

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

*Monday, January 24, 2022*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I have received communication from Dr. Lackram Bodoë, MP, Member for Fyzabad and Mr. Saddam Hosein MP, Member for Barataria/San Juan, who have requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

**PAPERS LAID**

1. Annual Report of the Anti-Terrorism Unit for the period 2020-2021. [*The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
2. Response of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to the First Report of the Public Accounts Committee of the Follow-up on the Implementation of the Recommendation made in the Twenty-Fifth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the Audited Financial Statements and Internal Controls of the National Lotteries Control Board (NLCB) for the year 2008 to 2021. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service to the Interim Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the Response of the Public Authorities to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
4. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Labour to the Second Report from the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination of the Report of the

**UNREVISED**

Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2020. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT**

**(Presentation)**

**NIHERST**

**Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)**

**Mr. Esmond Forde** (*Tunapuna*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have the honor to present Paper No. 1.

Fourth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an Inquiry into the role of NIHERST as it pertains to the development of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) sector in Trinidad and Tobago, First Session (2020/2021), Twelfth Parliament.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** The Minister of Finance.

**STANDING FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT**

**(Presentation)**

**The Minister of Finance** (*Hon. Colm Imbert*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have the honor to present:

Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Second Session (2021/2022), Twelfth Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2021.

**FINANCE (VARIATION OF APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2022**

Bill to vary the appropriation of sums, the issue of which was authorized by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020 and varied by the Finance

**UNREVISED**

(Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2021 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

## **STANDING FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT**

### **(Adoption)**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

*Be it resolved* that this House adopt the report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Second Session (2021/2022), Twelfth Parliament, on the consideration of proposals for the Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2021.

Madam Speaker, this is a routine matter that we are about. It is standard practice and it is in fact a requirement of the law that the fiscal accounts be closed on or before the 31<sup>st</sup> of January in the year following the close of a financial year on September 30<sup>th</sup>. We did not have this process last year, because there were no variations that required approval and therefore, the accounts for fiscal 2020 were closed without need for resort to the procedure that we are about today. However, Madam Speaker, we had some variations during the year to deal with a number of matters. These matters have been addressed in the Standing Finance Committee that we had on Friday and we are seeking approval following the approval of the Standing Finance Committee which met as I said on Friday the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, and the Committee agreed to a variation of the 2021 appropriation and to the write off of losses approved for fiscal 2020.

The variation of appropriation of resources in the sum of \$574 million, sorry, \$574,889,840 was necessary to bring to account expenditure in the same amount which is funded by advances from Treasury Deposits in fiscal 2021. The total increase, as I indicated just now, in Heads of Expenditure being proposed is \$574,889,840. The total decrease is the exact same amount \$574,889,840. It produces a nil net effect, there is no change to the appropriation for fiscal 2021.

The details of the proposed changes were circulated to all Members in the Standing Finance Committee and discussed at its meeting on Friday last. Clarification was sought with respect to some of the proposed changes to the appropriation for fiscal 2021. I received a list of questions and I assigned the staff in the Ministry of Finance to produce answers to the questions asked by hon. Members—if just give me one second, Madam Speaker, I will pull up some of the questions that were asked in due course. I anticipate that during the course of this debate, the various proposals contained with the Bill with respect to the Ministry of Public Administration, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and so on will be dealt with by other Members who have line responsibility for these matters.

Let me elaborate a little further on the main reasons why the additional funding is being proposed and just for the record let me just indicate that I was asked questions about the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses, specifically, how many persons access GATE funding in fiscal 2020? And about the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company. How many persons were not able to access the TTMF services in fiscal '21, due to the company's reduced request for disbursements? Strange question, but we endeavour, try our best, to answer.

With respect to the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago, which financial institution was used to refinance the \$230 million loan? What was the effect of refinancing the loan? And similarly with Evolving TecKnologies, the eTecK, what was the effect of refinancing the loan and what specific project was the 160 million loan to eTecK supposed to finance? So, I expect to get those answers from my Permanent Secretary if I have not received them already, and the responses will be circulated to Members.

Now, let us go to the actual amount itself the \$574 million and firstly, under Head 03: Judiciary, an increase of \$35,195,944 is being sought to retire an advance made from Treasury Deposits that facilitated payments to vendors who provided security and telephone services, as well as, office accommodation to the Judiciary. Under Head 17: Personnel Department, an increase of \$8,640,671 is being sought to retire an advance made from Treasury Deposits to facilitate payment for the rental and lease of office accommodation and this will be all of the office accommodation that is occupied by the CPO, the renewal of software licenses and to vendors who provided consultancy and janitorial services. Under Head 78: Ministry of Social Development and Family Services—an increase of \$531,053,225 is being sought to retire an advance from Treasury Deposits that enable the encashment of cheques in respect of senior citizens, Public Assistance and Disability Grants. It should be noted that in accordance with section 17(1)(b) of the Exchequer and Audit Act, Chap. 69:01, advances made from Treasury Deposits are recoverable within 12 months after the close of the financial year in which the advances are made—this is another reason why we are here today to resolve that matter.

Let me now look at the specific reduction in the allocation for the Ministry of Finance Head 18 from whence the money came to support the Judiciary, the

Personnel Department and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Upon a final review of the 2021 accounts, savings were identified by the Ministry in the original allocation where the amounts disbursed were less than the funding allocated in fiscal 2021. The details of these sum Items have already been circulated to Members and discussed at the Standing Finance Committee.

The Standing Finance Committee also agreed to the write off of losses in a total sum of \$8,218,653.91 for fiscal 2020, the previous year. And the reason why we are doing that this year, is that there was no opportunity last year because there was no requirement for a variation of appropriation Bill and debate of this nature. Those write offs are for the Auditor General, Head 02: a total of \$1,498,666.01 in respect of audit fees, deemed uncollectible—these audit fields were deemed uncollectible because these are fees charged by the Auditor General to state enterprises so it is really left pocket to right pocket. Head 26: Ministry of Education, one or, yes—

**Madam Speaker:** Might I remind you of Standing Order 48(1) in terms of while we are looking at the Committee Report, remember it is with respect to a certain circumscribed matter, which is for the variation of the appropriation.

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—oh certainly, Madam—

**Madam Speaker:** Please.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I will move immediately away from the write off of losses.

Let me move now to the fiscal outturn, because we have had a lengthy discourse at the Standing Finance Committee on the rationale for the movement of the funds, and the purposes for which the funds were used by the respective Ministries during fiscal 2021. And might I say that every year, when we do the budget, we make our best effort to make the best possible estimate of what expenditure will be, and what revenue will be, and what the requirements of each

Ministry or Department will be. There are certain Ministries and Departments that we have to keep a very close eye on, Social Development and Family Services in particular, because of the amount of money that is spent in that Ministry. I do not think Members understand the vast sums of money that are spent in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And the majority of this money—the vast majority of it is spent providing what we call in Trinidad and Tobago a social safety net.

So we have an unfunded pension plan for senior citizens. This is not a contributory plan and senior citizens are entitled as of right when they get to the age of 65 to receive a senior citizens pension once they meet certain criteria in terms of their income levels. But they do not contribute in a specific way unlike the National Insurance pension, for example, which is funded by contributions both from employer and employees and other private pension plans. The senior citizens pension plan is an unfunded pension plan and it is provided as a benefit to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who have reached the age of 65 and are in certain financial circumstances where their income is such that they qualify for the senior citizens pension. You would have heard the Minister indicate at the last meeting that the number of persons who receive senior citizens pension is now in excess of 100,000. I believe I heard the Minister say 105,000 or 108,000, it is somewhere in that vicinity—but it is over 100,000. And if one looks at the payout and the numbers one easily sees that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago spends \$4 billion, \$4 billion every year on payment of senior citizens pension. And this is a number that is increasing all the time and therefore, we in finance, are keeping a close eye on this expenditure to make sure that only those persons who are eligible to receive the pension and persons who may have passed away, may have

migrated, may have left the country or for one other reason no longer qualify for old age pension or senior citizens pension, as it is now called, are still on the list.

So it is something that we have to keep our close eyes on because it keeps going up. And at the beginning of the year, we would make a particular allocation to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and during the year we will monitor and during 2021 it became clear that we had to supplement the appropriation and vary the appropriation for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, not just for senior citizens pension, but also for the other grants, which again, we are keeping a close eye on, such as the conditional cash transfer, which is colloquially called the food card—that is the official name for the food card—conditional cash transfers, we have to keep a close eye on that, because the number of beneficiaries particularly during COVID has been on the increase. These are significant sums of money—hundreds of millions of dollars we are talking about.

In addition, the numbers with respect to Disability Grants, we have to keep an eye on that as well. Because when you add it all up, you are talking about \$5 billion, at least, that is spent by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago every single year on what is called the social safety net. And therefore, even though we had anticipated, there would be some streamlining, there was—I want to commend the Minister of Social Development and Family Services for all of her efforts in rooting out inefficiency, potential fraud, and other areas of wastage within the social safety net system, we still were required at the end of the year to provide additional funds to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Similarly, with respect to the Judiciary, the Judiciary has been on a development programme within the last several years, building out the new facilities, new systems, increasing the number of judicial officers, and their support



staff, and so on and again, we had made an estimate at the beginning of the year as to what the Judiciary would require and again, it became apparent during the year that we would have to supplement the Judiciary.

Similarly, with the Personnel Department, we had made an estimate of what we needed to spend and again, it became obvious during the year, especially because of the fact that the Personnel Department is doing a very comprehensive job evaluation exercise, more than one actually, for the Ministry of Finance—very important job evaluation exercise within the public service and the Personnel Department also manages the public service health plans, both for monthly paid and for daily paid workers—it became obvious that we would need to supplement the Personnel Department in terms of additional funds. So those are the explanations for the variation of appropriation by reducing the Ministry of Finance in areas where funds were not required by September 30<sup>th</sup> and being able to appropriate those funds or to send those funds by way of Treasury Deposits to those three areas.

But let me talk now briefly on the fiscal outturn for 2021, because we are closing the accounts for 2021 and I would have reported some time ago on the outcome of fiscal 2021, I would have done that some months ago and what I would have done at that time is use the best available information that I had, in terms of what the outturn was.

When the budget was originally presented, we had indicated a particular deficit of some \$8 billion at the end of the year because of reduction in revenues for all sorts of reasons, production challenges in the energy sector, the effects of COVID on the national economy and so on, revenue was less than expected, and the deficit increased by some \$5 billion. I can tell you now, that whereas I reported in October, that we anticipated a deficit of \$13.7 billion for '21, the actual deficit is

\$13.0 billion and there were all sorts of reasons for this but I do not want to get into too much detail, Madam Speaker—

**Madam Speaker:** I rise just as where you ended, in terms of to remind you of Standing Order 88, we are here to adopt the report and it is very specific. So while I think it is important, we might want to hear the matter, I would like us to comply with the Standing Order.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I am about to conclude, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you very much.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** In anticipation I thank you very much for rising to remind me and remind everybody else, that all we are talking about today is a variation of appropriation in a sum of \$574,889,840, taking the funds from the Ministry of Finance from several areas already articulated at the Standing Finance Committee and sending those funds to three areas: the Judiciary, the Personnel Department, and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for the reasons well-articulated at the Standing Finance Committee and briefly summarized by me just now. I beg to move.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

*Question proposed.*

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche West.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Davendranath Tancoo** (*Oropouche West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this Motion, the debate on this Motion, if I may:

*“Be it resolved that this House adopt the report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Second Session (2021/2022), Twelfth Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2021.”*

Madam Speaker, as the Minister indicated, a lot of the issues raised here would be fairly routine, in that it is a normal thing for the Minister to come to make variations between Heads. However, Madam Speaker, the Standing Finance Committee which met last week requested certain pieces of information from the Minister which he referred to in his own presentation and as at this point, as at 1.30 when I checked last, that information was not yet available. My understanding, Madam Speaker, is that the Standing Finance Committee includes all questions—the Report of the Standing Finance Committee includes all questions and all answers to those questions posed by Members on this side and answered by the Ministry of Finance or relevant Ministry on that side. In the absence of that, Madam Speaker, in the absence of the responses to these very valid questions that were raised, we are actually debating an incomplete report and therefore, I appeal to the Minister in presenting on subsequent occasions, that he provide the answers of questions raised by Members on this side, so that we would not have the situation where we are debating a matter without having full information of issues that we would have raised in the Standing Finance Committee. That is a very unfortunate state of events at this point.

**2.00 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, I want to put it on record as well that the Standing Finance Committee did not just consider the variation of appropriation for the fiscal year 2021, the Standing Finance Committee also looked at, as the Minister himself referred to:

“...the approval...”—for—“...the write-off of losses;”

—and:

“...the transfer of funds...between Sub-Heads under same of Head of Expenditure for fiscal year 2020, and the...”—same—“...transfer of

funds...between Sub-Heads...”—for—“...the same Head of Expenditure for fiscal...2021.”

So your Standing Finance Committee, Madam Speaker, last week actually reviewed the expenditure by the Government of \$2.975 billion. I would want to constrain my—

**Mr. Imbert:** Point of order, 48(1). I did not say anything about the transfers; that is not before us.

**Dr. Moonilal:** 48(1) is relevance.

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you very much, Member for Oropouche East. Member for Oropouche West, and it is the point I stood up on 48(1) when the Minister was moving the Motion, while we may have considered certain things, as you said, the “write-offs” and the “transfers” within the Standing Finance Committee—and I think it was discussed there—for the purposes of the variation those matters are irrelevant. And I think the Minister spoke about the write-offs to make the point, it is just a reporting exercise but it is not a requirement for what we are about to embark upon. Okay? So that we are very restricted in what we are looking at in the report and what the debate will be. I refer you to Standing Order 88.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Thank you, Madam Speaker, I would be guided. My reference to the Standing Finance Committee setting was basically to indicate what was said at that Finance Committee and what was done. There is nothing irrelevant about that. That is what actually happened, Minister, as you were present.

**Madam Speaker:** Member.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Yes, Ma'am.

**Madam Speaker:** I ruled—I ruled about certain things being irrelevant—

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Moving on—

**Madam Speaker:**—so that I take it your answer is in response to me which I do

not think you intended. So please move on.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Thank you, Madam.

Madam Speaker, it is noteworthy to note—it is noteworthy that the \$574,889,840 that the Minister is seeking the Parliament's approval for today via this variation of appropriation is not a nominal sum, it is a very substantial sum. The fact is though that this money has already been spent and all that is required now is for this Parliament to rubber-stamp the expenditure already undertaken by the Government. Given that situation, Madam Speaker, it brings the questions that were asked at the Standing Finance Committee to even more import because today the Minister had another opportunity to provide in greater detail the information justifying this very same expenditure. And with due respect, Madam Speaker, through you, I think the Minister failed to use that opportunity; given that he has not, Madam Speaker, I am forced to raise them here again because he has not provided answers to questions that were raised.

But, Madam Speaker, I want to caution you, the Minister used phrases such as “savings”; the Minister kept referring to the “savings”. In fact, in the documentation provided to the Standing Finance Committee that term is usually used—it has been used in fact on a consistent basis to reflect moneys not spent. Now, in traditional use of the term “savings” this would mean money left over after all your bills had been paid. This would mean moneys left over after financial management of a substantially qualitative basis so that you end up with additional funds that you did not have to expend on bills outstanding. Unfortunately, that is not what this savings is. In this case, when the Minister refers to “savings” all he is talking about, Madam Speaker, is money that he did not disburse. He would have allocated and did not disburse. As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Finance was asked in the Standing Finance Committee why he did not

disburse, the Minister was quick to advise that requests from the various agencies, from which he took this money that was allocated, were not forthcoming and therefore he believed that he ended up with a surplus. Madam Speaker, I am curious about that because there is a difference between allocation and disbursement as we all know, Madam Speaker. And I refer that specifically because the Minister would allocate funds in the annual budget; he has done so continuously for the last six years and we have several instances in Standing Finance Committee meetings, in sessions, where Ministers would come to the Parliament and advise that their requested money—did not get all that they asked for, they will make do and then they would come for a variation of appropriation at some other point in time.

So often the allocation and the disbursements are completely different. The Minister holds the trump card because if he does not disburse, funds will therefore not be expended by the Ministry or by the regional corporation or by the regional health facility. Funds will not be disbursed to them and therefore they have no money to pay contractors, et cetera, which has in fact been a consistent factor. So when the Minister says that these are “savings”, these are not real savings in true economic sense of the word. This is money that simply has not been given and in every instance in our—I am subject to correction by any Minister on the opposite side—in every instance in Ministries there are outstanding claims for payments of a substantial amount for years.

**Madam Speaker:** I get the point but remember we are not talking about Ministries in a vacuum or at large, we are talking about specific Ministries here and therefore it is not a question about what happens before, in prior years what other Ministries happen. Please condescend on the particulars before us.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Duly guided, Madam. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn specifically to the explanations given for these savings that the Minister has been claiming. Those explanations, Madam Speaker, were one-liners provided to the Standing Finance Committee. And I repeat for emphasis, Madam Speaker, that the absence of the answers to the questions what we raised then is what has forced us now to raise more questions. Madam Speaker, two-thirds or \$390 million of this unused money, which suddenly became available for transfer by the Minister, consisted of the refinancing of two loans. The first one was a \$230 million loan undertaken by UDeCOTT which matured and became due on September 14, 2021, and the second was 160 million—sorry, that became due on September 01, 2021, and the second was a \$160 million loan undertaken by eTecK Limited which matured and became due on September 14, 2021. Together that accounted for \$390 million not spent and therefore which was available for the Minister to transfer to whatever purposes and whatever use as he has described before. The question, Madam Speaker, was why—given that allocations were put in place, why did the Minister choose not to pay off these debts? Why did he choose to refinance them? That is a significant issue, Madam Speaker, because we have to look at the opportunity cost of refinancing. What is the benefit to the country? What is the benefit to taxpayers? How is it that we saved money, in the true sense of the word, by not paying off the debt but by refinancing?

When asked, Madam Speaker, the Minister's response in the Standing Finance Committee was trite. The Minister advised basically that this decision to refinance these loans was on the basis of an analysis of the Government's debt management strategy. So that they would look at the Government's cash flow, they would look at their revenues, they would look at the expenditures, and anticipated expenditure, and on the basis of that then decide whether or not they had sufficient

money to keep the country running or to pay existing bills and therefore they will decide whether they wanted to use that money to pay off existing bills or oncoming bills that they did not cater for or inadequately provided for, or whether they can pay off the debts that are due now. There is a concern, Madam Speaker, because there have been several reported incidents by the Minister himself where we keep pushing the can down the road in terms of debt restructuring and debt refinancing, and when we refinance these two loans in particular it means—and we took the money and the money has been used, according to the Minister, for payment of rent to his Cabinet colleague, et cetera, amongst other things. Refinancing actually comes with costs and it was one of the questions asked of the Minister, what were the actual costs to the taxpayers of refinancing? We have yet to learn, Madam Speaker, and I am hopeful that the Minister in his response, in his wind-up will provide that information.

I want to also put it on record, Madam Speaker, that the hon. Attorney General in the Standing Finance Committee advised the population of his conflict of interest in this particular matter and also voted. I would leave the ethical considerations for that right there but that is a matter, Madam Speaker, that I want to put on record that an issue was raised; the Member indicated his conflict of interest, as he should, and also voted to support this legislation, this Standing Finance Committee Report.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Madam Speaker, I rise with regard to a submission on 48(4), 48(6), imputing improper motives. It cannot be that you have done the correct thing and then a criticism such as that is borne.

**Madam Speaker:** And, Member, again I would rule in favour of the Attorney General. That is imputing improper motives. Okay? So I rule.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, I am duly guided. I stated my case already.



**Madam Speaker:** Member, it might be a particular style of speaking but I have ruled, and to say to me that, “I have said already what I have said”, that is not appropriate. So I will ask you to withdraw it.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, I humbly withdraw.

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you very much.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Thank you.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** [*Laughs*] Madam Speaker, as I indicated, refinancing comes with a cost, in particular in discussing the eTecK Limited loan the Minister was explicit in stating that the Government opted to borrow, and I quote:

“...an amount from another institution...”

Madam Speaker, it is no secret that the population already does not trust this Government and therefore in the interest of transparency the Minister has the opportunity today to provide in his wind-up to this debate some information to the national community for both the eTecK \$160 million loan, and the UDeCOTT \$230 million loan. Specifically, Madam Speaker, I want the Minister to advise the population, firstly, the name of the institution that provided the initial loan; the name of the institution whom the Government has now chosen for refinancing these loans; the selection criteria for these lending institutions specifically as it relates to these loans; whether any and to whom if any fees were paid including finance—finder’s fees; agents fees; agency fees; management fees and legal fees; the estimated opportunity cost of refinancing—

**Madam Speaker:** Again, Member, I think we are having a difficulty and again I will refer you to Standing Order 88(2). The refinancing is not an expenditure and we are not allowed in this debate to go into general principles. All right? So it is not that maybe what you are asking is not important but this is not the forum for it.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, if I therefore am to seek your clarification, questions were asked of the hon. Minister along the similar lines in the Standing Finance Committee. Those answers have not been provided and therefore we are being asked to debate in absent—

**Madam Speaker:** Member, if you noticed I allowed you an opportunity before I stood up. You are now seeking to widen the questions. The report says the questions and one was with respect to the institution and the other was with respect to the cost of refinancing. I believe the Minister was very specific in his response in saying he will give details on the impact. So I did not stand up when you identified those matters. You are now widening it. And as I said before, it may be important but it is not for this exercise.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Duly guided, Madam Speaker. In reference to those matters, all I can hope is that the Minister of Finance, at some point in time, will account to the population for the expenditure and the sources of expenditure as requested and provide the answers that were asked of him at the Standing Finance Committee so that the population will understand how these things have happened.

Madam Speaker, if I am to move on, the Government—the Minister also opted to take out of the allocation from CISL, the Community Improvement Services Limited, the sum of \$14.9 million. That money was allocated, according to the explanatory notes and the explanation provided by the Minister; it was for the purpose of paying operational costs but even then we have no indication of what those operational costs were about. Madam Speaker, as someone who represents a rural community which is barraged and savaged by flooding, et cetera, I am also curious as to find out how this money was allowed. Is it that CISL really did not request this money? Is it that there was no need for it?—because in my constituency there is desperate need for CISL and any other agency to step in and

resolve some of the issues that we have here, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I also note that the Ministry of Finance is asking this House to approve the removal of \$25 million from the ADB in 2021; the fund, as I indicated, certain expenditures outlined by the Minister, including the rental costs. But that represents 50 per cent of the allocation to the ADB by the Ministry of Finance. I find that incredulous, Madam Speaker. I find that incredulous because based on the Minister's discussion at the Standing Finance Committee, this would mean that the Agricultural Development Bank, based on his own logic, did not request this \$25 million. The Agricultural Development Bank did not ask for 50 per cent of its allocation to be given to them for reissue. On the basis of the Minister's discussion and argument it means that the loan portfolio of the ADB, new loan applications dropped by at least a half in the last fiscal year. That is an indictment against the Government for two reasons.

Madam Speaker, if I may; reason number one, if really there is a fall in the demand, as the Minister wants us to believe, for loans via the ADB by farmers, it means that really something is wrong with the Government's agricultural policy which is why it is not attracting persons into the sector. But more importantly, and the second issue, Madam Speaker, is I find this difficult to conceive given that, based on the Estimates of Expenditure in 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries actually spent more money than in 2020.

So whereas we are spending more money to develop agriculture, according to the Minister—according to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, in this case the Minister of Finance is saying that there is less demand for loans and therefore he has ended up with this savings. I am hopeful that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would be able to clarify this dichotomy of issues because the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is on record as saying that

we have had a substantial increase in agricultural production, and at this point in time during when—the period when this financing was required, several new loan initiatives were provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. So it appears that there was no buy-in by the population for access to this funding which is why the Minister now has \$25 million in his hands.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, again, this is not a debate about agriculture, about agriculture policy. Okay? And I believe even in the Standing Finance Committee when issues were asked with respect to agriculture, this is a question of—from the answers, and it is there in the report, is a question about loan funding and the applications for loan funding. Again, I caution you with respect to the nature of this debate.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, the Government's policy which would have resulted in a reduction in the demand for funds based on the Minister's allocation, which is why the Minister has—

**Madam Speaker:** And again, you are going into general principles which is not allowed.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Moving on, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I want to refer to the funding cut in GATE, also referred to by the Minister of Finance in his variation of appropriation; according to this Minister—and if I am allowed, Madam Speaker, I would like to read the explanation provided by the Minister to the Standing Finance Committee:

At the end of fiscal 2020 a balance of deposits remained available in the GATE fund. As a result, the entire sum allocated for deposit to the fund in fiscal 2021 was not utilized.

On the basis of that, the Minister has now moved \$80 million out of GATE to pay other bills that he had not catered for prior.

Madam Speaker, according to the Draft Estimates of Expenditure, 2022, the entire allocation for GATE in fiscal 2021 was \$400 million. The Minister in this approbation before the House today is seeking to move \$80 million out but is claiming, based on what he has provided to us here, that the entire sum allocated for deposit to the fund in fiscal 2021 was not utilized. Madam Speaker, I would like the Minister, when he has the opportunity, to explain what happened to the other \$320 million.

**Madam Speaker:** And again I like what you have said, “When he has the opportunity”, this is not the opportunity for that, Member. And, Member, this is the last time—I think I have expended my leniency. I think this is the last time I will stand and try to guide you.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I think—

**Mr. Hinds:** You need to sit down.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Laventille West, I would just caution you, we are about tolerance in here and respect.

**Mr. Hinds:** Right.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Laventille West, it might be your mike—it might be your mike.

**Mr. Hinds:** I so oblige you, Madam Speaker—oblige.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I wind up, Madam Speaker, I would like to advise that the Government has continued to provide very little explanation for the expenditures that they have undertaken, very, very little, has attempted, Madam Speaker, to constrain debate on issues raised for clarification, Madam Speaker. On that basis, Madam Speaker—

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member—

**Mr. D. Tancoo:**—I thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I will ask you to not just only withdraw, I will ask you to apologize for what you just said.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, I humbly withdraw and I apologize to the honourable House for my comments—

**Madam Speaker:** Okay.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:**—relating to the expenditure—

**Madam Speaker:** Member—

**Mr. D. Tancoo:**—and the lack of transparency.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member, when you apologize it is not tongue in cheek, and the person I am asking you to apologize to is to me because I have made certain rulings.

**Hon. Member:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Okay?

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, thank you. Madam Speaker, I wish to humbly apologize to you for my comments made with regard to—

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you very much.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:**—the funding and transparency.

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you very much. Are you finished?

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I am, Madam Speaker. I thank you very much.

**Madam Speaker:** All right. Minister of Public Administration.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):** Madam Speaker, I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to

this debate. I am here to address the issue of the adjustments to the allocations to the Personnel Department, the office of the Chief Personnel Officer. The Personnel Department is responsible for determining and advising on pay and terms and conditions of employment for employees in the public service estimated to be around 90,000 workers. The Department determines through consultation and negotiations with appropriate recognized majority unions and associations the terms and conditions of service for persons in the Civil Service, Statutory Authorities, the Teaching Service, the Public Service, the fire service and the prison service. The Department is also responsible for determination of terms and conditions of employment for members of the defence force, daily rated workers, contract employees and the provision of secretariat services and advising the Salaries Review Commission on the terms and conditions of employment for office holders within its purview, as well as providing secretariat services to the Human Resource Advisory Committee, a subcommittee of Cabinet for which the Department provides recommendations and advice to treat with organizations in the state sector.

The Department is also required to advise on a wide range of HR issues in the public service, including matters related to industrial relations. These matters before the Industrial Court, grievances and disputes, these include matters before the Industrial Court, grievances and disputes—

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, with due respect to the Minister, 48(1), please. This was said in the Standing Finance, her opening five minutes of what the Personnel Department is about.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Okay. So the fact that it was said in Standing Finance Committee does not mean it cannot be repeated here, but also, just for the guidance

of the Minister, while we understand the context, remember this is not a general debate and we are just really dealing with certain specific items and therefore I would ask you if you can go into the matter that is before us.

**Sen. The Hon. A. West:** Appreciate that, Madam Speaker. I was just setting the stage to discuss the specific adjustments. So I would just go straight to those.

Madam Speaker, the Personnel Department requested their allocation based on their estimate of what was expected to be expended in the year 2021 but was not—but that full allocation was not approved in the original allocation. The Budget Division was informed in writing in early January 2021, and March 2021, that the allocation provided under Head 17, Personnel Department, was insufficient to meet the expenditure for the financial year. Following the mid-year review, it was noted that no additional provision was made to Head 17, Personnel Department. The Minister of Finance was then informed by letter dated June 23, 2021, of the shortfall in the allocation. A meeting was held with representatives from the Budget Division and the Personnel Department regarding the options available to meet the expenditure.

In following those discussions, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance issued—arranged to have an issue—a warrant issued in the sum of \$13,249,936 to cover the shortfall in the following areas: Rental/Lease of Office and Other Accommodation, Fees, Other Contracted Services, Janitorial Services, all under the Recurrent Expenditure. Under PSIP the adjustments requested or the warrant was issued in respect of the following: conduct of a job evaluation and compensation exercise for the Civil Service and conduct of a job evaluation for officers within the purview of the SRC, totalling, as I indicated, \$13,249,936. However, the actual amount utilized by the Personnel Department from this warrant was \$8,640,671 allocated as follows: In respect of Rental and Lease of Accommodation,



\$2,192,433; Fees, \$67,800; Other Contracted Services, \$1,340,538; Janitorial Services, \$85,988.

In respect of the PSIP, the conduct of the job evaluation for the Civil Service, \$493,912.

**2.30 p.m.**

To provide some more context in respect of those adjustments, Madam Speaker, in respect of rental, the CPO's Department currently occupies four rental accommodations, down from a total of seven locations previously. As we would have indicated to this Parliament before, the CPO consolidated all of its office accommodation which was probably previously housed in four different locations, into one central location, and the three other properties currently being rented are rented for the storage of records as well as furniture and fixtures. The furniture and fixtures storage is there awaiting the Board of Surveys exercise, and the records, rental accommodation is being maintained pending the digitalization of the CPO's records and the location of a more permanent site to store the hard copies once that digitalization is completed.

In respect of the service fee, Madam Speaker, there was a small payment of 67,000 in respect of a support on—annual support on software in the amount of \$67,000.

“Other Contracted Services” in large part related to payment for an exercise being conducted by KR Services to review the Government's group health plan for both monthly and daily paid employees. The Government is seeking to ensure that it is receiving value for money in that regard, and/or to the extent that improvements can be effected to that plan.

With respect to Janitorial Services, there was an additional amount required to settle the fees due to MTS for the services provided to the Ministry over the

course of the year, and that amount was \$790,000.

Under the PSIP programme, as I had previously indicated, and my colleague, the Minister of Finance, in laying the Motion, indicated that a job evaluation is being conducted in respect of the civil service. The allocation previously received was not adequate to cover the cost of the work undertaken during the course of 2021, so a supplemental amount was requested and received. The total of that was in the region of 4 million—was in the region of \$5 million—no sorry, \$4,953,912—sorry, \$4,953,912. Down slightly because some of the deliverables were being questioned, and so that was rolled over into 2022.

With respect to the other PSIP programme, Madam Speaker, no further disbursement was made under this warrant, because the services that the CPO expected to receive under that contract were not delivered in a manner that the CPO found satisfactory. So, Madam Speaker, that explains the variation that occurred and approval for which is being sought today.

I will reiterate, the CPO did an adequate estimation of his needs and put in the request, and what he has done consistently since then, is try to ensure that he receives the releases from the Treasury so that he can meet his expenses and continue to do his work. The CPO has been doing yeoman service for the public service and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and the expenditure he is incurring is reasonable, in all the circumstances, to get the job done and to ensure that the terms and conditions and other contractual relationships are being serviced.

*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, again 48(1), with all due respect. This is not about the CPO. The Minister is going wide, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, I will just give you a little leeway to tie in.

**Sen. The Hon. A. West:** Yes, Madam Speaker. I was merely wrapping up. So

those are the explanations for the adjustments for this unit, and I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to explain them, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Chaguanas East.

**Ms. Vandana Mohit** (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity, as I rise to contribute to this debate on this Motion, and I rise today with a heavy heart to contribute to this debate.

Madam Speaker, in listening to the Minister of Finance, I am not sure if I heard correctly, but the Minister of Finance stated that he was not sure Members understand the amount of money spent in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. But, Madam Speaker, today I say we on this side totally understand the need for special emphasis in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Why, Madam Speaker? Because we understand the effects of the pandemic on the vulnerable as serious in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we understand that when our women and mothers are taking the streets asking for help for foodstuff, special emphasis is needed for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Madam Speaker, when our women have reached a stage of asking whether they are invisible, and they are stating the need for gender responsive recovery in terms of budget preparation, we understand the need for emphasis in the social sector.

Madam Speaker, when the Government is continuously reviewing grants that give families sometimes last hope, or give women in this country purchasing power, we understand that there is a need for emphasis in the social sector.

Madam Speaker, and in listening to the Minister of Finance, you know, sometimes we on this side wonder when they speak about safety nets, whether safety is even considered by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Government's harsh actions towards the poor and vulnerable are manifested in this Standing Finance Committee Report today. Because, Madam Speaker, this is an area where any caring government would demonstrate support and relief towards those affected.

Today we have before us the Standing Finance Committee Report which under Head 78, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the variation states:

For additional moneys for the purposes of payments of Senior Citizens Pensions, Disability Assistance Grants and Social Assistance Grants.

You would see that on page 4 of the SFC Report, and as my focus is clear today, Madam Speaker, on the social development Ministry, I want to say that this report reflects incompetence.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, the reason why I am saying incompetence, is that it is founded on the simple fact that if the Government knew what it was doing, there would be no need for us to be here for this purpose today.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, I just want to reflect briefly on some allocations as it relates to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, that will not be allowed. I ask all Members, before they rise to contribute, to become familiar with Standing Order 87 and Standing Order 88, which really circumscribes what we are about here. Again, this is not about general principles, about general policies. It is about the specific details of the Heads of Expenditure before us. I think, Member, you have already outlined for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services the expenditure and where it went. So that is where you are going to be confined.

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Yes. Madam Speaker, and I will be very clear, it relates to the \$531 million. So, Madam Speaker, we have before us this report seeking the approval to vary upwards by the sum of \$531 million which, in essence, is really the same figure as of 2020. But, Madam Speaker, moving on as it relates to that figure, it clearly shows that this was the sum of money, the total estimates needed for this particular fiscal year of 2021.

So, Madam Speaker, in terms of the report and what this report reflects, I would say that it is a cover-up of the obvious neglect and maltreatment of the poor and vulnerable in this country. When I say that, I state further that it is an attack on senior citizens of this country. The reason and the use of such a strong statement, Madam Speaker, is predicated on the fact that this variation seeks to address the shortfall for senior citizens pension, social assistance and disability grant as reflected in pages 22 to 24 in terms of the verbatim Minutes.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services at the Standing Finance Committee meeting, mentioned, when asked, that this was to deal with a shortfall. But previously in other SFCs the Minister clearly indicated that under the fiscal year 2021, 2,624 outstanding cases for senior citizens pension were awaiting investigation and/or approval. So, by common logic, moneys would have been required to fund such.

Madam Speaker, briefly, what is also mind-boggling is that under the line Item of Social Assistance reflected here as well in this SFC, we must also remember that income support grants phase one and phase two, those were paid under this particular Item. With phase 2, 1,158 grants being paid, a total, and 7,000 persons being rejected for the income support grants paid under this particular line Item, and that is very mind-boggling.

Madam Speaker, what these things clearly demonstrate is that the Minister

with responsibility for pensions and social assistance was not monitoring the status of the Ministry's allocation, which is clear, which is a clear indication of incompetence, as stated before, and lack of rudimentary public sector accounting know-how. Because, Madam Speaker, although you have increasing applications, as stated by the Minister in the Standing Finance Committee, you must cater for and expect increasing applications, because persons ages are changing and so on every year and, obviously, you are going to have additional persons. So you cannot cater the same funding each year. In addition to that, Madam Speaker, these are established services of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So falling into a shortfall should not be an excuse for these services under this Ministry.

Madam Speaker, as I try my best to keep it tight in terms of what is being discussed, the Minister mentioned review on programmes, in terms of all grants within the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. But, Madam Speaker, looking at this \$531 million, how much review, and how much more review as it pertains to grants and support coming from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services?

In fiscal 2021, the Minister made it clear that disability grants would have been reviewed in the second quarter, which was completed. So this is simply lack of planning and incompetence.

So as I move on, and I would have mentioned as it relates to the Senior Citizens Pension, Disability Assistance Grants, Social Assistance Grants, I want to say in closing that, Madam Speaker, this is a mere bookkeeping exercise to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. However, what is reflective in this accounting task are simply a few things: Incompetence, failure to budget properly for this Ministry, which is crucial to the operations during a pandemic for the

Government of Trinidad and Tobago. What it also reflects is wrong priorities, because coming for additional funding for these services which are established services of this Ministry, surely signifies wrong priorities by the Government.

Madam Speaker, this report also reflects: review, review, review, lack of support, reduction in support and, most of all, deceit because you have reviews—

**Madam Speaker:** Could you say what word you used, Member?

**Mr. Young:** What word you just read?

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Deceit.

**Madam Speaker:** Deceit?

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Yes.

**Madam Speaker:** I ask you to withdraw that word.

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Sure, Madam Speaker. I withdraw humbly, and I say that this reflects reviews when reviews have already been done by the Government in terms of these services.

So, Madam Speaker, based on the foregoing, what is gleaned is that the Government continues to be intolerant and uncaring to the poor and vulnerable in a decaying society, where every day the poor become poorer, and doom and gloom engulfs the entire population. I thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** The Attorney General.

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

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Before I begin, may I just be reminded, is it 20 minutes?

**Madam Speaker:** Twenty minutes.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Much obliged. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to join in this Motion to adopt the Report of the Standing Finance Committee. Of course, we also have the Bill

before us, which is traditionally not debated, and which sets out with clear terms and positions that which is to come after the report is accepted. That is, of course, the variation of sums the issue of which has been authorized by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) by the 2020 Act.

I have come to speak specifically and pointedly to the issue of the increases for the Judiciary. As is required, insofar as this is a report, the parliamentary rules dictate that if a Member has an interest to be declared then a Member ought to declare that interest. Therefore, I declare an interest, in part of the subject matter before this House, insofar that there are four properties that there are variations in respect of, and one of which I have an interest in, not the other three, as it relates to the Personnel Department.

Madam Speaker, in relation to the variation of appropriation for the Judiciary, as we speak pointedly to those factors, there are three matters before us that are the subject of this report. Pointedly, number one, the move from the Security Vote of the sum of 22.6-odd million, specifically to pay for contract salaries and licensing committees and, therefore, the need to supplement in terms of the variation, where that money came from. That is, the moneys which were taken from the Vote entitled Security.

Secondly, to treat with telephony and Internet and other provisions from Internet service providers, and that is of course in data transmission, some \$6.1-odd million. Lastly, the concept of Rent, Accommodation and Storage, where insufficient funds were provided to meet that Vote, Rental Accommodation for Courts and Court Operations, and where supplemental funds were required from the particular other areas.

So, Madam Speaker, permit me to put this into context. What is the context? We just heard from the hon. Member last who contributed, who said that the



Government has done nothing, as per her allegation, for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I would like to demonstrate why that was an anemic submission on the part of the hon. Member. I say so with the greatest of respect, because we in the Government, and particularly the Office of the Attorney General, could never think that the provision of justice, as I speak to this part of the variation, could ever be other than for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member who last spoke said that women and vulnerable people were categorized as invisible, but visibility is to be found in the very expenditure that we are looking at now, for the provision of contract salaries as it relates to justice for women and the vulnerable.

It was this Government in ensuring that \$22.62 million in this Item was spent on contract salaries across the Criminal Division, the Children's Division, the Family Division. And, Madam Speaker, I would remind in the context of a very narrow relevance to this debate, that the Opposition did not support the vast majority of this work.

So when we look at \$22,622,000, spent across nearly 1,000 jobs created in the Judiciary, by the birthing of the Criminal Division where the Domestic Violence Act has come under reform under this Government, under my hand as Attorney General—

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, 48(1). The Attorney General just stated that it is a very tight debate, and he is going all over the Judiciary. Madam Speaker, 48(1).

**Madam Speaker:** I overrule. It is in response to something. He is tying it in response to something that was made by the speaker before him.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. So for the benefit of all, particularly my friend from Pointe-a-Pierre, who may have been nodding off

perhaps, Security, 22.622893.93, in this debate on these papers for contract salaries in the Judiciary, which we are discussing here. Madam Speaker, he must at least pay attention.

Madam Speaker, when we are treating with contract salaries for the Judiciary to this appropriation, and in answer to the Member for Chaguanas East, I must say that visibility to the trauma in domestic violence is what we are treating. I wish to signal the gratitude of the Government, and I am sure of every right-thinking person, as we deal with the Item of Security as we are varying the appropriation to \$22.62 million, as we are looking to that, I would like to say thank you to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Gender-Based Violence Unit there. The Judiciary that we are paying contract officers for in this debate today, because now the visibility of domestic violence is to be found in a courtroom at midnight on a laptop, where a judicial officer can provide a protection officer. So I denounce the submissions coming from Chaguanas East. I would like the hon. Members opposite to pay attention to the material before them in this House.

You see, Madam Speaker, when we look to the meeting under the Security Vote, we vired the moneys that we are seeking to transfer here today in this report. We are dealing with 39 courtrooms, 22 in Trinidad, 17 in Tobago. It is that sum of some \$23-odd million that we are seeking to shore up in this report today. But, Madam Speaker, that does not even include the O'Meara courts, which are at the cusp of opening now for jury trials, or the Waterfront courts in respect to which there is—but I will not go further into that, because I would be outside—

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, 48(1)—48(1) please. I would ask for a ruling.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so, Attorney General, I think you anticipated the objection, and I uphold the objection. So I hope you are not going any further.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Sure, sure, of course, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you very much.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** My friends I am sure have to try to find something to say to be relevant. I am confident that the \$22.6 million that we are talking about here, in terms of addressing the issues of justice in our society, in terms of ensuring that we have an appropriate expenditure for the right reasons, must be acknowledged, and not the fabrication and tissue of submissions that we hear from the other side, in particular today.

Madam Speaker, let us turn to the second Item, which is Telephones. We see \$6.1-odd million being attributed in this committee's report, this Motion to adopt this report, where we had insufficient funds to meet the obligations for network data transmission and other telecommunications infrastructure. This is as a direct result of the COVID pandemic, but more particularly, it is because we were prudent enough in 2016 and in 2017 and 2018, to lay the legislative reform and operationalize the telecommunications environment in the Judiciary, so that we could have virtual courts running throughout the pandemic, 24 hours a day in terms of access.

Therefore, in direct answer to the Member for Chaguanas East, it is to definitely deliver justice to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that this expenditure of \$6.1-odd million becomes acutely relevant. Madam Speaker, I, again, wish to offer congratulations to the Judiciary, to the many entities that have operated, our IT department at the Office of the Attorney General in ensuring that there has been a seamless provision of ICT technology to underwrite these improvements and functionalities.

I would remind that in the context of this expenditure for ICT of \$6.1 million, that none of this existed prior to this Government's tenure. Let me repeat that: None of this existed and, therefore, I make the humble submission in the

relevance of this report in this Item of \$6.1 million, that we are definitely on the right track in terms of a very relevant relief for the citizens of our country. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, let us turn to Rent, Accommodation and Storage at the Judiciary. This is the third Item comprising the \$35-odd million that we are speaking about. In Rent, Accommodation and Storage, we are looking at \$6.5 million-odd. It is a matter of record that insufficient funds were provided to meet the rental accommodation for courts and court operations. I want to remind that a court is now down to a judicial officer. We do not have the concept of a court being a room. The virtual room is now facilitated by Microsoft Teams, so that a judge can sit at home, a defence attorney at home, a prosecutor in the office, a witness in a virtual access centre or in the prison. Therefore, we have multiplied the facility of justice down to every single judicial officer.

So not only do we have 39 buildings that we are treating with under this Item of \$6.5 million, where the shortfall was noted, but we are now ensuring that there are hundreds of other opportunities, part of which was met under the ICT Vote for \$6.1 million, part of it met in the contract personnel for \$23 million, Madam Speaker. You see, when you connect the contract officers and the \$23 million, you connect the ICT and technology under \$6.1 million, and you connect it with the rental and accommodation, only the blind, or perhaps the Opposition, would not see the relevance of justice being delivered for all in a time when it is most necessary.

So, Madam Speaker, this is demonstration of the opposite of what Chaguanas East spoke about. This is demonstration of foresight. This is demonstration of having done the groundwork long in advance. The Family and Children Division Act was born in 2015 and 2016, applicable to these Items. So

when we look to the expenditure that we have before us today, the staffing by way of contract personnel to \$23 million, the ICT for those contract personnel to operate—

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, 55(1)(b), the Attorney General is being repetitive and tedious.

**3.00 p.m.**

**Madam Speaker:** So, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, I understand you might find it tedious and I thank you for inviting me to share your view. I, however, disagree. Please continue.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Thank you. The ICT for this functionality to operate in, the Rental and Accommodation, Storage. And, Madam Speaker, you know, we are going to get to the point where you will continue to see dropping of figures on that last item as we progress ahead. That is for another debate.

**Madam Speaker:** [*Inaudible*]—Attorney General, remember we are in a very narrow corridor here.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Of course, Madam Speaker, I am very alive to the narrow functions of this debate and staying comfortably within those boundaries, Madam Speaker, I assure you.

So, Madam Speaker, this is an exercise in proper purpose. I wish to thank hon. Members for their attention, for those who are recently joining the waking world in this debate. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, opposite, my dear friend, I am sure that he is now elucidated, enlightened as to the propriety of the purpose that we exercise here today, Madam Speaker, if only for the fact that he has had the opportunity to exercise himself a few times by jumping up when not yet required.

So, Madam Speaker, with nothing more, in terms of positive, to add to this debate, I thank you for this opportunity for this short contribution.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Princes Town.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Barry Padarath** (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to the Motion before the House in terms of the Standing Finance Committee Report. Madam, I am very mindful of the restrictions in terms of what we are dealing with and I would like to say on the onset that there are three particular matters that I would like to address and raise in terms of getting a sense of clarity from the Member for Diego Martin North/East, Minister of Finance, when he responds.

Madam Speaker, being the first one, the Minister of Finance when he spoke and he dealt with the issue of the allocation for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Minister was at pains to focus with respect to the report on the issue of the Senior Citizens Grant. And that grant we were told by the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, when the Minister came for the Standing Finance Committee Report, that an additional 2,000 persons have been brought on to the register of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services over the last year.

But the Minister of Finance, when the Minister piloted the Motion, Madam Speaker, the Minister said—and I am paraphrasing—but he said that they were looking carefully and paying close attention to the senior citizens pension because the Minister alluded that this cost keeps moving astronomically in terms of the amount of persons who are now eligible and so on, from 4 billion to now where we are at 5 billion. The majority of the 531 million that will now go to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services after the Standing Finance Committee Report would be for the area of this Senior Citizens Grant that was referred to as old age pension.

The question that I really have for the Minister, in light of the Minister's comments and what we were told in the Standing Finance Committee, is whether or not Government has any intention—and the Minister of Social Development and Family Services in the Standing Finance Committee did allude to that there is being—there will be a review in terms of the eligibility of these grants. But in particular, with respect to the Senior Citizens Grant, whether or not the Government, as policy, in terms of what we are seeing happening today in terms of that movement of that 531 million going—

**Madam Speaker:** Member—and I am so happy that you started off your contribution by recognizing the narrow parameters, so I am not going to allow you to deal with general policy or—

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Sure.

**Madam Speaker:**—prospective policy. All right?

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Certainly. Madam, the 531 million that we are now going to see to the Senior Citizens Grant takes it up to about 5 billion for this fiscal year. And in terms of the Minister's comment, where the Minister was piloting the Motion, the question is whether or not the Government will be changing the criteria and removing the eligibility age from 65 to further up—

**Madam Speaker:** Again—

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—based on what the Minister—

**Madam Speaker:** Member, again, what we are talking about here is the actual expenditure that has occurred. When you are talking about review and the eligibility, you are talking about something in the future. That is my understanding. So again, I caution you and I really would not like to rise on that matter again.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Certainly, Madam, I will move away from that point that was made in the Standing Finance Committee on page 23 of the Report. Madam

Speaker, the hon. Attorney General dealt with some of the areas that fall under the Judiciary and the hon. Attorney General spoke specifically about the \$22 million that would now go to the Judiciary with respect to the payment of additional staff and so on. And the hon. Attorney General made some very interesting comments when he spoke about the \$22 million that will be utilized by the Judiciary. And it is a habit of the Attorney General to say that the Opposition does not support legislation that supports women and children. And the hon. Attorney General made that comment again. Madam Speaker, the records will show that the majority of legislation that was brought to deal with the protection of women and children, as dealt with by the Member for San Fernando West a short while ago, has been supported by Members of the Opposition from the Chief Whip all the way down to the last Member on this Bench as it relates to the protection of women and girls in this country.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Attorney General, when he spoke about that \$22 million that we are dealing with today that will go towards staffing at the Judiciary, the hon. Attorney General failed to indicate that despite all of these hirings and the additional persons that have been brought on at the Judiciary, a lot of the legislation that the Attorney General just spoke of has been ineffective, Madam Speaker.

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1), Standing Order 87 and Standing Order 88. Thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay. So I uphold on Standing Order 48(1). Anything about legislation would have been tangential. I am not going to allow the debate to develop on that. We are looking purely at the fiscal matters.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Thank you, Madam. I was only dealing with the comments made by the hon. Attorney General.



**Madam Speaker:** There is no need, after I have ruled, for somebody to explain because I have already ruled.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Noted, Madam. Madam, in light of the 22 million that will now be shifted to the Judiciary to deal with the personnel that will be hired or has been already hired, it does not reflect the work that should be done in terms of effecting a lot of the policy. So 22 million is now being placed in the Judiciary to hire these additional persons but it does not reflect what the hon. Attorney General calls a success or savings.

Madam Speaker, on the final issue, I want to deal with some of the matters that were raised by the Member—sorry, the Minister of Public Administration. And I know the Minister of Public Administration dealt with the issues of what the allocation would do in terms of the Ministry of Public Administration, in terms of these job evaluations. The hon. Minister when she spoke earlier did tell us that these job evaluations will also affect the areas of the SRC and the digitalization of the Ministry, Madam Speaker. These are some of the areas that we have not seen any sort of results despite the injection of continued funding, Madam Speaker. And while the Minister spoke about these job evaluations that will be done with the funding that will now be supplemented and varied, Madam Speaker, these are things that have already passed and we are seeing very little results coming out of it.

Madam Speaker, there was also an area in the Ministry of Public Utilities where we received a bundle of documents coming from the Standing Finance Committee and it had to do with the Ministry of Public Utilities—

**Madam Speaker:** Member, are you dealing with transfers?

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Yes.

**Madam Speaker:** Transfers is not—[*Inaudible*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Okay, Madam, I will move onto that point—from that point, sorry, and just to say in summary that the three areas that I was most concerned about had to do with the Minister's comments in relation to what we were told by the Minister of Social Development and Family Services in the Standing Finance Committee with respect to the review, the criteria and whether or not Government would be increasing the age of pension and then whether that is something that they are looking at.

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 55(1)(b), that whole Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been already gone through by MP Mohit and everyone else; 55(1)(b), please.

**Madam Speaker:** All right. And thank you for inviting me, Member for St. Joseph. I will give you some leeway. But remember what we are talking about is the expenditure.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Yes, Madam.

**Madam Speaker:** I am hearing you asking about other policy things and we understand—

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Certainly.

**Madam Speaker:**—where we are with that.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Yes, Madam. Madam, moving from that Ministry onto the Judiciary where we have seen a variation and in dealing with the 22 million, we have already discussed the concerns there in terms of the Attorney General spoke about IT and connectivity and these virtual courts and so on, Madam, where these funds will be injected or have already been injected. We look forward to seeing the results coming out of this variation. Suffice it to say that there has been very little that we have seen in the public domain. And with respect to the Ministry of Public Administration, the three areas that the Minister spoke about, the job evaluations,

the SRC and the digitalization within the context of the shift of moneys going into these votes in the Ministry of Public Administration, we are yet to get any sort of fleshing out coming from Members of Government.

And I really want to say, Madam, when you turn to page 9 of the Standing Finance Committee Report, page 9—and I know the Member for Oropouche West—and I will not belabour the point, Madam, because I understand that we are very restricted. But when you turn to page 9 of the report, it deals with the questions and the Minister of Finance in the Standing Finance Committee appeared to be very unprepared. And again today, when we thought that the Minister had some additional time, the Minister started off his presentation by sharing with us that he had mandated members of his Ministry to respond and to prepare the answers. We are now at 10 after three in the afternoon, Madam Speaker. The Standing Finance Committee was last week Friday and the Member for San Fernando West spoke about the Opposition being blind but we have been totally blindsided by the Member for Diego Martin North/East who himself seems to be very unprepared—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—last Friday and it is a continuation today. Madam Speaker, in any civilized society, in any democracy, in any Parliament in the world this could not have happened where the Opposition is being asked to contribute to the adoption of the Standing Finance Committee Report, and, Madam, if you turn page 9 of the report, the 99 per cent of what we are dealing with in terms of transfers, in terms of variations and in terms of savings—what the Minister calls savings but really was the underutilization of the funds—has not been answered. It has been not answered.

So today we are really being blindsided by the Member for Diego Martin

North/East. But in the context of where we are being asked to support the adoption of this Report of the Standing Finance Committee, the Member himself has failed to articulate why we are doing what we are doing today and why it is necessary for these funds to be shifted from these various Heads when it appears as though it is being done in a very ad hoc manner, Madam Speaker.

So I am hoping that the Member for Diego Martin North/East will be better prepared and will be able to answer some of the challenges on page 9 of the Standing Finance Committee Report. It is an insult to the Parliament and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago when a quarter after three, we are debating this Motion and we cannot get any answers from the Ministry of Finance, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, if it is anything that is an insult to the Chair and to the representatives of the people is that coming from the Member for Diego Martin North/East which is a clear demonstration of either the Minister is totally unprepared or the Minister is incompetent at what he is doing. So with those words, Madam Speaker, I thank you.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am glad that we have reached this point very quickly today so that we could dispense with this procedural matter, the closing of the accounts for fiscal 2021. I have received some of the answers to the questions posed on Friday and I will provide the responses that I have received at this point in time.

With respect to one of them, Madam Speaker, it appears to me that the communication sent to the Ministry may have been inaccurate and if it is, I will endeavour to get the accurate question. The question posed was: How many persons accessed GATE funding in fiscal 2020? But I rather suspect it should have

been fiscal 2021. So that is the question sent to us and the response I received was that 26,665 persons accessed GATE funding in fiscal 2020. And I will also get the information for fiscal 2021 and send that to Members. And that is a significant amount of persons, Madam Speaker. Let me repeat, 26,665 persons accessed GATE funding in fiscal 2020.

With respect to the question on TTMF, I am advised that TTMF had sufficient funds to fund its operations for 2021.

With respect to the question on the UDeCOTT loan, the institution that was used to refinance the \$230 million loan to UDeCOTT was First Citizens Bank. With respect to the effect of the loan, it had no effect on our net debt to GDP and they are currently calculating whether there was any effect on interest. Because one has to remember, as I said on Friday, that if we had paid this cash, we would have incurred interest on the overdraft at the Central Bank and that has to be weighed up on any interest charges that might be due on the refinanced loan.

Similarly, with respect to Evolving TecKnologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited, the effect of the loan, no effect on net debt to GDP ratio and again they are calculating for me what would have been the effect of using the Government's overdraft which has an interest charge associated with it versus the refinancing interest charge.

With respect to what project the 160 million loan to Evolving TecKnologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited was intended to finance, I am advised that this loan was to meet funding requirements associated with the development and management of the operationalization of the Vanguard Hotel Limited. Now, this would have been quite sometime in the past that those arrangements would have been made. That Vanguard Hotel is now what is called the Magdalena Hotel in Tobago. And those are the answers to the questions that I

have at this point in time.

With respect to the other points made, I want to reiterate that the expenditure in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services that has been supplemented by the additional \$500-odd million is \$5 billion a year or more. And that the expenditure on senior citizens pension is \$4 billion. That is a huge amount. So therefore, I reject the histrionics of the Member for Chaguanas East. Any country of the size of Trinidad and Tobago that spends \$5 billion a year on social grants has to be among the leaders in the world in terms of the amount of money it spends on taking care of the poor and the vulnerable. In fact, I am told Trinidad and Tobago is a world leader in terms of the amount of money that we spend taking care of our senior citizens, the disabled and the socially disadvantaged. It is not to use a colloquialism. Five billion dollars, Madam Speaker, is not chick feed. It is a huge sum of money and of that \$4 billion—and I will repeat this as much as is necessary—is spent on assisting over 100,000 senior citizens in terms of a senior citizens pension.

With respect to the other points raised, as you yourself, Madam Speaker, has pointed out, this is an extremely narrow debate. There were questions asked. The questions have been answered as far as is practicable within the time frame. And as I indicated, I have given an undertaking that I will provide the number of recipients of GATE funding in 2021 as well. And with those few words, Madam Speaker, I beg to move.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this House adopt the Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Second Session (2021/2022), Twelfth Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Variation of

Appropriation for the fiscal year 2021.

**FINANCE (VARIATION OF APPROPRIATION)  
(FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2022**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you Madam Speaker, I beg to move:

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

Madam Speaker, as is customary, the matters that are of significance with respect to this variation have been already been addressed at the Standing Finance Committee and also in the debate just concluded on the Motion to adopt the Report of the Standing Finance Committee. And as is customary therefore, Madam Speaker, I beg to move.

*Question proposed.*

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre):** Madam Speaker, I would not be talking more than five minutes. Can I stay here with the mask?

**Madam Speaker:** Once it is not more than five minutes.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** I am going to stop you at five minutes.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Yes, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I just thank you and just allow me to put on the records that based on this Bill, that the Opposition took part in the debate when we debated on the Standing Finance Committee Report as moved and mentioned by the Minister of Finance. So with those few words, Madam Speaker, I thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you so much, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Minister of Finance.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I wish to thank the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre for being so brief. At least one Member of the Opposition understands what we are about today and I beg to move.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 87(2), I now beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to vary the appropriation of sums, the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020 and varied by the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2021, be forthwith read a third time and passed.

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

*Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.*

**Madam Speaker:** Leader of the House.

### ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday 28 January, that day being—at 1.30 p.m.—that day being Private Members' Day, I ask my colleague to indicate what we shall be doing.

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, well, on Private Members' Day on Friday we will be debating Motion No. 6 on our private members' business moved by the Member for Naparima.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, there is one matter that qualifies to be raised on the Motion on the Adjournment of the House. I now call upon the Member for



Adjournment

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Chaguanas East.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Food Support Programme  
(Government's Reviewing Process)**

**Ms. Vandana Mohit** (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I rise to raise a matter on the adjournment which reads: the need for the Government to properly explain to the population the process for reviewing the Food Support Programme.

Madam Speaker, in light of the recent public pronouncement by the Minister of Social Development and Family Services regarding reviewing the Food Support Programme, I am here to ask today that the House and by extension, the population, be provided with a process map as regards to the review process of the Food Support Programme.

Madam Speaker, since the public utterances and document which circulated as it relates to the Food Support Programme, wherein it was stated that the programme would be suspended pending a review but the Minister later clarified that the programme will be reviewed and not suspended.

Madam Speaker, following that, my office, along with several other colleagues' MP offices on this side, would have been inundated with queries, with concerns and disbelief by potentially affected persons. Madam Speaker, because you see, when matters such as these arise for reviews in such a critical programme, we have persons—and it was stated in the document in terms of persons receiving the Disability Grant, Senior Citizens Pension and the Social Assistance Grants, et cetera, to review them with a view of removing them from the Food Support Programme. But, Madam Speaker, as we are aware, some persons receiving disability, when they have a rent to pay and then—when they have rent to pay and they pay their rent, they sort of rely on the food support.

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So, Madam Speaker, these queries, as I raised, revolve around whether a new criteria listing would be implemented causing some persons to be disqualified for the Food Support Programme. And, Madam Speaker, the hysteria and panic that pervade those persons is a manifestation that the country is replete with hungry persons despite them being categorized as hungry.

Madam Speaker, therefore, I have undertaken some research into the review process over the past few years as it relates to the Food Support Programme and it reflects—since these reports that I would have reviewed on the *Hansard*, et cetera, reflect that review would have been taking place in the Food Support Programme since 2016. And the latest report up to 2020, review would have been taking place until then.

Madam Speaker, and in addition to that, by the Government's own admission, that due to continuous review of the Food Support Programme, it has resulted in a reduction in the number of persons meeting the qualifying criteria for food cards and this has also resulted in a savings of approximately \$105,200,000 under the Food Support Programme. So, Madam Speaker, dare I ask the question, what is the need for—why is there a need for a review?

**3.30 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, this afternoon I am here to ask, whether—or can the Minister indicate since continuous review has been undertaken, whether a new means test will be required, whether additional documentation would be required, and whether new information on the status of the household, given the current societal order are also now required? We are seeking some clarification on the process. Madam Speaker, additionally, of greater concerns for such persons is when the programme will be normalized since recipients are currently fearful to utilize the existing cards? I am sure MPs, Members in this House would have

encountered such. So, Madam Speaker, as it relates to this, we are seeking some clarification and explanation as it relates to the population understanding the process for the review of the Food Support Programme. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** I now call upon the Minister of Planning and Development.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):**

Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, you may recall that prior to the advent of the People's National Movement in office between the years 2010 to 2015 there was a scandal which developed with regard to the use of food cards by Ministers of Government and other Members of Parliament, where it became very obvious that food cards were not necessarily being given to those who were really in need. As a matter of fact, the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East was one of the persons who worked in that part of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and I am sure the Member is well aware of these issues, so I am quite surprised that the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East is asking these questions, because she is well aware that there was quite a racket that was taking place with regard to food cards.

Madam Speaker, as you may know, the Parliament was apprised of this, and the facts were that there had to be a number of people who were taken off this food card or Food Support Programme, given the fact that they did not meet the criteria. We had reports of police officers, teachers, other persons who were in a particular bracket, who did not qualify for food support during the 2010 to 2015 period, but there were persons who did not qualify and were given food support. Madam Speaker, what this Government sought to do was ensure that only those people who qualified for food support were in fact given that kind of support. We have

spent, Madam Speaker, what would probably amount to hundreds of millions of dollars giving food support to those who were desperately in need of that kind of support, and over the years the Food Support Programme has consistently been re-examined for two reasons:

- (1) to ensure that the right persons were being given the kind of support that the food card provides; and
- (2) to ensure that persons who had improved their standing no longer needed this kind of support.

Madam Speaker, the policy is, that after a period of time on food support recipients are consistently re-examined to see if their circumstances have changed, and once their circumstances have changed and they are doing better financially they are taken off food support. The current situation is again, a re-examination of those persons who are on food support, and also an examination to determine whether or not we need to increase the amount of funding that is given for food support, given the changes that are taking place in the supermarkets with the price of food and so on. And, Madam Speaker, there is nothing underhand or deleterious about what is being done. It is still being done in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:** And the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is one Ministry that ensures that those persons who are most in need are properly taken care of, not only for food support but the Disability Grant, the Senior Citizens Grant. The Disability Grant has been increased to include a wider range of persons who can access this grant. The same thing with the Senior Citizens Grant. This is the Ministry that ensure that there is a Funeral Grant available to those who cannot, unfortunately, pay to bury their decease. Madam

Food Support Programme  
Hon. C. Robinson-Regis (cont'd)

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Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has continuously worked in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and with specific reference to food support we have moved away from what took place between 2010 and 2015 where persons who did not deserve to be on this kind of support have been moved off the system. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 3.37 p.m.*