our teachers. For the record, she noted that some teachers did not request devices—to our teachers and students, sorry.

Teachers have not been alone in this pandemic fight. The fighting for students to ensure that learning continues and exams and assessments go on without fail. Therefore, it is only fair that teachers and staff be provided with the correct remuneration, tenure, classification, rectification which is why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we went into IHRIS, Integrated Human Resource Information System. We are digitizing the Ministry so no longer would any teacher have to wait to be upgraded to receive his or her increments or promotion because the IHRIS system will take us firmly into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We created a committee solely to deal with this matter. We want to ensure that our teachers are appropriately compensated for the priceless work that they do. We are dedicated to ensuring that this project is executed well within our tenure in government.

**5.30 p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, technological devices have become prominent tools of the trade, and I have sat here and listened, again and again, the Opposition speak about the laptops in 2010, and I am saying this for the last time, no, no, no. In 2010, it did not make any sense. In 2010, we had no IT officers. In 2010, if we had 100 IT teachers in the country, we had plenty. In 2010, the laptops were used as doorstops and pornography hubs. In 2021, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have the training for the teachers and the students. We have an IT technician in every single class. When the Member for Tabaquite said, “If we had kept the UNC’s laptop scheme,” I laughed. That laptop scheme was an abject failure and cost taxpayers

millions of dollars. Perhaps it built palaces and bought Prados, but the benefit for the students of the nation, as a teacher then, that is a fallacy and a fantasy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you do not want to take my word for it, Dr. Rowley, the hon. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, prophesied in his budget contribution in 2010, and I quote:

“With respect to the question of the laptops, the country’s continuous investment in education has been a feature of our independence effort and to this end, the PNM has been the unquestioned pioneer. We support to the fullest, any and all efforts of the Government which can meaningfully provide opportunity for citizens as they seek to develop themselves for whatever worthy purpose they choose. With respect to preparing students for the entrance survival in this communication age, we support access and training involving the use of computers in schools. Where we differ from the current approach is that the PNM considers the Government’s laptop caper to be doomed to failure, wasteful and possibly counter-productive.”

In 2021, we are doing exactly what he requested, training, access for everyone.  
*[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Opposition Leader spoke about leaving schools to rot. I can tell you, knotted, snarled mess, that we the Government of Trinidad and Tobago are still unravelling to this day stem from that 2010 to 2015 time period. I would like to remind the Opposition Leader that we have been living through a pandemic as we were forced to close schools. But did the work stop, Mr. Deputy Speaker? It did not. Refurbishment and improvement to secondary schools continued. The improvement, refurbishment, extension to primary schools continued. Plumbing, ceiling, fencing, electrical, painting, everything that we could do, we did. Cunupia Secondary School, Matelot, Guayaguayare, Toco, Point

Fortin, Tableland, Siparia, Cedros, Diego Martin, Palo Seco Government, and the list goes on and on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but to them, we did nothing because they could never see the good that the People's National Movement do. [*Desk thumping*]

Further, in fiscal 2022, the Government will invest even more money towards the construction and completion of facilities for five ECCE centres in the La Pastora Government ECCE, Marabella Government ECCE, Tulsi Manas ECCE, Maracas Valley, Springvale. Do you see the variety, Mr. Deputy Speaker? [*Interruption*] We could build one by you but you will have to ask. The past 19 months have been an interesting journey. Resilience, we have learnt; kindness we have learnt, and I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the hard-working staff at the Ministry of Education. You see, as committed as this Government is to our children's overall well-being and development, we need the support of the public servants, we need the support of the teachers and we need the support of the parents.

The Member for Tabaquite went on a tangent to say all stakeholders are dissatisfied. I beg to disagree. I would like her to ask the Maha Sabha, ask the association of the Catholic schools, Anglican schools, they would all tell you how appreciative they were that the Ministry held discussions concerning school reopening. We made amendments based on their recommendations. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we do not just hear our stakeholders but we listen. Not all recommendations can be implemented, but due consideration was given, and we continue to review every single day, every single week, because we understand we are going through a process. A kingdom divided amongst itself will fall, which is why the teachers, principals, parents, caregivers, students, the Ministry of Education and other education stakeholders must be united.



We will not allow vaccination or COVID to divide us, because none must fall to this deadly virus or left behind in fear. You see, this is not an ad hoc organization. This is not based on whim and fantasy. We do not worship on an altar, on a shrine, putting one person before all. We put the nation first. We take this very seriously, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we took it so seriously that when the hon. Prime Minister procured Pfizer, we went first with our children. [*Desk thumping*] We took our sons, we took our daughters and we showed the nation that we were willing to create a safe space, an environment for our children. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have not seen one Opposition Member do the same. You see, the Opposition Leader was right, there is a war against the people, but this war is the people who are against the nation. They are not patriots. They care about party, not the people. [*Desk thumping*]

Difficult times, difficult decisions. You see, by nature Trinidadians and Tobagonians, they are not difficult people, and this is a war with an invisible enemy and an enemy so insidious its very presence has affected every facet of governance: health, finance, trade, education. So while some would sombrely reflect, others thrive in the chaos. They chuckle in the backrooms in glee, and as they are chuckling, every death, every misstep is met with mirth. We cannot fight COVID-19 with a misled, misinformed, misguided citizen. I am speaking as a mother, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am speaking from my heart. While they are encouraging you not to vaccinate, their children are vaccinated. While they tell you protest, they are hopping on planes and going Miami for birthday parties. While they encourage you to keep your children home, their children are in schools studying for scholarships.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a parent, as the Member of Parliament for D'Abadie/O'Meara, I urge everyone to vaccinate their children because it is their

best [*Desk thumping*] chance in this future. COVID-19 is not going to go away. And my back is broad, I could take the “licks”. The hon. Member for St. Ann’s East, she is strong, and she could withstand the pressure. We will always put the children first. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rather empathize than sympathize. I rather tell you I understand what you are going through than sit next to you at a funeral, three feet apart. [*Desk thumping*] So you could beat the PNM, you could beat the Ministry of Education, but let me tell you something, you cannot beat science, you cannot beat common sense, so thump up your chest and talk like a big woman because as far as we are concerned, vaccination and education go hand in hand. I thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Chief Whip?

**Hon. Member:** There are speakers? No speakers? [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Lee:** [*Inaudible*]

[*Pause*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Leader of the House? Leader of the House? Chief Whip?  
[*Crosstalk*]

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** You are not putting in anybody else at this time?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** At the side.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Okay. Mr. Deputy Speaker, just give us a second, please. The Minister is getting his documents. [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members, please, the session—the sitting is still in session.

**Ms. Ameen:** I feel like we are being misled, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members, the sitting is still in session.

**Mr. Lee:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the sitting is—[*Inaudible*]

**Ms. Ameen:** What is happening?

**Hon. Member:** What is happening? We do not know what is happening.

**Ms. Ameen:** The Minister is present. He should be wrapping up.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Madam Speaker:** Okay. So there are no other speakers? Okay. So, before calling upon the Minister of Finance, I would call upon the Member for Oropouche East.  
 [*Desk thumping*]

**COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGE  
 (HON. FARIS AL-RAWI)**

**Dr. Roodal Moonilal** (*Oropouche East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I hereby seek your leave in accordance with Standing Order 32(2) to raise a matter directly concerning the privileges of the House of Representatives.

Madam Speaker, during the debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2021, on Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, 2021, the Member for San Fernando West, in responding to the budget contribution of the Member for Siparia, confidently represented to the House and made inter alia the following statement in relation to government rentals, and I quote from the Member for San Fernando West:

“And the Leader of the Opposition is also not telling the country that under her prime ministership...rented properties to...Kamla Persad-Bissessar’s members of family, all received rentals from the Government.”

The statement that the members of the family of the Leader of the Opposition having received government rentals is absolutely false, untrue and misleading. [*Desk thumping*] I have served as the Minister of Housing and Urban Development in the Government led by the Member for Siparia and had full access to Cabinet Notes and Minutes, so I would have been aware of any such government rentals. Further, the Property and Real Estate Services Division, responsible for government rentals,

fell under my ministerial portfolio, this according to the *Trinidad and Tobago Gazette* Vol. 51 No. 120, dated 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012. Additionally, I have known the Member for Siparia and members of her family for over 30 years. As such, I can categorically state and confirm that no family members of the Member for Siparia benefited from any government rentals. [*Desk thumping*]

This matter, Madam Speaker, is grounded on the fact that the Member for San Fernando West deliberately misled this honourable House [*Desk thumping*] and, by extension, the viewing citizens of the country as he knew or ought to have known the statement he made was a deliberate untruth. It was false and it was incorrect. [*Desk thumping*] According to David McGee's *Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand*, Third Edition, it requires three elements to be established that a Member is in contempt by reason of a statement that he or she has made in the House:

1. The statement must, in fact, have been misleading;
2. It must be established that the member making the statement knew or ought to have known at the time that the statement made was incorrect; and
3. In making the statement, the member must have intended to deliberately mislead the House.

It is submitted, Madam Speaker, that the statement was misleading, the Member knew that the statement was incorrect and the statement could have only been made to deliberately mislead the House [*Desk thumping*] for the following reasons:

- The Member as part of the present Cabinet knew or ought to have known, as he would have readily available access to information relating to government rentals.
- The Member failed to disclose the particulars of the alleged property, the date on which the lease was signed, the particulars of the property,

which department of the Government it is rented to, or the owners of the said property or properties.

- The Member was not able to provide information because it does not exist as it is simply untrue. [*Desk thumping*]
- The Member is acutely familiar with the operations of government rental and would have known or ought to have known where to confirm the information.
- The Member deliberately made the statement in response to the truthfulness of the assertions made in the budget contribution of the hon. Member for Siparia to many lucrative and multi-million dollar rentals which he and his family benefit.
- The Member sought to distract from these undisputed facts and maliciously placed on the record that family members of the Member for Siparia received government rentals, which is simply untrue.
- The fact that the Member has knowledge of the facts with easy, ready and available access to government records, that there is a ready presumption that the Member for San Fernando West made the statement with the intention to mislead the House.
- The fact that malice is established on the part of the Member for San Fernando West further propels that the intention of the Member was to mislead the House.

Based on the foregoing, the Member has deliberately made a misleading statement. He has committed a contempt of the Parliament and abused his privilege as a Member of this esteemed House. As such, Madam Speaker, I submit that the hon. Member has committed a breach of privilege of the House. In this regard,

Committee Privilege (cont'd)  
Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

09.10.2021

Madam Speaker, I refer this matter for your urgent attention and determination.  
Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I will rule at a subsequent sitting of the House.

### **APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2022) BILL, 2021**

**Madam Speaker:** The Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*] Minister, you are reminded you have 45 minutes with no extension.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is obvious that the contributions by the other said have collapsed, and there is a very good reason for that, Madam Speaker, because there is nothing in this 2022 budget that they can get their teeth into. This 2022 budget is one of the most transformational budgets presented in this Parliament. [*Desk thumping*] It is transformational. And when one examines the measures and the recital of policy, one sees that this budget is a blueprint for the way forward for the growth and transformation of Trinidad and Tobago.

I have listened very carefully to Members opposite, there is nothing that I have heard from the other side that really warrants a response; very, very, very little. In fact, I could simply conclude this winding up by saying I beg to move. But since Members opposite had nothing to say, Madam Speaker—and I was very disappointed in the Leader of the Opposition. I would think that somebody with that vast experience, that we were told about in this Parliament, would have had the stamina to be able to speak for as long as I spoke. And, Madam Speaker, I could have easily spoken for another two or three hours so I was very, very disappointed when the Leader of the Opposition responded, and after just over two hours, threw in the towel and gave up the ghost.

So let me deal with the issues in the budget since the hon. Members opposite did not; absolutely did not. And there was one contribution, in particular, the

**UNREVISED**

Minister of Health was pointing out to me, a cynical undertone against vaccination. Because the Members opposite, since we have had to deal with this pandemic, have in a very cynical way tried to undermine the Government's immunization and vaccination programmes; [*Desk thumping*] in a very, very cynical way. It started with the Member for Oropouche East who claimed that even though the Sinopharm vaccine was approved by the World Health Organization, he insinuated, Madam Speaker, that we were trying to make the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago guinea pigs for the utilization of the Sinopharm vaccine. Well, I was very happy recently when I saw, Madam Speaker, I saw that the United States of America has decided to accept persons who are vaccinated with all WHO vaccines [*Desk thumping*] which proves conclusively that the policy of the PNM Government was correct from day one. [*Desk thumping*] There are other territories in the Caribbean who chose not to use WHO vaccines. Well, unfortunately for them, their citizens may not be able to easily enter the United States in the near future.

But let me go now to the measures, Madam Speaker, because not one of them spoke about the measures. The first measure is a reduction in the tax rate by 5 per cent for significant exporters of local goods. Not one of them, including the Leader of the Opposition, had a word to say about the reduction in tax for significant exporters of local goods; not one. And as the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs pointed out, this is what in another country we would call fiscal stimulus. None of them had anything to say about the reduction in the tax rate for small and medium-sized companies whose core business is technology and digitization. Not a word from one of them on that side, Madam Speaker. Again, a fiscal business stimulus programme. None of them had anything to say about new companies, start-up companies involved in digitization where we gave very generous tax incentives. We signalled very generous tax incentives: a 50 per cent

tax exemption on the first \$100,000 of chargeable income in the first year, and the first 200,000 of chargeable income in the second year. Not one of them talked about that.

The fourth measure: a research and development capital allowance, up to 40 per cent of expenditure incurred by companies in research and development. And I dare say, Madam Speaker, I have not seen a tax incentive for research and development for a very long time and that is why I say this budget is transformational, and that is why the other side has collapsed because you could not argue against these measures. A tax concession for companies involved in enhanced oil recovery. They could not argue against that either. That is why they had nothing to say. Listing of small and medium enterprises on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange, using the Jamaican model of mentorship. They had nothing to say about that because they could not argue against it.

Penalties for overweight trucks destroying our roads, they could not argue against that either, Madam Speaker. An incentive for development and expansion in the manufacturing sector, 5 per cent reduction in tax, they could not argue against that. An incentive for foreign investment, reduction in the withholding tax rate, they could not argue against that either. Strengthening of the Board of Inland Revenue, recruitment of audit and compliance officers, they had nothing to say about that. Tax allowance for first-time homeowners, increasing the deduction for mortgage interest on mortgages for first-time homeowners from the current 25,000 a year to 30,000 a year, they could not say anything about that. They could not argue against that either.

Twelve—I have listed 11 measures, which not one of them could say anything about. Twelve, contributions to approved pension fund plans, deferred annuities, increasing the annual deduction from 50,000 a year to 60,000 a year,



impacting a 100,000 persons involved in pension plans and deferred annuity schemes, they could not say anything about the either. Electric vehicles, some one of them uttered some— I am trying not to use an unparliamentary word. Give me a second, Madam Speaker, I am looking for a synonym for nonsensical. One of them offered a silly, silly comment, that the batteries for electric vehicles only last for one year. To show the level of research and the lack of knowledge on that side, Madam Speaker, in the United States, they are now giving warranties for batteries for electric vehicles up to 10 years, manufacturer's warranty, but according to the other side, electric vehicle batteries only last for one year. That is all they had to say about electric vehicles.

Heritage conservation, budget measure number 14, where we are providing a tax allowance uplift for companies who would spend money on renovating and preserving our heritage properties, and I listed them: The Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Queen's Royal College, the Reform Village Shiva Mandir, the Iere Village Masjid, the Banwari burial site. Not one of them could object to that, so that is why they said nothing about that.

Measure number 15, specified therapy equipment for the hearing impaired, the visually impaired, physical mobility equipment, removal of all VAT and customs duty. They could not say anything about that. None of them spoke about that. I think one of them spoke about somebody in a wheelchair walking as if it was something from the Old Testament. [*Desk thumping*] You know, somebody, they waved their hand and the person walked out of the wheelchair. [*Desk thumping*] That is the only comment I heard about physically impaired people. I think it is quite famous now on social media. [*Laughter*]

**6.00 p.m.**

Item number 16, offers for sale by FCB, 10million shares as we decide to

divest the assets of the State to the ordinary people of Trinidad and Tobago. Let me give the commitment now, Madam Speaker. As we did in the past, unlike what they did, we will ensure that the divestment of these shares of First Citizens will go to institutions, such as the National Insurance Board, the Unit Trust and it will be preserved for ordinary people in Trinidad and Tobago. Not the big shots, but for ordinary people in Trinidad and Tobago as we did with the last divestment of FCB. Not like them, not like them, where wealthy people were able to pick up 500,000 and 600,000 shares under very dubious circumstances, ending up getting fined by the Security and Exchange Commission. [*Desk thumping*] There people, people that they put on the Board of FCB, dishonest people, that is UNC style. PNM style, we make sure every citizen has a fair opportunity to participate in the divestment of the State assets. So that was number 16.

Number 17, utility rebates. T&TEC and WASA, where we are increasing the amount of the rebate for persons whose electricity bill is \$300 or lower. The PNM introduced a measure where we would rebate 25 per cent—Madam Speaker, there is a running chorus on that side. I do not know what is going on. Could I ask you for your protection, Madam Speaker?

**Madam Speaker:** Please continue.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** What wrong with that fellow? Made a pathetic contribution and now disturbing the House. Number 17, utility rebates. T&TEC and WASA: Currently there is a 25 per cent rebate on bills of electricity, \$300 or lower, we are increasing that to 35 per cent, Madam Speaker. This will help 210,000 households at the lower income level, 210,000. And we are going to do the same thing with respect to the cost of water, all in transition towards a utility cash card which will give to people at the lowest levels of the spectrum and similarly a fuel cash card to vulnerable groups, Madam Speaker. I did not hear a word about that, not a word.

Number 18, all computer hardware, software and peripheral, removal of all import duties and taxes, VAT, online purchase tax to stimulate the digital economy. Not a word from the other side about the removal of duties and VAT from hardware, software and peripherals, not a word. Nineteen, the removal of VAT on basic food items. They could not say anything about that.

So, Madam Speaker, I have gone through all of the budget measures and I have demonstrated to you, Madam Speaker, that in their very weak contributions to this debate they could not challenge any of the measures in the budget and that is why, and that is why, their contributions have collapsed. [*Desk thumping*] Contributions have collapsed. And in fact, the response of the Leader of the Opposition was simply a feeble attempt at “bussing mark”, which is simply the modus operandi of Members opposite when they have nothing to say, they simply try to “buss mark”. They do not deal with anything substance, their contributions are incoherent, they cannot even speak English properly, Madam Speaker. In fact I wanted to quote Standing Order 8(1) which is the language of this Parliament is English. On many occasions, I wanted to cite Standing Order 8(1).

So, Madam Speaker, there is very little left to say. We have successfully managed the economy of this country for the last six years. And for all the “ole talk” on the other side, as the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara pointed out, they live in some sort of alternate reality, because I hear them regurgitating the same tired, old useless arguments that they brought in the general election of 2020 and they were rejected by the population [*Desk thumping*] and they do not seem to understand that they have been discredited and rejected by the population twice in the last six years. And no matter what they say or think, as the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara pointed out, you cannot change the fact that you have lost the last two elections and the population has rejected you. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam Speaker, it has been my privilege and my pleasure to work with all of my colleagues, to work with all of my colleagues to produce all of the measures and the statements of policy in this Budget Statement 2022. It has been my pleasure and my privilege to work with the Minister of Planning and Development [*Desk thumping*] who has responsibility for the capital programme. It has been my pleasure and privilege to work with all of my hard-working colleagues in developing the programmes, especially in digital transformation. [*Desk thumping*] I especially want to single out the Minister of Health for his sterling contribution [*Desk thumping*] over the last 18 months working steadfastly with his other colleagues in our public health group.

I have named them and I will name them again: the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the Attorney General, the Minister of National Security, and first and foremost the Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*] I wish to congratulate that group for saving the health and lives of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] I wish to thank the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs for his sterling efforts in obtaining vaccines, [*Desk thumping*] together with myself and the Minister of Health and, of course, first and foremost the Prime Minister, [*Desk thumping*] because the Prime Minister has been in the forefront of obtaining vaccines for this country and all of those vaccines that the Minister of Foreign Affairs called out: the Pfizer vaccines, the Sinopharm vaccines, the AstraZeneca donations, the Prime Minister has been first and foremost among initiating that. My responsibility was to obtain the necessary funds to make sure that payments were made on time.

And so, Madam Speaker, we have come through a very, very difficult year. As I indicated in my budget statement, this is the first time in almost 60 years that the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has had to face both a health crisis and a financial crisis at the same time. There have been financial issues and financial

problems in the past, but never accompanied by a health crisis, a global pandemic. This is the first time any government in this country has had to face both of these things, a financial crisis and a health crisis at the same time. And despite the obstructionism of Members opposite [*Desk thumping*] we have come through it, we are resilient as a country and this is why the theme of this budget is: “Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic”. And in that statement I am not simply talking about the PNM Government, I am talking about the people of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] who have shown resilience in the face of a global pandemic. So having said all of that, Madam Speaker, and since they have nothing to say, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Members:** “Yaay! [*Continuous desk thumping and crosstalk*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, one minute please. I will just let the Clerk read the Bill, sorry.

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 81(8), I beg to move:

That the Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2021, be referred to the Standing Finance Committee for the consideration of the Bill together with the Estimates.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, the House shall now go into Standing Finance Committee to consider the Bill and the Estimates. [*Crosstalk*]

*House resolved itself into Standing Finance Committee.*

**Madam Chairman:** Members, you all will let me know when you all are ready for us to proceed. Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Order 81(2) and (8), the Estimates containing the details of the financial requirements along with the Appropriation Bill have been referred to this Committee for consideration.

The documents before the Committee therefore include the *Draft Estimates Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the Financial Year 2022* which identifies:

1. The Heads of Expenditure;
2. The chart of accounts for expenditure;
3. The classification of expenditure Sub-Items under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases Sub-Heads;
4. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure;
5. The Sub-Item details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the Financial Year 2022* which identifies:

1. The statutory board or body for each Head of Expenditure;
2. The abstract of estimated revenue and expenditure for the year ending 30<sup>th</sup> of September, 2022;
3. The abstract showing the Government's subvention for 2020 Actual Expenditure, 2021 Estimates, 2021 Revised Estimates, 2022 Estimates and the increase or decrease of the 2022 Estimates over or under the 2021 Revised Estimates;
4. The chart of accounts for income and expenditure;

5. The classification of expenditure Sub-Heads under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases, Sub-Heads;
6. The Sub-Item details relevant to each statutory board or body for current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the Financial Year 2022* which includes:

1. The summary of estimates of the Development Programme for the financial year 2022 for Part A, the Consolidated Fund;
2. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Sub-Head 09, Development Programme Consolidated Fund;
3. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding;
4. The summary of estimates of Part B, the Infrastructure Development Fund for the financial year 2022;
5. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Sub-Head 701, Infrastructure Development Fund;
6. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2021: The Bill provides for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2022. The Bill seeks to authorize the sum of \$43,805,107,455 from the Consolidated Fund. The Schedule details the sum to be approved for each Head of Expenditure.

In accordance with Standing Order 85(1), the consideration of the clauses of the Bill will be postponed until after the consideration of the Schedule which lists the Heads of Expenditure to be approved. The Heads will be considered in the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition.

Proposed work schedule: Hon. Members, there are 40 Heads of Expenditure to be considered over a five-day period. Therefore, I propose that the Committee meets each day from 10.00 to 8.00 p.m., or for so long thereafter, to consider a minimum of eight Heads of Expenditure per day.

Consideration of the Tobago House of Assembly: Hon. Members, I crave your indulgence to have the Committee agree on the time for the examination of the Tobago House of Assembly and the Central Administrative Services, Tobago, on day four, which will be Thursday October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021, in order to allow these representatives to make arrangements to travel to Tobago. May I respectfully suggest that given the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition the Tobago House of Assembly and the Central Administrative Services, Tobago be examined at 10.00 a.m. and 1.00 p.m. respectively on Thursday the 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2021? I expect that we all will concur with this? Right?

Speaking time. Yes.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Ma'am, we do have Cabinet on Thursday.

**Madam Chairman:** On Thursday. All right, so Thursday we would start then at what, 1.30 p.m.?

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Yes, please.

**Madam Chairman:** All right, so maybe I—maybe I suggest that you speak to the Whip and see if you all could arrange a different date for Tobago. Because if we get them here at 1.30, if we start them at 1.30 it means they will have to overnight in Port of Spain. So maybe they can be taken either on day three or day five.



**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** May I suggest day five. Sorry, may I suggest day five, Ma'am.

**Mr. Lee:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** And CAST.

**Mr. Lee:** [*Inaudible*] —and we can adjust—

**Madam Chairman:** Accordingly.

**Mr. Lee:** Accordingly.

**Madam Chairman:** Okay, so that—

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Yes, thank you.

**Madam Chairman:**—the agreement is day five, which will be Friday, October 15<sup>th</sup>—

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Yes, correct.

**Madam Chairman:** And therefore at 10.00 a.m. and 1.00 p.m. respectively.

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Chair, can I just suggest something. Can day five now be considered day four and day four be day five? It will make things much easier.

**Madam Chairman:** Yeah, that can work.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Agreed.

**Madam Chairman:** All right. So, Secretariat you have that? Okay, good, thank you.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Thank you.

**Madam Chairman:** And that is just for the purposes of the order, yes? Okay, speaking time.

Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Order 45(1), the speaking time in Standing Finance Committee shall not exceed five minutes on each intervention. Each Minister will be invited to make a brief five-minute opening statement on the Ministry or department's priority areas for the upcoming year.

Procedure for each Head: Hon. Members, the procedure for each Head of Expenditure shall be as follows:

1. The Head and the amount to be appropriated will be announced by the Chairman;
2. The Minister will then be invited to make a brief opening statement;
3. The Chairman will then propose the question that the sum proposed stand part of the Schedule;
4. For each Head of Expenditure the Chairman will call the Sub-Head followed by the Item. The Chairman will not call the Sub-Items. Discussions can ensue on the Item called or the relevant Sub-Item and clarifications sought. Once the Committee moves to another Sub-Head, questions from a previous Sub-Head will not be entertained. Once the Committee moves to another Sub-Head, questions from a previous Sub-Head will not be entertained;
5. The Chairman will repeat the procedure for the Development Programme;
6. Once this is concluded, the Chairman will then put the question that the sum stand part of the Schedule;
7. The procedure will be repeated for each Head of Expenditure.

Okay? So, other business. Are there any items that either the Leader of the House or the Whip may wish to raise?

**Mr. Lee:** Just some clarification, Chair. On day four which starts on Thursday, what is that start time for that SFC day?

**Madam Chairman:** Well, day four which is the Thursday is Cabinet day.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Yes.

**Madam Chairman:** So would 1.30—

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Day four will start at 130 p.m.

**Mr. Lee:** And how late we will complete the eight Heads on that day if we start at 1.30.

**Madam Chairman:** Well, it would all depend on the Members.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** On you. [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Chairman:** Okay, we know we have a curfew, yes?—and we know what business we have to get done in the time, so I guess we will all have to be very prudent in the management of our time.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** We usually are.

**Mr. Lee:** We normally too.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Not at all.

**Madam Chairman:** Okay, just another thing. I want to remind Members with Standing Finance Committee we are allowing 16:14, okay?—in the Chamber. [*Crosstalk*] Excuse me.

**Mr. Lee:** Just repeat the numbers.

**Madam Chairman:** For Standing Finance Committee: 16 Government, 14 Opposition. It keeps the balance. All right? Hon. Members, the meeting of this Standing Finance Committee is suspended and will be resumed on Monday, October 11, 2020 at 10.00 a.m. Do have a good weekend.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Same to you Ma'am.

**6.22 p.m.:** *Standing Finance Committee suspended.*