

**SENATE**

*Monday, October 18, 2021*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**A PROCLAMATION**

**The Clerk:** A Proclamation by Her Excellency Paula-Mae Weekes, ORTT, President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

“WHEREAS it is provided by subsection (1) of section 67 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that each session of Parliament shall be held at such place within Trinidad and Tobago and shall commence at such time as the President may by Proclamation appoint:

Now, therefore, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, do hereby appoint the Red House, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, as the place at which the Second Session of the Twelfth Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago shall continue, with any Member, if necessary, being present virtually with the approval of the Speaker of the House of Representatives or the President of the Senate, as the case may be, during the outbreak of a dangerous infectious disease in Trinidad and Tobago.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of  
the President of the Republic of  
Trinidad and Tobago, at the Office  
of the President, St. Ann’s, this 1st  
day of October, 2021.”

[*National Anthem played*]

**UNREVISED**

### LEAVE OF ABSENCE

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne, who is out of the country. I have not yet received the instrument of appointment and, therefore, I will revert to this item on the Order Paper at a later stage.

### COVID-19 SAFETY MEASURES (ACCOMMODATION ARRANGEMENTS)

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I have today advised the Leaders of the Benches and the coordinator, through the Clerk of the Senate, that there has been a revision to the COVID-19 safety measures in this Chamber. Effective today, the attendance of Members in the Chamber will immediately revert to the original accommodation arrangements. Accordingly, all Senators can now be physically present in the Chamber, while strictly observing the physical distancing requirements.

Members are reminded that this also means that the three-minute grace period for the assembling of Members for divisions will be discontinued. All other COVID-19 safety measures at the Parliament remain in effect. Hon. Senators, I thank you all for your cooperation. [*Interruption*]

### SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I am now in receipt of the Instrument.

Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from Her Excellency The President, Paula-Mae Weekes, ORTT:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Her Excellency PAULA-MAE WEEKES,  
O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of Trinidad

and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the  
Armed Forces.

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes  
President.

TO: MR. NDALE YOUNG

WHEREAS Senator Dr. Amery Browne is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, NDALE YOUNG to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 and continuing during the absence of Senator The Honourable Dr. Amery Browne from Trinidad and Tobago.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the  
President of the Republic of Trinidad  
and Tobago at the Office of the  
President, St. Ann's, this 18<sup>th</sup> day of  
October, 2021."

### **OATH OF AFFIRMATION**

*Senator Ndale Young took and subscribed the Oath of Affirmation as required by law.*

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

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2022, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

**UNREVISED**

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **PAPERS LAID**

1. Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Extension of Period for Payment of Fifty Percent of Fixed Penalty) (No. 3) Order, 2021. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan)*]
2. Annual Report of the National Infrastructure Development Company Limited for the year 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan*]
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Works and Transport to the Second Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Vehicle Management Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial years 2013 and 2014. [*Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan*]  
Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Digital Transformation to the Fourth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Information and Communication Technology Company Limited for the financial years 2015 to 2019. [*The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus)*]
4. Annual Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards for the period 2017/2018. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)*]
5. Annual Administrative Report of the National Flour Mills for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

6. Annual Administrative Report of the Statutory Authorities Service Commission for the period October 2019 to September 2020. [*The Vice-President (Sen. Nigel de Freitas)*]
7. Report on the Fourth withdrawal in the amount of US \$100,000,000.00 from the Trinidad and Tobago Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in accordance with Section 15A3 of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, Chapter 70:09 as amended for the period May to June, 2021. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat)*]
8. Report on the Fifth withdrawal in the amount of US \$100,000,000.00 from the Trinidad and Tobago Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in accordance with Section 15A3 of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, Chapter 70:09 as amended for the period May to June, 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
9. Consolidated Financial Statements of Caribbean Airlines Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2015. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
10. Annual Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Solid Waste Management Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2018. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
11. Annual Audited Financial Statements of National Quarries Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
12. Annual Audited Financial Statements of National Quarries Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
13. Annual Audited Financial Statements of National Quarries Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2018. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]

14. Annual Audited Financial Statements of National Quarries Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
15. Consolidated Financial Statements of Trinidad and Tobago National Petroleum Marketing Company Limited for the financial year ended March 31, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
16. Consolidated Financial Statements of Evolving TecKnologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
17. Annual Audited Financial Statements of MIC-Institute of Technology formerly Metal Industries Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
18. Annual Audited Financial Statements of Portfolio Credit Management Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
19. Annual Audited Financial Statements of Youth Training and Employment Partnership Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
20. Annual Audited Financial Statements of Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended March 31, 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
21. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the First Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on a Continuation Inquiry into measures for ensuring water security in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]

22. Value Added Tax (Amendment to Schedule 2) Order, 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
23. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to the Third Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial years 2016 to 2018. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
24. Annual Report of the Equal Opportunity Commission for the year 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
25. Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
26. Draft Estimates – Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
27. Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
28. Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the financial year 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
29. Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
30. Social Sector Investment Programme 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
31. Public Sector Investment Programme 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
32. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
33. Review of the Economy 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]

**BUDGET SPEAKING DEBATE**

**Madam President:** Leader of Government Business.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Madam President, further to the Motion passed on Tuesday, September 14, 2021, in relation to speaking time during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and following discussions with the Leader and coordinator of the Benches opposite, I beg to move that pursuant to Standing Order 43(1), the speaking time limit for speeches in debates be restored for the debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2021, only. Thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

**Madam President:** Minister of Finance. Minister, may I remind you, you have 45 minutes.

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

That a Bill to provide for service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended on the 30th day of September, 2022, but now read a second time.

Madam President, the Bill before the House seeks to appropriate the sum of \$43,805,107,455, for the service of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2022.

It should be noted that this appropriation does not include direct charges, which do not need to be appropriated and, therefore, the 2022 budget is, in fact, \$52.3 billion, with revenue of 43 billion, thereby resulting in an estimated fiscal deficit of \$9 billion.

This year's budget is against the backdrop of our budget theme which is, "Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic". I would not go into any great detail



on the measures taken by the Government after the COVID-19 pandemic reached our country in March 2020, except to say that, based on the regular updates from the Minister of Health, I observed that recently within the last couple of days we crossed a threshold of 40 per cent of our population being fully vaccinated. When one takes into account the fact that at present one cannot vaccinate children between the ages of one month and 12 years, then one would see that the actual numbers of persons, or the actual percentage of persons, between the ages of 12 upwards, is significantly more than 40 per cent.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate all those who are responsible for our vaccination programme, both in the public sector and in the private sector, all those who have assisted us, all our frontline workers both in the health sector and in the other frontline areas, such as the police service and other essential services.

When I read the budget statement in the other place, I was able to say at that time, a couple of weeks ago, that over one million doses of WHO-approved vaccines had been administered in Trinidad and Tobago at that time. The number continues to increase on a regular basis, and it is significantly more than one million at this time. I can give you some numbers, Madam President.

The number of persons who have been partially vaccinated is 609,136, and the number of persons who have been fully vaccinated is 564,703, and that is the information I have received as of Friday the 15<sup>th</sup> of October.

So, again, I would like to place our gratitude and our appreciation on all of the persons who have been responsible for this significant vaccination programme. I dare say that we are quite ahead of a number of other countries in the region. There were some countries that were ahead of us, we have caught up with them,

and as I look at these numbers every day the numbers continue to rise, and one hopes, as we move into 2022, that we will continue with an aggressive vaccination programme. That is our intention; that is our plan. We have more than enough vaccines to do that.

We still have approximately 800,000 doses of approved WHO vaccines in stock, and we also have access to a significant additional number of COVID-19 WHO-approved vaccines, if such is required. We have access to a significant number of Johnson & Johnson single-shot vaccines, over 600,000 of those are still available to us, and we also have access to additional vaccines through the COVAX allowance, and also based on donations from countries such as the United States.

So in terms of vaccine availability and capacity to vaccinate our population, we are in an extremely good place. Our issue now is to deal with vaccine hesitancy, but I have observed that since the United States announced that it would accept all WHO-approved vaccines as an essential prerequisite for travelling to the United States, that there has certainly been an uptick in vaccination, and one hopes that this will continue.

With respect to the EU, the EU is still working through its vaccine passport regime. The United Kingdom has recently relaxed its requirements with respect to Trinidad and Tobago, and if I look at what the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom is saying, I would think that there would be further relaxations as we go along.

So that this budget is in the context of a full reopening of the economy in the year 2022 but, of course, that is dependent on the success of our vaccination programme. I would urge all Members to assist with that programme. I know that

many Members have been doing that, and I thank them for that, and I would urge them to continue to assist all of us with respect to reaching the WHO target of 70 per cent of our population being fully vaccinated as quickly as possible.

I also would not go into any great detail on the COVID-19 relief measures that we have provided in 2020 and 2021. I think that is well publicized in the public domain, and it involved a number of grants, income support, salary relief, rental support, food support. It involved collaboration with the religious bodies in terms of providing them with the funds to do distribution of food among their various congregations. It involved a small business loan facility, which we have improved. The new SME loan facility that will be implemented very shortly, within a matter of days, if not weeks, now provides 100 per cent Government guarantee for these loans.

We have extended the period of the repayment from five years to seven years. The interest rate remains at zero, the Government pays the interest. There is a two-year moratorium on payments of principal so that the small businesses do not have to start repaying this facility until year three. We have extended the options or the range of things that the loans can be used for, from basic operational expenses, payroll support and so on, to the purchase of equipment and machinery and business expansion. Limiting it, of course, to things like the purchase of personal vehicles; the loan is not for that. It is to support businesses and to help them to get back on their feet.

We have lowered the threshold at the lower end to \$500,000, as the qualification for the Small and Medium Enterprise Guaranteed Loan Facility, Phase 2, as it is called, and increased the upper limit to 25 million. So all SMEs with an annual turnover of 500,000 or up to 25million, can now apply for this loan

facility.

We have also relaxed the statutory requirements. We recognized that with COVID, it was difficult for many businesses, and in particular small businesses, to be up-to-date with their statutory obligations for one reason or another. So that we have pushed back the cut-off to the end of December 2018, so that once the businesses are up-to-date with their tax, income tax, value added tax and national insurance payments up to the end of 2018, they will qualify. That was one of the problems that we had before, that businesses could not qualify, because they could not provide evidence of being up-to-date with their statutory obligations. We will now give the businesses one year to come up-to-date for 2019 and 2020, and if they fail to do that within that one year, they would have to pay off the full amount of the loan within a two-year period.

That small and medium enterprise loan facility, the “enhanced model”, if I call it that, was based on considerable discussion with stakeholders, which were progressed on our behalf by the Central Bank and other market actors who had discussions with all of the various business organizations, with the banks, to determine what had prevented small businesses from accessing the Phase I loan facility, and these are the enhancements that have come out of it. They wanted a longer time to repay. They wanted more support from the Government, in terms of Government guarantee. They could not, or many of them could not come up-to-date right away, in terms of their statutory obligations, and they also would want to use the facility to upgrade their business, buy equipment and machinery and so on.

**10.30 a.m.**

So all of this new facility has come out of that. And as I said, we expect that within the next couple of days, if not, next couple of weeks, that Phase II facility

will be sorted out. It is—the legal documents are being vetted at this time; the banks are ready to go.

With respect to the reopening of the economy, you would have heard, Madam President, the safe-zone initiative implemented on 11<sup>th</sup> October. And this initiative permits betting shops, bars, gyms, private member clubs, restaurants where all staff are fully vaccinated to operate as safe zones and only fully vaccinated people can visit. And you may have heard the hon. Prime Minister over the weekend talk about further relaxation of some of the COVID-19 restrictions.

With respect to our foreign exchange position, Madam President, we currently have reserves of just over US \$7 billion or 8.7 months of import cover and our reserves were boosted recently by a general allocation of Special Drawing Rights by the IMF to the world. And the total allocation of Special Drawing Rights was US \$650 billion. And the actual Special Drawing Rights that a country gets is based on its shares with the IMF. And our share out of that is \$650 million Trinidad—sorry, US dollars. The SDR is currency created by the IMF. It is a basket of currencies and when you convert it you will get US \$650 million in additional SDRs were made available to Trinidad and Tobago. And the first obvious thing that occurs when you get an SDR allocation is your foreign reserves are boosted by the amount and it can be used for all sorts of things, to reduce your foreign debt, to finance expenditure and to ease liquidity constraint in your country.

In terms the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, that is 5.—US \$5.6 the same amount as it was in September 2015 six years ago. So that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund has maintained its value. And all we have done over the last six years is withdraw the income, the interest earned by the fund. We have not

withdrawn any of the principal that was standing in the fund in September of 2015.

With respect to the performance of the economy in 2021, in 2020 because of the shock of the pandemic, we faced and we are still facing, Madam President, an unprecedented situation in Trinidad and Tobago where we have a dual shock of a health crisis and an economic crisis, and no other Government has had to face that before. Previously you have had health shocks on their own or economic shocks on their own but we have both, and it has created tremendous instability in the world in 2020, one. And just before the pandemic hit, you would have seen also, Madam President, what happened to oil prices. There was the unprecedented, again, situation where the price of West Texas Intermediate oil dropped to zero and then went into negative territory in the early part of 2020. Fortunately, oil prices have recovered. It took a while. It took a while for them to get back up to \$10 and \$20 and so on, and as a result Heritage Petroleum stored its oil. It did not sell it because it was costing more than \$20 to produce the oil. Heritage's price of lifting oil is somewhere in the US \$ 27 range, so that Heritage waited until the price got up to \$28 or \$29 and started to sell again so that there would be no loss on the production of oil.

Fortunately, as I now speak, Madam Speaker, again—Madam President, sorry, I apologize. As again there has been an unbelievable increase in the price of oil. Nobody expected this but it is as a result of the disruption to supply chains, disruption to infrastructure, disruption to investment in exploration and production creating a demand for oil as the world recovered out of the pandemic and economies needed hydrocarbons to rebuild their economies. So as I look at my application here on my phone today, the price of Brent is \$85.27, and the price of WTI is \$83 and nobody would have expected that one year ago. And the

predictions were that oil would remain in 40s and the 50s for the foreseeable future. We are now seeing going forward quite a bright picture for oil which is also assisting with oil production, giving incentives for oil production and also the price of natural gas has literally doubled over the last year, Madam President. We had some very dark moments there a couple years ago when the price of natural gas dropped below \$2 down to \$1.75 on \$1.80 and so on. As I look again today, it is \$5.41 and in recent times it has crossed \$6. And we in Trinidad and Tobago now have the advantage of being able to earn revenue from a basket of natural gas pieces, not just Henry Hub which is what I quoted there at \$5.41 but also the European benchmark which has crossed \$10 and heading for \$15, and the Japanese, the Far East benchmark which is over \$20. In fact, I heard the other day it had gone up as at \$50. I could not believe that but apparently it is so.

So that we get oil—we get revenue from a basket; those are the terms negotiated by the hon. Prime Minister and the other members of his team when they went on a number of foreign trips over the last several years. They negotiated a revenue-sharing mechanism which is based on a formula which applies the price of natural gas in the Far East, the price of natural gas in Europe and the price of natural gas in the United States. And therefore, with those unprecedented prices in the Far East and in Europe, we will be getting some extraordinary revenue from the oil and gas majors in this year 2022.

The revenue expectation for 2022 is about \$6 billion more than 2021 at \$43 billion. Our revenue for 2021 was \$37 billion. So at 43, we are expecting about \$6 billion more, most of which will come from the energy sector. But we also expect improved efficiency as the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority is established. We expect improved efficiency in tax collections so that a number of persons who

are currently outside of tax net at this time will pay their fair share of taxes.

We have also passed the gambling and gaming commission legislation in this place and the other place. The board will be appointed soon, the commission. In fact, I am finalizing the potential names for that board right now for submission for the consideration of Cabinet. And that gaming commission should be up and running in terms of establishing its procedure, engaging in hiring of staff, you know, determining where it will be accommodated and so on. So that in 2022 we do expect significant improvement in revenue from the gaming and gambling sector.

We are also continuing with our programme of gathering information for the ultimate collection of property tax. And as I said in the other place, what is taking place at this point in time is an information-gathering exercise being undertaken by the Valuations Division, essentially by the Commissioner of Valuations. It is a public service-led exercise. It is not driven by the Minister of Finance. It is being driven by the Valuations Division in order to create what is called the valuation rolls or the property rolls, because before you can impose property tax, you have to have populated the rolls. And the rolls essentially will have a description of the properties, the location, age, size, type, that sort of thing, and we have to reach 50 per cent of the number of properties in any category whether it is residential, agricultural, commercial. We are not doing industrial at this point in time. Industrial will come afterwards; maybe later in the year they would initiate an information-gathering exercise for industrial properties. And once the rolls are populated, then the formula for imposing a tax is quite simple. And let us just—let me give an example.

If someone has, owns a property which could rent for \$3,000 a month or



\$36,000 a year, the tax is calculated by taking that amount, the \$36,000 a year multiplying it by 0.9 to remove what is called the voids and other areas in the property that are not used, so you come down to \$32,400 and then you multiply that by 3 per cent. For a residential property you get about a \$1,000, so that the—and that is per year. So that the property tax on a property of that type which is quite a few properties in Trinidad and Tobago for persons at the lower income which is somewhere around \$80, \$90 a month.

For larger properties, properties that might rent for \$10,000, if I do the same calculation I would get about three times that. So the property tax area of \$3,000 per year or \$250 per month for a property that rents for \$10,000 a month. So that is the plan for property tax. And we expect that at some point in time during fiscal 2022 we can begin, initiate the process of collecting the property tax. So those are three new revenue streams: the enhanced revenue coming out of the new Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority, the improved revenue coming out of the gambling and gaming commission and the resumption of the collection of tax on properties which is really just land and building tax in another name which we have had in Trinidad and Tobago since the year 1900—have been collecting tax on property in Trinidad and Tobago for over 100 years. And, in fact, if one looks at the history of property tax around the world, property tax has been collected for over 6,000 years in some countries.

If I move now back to the economic performance, as I indicated there was quite a lot of economic disturbance in the year 2020, so that the decline in the economy in that year is estimated now at 7.4 per cent. The decline for the world when one looks, uses the IMF literature, one sees the decline for all countries in the world was somewhere between 9 and 11 per cent. So Trinidad and Tobago's -.74

was not out of sync with what was happening in the world. And if we look at other countries in the Caribbean, the Barbados economy declined by 18 per cent, St. Kitts 17 per cent and so on. So that we did not suffer as badly as our member countries in Caricom. Their economic decline was almost twice as bad or more, than us. We expect in 2022, because of the relaxation of the lockdown measures and the resumption of economic activity, we expect in 2021 that the rate of decline will decelerate from 7.4 per cent in 2020 to just about 1 per cent in 2021 and we expect quite a strong economic recovery in 2022 for many different reasons. One would be the full reopening of the economy and the other would be the improved conditions in the energy sector.

With respect to our credit ratings, we were able to reaffirm our investment grade rating from Standard & Poor's. For the second year of the pandemic we were able to do that in 2020 and we did it again in 2021. That was not an easy task at all. And just for reference, our credit rating with Standard & Poor's is better than a number of countries in the region and I think I better read them out. We are better than the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Barbados, Belize, Grenada, Brazil, Paraguay, Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela. So that Trinidad and Tobago's rating is among the best in the Latin American and Caribbean region and is the best in Caricom by far.

And just to reiterate the point I made just now. Panama suffered a negative 17.9 per cent economic contraction in 2020 and Peru's economy contracted by 11.1 per cent; St. Lucia contracted by 18.9 per cent; St. Kitts and Nevis 18.7 per cent; Barbados negative 18 per cent; Antigua negative 17.3 per cent and Jamaica a negative 10.2 per cent.

In terms of inflation we are still enjoying a stable low-inflation environment or less than 2 per cent for quite some time now as a result of our policies of maintaining a stable exchange rate. As a comparison if I look around the region, Brazil, Mexico and Peru experienced relatively high inflation rates within recent years, 10.4 per cent in Brazil, 5.8 per cent in Mexico and 5 per cent in Peru. If I look at our work plan going forward, Madam President—and how much more time do I have?

**Madam President:** You finish at three minutes past 11. It is 10.46 right now.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Okay. About 18 minutes. Thank you. If I move forward now in terms of institutional building, our plan is to come to the Parliament with legislative amendments for the Unit Trust Corporation to give it more flexibility to maximize the returns on its investment portfolio.

And I spoke about the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. And I might just say that we are satisfied that the way we have gone about creating the legislation for the Revenue Authority by the establishment of a separate enforcement division comprised of public officers appointed by the Public Service Commission reporting to the Public Service Commission for discipline and so on, that we are not departing from what currently obtains with the current arrangements. And we are giving public officers at the Board of Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise a range of options for them to select such as: redeployment within the public service, retirement, transfer to the new Revenue Authority and so on and there will be consultations with all concerned to ensure as orderly a transition process as possible.

As I just mentioned before, we are also moving to establish the gaming control commission and we believe that this \$16billion industry, because that is

what it is, Madam President, it generates 16, one-six billion dollars in income in any given year. And right now the tax that is collected from this sector is a pittance and we believe that with properly regulated sector, a proper licensing regime, we would get the kind of revenue we should be getting from that sector which has been estimated as much as \$500 million per year, which is not that much. It is just a couple percentage points, 3 per cent of the turnover in that industry.

In terms of the situation with mortgages, we are moving to merge the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company and the Home Mortgage Bank, create a new entity called the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Bank and we will be making an initial public offer of government shares in this entity to encourage public participation in the capital market. That is expected to be completed in fiscal 2022 and would provide much more flexibility for persons accessing mortgages.

With respect to procurement, I laid in the Parliament 10 individual regulations in July of 2021. We put them out for public comment. We have gotten some comments, not a lot. Those comments have been sent to the regulator and on the completion of this budget exercise we will be coming to the Parliament to debate the regulations for the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act so that we can proclaim the operational sections of that Act and get the new procurement system going.

With respect to fuel liberalization we have made amendments, as you would know, Madam President, to the Petroleum Act, the Petroleum Production Levy and Subsidy Act via the Finance Act of 2021 in July. And in there we put a commence provision, so that law is not yet enforced. And as I indicated in the other place, the liberalization of fuel prices will go hand in hand with a new assistance regime for the most vulnerable in the society, a fuel cash card.

With respect to trade and investment promotion, we are developing a trade and investment promotion agency to remove the current duplication among the 13 entities that currently function in the sphere of trade and investment. For the first step is to merge InvesTT and ExporTT to restructure the country's trade and investment institutional arrangements. And this new agency will be built on the same principle of the Single Electronic Window reducing the need for multiple visits to multiple agencies to conduct business.

With respect to the international financial centre, we have given a new mandate which is to develop financial technology, Fintech as it called, Fintech services as we move towards a cashless society. And the mandate we have given the international financial centre is to assist us to accelerate digitization of payments across the Government through the enablement of multiple electronic funds transfer methods across all receivers of revenue within the public sector. So the plan is that all government payments can be online and can be done electronically.

We also have given the international financial centre a mandate to facilitate investment opportunities through the development of a Fintech hub in Trinidad and Tobago. With respect to digital transformation, this an area of focus of this Government, we will expand our current public Wi-Fi system, TT Wi-Fi and the intention is to roll out additional public Wi-Fi at all transport hubs, libraries, schools, health facilities.

We also plan to increase the number of ICT access centres particularly in rural areas or undeveloped areas where persons can go and get Internet services at one of these centres. The current number is six centres. Our plan is to increase that to 50 by the end of fiscal 2022. We also will be pushing hard into digital skills

training with a target of 12,000 persons to receive technology training at the ICT access centres and also of that 12,000, 2,000 under an arrangement with the Microsoft philanthropic group. Broadband service will also be provided in underserved communities. The plan for 2022 is to connect, at least, 25 underserved communities and the plan is, as we move along, to fully connect Trinidad and Tobago digitally.

We also intend to create a digital developer hub together with the private sector and academia and small developers to establish a platform for the development of software and applications and to introduce digital wallets to speed up the whole process of transactions and facilitate cashless transactions. Those are some of the things that we plan to do. We also intend to create a digital ID, national digital ID for every citizen so that this ID can be used to access government services and reduce bureaucracy and red tape.

With respect to construction, we have received approval for a loan from the Development Bank of Latin America CAF in the order of US \$175million just over TT \$1 billion and this will be used for air, sea and land transport infrastructure. Some of the projects that are due for completion or commencement will be the completion of the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway extension to Manzanilla, first phase that is. Commencement and construction of the Valencia to Toco Road, the Solomon Hochoy extension to Point Fortin, completion of a vehicular and pedestrian overpass in Diego Martin and commencement of construction of the Macoya interchange.

In Tobago we are continuing with the construction of the new terminal building at the ANR Robinson International Airport. At this time we are also upgrading the existing terminal for improved services. So that while the new

terminal is under construction, the existing terminal is to be upgraded or is being upgraded as we speak to a much better facility providing much better facilities for both domestic and local travellers—international travellers, sorry, both domestic and international travellers.

The Toco port, the environmental impact assessment study is in progress and once that is satisfactorily completed, then we will move towards the Toco port. I will not give a time frame for that. And just to say that the EIA is in progress.

In Moruga the fishing port and grand facilities—fishing port and facilities at Gran Chemin will bring improved facilities for the fishing communities in that area La Ruffin, Marac and Gran Chemin.

We are also planning a government funded marina in Tobago, in south west Tobago in the area of Cove Canoe Bay which will be funded by the Government in the first instance and should improve tourism significantly in Tobago.

There is also a significant amount of coastal protection taking place and to take place in both Trinidad and in Tobago. With respect to the port, a request for information has been issued seeking experience in international shipping business, cargo handling and for seeking information from experienced international shipping businesses, cargo handling, cruise shipping businesses to enter into a public/private partnership with the Port Authority.

There is quite a bit on agriculture. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is in this House and because of limited time, I will leave that for the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to deal with. Similarly—

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Yeah. Similarly with respect to tourism and trade and industry.

So just to sum up, the total revenue \$43.3 billion, total expenditure \$52.4

billion, fiscal deficit 9.1, I am rounding off. The major allocations for 2022 are education and training 6.9; health 6.4 billion; national security 5.7 billion; works and transport 3.6 billion; public utilities 2.7 billion; rural development 1.7 billion; agriculture 1.24 billion; housing, 600—and quite a bit of housing will be financing other ways.

**11.00 a.m.**

With respect to the fiscal measures, these are all available on the Ministry of Finance's website, but there are a number of them:

- Tax relief or tax reductions for significant exporters of local goods;
- Tax reduction for small and medium companies involved in technology and digitization;
- Tax concessions or tax relief for start-up companies in the digital and technology solutions area;
- Tax concessions for companies involved in research and development;
- Tax concessions for companies involved in enhanced oil recovery and carbon capture.

I spoke of the SME loan facility previously, but we are also moving to improve the junior stock exchange to provide significant tax relief for small and medium enterprises that list on the junior stock exchange to encourage them to grow and to become more disciplined. To protect our nation's infrastructure the fines under the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act for overweight trucks will be increased significantly. For the manufacturing sectors:

- We again are offering a tax reduction for companies involved in manufacturing, excluding petrochemicals.
- We are reducing the withholding tax rate to encourage foreign



investment.

- We are employing 100 audit and compliance officers, recent graduates.
- Increasing the allowance for first-time homeowners on mortgage interest from 25,000 to 30,000.
- Increasing the allowance for approved pension fund and annuity contributions from 50,000 to 60,000 to encourage people to save.
- Taking all taxes off electric vehicles, battery-powered electric vehicles with an age limit on used battery-powered electric vehicles of two years.
- We are giving a tax allowance to companies that invest in restoration of our heritage properties.
- We are waiving all taxes on therapy equipment for the disabled.
- We are offering 10 million shares of FCB in a public offering.
- And we are giving enhanced utility rebates and moving to a fuel card and a utility cash card for persons at the lowest end of the spectrum to help them to pay their utility bills and their gas bill.
- And finally, we are removing VAT on the most common items purchased in the supermarket by ordinary people—some 45 items.

And with those few words, Madam President, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question proposed.*

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark. Sen. Mark, I remind you, you have 40 minutes.

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Madam. Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me the opportunity to contribute in what is perhaps the most critical

budget debate in the history of our Republic. We have carefully reviewed what the Minister of Finance has presented to this nation this morning as well as on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October. Having done so, we must conclude and agree with the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Leader of the Opposition, in her brilliant contribution to the budget, when she said, and I quote, that budget 2022 is nothing but:

“...a declaration of war...”—by this incompetent [*Desk thumping*] Government—“...on the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.”

Madam President, for the past six years this Government has inflicted the most brutal and severe pain on our population. They have kicked down and cuffed up the workers of our once glorious energy sector, throwing thousands of them on the unemployment garbage heap. They have beaten and abused the owners of small businesses struggling to keep their livelihoods intact. They have degraded and abused the members of the public service, the police service and the health service. Now after six years of brutality, pain and suffering, they have now come with what our Leader of the Opposition has described as a weaponized budget. A budget meant to inflict maximum injury on the people of this nation while they simultaneously enrich themselves, their family and their financiers. But budget 2022 is not just a weapon to rob the people of our nation. It is also the get-away car this Government intends to use to drive away with our national patrimony.

Madam President, while they drive away in a luxury car the people of our nation are left penniless on a road to nowhere. Whilst they enrich themselves, their family and their financiers, they have put Trinidad and Tobago on a road to a dead end. In this budget debate it brings me no pleasure to record that our country is enduring a constitutional calamity that will have untold and rippling effects throughout every sector of our society, including our economy. There is no greater

single impediment to economic prosperity than the erosion of the rule of law, and there has been no greater threat to the rule of law than this Government. Let me repeat, Madam President, so that the country's chief lawmaker whose incompetence is the sole cause for this calamity which has befallen our great Republic, could appreciate the gravity and seriousness of his hubris.

Madam President, there is no greater risk to economic prosperity than the erosion of the rule of law. It is a fact that our economy depends heavily on foreign direct investment. Madam President, which foreign investor would want to inject capital into a country that cannot even select a Commissioner of Police? Currently, there is a whole new exciting industry being developed called Space Tourism. Private companies are now testing rockets, and the ability to take paying customers into space. That is what is happening now elsewhere in the world. So in other places, companies are taking persons to the edge of earth's atmosphere, meanwhile in Trinidad and Tobago a merit list from the Police Service Commission cannot even travel from the President's House to the Parliament. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, which foreign investor would want to invest money in a country where the chief lawmaker cannot draft the simplest of documents much less for being able to draft the complex financial and regulatory framework that foreign investors require to ensure protection on their investment?

Madam President, which foreign investor would want to invest in a country where that same incompetent chief law drafter uses Parliament to make unfounded accusations against a Member of Parliament, and then is forced to promptly apologize? I say this now to the Minister of Finance: of all the measures that the Minister may have in his budget, the most important measure that the Minister could introduce as a tax is to tax the chief lawmaker on every case that he has lost.

Madam President, we should not have to worry about property tax after that. With that money we could buy everybody in this country a Porsche Cayenne. Madam President, our country's Constitution, the rule of law and democracy is under siege. It is facing an unprecedented assault, whether by design or through inadvertent incompetence, people have lost faith in our independent institutions. It is these institutions that underpin our prosperity by ensuring confidence in our economy. Madam President, our position is dire that we no longer speak about their independence, because the institutions no longer exist. We have no Commissioner of Police, we have no Police Service Commission, we have an Attorney General's Office without competent leadership, we have an unknown, we have an unknown public official that is a puppet master manipulating constitutional processes, and we have a President, who I will not mention, because the Standing Orders do not permit me to impeach that officer.

Madam President, let me make it abundantly clear, our economic problems do not exist in isolation, they do not exist in a vacuum. If investors and citizens have no confidence in our institutions, then they would have no confidence in our economy. If investors think that there is a political conspiracy to appoint a puppet Commissioner of Police, then they will not invest for fear of political prosecution. If investors are not convinced that this Government has the political strength and will to remove the obvious source of incompetence from their ranks they will not invest. Madam President, a budget is not simply a proposal by the Government on how they intend to spend taxpayers' money. It is also an account for moneys that have already been spent. And as we saw in the other place, when I looked on television, when it was time to account for how they have spent taxpayers' money, many Government Ministers including the Prime Minister suddenly were unable to

do. I wondered, Madam President, if they got an attack of Pip. So they pipped the budget debate there because they do not want to account to the people.

Madam President, I would like to say that several assumptions underlying this budget are unrealistic and impractical, whether it is the revenue side of the budget, the inflationary side of the budget, the expenditure side of the budget, the fiscal deficit side, the oil and gas output side of the budget, they are unrealistic, and as such the budget is doomed to failure. Madam President, let us look at some of the things this Government with the same Minister of Finance promised during the last budget. The Minister informed us that he was going to introduce a tech investment fund and a tech promotion and development company which would act as a catalyst to grow the IT economy. Madam President, nothing has happened with that initiative. This year the Minister has come back with the same empty promise of a digital transformation policy. Madam President, the Ministry of digitization, as the Leader of the Opposition said, does not even have a website established to date. Madam President, you know what they call those who use the Internet to con people? They call them spammers. And that is what the Minister is doing. He does not have a digital plan.

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. W. Mark:** He is just spamming.

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes, Madam.

**Madam President:** I have allowed you for some time now to make your contribution, but your language is somewhat inflammatory, and I need to remind you as well of Standing Order 46(8). Okay?

**Sen. W. Mark:** Madam President, I thank you. Madam President, we are saying

that the Government is just spamming the population, and we should call this Government a click-bait government. Last year the Government promised that it was going to introduce a new service delivery model that would include improvements such as getting a passport in two weeks. Nothing has happened. Forget passports, today people in large parts of this country will feel lucky if they get water in their pipes once every two weeks. Last year the Minister promised aluminium, the aluminium industry would be revisited to foster downstream aluminium production. Nothing has happened. The only industry this Minister is fostering is the Government's own smokescreen industry. Last year the Minister promised that a new smart model was going to be introduced this year for the construction sector. Madam President, that was supposed to bring about a smart-growth programme utilizing a smart-growth score card. Well, that smart model was really a smart-man model, because like a smart man that model disappeared.

This is why we say the budget of 2022 is a PNM road to nowhere. The budget did not do what it said it was going to do last year, Madam President. And the Minister comes back this year to take this country for a ride once again. Whilst the Minister continues to take us on this road to nowhere, the nation and the economy hurdle towards catastrophe. Our public institutions, the rule of law and our democracy continue to be attacked and assaulted, including the Police Service Commission. The office of the Police Commissioner, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, the Integrity Commission, the Teaching Service Commission, the churches, the trade union movement, among others, Madam President, too numerous to mention. The only institution this Government has not assaulted is the St. Ann's Hospital, and I am sure they will get to that soon. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, this incompetent and inept Government has boasted and congratulated itself in the budget statement presented by the Minister of stabilizing this economy. What stabilization is the Minister referring to? Here are the blunt and stubborn facts. The country's rating has been on a continuous slide since 2016 with Moody's rating falling to BAA-2 in 2016, to then BA-1 in 2017, which is a sub-investment grade similar to junk status. Madam President, just as they turned the once mighty Petrotrin refinery into a junk yard, so they have turned our entire economy to junk status. The Minister was keen to remind us in his budget statement that the Moody's rating was stable. But, Madam President, it is a stable junk rating. It is like telling somebody after they crashed their car, "don't worry, the car is now stable". But, Madam President, that means that the car is not going anywhere. The Standard & Poor's rating was moved from A to BB minus, just one step away from junk rating. This incompetent Government has converted a pristine investment grade rating from two leading credit agencies in the world to junk, and the Government calls it stabilizing the economy.

This is why, Madam President, we are saying that the Minister is mamaguying the people, and this budget is a road to nowhere filled with PNM potholes. The country's foreign reserves have fallen from US 10.4 billion in September of 2015 when the Minister took office to US 7.1 billion. The debt to GDP has now deteriorated to over 90 per cent, and we are predicting before the end of this year, because of the amount of borrowing this Government has engaged in, it will pass 100 per cent. Absolutely no attention to the areas that we need to address. Whether the rankings are tainted or not. These include issues around the ease of starting a new business, and the ease of obtaining permits, the protection of property rights, difficulties with enforcing contracts among others.

Madam President, under the watch of this hapless Minister, the country has experienced six consecutive years of economic contraction or negative economic growth. The data has revealed that in 2018 there was a 0.1 per cent growth rate that the Minister is now boasting about. But then again, Madam President, this is the same Government that has a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a bus shed and a standpipe. So it is no surprise that it is boasting about a 0.1 per cent growth. Imagine a growth rate of one-tenth of 1 per cent is the reason for celebration. The *Review of the Economy* shows a revision of the number for 2018 to minus 0.7 per cent. So even in that year there was a contraction. So the Minister has presided continually over a contracting economy. Madam President, sometimes I wonder if this Government is deliberately making the economy small so it can look or feel big. The truth is, that economic output has been falling continuously under this Government. Real GDP has contracted in critical sectors of the economy long before COVID-19.

Between 2016 and 2019 agriculture contracted by 12.2 per cent, mining contracted by 20.8 per cent, the manufacturing sector contracted by 6.7 per cent, whilst the construction sector by 13.3 per cent. Overall the economy contracted by 9.9 per cent in real terms between the periods '16 to '19. When the contraction in 2020 is considered, the economy would have contracted by 17.3 per cent since this Government came into office, and in particular, agriculture by 13 per cent, mining by 32.2 per cent, manufacturing by 17.1 per cent, and construction by 22.6 per cent. The energy sector, the main driver of our economy in the past, Madam President, has been completely decimated. Petrotrin has been shut down, Atlantic LNG has been shut for several months. Over 400 million wasted in an upgrade which is still unaccountable for, whilst petrochemical plants at Point Lisas have



been shuttered for several months. Gas output which was 3.8 billion standard cubic feet, under the PP administration fell to 2.7 billion standard cubic feet; oil output which was 80,000 barrels a day under the PP is now less than 60,000 barrels a day. Rig days which was about 40,000 feet per month has now collapsed to 17,000 feet per month, thanks to this Government.

Today real GDP stands at a 143 billion, expected to be reduced to 141 billion. When the PP left office, the People's Partnership government, our GDP stood at \$170.8 billion, Madam President. It has contracted by about 20 per cent in that period under this Government. Not to mention, Madam President, our fiscal deficit, it has worsened. Under the PP it was 2.7 billion or 1.6 per cent of GDP in 2015. Under this Government in 2016, it went to 5.3 or 7.9 billion in 2016, and between '16 and '19 the total cumulative deficit totalled \$31 billion. When you take into account the deficit for the four-year period under this Government, it is amazing what has happened. When the deficit of the last two years 2020 and 2021 is included, the cumulative deficit for the period under this Government is 61.6 billion, and when we take the 2022 projection, it is going to be over \$70 billion. Imagine? Madam President, this is this worst performance in the history of this country. COVID did not crash the economy, the Government crashed the economy. This economy is not suffering from COVID-19, it is suffering from six years under an incompetent and corrupt PNM Government. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, capital expenditure has been reduced from \$7.6 billion under the PP administration in 2015, to 3.9 billion under this regime, as projected for 2022. Madam President, what is frightening is the rapid build-up of debt, and particularly the build-up of this country's foreign debt. Our country's foreign debt now amounts to well over \$4 billion or 20 per cent of GDP.

Madam President, under the administration of the People's Partnership, foreign exchange reserves stood at 10.4 billion. The country had an A-rated Standard & Poor's and a BA-2 Moody's rating. That is a solidly investment grade. The debt-to-GDP was less than 50 per cent, and the ease of doing business was 79 out of 189 countries. Real GDP also increased by 1.5 per cent in 2015. Simply put, Madam President, our economy and our nation were far better off six years ago under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration than we are today. [*Desk thumping*] This is a budget without a vision. Let us look at the weapons contained in this budget that will be used and waged against the people in this war that the Government has declared, Madam President. They are going to impose full economic cost for water and electricity. That may go up by 100 per cent. They are going to impose the draconian and infamous property tax with all its consequences negative. They are going to impose the full economic cost of fuel at the pump, whether it is super, premium or diesel. They are going to embark upon the privatization of the Port of Spain Port or the Port of Port of Spain. They are going to further restructure and maybe privatize TSTT resulting in thousands of workers being retrenched; they are possibly going to restructure and privatize WASA and you may have major retrenchment of hundreds of workers there.

Madam President, the cost of living is completely out of the reach of the ordinary people. Could you imagine a Kiss loaf, grain loaf is costing the ordinary man \$17, and the minimum wage per hour is 17.50, so we have reached, Madam President. You have to work for one hour to earn one loaf of bread in Trinidad and Tobago under this PNM Government. In the absence of any hope, vision and/or economic plan this incompetent Government plans to squeeze our population even further. Madam President, not a single, single productive stream of revenue for our

country has been offered. None of the fiscal measures will generate any meaningful diversification of our economy.

**11.30 a.m.**

Let us look at the labour market, Madam President. The labour market has deteriorated and underperformed under this Government. The number of persons in the country's labour force moved from 645,000 in 2015 to 611 at the end of 2020, a difference of 34,000 individuals. The number of persons employed stood at 623,000 in 2015. Today it has collapsed to 582,000 workers, a difference of 40,000 workers. When account is taken of the number of persons unemployed, it rose from 22,000 or 3.4 per cent in 2015 to 28,450, representing 5.1 per cent in 2020. Not a word from the lips of the Minister as it relates to unemployment, employment generation, especially for our youths and our women and our university students.

Madam President, do you know that we have over 5,700 university undergraduates with their first degrees who are unemployed according to CSO data? Madam President, the labour force participation rate is at its lowest since 1986. It is now 56.5 per cent; 60,000 workers have disappeared and there is no account for that. So the labour force participation rate has collapsed and that has negative consequences for the labour market, for the national economy, for national output; for labour productivity, for per capital labour output, and for the overall performance of our economy; 112,000 persons have been unemployed in this country according to data we got from the NIS, Madam President.

I want to rush to the sale of shares at FCB as announced by the Minister. Madam President, the Minister identified the First Citizens Bank as its target to raise some \$550 million through the sale of 10.9million ordinary shares to the wider public, thereby reducing the government ownership of this bank from 64.4

per cent to 60.1 per cent. This is an interesting development for which clarification is required. Prior to this announcement, FCB had been or had a number, or was the subject, I should say, of a number of well-written investigative articles in the *Business Express*.

Madam President, let me put this in perspective for you. One of the most challenging problems facing the national economy and negatively affecting small and medium-sized enterprises is the perpetual and eternal scarcity of foreign exchange. Foreign exchange is the lifeblood of our economy and the Minister failed to adequately address this vexing problem. Yet, Madam President, out like a bolt out of the—a bolt of lightning, rather, out of the blue, the Minister informed us that he intends to divest 10.9 million ordinary shares in the First Citizens Bank to raise the amount I mentioned.

But, Madam President, just recently, this same state-owned bank which was able to invest some US \$39.2 million or 269 million in shares in a small brokerage firm, gave that firm or a company called Cornerstone Financial Holdings Limited a loan of US 25 million or the equivalent of \$170 million. Madam President, this company called Cornerstone Financial Holdings is registered as a St. Lucian offshore company. We do not know the shareholders, we do not know the owners, we do not know the directors. Can the Minister explain why the FCB made such an investment in a company called Barita Investment Limited? Why did FCB choose to lend some US \$25 million to an offshore company? The owners are not known. Why is FCB lending US \$25 million of depositors' money to an offshore-based company? Can the Minister explain this bizarre development?

Madam President, for all intents and purposes, this company called Cornerstone is nothing more than a paper company. It is not listed on the Jamaican

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Stock Exchange. It is a purely privately-run entity. Did the FCB conduct a proper due diligence? How can the share of this company rise from \$15 in 2015 to \$100 million in 2021?

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** [*Inaudible*]

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, a point of order is being invoked. Minister?

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order, 46(1).

**Sen. W. Mark:** I am dealing with the FCB shares.

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, continue.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes. It must be noted that this same offshore company owned some 75 per cent of the shares of the same company called Barita. Madam President, the truth is at this time of foreign exchange scarcity, FCB has made available almost half a billion dollars to these two closely related and connected companies. Madam President, it would appear that the shares of Cornerstone Financial Holdings Limited, currently held in Barita Investments Limited, may have been used as collateral to secure the US \$25 million.

Madam President, we are in the dark on this matter. We therefore call on the Minister to shine a light in the dark corners of this transaction. Because Barita Investment Limited and Cornerstone Financial Holdings appear to be one and the same company and our moneys at FCB, as depositors—I am a depositor at FCB, and that money that I have there and other depositors face great exposure in the event of a crash of this company. Who will protect our deposits at FCB?

So, Madam President, we are saying in the interest of transparency, accountability and good governance, we are calling on the Minister of Finance to conduct an internal forensic audit into this recent bizarre transaction and opaque arrangement and to direct FCB not to invest one more dollar of depositors' money

into what appears to be a growing Ponzi scheme. The people of Trinidad and Tobago demand answers and we are calling on the Minister to deal with this. This is not a time to be silent or to take an oath of silence. And, Madam President, in the event that they fail to do, so we are calling—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—we are calling for the immediate resignation or removal of the CEO of FCB and the entire Board of Directors if they do not take steps to stop this Ponzi scheme [*Desk thumping*] that they are engaged in, Madam President.

Madam President—

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, as you wind down, can I ask you to lower your voice, please?

**Sen. W. Mark:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, all I want to tell you, in closing, our institutions are under attack but we have a plan to revolutionize and transform our economy, to rebuild and restore our Trinidad and Tobago economy. We intend to create 50,000 jobs in the next five years. We intend to double the non-energy export by US \$5 billion, Madam President. We intend to establish a policy framework within a suite of measures aimed at generating jobs, foreign exchange and foreign direct investment through lowered taxation, food security, technology and climate change. Not only would the UNC address immediate policy actions but we will promote a stabilization framework consisting of a mix of fiscal and exchange rate actions. Madam President, may I say, infrastructure is very critical to this master plan and diversification is at the heart of this plan. Time will not permit me to drill down into any further details at this time.

So let me wind down at this time, Madam President. As the alternative

government, [*Laughter*] the time has come for the people to wake up, the time has come for the people to stand up, the time has come for the people to remove this albatross around their necks called the PNM. [*Desk thumping*] The UNC would like to remind this oppressive PNM regime that the rights of the people come not from the generosity of the State but from the hand of God. We, in the UNC, are prepared to pay any price, bear any cost, meet any challenge and oppose any force to ensure the freedom and liberation of our nation. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, the bonds of mass misery must be broken. The chains of poverty must be cast off. A revolution of hope must eternally prevail in our hearts. The long, twilight struggle of the people for genuine freedom must come to an end. Our struggle against the Government to overcome crime, poverty, hunger, discrimination and oppression is also at hand. Liberation from these modern day pharaohs are at hand—liberation is at hand rather.

Madam President, freedom is indivisible. When one man is enslaved, no man is free. This Government led by Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley has completely lost its way. The nation is crying out for social justice, equality and unity. Madam President, in the midst of the piercing darkness, there exists a ray of light. The sun is about to rise once again, [*Desk thumping*] extending its glorious rays of protection to all and discriminating against none.

As the good book tells us: [*Laughter*]

“Weeping may endure”—only—“for”—the—“night, but joy cometh in the morning.” [*Desk thumping*]

The sun will rise again and the dark deeds of this oppressive PNM Government will wither and evenly die and the PNM will disappear. Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity [*Desk thumping*] to make my

contribution to this very important document. Thank you very much.

**Sen. Charrise Seepersad:** Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2021. Madam President, commentators, pundits, parliamentarians and the general public all recognize that the country is facing serious challenges going forward. It is also accepted that the virus is not going away soon and the world economy, while it is recovering, faces an uphill climb. Many international constraints such as restrictions to travel, transportation bottlenecks—which we expect to continue into 2022—risk averse investors and rising prices will adversely stymie the most optimistic intentions to stabilize and energize the well-being of citizens. If it is accepted that the primary focus of any administration is to consistently improve the quality of life for everyone in Trinidad and Tobago, then it is axiomatic that meaningful implementation must follow policy in a cohesive and committed process for present and future generations.

I am not sure that after all that has been said in the public domain, the policies, objectives, roadmap, strategy and timelines for rapid recovery have been adequately articulated. At the end of the day, recurrent expenditure and survival are the primary focus of this Bill. In my view, it did not adequately address the route and the time frame to recovery and growth. Madam President, the trend of many of the economic indicators are moving in the wrong direction. For example, as at March 2021, the annual GDP growth rate is negative 7.7 per cent.

Madam President, my focus today is to address the urgency to transform Trinidad and Tobago, given our dependency on depleting and finite fossil energy resources, inefficient and obsolete infrastructure and systems, and inadequately prepared human resources. There is much to be done with the paucity of available



resources, bearing in mind that we serve the well-being of citizens. The most recent study on poverty in Trinidad and Tobago concluded that more than 300,000 persons were living on not more than \$985 a month. Madam President, the entire country needs to buy into the need for transformation. We need to aggressively set out programmes to train, retrain and upskill our citizens so that they have the relevant skills to build a better and more resilient country for future generations.

Fuel market liberalization: the liberalization of fuel markets announced in the fiscal 2021 budget remains in progress. A critical element of the market liberalization is the shift to floating fuel prices. Fixed retail margins for premium, super and diesel fuel will be removed. Several factors including partial regulation, market structure and taxation are likely to influence the outcome of this initiative and its impact on the economy. Madam President, under the current elevated levels of world crude oil prices, the shift to a market-based price regime for liquid petroleum products is highly likely to contribute to increase domestic inflationary pressures.

Relief measures: The Minister of Finance announced that a fuel cash card would be made available to vulnerable groups to ease the impact of higher fuel cost. Measures were also announced to assist lower volume consumers of electricity, including the increase in the current rebate from 25 per cent to 35 per cent for consumers with a VAT inclusive bill of \$300 or less. Similar to the fuel card initiative, a utility cash card is proposed to assist low income and vulnerable groups to access subsidies for electricity and water. While initiatives such as cash cards effectively create a more targeted approach to the provision of subsidies to those who need it most, the impact of utility and fuel price hikes will be inflationary—[*Interruption*] Can I go on?—will be inflationary across the broader

economy. This could more than likely erode the relief gained from access to cash cards and other aid programmes.

Trinidad and Tobago's energy transition: Madam President, I am really heartened that we recognize that climate change demands serious attention and focus. Energy transformation from oil and gas to renewable energy to diversify our economy is critical to Trinidad and Tobago's survival. Across the world, there is a massive shift to electric vehicles. Major companies such as BP and Exxon are pivoting their businesses to becoming integrated energy companies committed to net zero by 2050, including emissions associated with the use of hydrocarbons. BP and Shell have committed to develop in Trinidad and Tobago two grid-scale renewable energy projects for delivery in 2022. In the upstream sector, DeNovo Energy and Trinity Exploration recently announced their intentions to introduce low carbon technologies into their facilities. Trinidad and Tobago will be severely negatively affected by these worldwide policies and the financial contributions of the hydrocarbon energy mix will significantly decrease by 2050.

Madam President, the reality is that all of the world's hydrocarbons that are discovered or not will not be produced but left in the ground. Therefore, there will be worldwide competition to produce as much oil and gas as possible. What this means is that there will be country to country competition to attract as much exploration and production as possible. Royalties and rents will have to be reduced to attract investments and therefore, government income will be reduced. Logic suggests that the current high price of the oil and gas environment is not sustainable. For example, with respect to natural gas, Morgan Stanley Research in the article "Resetting the Deck, Quantifying the Energy Crunch", October 06, 2021 states:

Over the next five years, we expect demand growth to average approximately 3 per cent, roughly half the rate of the prior five. Furthermore, we forecast that erosion from renewables in the power sector will lead peak US gas demand in the late 2020s with modest annual declines thereafter.

Therefore, we need to aggressively explore and develop Trinidad and Tobago's oil and gas assets and use these financial resources to fund the country's future. A comprehensive national energy policy should include measures such as:

1. Accelerate the development of oil resources on an offshore in the shortest possible time. This includes further incentives for private capital and partnerships to support the development of resources held by Heritage Petroleum.

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

2. Increase exploration and development work in shallow waters maturing gas fields; and
3. Increase exploration in deep-water.

Mr. Vice-President, we urgently need a national strategic plan to ensure we maximize all possible opportunities and move the country forward in a structured way. This positions Trinidad and Tobago to be well placed in the energy transition for the foreseeable future and this plan cannot be treated as other plans, being abandoned and left to gather dust on a shelf. The views and inputs of technocrats and a wide cross section of society is crucial. This will augment the quality and transparency of such an endeavour. This plan should include:

1. A diversification agenda to substantially increase exports outside of the oil and gas sectors and should comprise sectors such as, manufacturing for

export, creative industries, music film, entertainment, fine and performing arts, et cetera, digital platforms and so on.

2. Measures to incentivize existing operators in the upstream and downstream to make investments required to reduce emissions to create less carbon intensive energy exports; support research and development and investment in carbon capture and storage; support further development and investment in hydrogen.
3. Policy and regulation that allows private citizens to invest in home solar systems. I am sure many, many, citizens will definitely take advantage of this.
4. A national strategy for the introduction of electric vehicles and the phasing out of internal combustion engine vehicles over time. There should also be measures to support the development of electric vehicle charging networks across Trinidad and Tobago.

Electric vehicles: Mr. Vice-President, in keeping with the Government's encouragement of a green economy and to reduce the country's carbon footprint, the Minister of Finance proposed to remove all customs duties on motor vehicle taxes and all VAT on the importation of electric vehicles from January 2022. While the intention is to reduce the country's carbon footprints, there may be other favourable outcomes at the national level. Shifting consumers towards electric vehicles while initially sacrificing lost revenues from duties and taxes could:

1. Assist in reducing the recurrent foreign exchange cost associated with the importation of traditional fuels for internal combustion engine vehicles.
2. Encourage consumption of cleaner, subsidy-free, gas-generated

electricity. Of course, I am assuming that electricity tariffs will be adjusted in a timely manner.

3. Accelerate private investment in related infrastructure and industries, such as charging stations, service and repairs and so on, without the Government nurturing these industries. Automobile dealers and other entrepreneurs could also stand to benefit if they can position themselves to quickly meet the changing consumer patterns in the automotive space. And, of course, all of this is predicated on adequate charging stations and the farms to generate clean, environmentally-friendly energy to supply those charging stations.

Greenhouse gas reduction: The Minister of Finance outlined in the 2022 fiscal budget a new specific tax allowance for investments in enhanced oil recovery and carbon capture and sequestration. Mr. Vice-President, while this is a step in the right direction, the credit seems a bit low for the measure to have much of an impact. However, I expect that this issue would be addressed in a comprehensive reform programme.

Restructuring of the power sector: Mr. Vice-President, the key to any energy transition strategy is the restructuring of the power sector. The tariffs for electricity vary depending on the type of customer. However, rates were established in 2009, 12 years ago, and they have not been adjusted since. The electricity tariffs are well below typical international rates based on fully commercial conditions. All electricity generation is based on natural gas and the gas price to utilities is subsidized about \$1 per MMBtu which, again, is below international market prices. Mr. Vice-President, we are subsidizing both electricity rates to all consumers and natural gas used to generate electricity. This is unsustainable.

Renewable energy resources: It will not be possible to economically develop the renewable resources of Trinidad and Tobago for electricity generating against a gas price subsidized by \$1 per MMBtu. Mr. Vice-President, without significant change in current policies, the introduction of renewable energy is uneconomic. The long-term consequences of not developing renewable resources could be disastrous. The current gas-based electrical generation capacity will become useless when natural gas production becomes insufficient and the country would not have prepared for the eventual large-scale worldwide change over to renewables. As part of the overall policy to achieve net zero by 2050, all power generation should be based on renewables:

1. Develop utility-scale solar energy from 2025 onwards. This is relatively low cost.
2. Develop offshore wind energy; and
3. Develop utility-scale renewable energy storage to be able to produce 100 per cent renewable electricity on a 24/7 basis by 2050.

Education budget allocation, 5.199 million. Mr. Vice-President, the school system has been built on systematic inequalities. It is elitist and it is irrelevant to the needs of a country in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The system promotes prestige schools and the belief that attending these institutions is highly revered. You just have to go online and see the photographs of children receiving their SEA results in 2021. How wonderful. My daughter, son passed for Bishop's, Convent, St. Mary's, et cetera. What about the thousands of other children, do they not deserve to get the same opportunities and exposure?

**12.00 noon**

We need to radically reform the education system where it is every child's

right to attend secondary school, and all secondary schools are of high standards and provide quality education. [*Desk thumping*] Every child must be literate and can find a place to grow and earn a decent livelihood. There will always be exceptions but life in the underworld must never be a first choice. A reformed education system is one of the solutions for the disadvantaged communities. A free education system has not solved the social issues associated with delinquents, drug abuse and stunted opportunities. This is a failed education system where CSEC passes are valued above all else without adequate technology and trade education options. Students emerge from this system with literacy and insufficient life skills. The inadequacy of the education system being inflicted on numerous children whose capacity to learn and progress is impeded by abuse, cruelty, and an absence of parental love.

Mr. Vice-President, in 1979 as part of my final year university behaviour sciences project, my group did a study on attitudes and expectations of students in Form 3 and Form 5 in schools in Trinidad. Our findings 42 years ago were exactly as I described. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced both businesses and educational institutions to embrace the concept of work and learn from home. However, online development, availability and presentation of local education content are in the embryonic stages. Vision, creativity and distribution of local content for lifetime skills must be a priority in any educational syllabus going forward. Special institutions for technical and vocational skills in artificial intelligence, for example, are required in the digital age. The infrastructure for country-wide digital delivery and access is still an inadequate, but quality takes time.

Special needs children. Mr. Vice-President, make the education of special

needs children a priority. Historically, the education of special needs children [*Desk thumping*] has been largely ignored or treated in a haphazard manner. Many of these children have little or no access to a formal education. Internationally recognized figures are that between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of any population will have reading delay and other literacy challenges. This extrapolates to 150,000 to 200,000 people in Trinidad and Tobago, or around six to seven students in each classroom, and about 50 to 70 students in a school of 350 students who need reading support using special methods of teaching literacy, not just extra lessons.

Mr. Vice-President, since 1990 the Dyslexia Association has been training teachers in specific methods for teaching dyslexic children. There are 800 teachers in public and private schools who received this training. These teachers are spread all over Trinidad and Tobago. This is not enough. There is much more that must be done by the Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Agriculture: Budget allocations \$709.144 million. Managing the country's food supply in the face of COVID-19 and the global energy crisis is critical. Successive governments have attempted to jump start the thrust in local food sufficiency with minimum results. Available data shows food imports between 2011 and 2016 were 32.7 billion, and in 2019 were approximately \$5.6 billion. Contribution to GDP is below 0.5 per cent since 2012. Employment in the agricultural sector is approximately 4 per cent of the population. Food inflation increased from 3.2 per cent in January 2021 to 4.9 per cent in June 2021 because of increased commodity prices, increased shipping cost, transportation delays and adverse weather conditions. This situation is expected to continue into 2022.

Agriculture can provide significant benefits including the creation of industries and jobs, saving billions of dollars on food imports by feeding citizens



with home-grown products, making a substantial contribution to national income and foreign exchange savings. If we are to substantially reduce the bleeding of foreign exchange and the country's reliance on food imports, then sustained and concerted efforts by the sector are mandatory. Agriculture must embrace modern methods of technology-based farming to provide the nation with an adequate supply of products.

Environmental pollution: Mr Vice-President, it is now time to immediately ban non-biodegradable, non-compostable containers, and single use plastic containers such as straws, packaging material, bags and bottles. Care must be taken to make sure that the substitutes are not hazardous. The beverage container legislation must be enacted. It has been languishing in draft form for many years. Recycling must be implemented on a national scale. However, our citizens must take responsibility for their unchecked and rampant dumping of garbage along roadways, in neighbourhoods, and in the seas and rivers. This cannot continue.

Mr. Vice-President, I believe that incisive, skilful and prudent management of not only the economy, but of all social institutions are essential in the many national and global vagaries and challenges including the pestilence of COVID-19 to cope with balance of payment problems; unstable economy; low or negative economic growth; debt servicing requirements; social dislocation and disruption. The bright and the best do not reside in one group but in all of us. Keeping the interest and well-being of all our citizens in focus we owe it to ourselves to do the absolute best we can. Satisficing by itself is not good enough in the long-term. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young):** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, it is always a great privilege to be afforded the opportunity to join a debate in this House from where I started back in 2014. Mr. Vice-President, I have come here today, I have listened to the previous speaker and her contribution towards the energy sector previously, but I have come here today to give an account to the people of Trinidad and Tobago as to what is taking place with the energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago and in fact globally. So I begin.

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to just pay my respects to the late Minister Franklin Khan who was the former Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and his untimely passing earlier this year that propelled me to be assigned this portfolio. Mr. Vice-President, I think it is timely especially having listened to the last speaker to put some context on the energy sector. The global energy sector as the former speaker rightly said, is going through a transition. That is the reality that we are facing but it needs to be understood that this is a global phenomenon. We have seen changes taking place very rapidly in the global energy sector as the world and developed nations are pressured to move away from fossil fuels. We have seen an increase in reliance on renewables in particular on wind and solar renewable energy. We have seen declarations of desires to use greener cleaner energy.

In fact, in a couple weeks' time our hon. Prime Minister will lead a delegation from Trinidad and Tobago to COP26, which is a gathering of global leaders to discuss climate change and there will be effects of these discussions and decisions taken, some already that have been taken on the global energy sector. However, there are persons who would have Trinidad and Tobago believe that the end of the energy sector, as we know it, is near.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

As Madam President returns, I would like to simply say that this is in fact not so. Do not let the Chicken Little syndrome that is taking place in some quarters, that the energy sector is suddenly going to vanish from globe frighten anyone and in particular us here in Trinidad and Tobago. The current fossil fuels used are coal, oil and gas. The first one that is contributing to the global energy warming crisis is coal, and that is the first one that the global energy sector and the developed countries are moving away from. Oil and gas have a much longer horizon. The horizon for oil may be more limited as I will discuss than that for gas.

I, as the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, have told our sector we will push our oil production in Trinidad and Tobago with a horizon of 2028—2030. So we recognize that there may be a limited shelf life for oil product globally. But we are however in the meantime—I hope the former speaker is listening—we are focused on increasing our oil production. As I heard her say, gas in the ground is of no value. You have to monetize it. And the way we go about increasing our oil production, Madam President, is Heritage, our state-owned company have been mandated to take certain tracks to be able to increase their oil production. I have also been utilizing farm-outs, an increased amount of farm-outs and lease-outs. In fact, since being the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—in fact, this morning I signed another lease-out and there are a number of increased farm-outs and lease-outs to give persons the opportunity especially at this time when oil prices are very high globally for persons to get into the ground and pull up our resources, our liquid resources.

We are also seeking other interested parties. I am happy to report to the country that we had the foresight to allow EOG and Heritage to enter into a recent

joint venture where they expect in the next couple years to increase significantly the oil production in Trinidad and Tobago out of Heritage's fields. BHP has also had some recent success. Madam President, it is accepted that gas is the transition fuel. I have personally participated in the past few weeks and months in a number of global panel discussions. Some with other Energy Ministers, environmentalists, those are pushing renewables, those who are focused on the energy sector globally, and it is the conclusion of all that the transition energy source is going to be gas, and that is fortunate for Trinidad and Tobago and that we had the foresight a couple decades ago to move, really, to gas production in Trinidad and Tobago. And it is generally accepted, Madam President, that this will be the position and gas will be the transition energy commodity until at least 2050. That is the horizon we are looking at.

What we have seen happen recently in Europe within the past few weeks, the world must look on at that. There was this thrust towards the use of renewables. In particular, these are countries where their oil and gas resources are not abundant or they do not have at all so they use solar and they use wind. Look at what happened in UK. Very, very recently in the past couple weeks, wind stopped. There was a slowdown in wind patterns and it collapsed their whole energy production and electricity production. There then became a shortage of gas supply in Europe and they went into a semi-crisis. This has shot gas prices up globally and that is a warning that whilst we move away from the fossil fuels as we should, there is a transition that needs to take place. So right now you are seeing for the first time in many decades extremely high gas prices has led to a number of consequences in Europe and those countries who had moved towards more reliance on renewables and it has fall back.

I was reading an article this weekend. They had to restart coal production electricity in the United Kingdom, something they have moved away from. They actually had a couple of coal plants that they were moving towards getting rid of but they had them on standby due to this gas shortage and the reliance on renewables that did not come through. Immediately they had to restart this coal to ensure as they go into their winter months there is electricity being produced for heating and other manufacturing and production. We saw queues. We saw the Prime Minister in the United Kingdom having to call out the army to drive tankers to get oil to gas stations. So let us not be fooled, let us all not be worried in Trinidad and Tobago unnecessarily.

The Government is aware that the globe is moving more towards renewables but we are also realistic. We are also realistic and you are seeing first hand—this is not hypothetical—the effects of a complete reliance too early on renewables. There must be a fall-back position. Right now that continues to be gas. Trinidad and Tobago has nothing to fear with respect to our oil and gas energy sector for the foreseeable decades. So anybody who tries to peddle a story otherwise is nothing but a fear-monger and you can see live examples currently why this is not going to happen overnight. We are seeing the markets in Europe as COVID has dispensed and they need increased production. Right now everybody is predicting a colder winter and all over the world there is a rush for gas. You are seeing the oil prices increase as well and this is because the world is not as yet at the position where we can depend completely on renewables or even in the majority on renewables.

So the message, Madam President, is that Trinidad and Tobago, is that an oil and gas sector is here to stay in the next few decades, and as I am about to say the Government has been working assiduously to secure it and to derive maximum

benefit for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I take this opportunity, Madam President, through you, to remind our population or citizens that the energy sector is a global one. It is global in nature. So what happens with global commodity prices determines what happens here in Trinidad and Tobago. And this is an important point for the psyche of our people to understand. I think the vast majority of sensible people do, but every time there is a dip downwards in a global commodity pricing, people like to try and disturb our psyche and put us in a sense of panic that the sky is falling.

Once you understand that in an energy setting commodity prices are set globally, you then know what to monitor and you know how to deal with it. Unfortunately, Madam President, we have a number of persons who interfere with that national psyche and are always trying to paint Trinidad and Tobago in a negative light. They write regularly in the newspapers articles and columns. But through you and the Senate here today, Madam President, I put the country on notice, in reality these persons are doing nothing more but carrying out an agenda of those who are trying to derive maximum benefit from our limited resources. I say that without fear of contradiction. I have been provided with the evidence that very often some of what we are seeing being peddled out there is being driven by certain companies and certain entities who are on the other side of the negotiation table with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago since 2015 has had at its mandate in the energy sector securing it but also deriving maximum benefit for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and that does not sit well all of the time with those who are trying to maximize their profits based on our limited resources. So, many of these persons I say again without fear of contradiction, receive gifts and other

forms of compensation from companies with these agendas which are opposite to that what the Government is trying to achieve for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I would like to remind the country of what happened in April in last year and even in April of this year. April of last year globally we had a crash of oil prices. In fact, WTI, which is the index that used in the United States of carrying oil from internally to the coastline went into the negative I think for in first time ever. What that indicates is that people were paying people to come and take the oil for them. You did not have to buy oil. That was one of the effects of what was going on with COVID and a reduction in a demand. Look at what is happening today when we get to the global prices today and that was just a year ago. In April of this year, there was a collapse as well from January to about April of this year of global commodity prices which Trinidad and Tobago produces ammonia and methanol. So again to tell the population the ammonia and methanol plants at Point Lisas earlier this year from January to April because of the global commodity prices, that is the point I am making, they were below US \$200 a metric tonne.

Ammonia had dropped to \$175 a metric tonne US. Methanol was hovering around 180. At that time all of the naysayers, these same article writers, all of these people were crying, the sky was falling, the Point Lisas plants are shutting down. I just heard Sen. Mark in his normal loud tone screaming this narrative but why did that happen, what was going on. And then all of the naysayers including a failed former Energy Minister who is now touting himself in Guyana as an energy consultant, who did nothing whilst he sat in the chair of energy to increase our production, to secure better prices for Trinidad and Tobago for our resources, the resources of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago which is something I am proud

the Prime Minister gave me the opportunity even before being the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to work with the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to fight for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and I can say that without fear of contradiction.

The multinationals know that has been the position of the Government since 2015, fighting for increased and enhanced revenue for our limited natural resources. So these people have tried to portray it in a different light and they said these difficulties which we know were global in nature when they had those commodity crashes of prices they said, no, it is Rowley and Young went to Houston, negotiate a bad gas price and that what is leading to the destruction of Point Lisas. Completely false. I ask the population to listen, since April of this year have you heard anything about plant shut down in Point Lisas? The answer is no and I will explain to you why. At that time ammonia and methanol was being sold for less than \$180 a metric tonne. Today, Madam President, today and it has been this way since about April of this year, ammonia prices rebounded from under US \$200 per metric tonne to over \$600 a metric tonne in October. That is an increase threefold. That is why you are not hearing any noise and any talk about closure, and any talk about the price of gas in Trinidad and Tobago in the past few months.

So let the population take note of this and do not let those naysayers, those negative connotators interfere with your psyche. Ammonia, I remember when Minister Khan and I were in meetings with the boardrooms away of the major ammonia producers and they were talking about, oh, Trinidad is uncompetitive and these types of things, and bombarding us with this, and we were holding firm because we have to derive maximum benefit and returns for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. At the time ammonia prices were below \$200 a metric tonne. They



then have gone up—sorry, that is ammonia to over 600. Today ammonia is over US \$665 a metric tonne. That is why you hear silence. Methanol at the time in April of this year I remember having to call the hon. Prime Minister because we were being put under pressure they were threatening to shut down plants at Point Lisas again in April of this year, one of the largest methanol producers and it was all over negotiation of price.

At the time, articles were coming in the newspaper. I now understand why, and I understand who is writing it, and what they were being given to write these articles. At the time ammonia prices were below US \$200 a metric tonne. You know what happened? Ammonia prices went over \$450 a metric tonne. Today, and it has been this way for a few months, ammonia is over US \$500 a metric tonne. Silence. What happened? All of the contracts at Point Lisas for ammonia and methanol producers were signed with NGC where they had been fighting before. Because there is money being made and that is what the population needs to understand. So do not believe the falsehoods that are portrayed that the Government collapsed Point Lisas. It is not so.

Right now Point Lisas is blossoming. There is complete silence. You can hear a pin drop because global commodity prices are at a very high level, two and three times what they have been achieving. So they are using all of the gas they possibly can to produce the ammonia, the methanol, and the other by-products. This is what is going down. You are not hearing about that. So it was a reflection, Madam President, of global commodity prices. No crisis at Point Lisas. And I just want to refer very briefly to an article that I saw on September 28, 2021:

“BASF becomes latest to curtail fertiliser production”

Ammonia is used in fertilizer production. What happened in September is as gas

prices rose due to a limited supply in Europe you know what happened? Over six ammonia plants were shut down in Europe. I was surprised they did not say that is because of gas prices negotiated. It is a reflection of global commodity prices. The gas price went up to over 20-something dollars. You heard the Minister of Finance today talk about Henry Hub pricing over \$5. So when gas prices went over US \$20 an MMBtu, persons had to shut down ammonia prices in Europe.

“Chemical giants BASF have become the latest to curtail certain fertilisers production capacity, due to the ‘extremely challenging’ economics at the hands of natural gas prices.

The company has curtailed ammonia production at both its Antwerp in Belgium and another plant in Germany.

‘Due to the recent rise on natural gas prices in Europe, the economics for operating an ammonia plant in the region has become extremely challenging,’ the company said in a statement. ‘As a result, BASF have curtailed its ammonia production at its production site in Antwerp and Ludwigshafen.’

‘BASF will continuously monitor the gas price development and adjust its ammonia production accordingly.’

The announcement is the latest in a long line of fertiliser plant closures and capacity reduction as the sector struggles with negative margins as a result of soaring natural gas pricing.

Of the plant closures to date we know that...”

And they counted, one, two. One in the Netherlands, one in Belgium. CF Industries closed two plants in the UK in Ince and Billingham with the latter set to resume operations as soon as they get UK Government support. What we have seen in

recent weeks is the UK Government has had to step in and try to subsidize the price of gas to make sure people continue to get gas and electricity. The point is, Madam President, you are dealing with international global commodity pricing, and I want the population to make note and that is why right now you are hearing dead silence.

What have we been doing, Madam President, and what have we achieved in the energy sector? We have been engaged in some very serious and sophisticated negotiations with the gas upstream producers. Because at the end of the day as I was just speaking to the Minister of Finance, one of the things Trinidad and Tobago never did is get into upstream gas production itself. So we depend on all of these multinationals to product our resource of gas. What we need to do is we need to get the production going and we need to make sure we derive satisfactory returns from the sale of that gas.

I heard Sen. Mark talk about foreign direct investment and there being no—that is completely false. In the energy sector in last six years we have had serious foreign direct investment of US [*Desk thumping*] billions, billions of dollars due as a direct result of conversations that have come out of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries as the Prime Minister has been focused on this area. We have had foreign direct investment with Shell, BP, BHP, EOG, DeNovo, Touchstone, as our major gas producers. [*Desk thumping*] And just to give the country an idea, with Shell we had Colibri and Barracuda. That is a direct result of negotiations. I sat in those negotiations from 2016 and what we did as a Government. It was not based on giving away via fiscal schemes. That is all that the former administration talks about, well they cut the fiscal schemes, which meant less revenue for Trinidad and Tobago. No, we sat

there and we negotiated and we fought hard, we got Shell to do Colibri and Barracuda.

First gas was achieved from Shell Barracuda project in July 2021. The project is located at Block 5C in the ECMA and it will deliver 140 million scfs a day of sustain near term gas production. Peak production is expected to be approximately 220 mmcf a day. That is a direct result of the work we did over the last six years. On the BP side you have Matapal and Cassia compression. Again, direct work that we did, the negotiations we did. It was not based on giving away via fiscal and reduction of taxes. It was negotiations, negotiating and pushing hard in difficult circumstances.

So BP has done the Cassia compression that will have a throughput of 1.2 BCF of natural gas per day, first gas expected from the platform in 2022. BPTT's Matapal project, the project will deliver 250 million to 350 million scfs a day in its initial stages. BHP, again, I was there with the Prime Minister when we went to Australia and walked into BHP headquarters in Melbourne in Australia as they were about to take a decision or not take a decision with Ruby Delaware in Trinidad.

**12.30 p.m.**

They had just announced that they were selling off all of their shale and all of their Gulf Coast assets, their shale assets in the United States. We went there and pushed and said continue to invest in Trinidad and Tobago, we will work with you. We got Ruby Delaware that came on this year as a direct result of that [*Desk thumping*] and it increased oil production in Trinidad and Tobago and gas production. It came on ahead of time during a period of COVID. These are the positive stories as a result of the hard work put on by the Government of Trinidad

and Tobago since 2016. That is on the BHP side. [*Desk thumping*]

The EOG side. EOG has signed a joint venture agreement with Heritage. They have been consistent with their gas production in Trinidad and Tobago. A few weeks ago, I had a meeting with their executives in Houston and Trinidad to encourage them to continue production in Trinidad and Tobago. Touchstone onshore. They have had significant finds of liquid and gas onshore and I am hoping in the next few months, it will be the largest onshore gas production in Trinidad and Tobago. Again, the Government working with them to get these things done. It is not about the award of “ah block” via a bid round as I heard the former Minister say, “oh, he is responsible for that”. It is the work that has to take place. Who is going to sit with them, work with them, push them to get it done?

So, I want the people of Trinidad and Tobago to know that is what is going on. I am happy to announce here today that last week the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago took a decision and gave us a green light to go ahead with the Manatee contract. [*Desk thumping*] For the first time, we were able to negotiate. Loran-Manatee is a gas field that straddles Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela. We have heard about it since 2010. Nothing was done. We, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, through the Prime Minister taking the direction, went and negotiated with the Government of Venezuela to let us develop the Manatee side just under 2 tcf of gas and leave the Loran side which is over of 8 tcf of gas on the Venezuelan side of the border. Because of their unfortunate sanctions against them, let us develop it. People said it could not be done. I am happy to say today, we negotiated a PSC with Shell. The Manatee project has—we have gotten the green light to go ahead with the PSC. In a few weeks, I am hoping we will be able to sign that agreement. That is going to be the single largest new gas production contract and gas

production in Trinidad and Tobago for decades. [*Desk thumping*]

Again, it was done by this Government, sitting and doing the hard negotiations. I would like to thank the public servants at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for working with me night and day as we negotiated it. For all of the foreign consultants that we brought in for the first time, top class, best-in-class attorneys from outside of Trinidad and Tobago to sit with us. Some consultants, Poten & Partners, gas strategies, to sit with us to assist us with the negotiations. And for the first time in a long time, Trinidad and Tobago sat opposite these large multinationals and derived benefit for Trinidad and Tobago. So Manatee is going to happen. [*Desk thumping*] Since 2018, Madam President, we have achieved payments of over 3.8—over \$3 billion, sorry, in just clawbacks from the past because we sat there and we demanded it and we negotiated and there was respect in the boardrooms and with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Minister of Finance touched this morning on something that this country has never done and again, I thank the people of Trinidad and Tobago for having been given the opportunity to lead and drive the negotiations on their behalf. For the first time, we have what is called an enhanced revenue gas basket price. Before, it used to be linked to Lake Charles and some people talk about Henry Hub. Today, Henry Hub, just to give the population an idea, Henry Hub is an indice out of the United States. Today, the Henry Hub price of gas is \$5.42. But you know what we did, Madam President? We negotiated it and said we do not want one gas “indice”. I said I want a gas “indice” for the Far East called JKM. I want one from Europe called NBP and we will not link it to Henry Hub or Lake Charles or anything like that. What we will do is we will then add Brent, an oil price and have a reduction

on the oil price so you are spreading your risk. That has never been done in all of the decades of Trinidad and Tobago.

We negotiated this formula and today, I can stand here and tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago as a result of what we negotiated in 2018/2019, that basket price for gas, we are, today, getting an enhanced revenue of tens of millions of dollars for—US dollars for Trinidad and Tobago. So whilst a Henry Hub price today might be \$5, we are getting over for \$11 for gas. [*Desk thumping*] So do not listen to the naysayers out there and those who every week want to write a negative column in the—These are facts, these are irrefutable facts. This is what we have been doing for you in the energy sector.

Gas production. Yes, we had a dip in gas production. I want the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President, to understand, even when you negotiate a gas contract today, like Manatee, it is going to have a lead time of years. What we are facing today, that decline, as I heard Sen. Mark talked about, a drop from 3.4 bcf a day to 2.8 bcf is because nothing happened in 2010 to 2015. There is no new negotiation of a gas contract. So therefore, what we had do when we came in in 2015 is hustle it, push it and what you are going to see next year is an increase in gas production [*Desk thumping*] as a result of that.

So a gas production next year, it is—this year, it was projected to be unfortunately 2.7. In 2019, it was 3.5 bcf a day; 2020, it dropped to three bcf a day, in 2021, we dropped to 2.7 bcf a day and that is because there was that lapse, just switching a fiscal scheme and reducing tax. So it is not only reduced revenue but we did not get the increased production. Next year, we are projecting to get back up to 3.37 bcf a day because of the hard work that was done, standing up and opposite those and demanding respect for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

NGC. I am happy to say that NGC has completed all of their downstream negotiations of contracts. Something again that did not happen previously and unfortunately, they were being hamstrung. Month-to-month contracts with the down-streamers. Again, this is directly linked to what I started off by saying those global commodity prices for the petchem industry which are ammonia and methanol as prices are sky high right now, they were very happy to sign on the same terms that we were offering all along. So thank God we stood strong even though all of the naysayers were saying collapse of Point Lisas. And today, in the next fiscal, we will derive the benefits of standing strong and having backbones for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

There has been a concerted effort to push NGC out of the value chain. What that means is there are certain persons who have an agenda that they just want NGC to be paid a small number of cents to transport gas. This Government has stood strong from 2016 and we have pushed back. NGC is not coming out of the value chain. NGC has every right, just like the big multinationals from molecule out of the ground to sale of cargo wherever it goes. Why should the people of Trinidad and Tobago also not have a play in that? And that is what this Government has stood strong for and what we fought.

NGC results. Yes, they took a dip. Last year, unfortunately for the first time, they suffered a loss. As I said right here in the Senate a few months ago, that loss was a direct result of the one FDI negotiation between 2010 and 2015. At the end of 2015, a loss of over \$2 billion from one single contract had to be booked on NGC's books now because of the accounting rules and also, a depreciation had to be booked on their ageing infrastructure, but we continue to fight with NGC. We continue when we are discussing future gas development and production, use the



NGC facilities. I have had that conversation just recently with Shell. I am saying do not worry to go and build new facilities, let us use what exists.

So all of what you have been hearing about losses at NGC and these wild accusations of losses and figures and \$400 million, that was again complete falsehoods. Yes, sometimes businesses take a risk, “ah gamble” and it does not work out, that is the energy sector. You know how many people have drilled dry holes and dry wells and not gotten returns? But I stand here today and assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago as we continue to negotiate as we are doing right now with Atlantic LNG and restructuring, we will find a way to recover, as we did for the first time with a basket price of gas. That was never done before and just the revenue we have earned by that, the increased enhanced revenue by negotiating that and pushing and fighting for that has earned double and triple what you hear about NGC spending on Train 1.

And I will tell the Train 1 story. I cannot tell it as yet because of where we are, at the sensitive stage of negotiations. And they like to make noise, “oh” but you cannot. Anybody who has been involved in sophisticated commercial negotiations knows you cannot but pressure can be put on the Government, pressure can be put on NGC by naysayers to try and change what you are doing at the negotiation table. So when I am going into negotiations and leading the team and there is a negative article not telling the full truth and the population is—it may, they hope that can influence how we sit opposite and push. It is not going to happen, not whilst I am there, and I assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago that is not the Government’s position and we will continue to fight to get better returns for them.

The Petrotrin restructuring. We all know by now any sensible person in

Trinidad and Tobago, the clarion call that Petrotrin was shut down is false; it was restructured. Heritage, I can say today, is the oil producer, exploration and production, Paria, importation of fuel, sale of fuels locally and domestically as well as in the Caricom, have been making profit. Guaracara that the refinery assets are in has gone out, an RFP. I think that it has been narrowed down to three international players right now are being assessed, evaluated. Let us see where that goes.

But what has it meant? Heritage, for the nine-month period ending June 2020 made a profit of \$700 million. They had revenue of \$3.2 billion. Paid taxes, levies and royalties of \$700 million. For a nine-month period ending of June this year, 2021, the profit increased to \$1.2 billion. Revenue of \$4.9 billion. Taxes, levies and royalties paid of \$606 million. Paria has been posting profits throughout as well I am happy to say. We are expecting increased projected royalty revenue over the next fiscal. We are hoping in the next fiscal we will be able to have royalty from both oil and natural gas totally over \$5 billion. So what we are looking at is as the global energy prices have risen, commodity prices have risen, we will derive some of the benefits of that here.

Oil production. As I said a short while ago, we are pushing to increase oil production in Trinidad and Tobago because we recognize the world is moving further and further away from oil but it is not going to disappear overnight. So Heritage has been mandated, we are looking at more farm-outs and lease-outs and we will increase the oil production.

Other initiatives, Madam President, just to touch on very briefly. Might I ask how much time I have?

**Madam President:** You actually have six minutes. You finish at 12.48.

**Hon. S. Young:** Thank you very much, Madam President. I just want to touch on some of the other important initiatives taking place out of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. Fuel liberalization, we have passed the legislation. The Government has not implemented it as yet because we are sensitive and we are looking at what is going on as global prices rise. So right now, we, the taxpayers, are still absorbing that subsidy but the legislation is in place, the Ministry is ready when the Government takes a decision.

So, again, do not let the naysayers affect your psyche. We are putting things in place for those who are at the vulnerable parts of our society. We will continue to subsidize that for you personally at an individual level. But why should a person get the same subsidy as someone who needs it when they can afford it? They are multimillionaires. That is what the Government is going to do.

Renewables, we have a massive renewable project, a solar project. It is called Project Lara, 112.2 megawatts of electricity to come. [*Desk thumping*] That is currently being negotiated. We are also looking at carbon capture utilization and storage to do our part to reduce the global energy climate change. Hydrogen, we have been assessing. I have been working with the Minister of Public Utilities and his team negotiating but also looking at how can we get a hydrogen project off of the ground in Trinidad and Tobago; and we have to line up the figures. We would not just rush into something unless it makes sense for the population of Trinidad and Tobago, but we are working on it. So you have solar, you have carbon capture and you have hydrogen coming.

Electric vehicles. I am happy that the Minister of Finance announced this measure in the budget. You will hear more from the Ministry of Planning and Development and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. It did not happen

like “vaps”. It is a policy decision that was taken that we will encourage persons to go the route. We do not expect everyone to immediately switch to electricity. Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries is going to build some of the units for public charging in Tobago, in the north east of Trinidad, there is already one in central Trinidad, in the south of Trinidad, in the west of Trinidad, right here in the Savannah in Port of Spain North/St Ann’s West. That is going to happen in the next fiscal and we are encouraging people to move, it is a transition, it does not happen overnight.

Young people at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, I heard someone, a previous speaker, talking about them being left—completely untrue. There is a programme. We are utilizing some of our top scholarship winners. We are going to continue it. The Cabinet recently gave me the green light to go ahead with that.

We have bid rounds coming up. We recognize, I think the previous Senator was talking, we need to understand the change globally and we do. We recognize that we have to be competitive. So you are going to see fiscal changes taking place, you are going to see us look at the royalties, we are looking at the STP, we are looking at the PPT because we recognize that in the next bid round, we need to be successful to keep Trinidad and Tobago alive as a province in this changing global environment, especially where we have Guyana and Suriname with significantly bigger reserves being found of oil. So we are aware of this. And I want to assure, Madam President, through you, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, I have only been able to deliver a very quick and brief snapshot.

In conclusion, Madam President, the energy sector is here to stay. The Government will work towards diversification. The Prime Minister has prioritized

the energy sector. The Government continues to work. I have only given you unfortunately a tip of the iceberg of some of the things we have been able to achieve for the people of Trinidad and Tobago over the last six years and we will continue to work towards and we will continue to keep you abreast as we fight for us to stay in the global energy sector and to make sure we are competitive. But most importantly, as I tell the staff at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries all the time, we must derive the best benefits for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President and Members of this honourable House, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today's debate as I share the current schedule of plans for the Ministry of Works and Transport. Minister of Finance delivered a budget schedule for the nation on October 4<sup>th</sup>, Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister of Finance for the work being done by his technocrats of the Ministry and the sound guiding which he continues to provide in what is truly unprecedented times for our country and the world as a whole. It is clear, Madam President, that this is probably the most difficult time to be a Minister and definitely so to be the Minister of Finance.

In my opinion, the operative word in this decision is resilience as the budget for 2022 demonstrates nothing short of resourcefulness in providing the essential elements to move this country forward despite the challenges we face. As a nation, we have experienced tough economic times in the past but the Coronavirus has added new dimensions of hardship with the unique and detrimental effects. This crisis is being felt the world over.

The World Bank has forecast that emerging and developing economies are

expected to have a decrease in GDP for some time. This forecast is no different for Trinidad and Tobago. As such, the Government, we are required to implement strategic measures to facilitate sustained economic growth for the future. Madam President, the road ahead is not an easy one. The challenges we face as a nation are not for the light-hearted. However, in 2016, when I was placed at the helm of the Ministry of Works and Transport, I pledged to operate on a two-fold mission. One, to improve service delivery to the people of Trinidad and Tobago through the provision of quality, physical infrastructure inclusive of safe and efficient transportation and transport infrastructure. Two, to efficiently manage the limited resources that are available via the execution of projects that would stimulate economic growth and touch the lives of many citizens. My goal is quite simple: I was appointed to improve lives by doing more with less.

Madam President, given our current financial outlook, the Ministry's allocation cannot compare to the days when oil dollars were flowing. Despite the decline, our deliverables to the people of Trinidad and Tobago have nevertheless increased. For the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, we have four major infrastructure projects occurring simultaneously during the period of economic contraction.

The Ministry of Works and Transport is strictly balancing between constructing and maintaining our infrastructure while increasing capacity and introducing new technology. We are now required to grapple with the challenges of age and ageing infrastructure that no longer serves us because of natural deterioration. The global phenomena of climate has placed considerable pressure on our drainage system which are over 50 years old. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a formidable foe as we have dealt with the suspension of normal pace of

administration. The choices we make as a people today will ultimately shape our age.

And, Madam President, I just want to go back to the contribution by the Sen. Mark where he said that you know, one—well, he virtually tried to be the godfather of FCB and tried to indicate that this Government was trying to create mayhem and havoc at FCB. I just need to remind the hon. Senator that it was him, in a different place, when the Members were called upon to account for their actions, who intervened and did not allow the Member to account for his action at that point in time. The same FCB, the same directors, the same CEO at that time. So I totally agree with the Senator that Ministers are supposed to account for their actions and today, I am here to do that for the Ministry of Works and Transport. He also indicated that the Government spoke about digitalization and there was nothing being done.

So unlike many contributions in the past, I will not begin with the talk of major highways and other infrastructure projects, instead I wish to bring into focus the Ministry's digitalization thrust which has allowed us to navigate and reengineer our business processes to improve output during this time. It totally contradicts what Sen. Mark said.

Within just a few months, the COVID-19 crisis imposed drastic change on the way companies around the world and in all sectors do business. As the Minister of Works and Transport, I can attest to the benefit of transitioning to digitalized system by drawing reference to the Licensing Division. Such evolution has brought about fast turnaround times and the ability to serve more clients, greater transparency and modern processes that have birthed a more responsive and productive framework for our digitalization process has facilitated greater

convenience and ease of doing business for all of our customers.

From a financial point of view, the Licensing Division was operating above its projected budgetary revenue and I wish to emphasize that this surplus was not attributed to an increase in the cost of service, rather it was created through the efficient streamlining of processes that allow for use of technology and the introduction of new electronic systems. For example, in the area of renewals of driver's permit and vehicle transaction, the Division would successfully double its output. These system changes resulted in increased approximately 25 to 30 per cent of the projected revenue during January 2020 to May 2021.

To support our thrust towards sustainable development beyond the realm of the Licensing Division, the Ministry will continue to harness digital tools especially for the "unserving" groups. The Ministry, while the internal digitalization committee was established in October 2020 to examine business processes and identify opportunities for digitalizing records, this audit facility facilitated the alignment of processes to enhance the Ministry's internal processes and recordkeeping while increasing efficiencies in the provision of other services to the public.

The bird's-eye view of the continued digitalization process would demonstrate the implementation of several other key initiatives across Licensing Office for the year 2022. Efforts will focus on: the upgrade of electronic vehicle registration system; data migration validation which includes the digitalization of maxi taxi records, taxi badge records, registration documents, vehicle registration records along with new driver's permit records; expansion use of the debit card acceptance; modernization of the driver's permit and the taxi badge issuance system; the use of online application for learner's permit and taxi badge; online



scheduling of regulations and driving test; online renewal processes for driver's permit; speedier certified copy renewals, and deliveries and modernization of the number plate system.

Madam President, the Ministry of Works has positioned itself as the leader in technology integration and have cupped the coveted IDB award for innovation in the public sector in 2022. The Ministry has been adjudged by many as an example of an entity transforming into a truly new organization that is able to pivot to meet the needs of the ever-changing environment.

Madam President, over the past five years, the Ministry has worked towards the building out of expansion of high quality infrastructure to support economic growth and development. High quality infrastructure unlocks economic potential and ensures the equitable distribution of opportunities for all. While the last 12 months, we were not without our challenges, the Ministry made significant progress on projects under the national highways and roads infrastructure programme which when completed will reshape and rejuvenate the economies of small communities across the nation.

The Ministry's national highways and roads infrastructure programme includes the Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin, the Churchill Roosevelt Extension to Sangre Grande, the Diego Martin Vehicular Overpass, the Valencia to Toco Road Upgrade, the Port of Spain East-West Corridor Transportation Project.

Many of our detractors have asked the question: Why build new highways when we can focus on rehabilitating our existing road network? But the reality is the Ministry needs to create a balance between maintaining our capital stock of infrastructure while planning for further capacity. For the past 20 years, the

increase in private vehicle ownership has resulted in a significant portion of our road network reaching traffic flow capacity thus reducing the level of service. As a result, the buildout of new infrastructure is necessary for the following reasons:

- Our existing roads have reached capacity. Additional planned roads will reduce congestion along major road links throughout country.
- Added motorways will protect existing infrastructure by reducing traffic loads on current roads that are now at capacity.
- New roadways will allow heavy trucks to transit from our main roads into new purpose-built roads that have been engineered to better accommodate heavier loads and traffic volumes.
- New roads will reduce travel time for users and create more expressed routes with minimal traffic interruption and adding roads will increase the road safety as a result of improved geometric alignment, lane width and safer furniture like guard rails, barriers, et cetera.

**1.00 p.m.**

Taking all these factors into consideration, the Ministry of Works and Transport remains committed to delivering the following projects. In the south, Madam President, work continues on the Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin. In addition to improving access to residential areas such as La Romain, Oropouche Village, Mon Desir, La Brea, Fyzabad and Rousillac, this highway is a set to further expand the economic landscape of the south Trinidad.

To date, package 1A, 2A and 2B have been completed. Construction is ongoing on the remaining nine packages. In fiscal 2022, the remaining nine packages along the north link of the Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin will be completed. These works involve the completion of approximately 30

kilometres of dual two lane carriageways from Dumfries to Dunlop; four interchanges at St. Mary's, Mon Desir, Grant Road and the La Brea intersection; roundabouts at Dumfries, Shore of Peace, Fyzabad Main Road and the Dunlop Overpass at Delhi Road and the Southern Main Road.

Madam President, in 2022 motorists will continue to enjoy the benefit of a phased opening of this highway. The Churchill Roosevelt extension to Sangre Grande will offer new and improved access to the communities between Arima and Sangre Grande that are not currently served by a direct highway. It facilitates decreased traffic congestion in the town of Sangre Grande and more efficiently links the west of Trinidad to the east, as an alternate route in the event of natural disaster. By expanding our national highway grid, the Ministry is attaining its mandate to improve connectivity between major towns with access time between 15 and 20 minutes. In fiscal 2022, work will continue on the Cumuto to Sangre Grande Highway.

Madam President, the Diego Martin vehicular overpass is yet another example in the plan to allow the safe mobility to improve the life of people who enter and exit the communities. Currently the project to construct an overpass, drainage infrastructure and a roundabout at Columbus Boulevard as well as the connector roads to the surrounding communities is currently underway. The Ministry is expected to deliver this project to the people of Trinidad and Tobago in 2022. The Valencia to Toco highway is greatly needed in the east. As those who drive the Toco area are aware, the Toco Main Road has lots of limitations. In addition to being narrow, winding and clusters with structurally deficient areas, the road's poor condition impedes the route's use.

To address these issues the PURE Unit and the National Infrastructure

Development Company have jointly managed and designed the construction of the vital improvement of the road network. Rehabilitation work on the section between Valencia Junction and the Toco Road are presently being carried out by the PURE Unit. Detailed designs are ongoing for the remainder of the project. Construction work will continue in 2022.

Madam President, I now turn my attention to the pressing and much discussed issues of our existing road condition. Madam President, the Mighty Duke once said that Calypso is an editorial in song about the life that we undergo, and it was Ras Shorty I in 1978 captured the ongoing challenges of infrastructure in his song “Money Ain’t No Problem”. While this song was composed 43 years ago and many administrations, including the UNC and the NAR, have come and gone, in many respects we still contend with some of the same challenges today. This signals to me that as Minister while we have made significant progress in many areas, there is much work to be done and we must continue to reengineer the way we do things.

The Ministry has not stuck its head in the sand, nor has it passed the buck. Regarding the present conditions of our roadway, a recent road assessment has shown that 31 per cent of the roads that fall under the Ministry’s purview are in poor to critical condition. Despite jurisdictional challenges and the Ministry being responsible for only 21 per cent of the national road network we have continued to execute work in the areas that are in dire need of repair, although they are not directly the responsibility of our entities. For instance, the Ministry’s PURE Unit is currently undergoing urgent road repairs at Evans Street, which is the critical link in the Curepe community. This road, Madam President, falls under the purview of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. As we are all aware, our road network

is the main form of inland transportation. Effective maintenance of this estimated 40 billion asset is critical if we are to protect our investments.

Madam President, road maintenance is an expensive undertaking and the Ministry has noted with much concern the condition of highly traversed roads that require urgent repair. One casual factor has been the utilization of the roadways by overweight trucks. On licensing a vehicle the allowable weight is assigned. In the case of vehicles of a certain size, there exists a transport board which advises on the importation, registration, weight limit and roads to be traversed by a vehicle of a certain size. The flagrant disregard of these stipulations over time continues to cause serious denigration to roads which were not built to withstand the loads to which these are being subjected. It is in this context that the Minister of Finance announced the increase in fines from 750 to \$8,000. While this may seem a large increase, it is no way compared to the cost of fixing a kilometre of roadway.

Contrary to those on the opposite side who think we have been or have you believe that we are simply seeking to tax and fine the population, this is one area where we would welcome not having to institute the fine. The aim is so to have individuals and companies comply with the law and thereby assist in lengthening the life of the roadway. Another step to be taken in 2021/22 fiscal year to address the condition of the nation's roadway is the provision by the Ministry of Finance of 40million to the Ministry to execute repairs on secondary, minor, agriculture and forestry area roads.

As we roll out our new projects, it is expected that the public will see notable improvement over the upcoming years. Some roads we intend to address in the near future include downtown Port of Spain. Some of the roads: Sackville Street, around Independence Square; in places like Sangre Grande, the Ojoe Road,

Foster Road, Picton Road; roads that people think are under the Ministry of Works and Transport and are not. Then you have the Trincity Central Road and even in places like Chaguanas, the Charlieville Connector Road, where the Ministry seems to be getting a lot of licks for people not understanding that those roads fall under the Chaguanas Borough Corporation and other entities; roads like the Camden Road, which we know is in dire need of repair but does not fall under the Ministry of Works and Transport.

In addition, the Ministry of Finance has also advised that funding will be provided to focus on an aggressive preventative maintenance road repair programme, which includes milling and patch paving as well as pothole repairs across the country. Madam President, I think the country is totally fed up of going into an infringement on the road and then you hear this road is not the Ministry of Works and Transport's road, this is local government, this is agriculture. I think what we are trying to do now is to—the Ministry is also reviewing its organization structure with the intent of examining a feasible road agency. And that agency is simply where we will try to collaborate with all the stakeholders, WASA, local government, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, to try to have a better communication and to start to repair roads going forward as an agency. This is not an overnight fix but it is something where we intend to engage all the stakeholders to come together and actually try to solve the problem, without having to blame, “who road is who road”.

Madam President, in fiscal 2021, the Highways Division, through its asphalt plant in Agua Santa provided material for repairs to over 54,250 square meters of roadway. That falls under the purview of the Ministry of Works and Transport. Assistance for material is also provided to other entities. To adequately respond to

the demand for increased maintenance, the Ministry is pursuing procurement of a new energy efficient plant with the capability of utilizing in excess of 60 per cent recyclable material.

This initiative, apart from being environmentally-friendly, will be reliable, cost efficient and will increase productivity to facilitate more in-house patching by the Ministry and other state agencies. Again, Madam President, what we are hoping to do is to use back all the material that mill from the road and put it into a plan to reduce the cost, and this material could be used on secondary roads where we can assist the corporations, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and we are talking about starting to have that conversation about a road agency.

The Highways Division is also undertaking steps to introduce mechanisms and trying to use mechanical equipment in its approach to road maintenance, which includes the vegetation, maintenance with the procurement of wheel tractors, deck mowers and road sweepers. The Division also continues with maintenance work through desilting of main culverts, covered crossing, key highway construction of cylinder crossing, bridge upgrades work, catch pit cleaning, verge reshaping, particularly in high-risk areas such as the North Coast Road where proper drains are critical.

Unfortunately, in most of these areas where we have landslips and road slippage, there is no proper drainage and we recognize without proper drainage we really have no roads. So we are going to focus our attention on creating drains in these areas where we have these challenges.

Moving forward, the Ministry will continue to work with WASA and the regional corporations to develop short, medium and long-term strategies for sustainable collaboration and road rehabilitation. My ultimate goal is to ensure that

the public driving experience is not impacted by the operations or in operations of the relative stakeholders. I think again the population is fed up of hearing this is what WASA's problem, this is Ministry of Works and Transport's problem, this is local government's problem. Once and for all, we are trying to find the solution to give you that driving experience that is expected.

In the course of expanding and improving our road network, especially in smaller communities, a programme of upgrade road efficiency executed over 128 projects in 2021, including road rehabilitation, drainage, slope stabilization work, pedestrian overpass, traffic management measures and the construction of bridges. In 2022, work will continue on the Moruga Road Rehabilitation Project, the San Fernando Waterfront Project and the Morvant to Maritime Roundabout Upgrade Project, all which are intended to connect communities, strengthen linkages and improve connectivity.

Madam President, I wish to reinforce that improving the condition of our road network is not merely old talk. A team at the Ministry is cognizant of its impact on the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and we have seen efforts to bear fruits, but we are fully aware that there is much more work to be done. It is our intention to address the conditions of a road in a systematic way, keeping in view the needs of our citizenry.

As I now turn my attention to the issue of drainage, I need not remind this honourable Chamber that global warming is a worldwide problem. It has thrust us all into an age of climate change which, among other effects, is wreaking havoc through the forces of Mother Nature. In fact, the proportion of the population exposed to flooding, according to a recent study by the University of Arizona has grown 24 per cent globally since the turn of the century. And Madam President,



that is why you hear from time to time people telling you about, “my area never got flooded in the past”. What is happening now? It is happening around the world. It is not just in Trinidad. Global warming is allowing areas that did not have that flooding in the past to take place now.

In the United States this year flooding brought distress and tragedy as the Hurricane Ida left 43 dead in four states in late August, according to the *New York Times*, causing President Biden to pronounce that the wider problem of global warming weather events as one of the greatest challenges of our time. Earlier this year we have witnessed Guyana’s experience where President Ali hailed as the country’s worst natural disasters. This episode affected over 29,000 households. So it is not just here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, climate change caused tropical cyclones to increase in intensity. This results in increased rainfall and large storm surges. We are living in a new age, therefore we cannot be comforted by the old saying, “God is a Trini” because warmer temperatures have turned Mother Nature into a beast. Madam President, when it comes to our infrastructure it is important to realize that a significant portion of the drainage and irrigation network is more than 50 years old. Most of the network perform adequately but there are many factors that affect the efficiency and effectiveness of these systems. These include widespread indiscriminate dumping of garbage which reduces flow and leads to flooding, not to mention great environmental impacts.

The stripping of previously healthy vegetation areas caused by slash and burn methods of agriculture, forest fires during dry season and other indiscriminate cleaning also leads to greater runoff, causing high peak flooding situations. Significant planned and unplanned developments during ensuing years meant that

many water courses are now inadequate to cover storm waters at greater flow rates. This has led to flooding in many areas.

Madam President, all I have just said brings home the point that our individual actions have contributed in some way to flooding. Therefore, I urge each citizen to take responsibility for their action and the impact on our environment. Our strategy for drainage response has grown increasingly aggressive over the past few years. In recognition of this, the Ministry of Works and Transport has embarked on flood mitigation measures which include engagement of a consultant through the Development Bank of Latin America to assist in the development of a short, medium and long-term strategy for flooding. In addition, improvements were also made to the existing pumps and gate inventory as part of the infrastructure development upgrade process.

Thirteen projects have been identified, with ongoing work in the following areas: Penal, St. Augustine, El Socorro south, Woodland, Bamboo, Caroni irrigation area, St. Johns in Fyzabad. In the area of desilting, in 2021, the Drainage Division proposed 227 projects. It completed 215, the rest ongoing.

Under the Capital Programme, works were undertaken in the Diana River, the Caroni River. As part of these projects, paving work, access ramps and the widening of the existing embankment with flap gates were carried out. These gates would control the flow of water from the tributaries into the Caroni River and prevent backflow.

Madam President, for the coming fiscal year, the Drainage Division will focus on the following work. The programme of upgrade drainage channels, continuation of work on the Arima, Diana and the Diego Martin River with proposed work to commence in the Arouca River. Under the major river cleaning

programme, Phase 2 of the Caroni River Rehabilitation and Improvement Work Project, construction work is proposed to be undertaken in the New Street, Caroni and the rehabilitation work off Trantrill Road in St. Augustine and the Rocky River in St. Helena.

Under the Infrastructure Rehabilitation and Flood Mitigation Programme, continuation of work at the Marie Doulay and the Guaracara River, the Diana River, Caroni irrigation Phase 3 rehabilitation work at the drainage structure in the Caroni irrigation area, Bamboo Nos. 1 and 2, Guayaguayare River to mitigate flooding with proposed work on the Ciperio and the Vistabella River. Under the programme of upgrade of existing drainage pumps and gates inventory, proposed works are, the upgrade of the Bamboo No. 1 pump house, the upgrade of the Sea Lots pump house and gate structures and reconstruction of the William Street pump house.

Madam President, when it comes to the protection of a Trinidad and Tobago vulnerable 974 kilometres of coastline, the Ministry holds the responsibility for working to prevent coastal erosion and flooding. Through the work of the Coastal Protection Unit, the Ministry carried out a sophisticated national defence system designed to protect our most threatened coastline areas from coastal retreat. As ocean levels rise due to the climate change, this type of intervention is critical to protect our seaside settlements, infrastructure and the surrounding lands from the growing threat of coastal current. Threatened with the coastal erosion, it is an expensive undertaking. However, the allocation funding will be invested in the areas that are most critical, as its negative impact is far greater than the cost.

During the fiscal year 2021, the Coastal Protection Unit continues to work in the following projects: Cap De Ville, where shoreline stabilization works are in

progress, including the construction of a rock revetment with a concrete walkway, a greenheart timber boardwalk, beach access, along with slipway drainage and ancillary work. The Lady Hailes Avenue, San Fernando, which includes the rehabilitation of an existing sea wall. In Matelot, which includes the shoreline stabilization work along the Paria Main Road.

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

Mr. Vice-President, a comprehensive National Coastal Monitoring Programme is ongoing and it is bridging the gap between science and decision-making in areas that are threatened by coastal flooding and erosion. Again, Mr. Vice-President, we are not just not deciding, getting up in the morning and decide we are going to do a project here and we are doing a project there. It is driven by the science.

A snapshot of new projects proposed for fiscal year 2021/2022 includes the Mayaro/Guayaguayare Coastal Management Programme which is at the west Guayaguayare coastal protection works; the Macqueripe Coastal Improvement Work; Matelot Shorelines Stabilization Work, Phase 3; a comprehensive national coastal monitoring programme; Cap De Ville Shoreline Stabilization work; Vistabella Seawall Repair Work; and the Little Rockly Bay in Tobago.

At this juncture in my contribution, I would like to discuss the Ministry's contribution to the blue economy, a more recent concept. It refers primarily to sustainable utilization of an ocean industry for the purpose of economic development, providing better livelihoods and economic jobs. Therefore, I would like to present several initiatives the Ministry has undertaken to develop this sector. The Ministry of Works and Transport recognizes its responsibility to develop port infrastructure and in 2021, continues work on the Moruga Fishing Port. This

facility is intended to bring much needed economic momentum to the south of Trinidad. In Moruga, the fishing industry is already established, but this project will enhance revenue by providing vital structural components.

In 2022, work will also continue on the following projects: the Toco fast ferry port, the Tobago marina and La Brea Dry docking facilities. Mr. Vice-President, some may recall that last year the Ministry of Works and Transport was assigned the specific mandate in the national budget of 2021 to strategize the introduction of a private sector operator into the handling of the operations of the Port of Port of Spain. The objective is to have the port's output meet international quality standards and improve profitability for the benefit of the entire nation. Currently, the Ministry would have put out an expression of interest, and we await the submissions from the interested parties.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Sure. What we expect is an improved level of governance in the Port of Port of Spain operations, improved port activities and operations efficiency that can positively leverage to improve the ease of doing business, stimulate local manufacturing sector, enhance the overall experience of port users, business and the national community.

Other developments at the port include the acquisition of a new ship to shore gantry crane capable of servicing the Panama sized vessels. The machinery now improves the speed of cargo operations at the port, and we can now boast of removing over 35 containers per hour and the lifting of over 75 tonnes. Again, Mr. Vice-President, what we are doing at the port, we are not just shutting down and waiting for a partner. We are continuing the improvement at the port and this year we will see the acquisition of another gantry crane.

As I move along, the Ministry does have a lot more areas so that we can report on. One of the other areas I would like to report on is the sea bridge where we have, for the first time, four passenger vessels operating on a cargo vessel. So we have a surplus amount of seats available and I know once things get back to normal the travelling between Trinidad and Tobago will be a lot more enjoyable. I can speak about the Maritime Service Division, where we are again using technology to modernize that system. And most of the services there are online and we are working on a new maritime policy again to enhance that blue economy.

Mr. Vice-President, the Airports Authority will come into some praise again this year. They got, and I want to congratulate them. They won the best airport in the Caribbean by SKYTRAX World, [*Desk thumping*] the third best airport in Central America and the Caribbean, and the first place as the cleanest airport in the Caribbean. [*Desk thumping*] So I want to congratulate them, and I also want to congratulate the Airports Authority, the Ministry of Tourism and the team at KLM for a long negotiation that bore fruits where we had, for the first time in over 20 years, KLM landing in Piarco again, and this is expected to boost trade between Trinidad and Europe.

Mr. Vice-President, in closing I just want to, again point out that the Ministry would have done its part based on using technology and our delivery of infrastructure. We compliment the Ministry of Finance for a well-put budget. As I said before, I do not think anybody wants the job to be the Minister of Finance at this point in time. This is the most difficult time, not only for Trinidad but for the world. And I want to say hats off to the Minister of Finance, his team, Minister of Planning and Development and her team, and Trinidad and Tobago is definitely in good hands. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Damien Lyder:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you and I thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar for giving me the opportunity and entrusting me to respond to this national budget. I also take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Leader of the Opposition when I viewed her response on television in another place, where she was able to expose this Government's failure and inability to manage the affairs of the economy of our blessed nation.

I also would like to congratulate my colleague Sen. Mark, who spoke before me, in his continued efforts to hold this Government to account. You see, Mr. Vice-President, it is the Government's responsibility to come to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago in a manner in which they spend taxpayers' dollars and in the policies that they introduce through each of their Ministries.

It is the Opposition's duty and my duty to provide the checks and balances to hold this Government to account as it pertains to the details in this budget. So you can understand my disappointment, Mr. Vice-President, and the disappointment of all the citizens in this country when we looked on, on television in another place and we saw that in this other place the Government failed to present the affairs of key Ministries. Instead, Mr. Vice-President, we read in the papers that they shut down the budget debate, in effect abandoning the responsibilities to account to the people. Let me make it pellucidly clear to this nation, with power comes responsibility and the UNC is not in government and therefore cannot be blamed for this Government's dereliction of duty that was entrusted in them by the electorate.

But one thing that is consistent, Mr. Vice-President, is that the Government continues to present budgets filled with pie in the sky and nice-to-have initiatives

and programmes. Such promises typically are never delivered by this Government and rehashed and regurgitated in subsequent budget statements. All this while evading and failing to place a comprehensive solution to deal with the core problems plaguing key economic sectors.

Mr. Vice-President, in my contribution I intend to illustrate how this Government has failed to transform the economy outside of the energy sector and resulted in the abandonment of key economic sectors. They have abandoned manufacturing. They have abandoned tourism. They have abandoned agriculture, just to name a few. I hear the Minister saying what, it is not her fault. But at this point, I would like to echo the sentiments expressed by the hon. Leader of the Opposition when she stated that this Government has declared war on the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

**1.30 p.m.**

You see, Mr. Vice-President, I stand firm in my conviction that it will take a United National Congress government to restore the institutions of our democracy [*Desk thumping*] and to deliver the economic transformation necessary to rebuild our economy.

Mr. Vice-President, Sen. Mark went at length to talk about the macroeconomic factors, so I will brisk over a few for the context of my contribution. But when we look at these basic macroeconomic factors, it is clear that the budget was presented in the context of a failed government and a collapsed economy. One has to look at gross domestic product which has declined by 17 per cent from 2015—2020, declining foreign reserves. In September 2015, when the PNM came into office, net official reserves stood at \$10.459 billion and by August 2021, this key foreign reserve statistic stood at a mere \$7.1 billion. This is the spite



receiving \$644 million from the IMF SDR allocation.

We see continued reliance on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund which has now become a hallmark of this Government. Mass joblessness, one in every five workers is unemployed as was revealed in the NIB report where we saw over 112,000 persons without a job as at June the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020. And this, Mr. Vice-President, was in the formal sector for there are thousands more in the informal sector that are out of work today. It is estimated over 200,000 out of work, Mr. Vice-President.

We see a decline in exports despite this Government's spin on statistics. We see \$10 billion in foreign direct investment leaving our shores from 2015—2020, net public sector debt to GDP at 84.8 and climbing, and gross public sector debt to GDP at 92.6 per cent.

Mr. Vice-President, let me remind this nation that net debt to GDP stood at 47.1 in September 2015 under a UNC-led government. Under the PNM Government, net public sector debt outstanding is in excess of \$125 billion. Let me put this into perspective for you. This Government increased debt by \$47.9 billion in just six years. I mean, our children and our grandchildren will have to pay back this debt. The PNM has crashed this economy well before COVID and now they present no real roadmap for recovery.

Mr. Vice-President, the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry's contribution in another place, when I was reviewing it on TV, it was in that contribution to the debate where she—where the hon. Minister, sorry, cherry-picked headlines that would have emerged a day after the budget debate. The day after the fourth. But I believe that the Minister did not pick up the headlines on the 6<sup>th</sup>, the 7<sup>th</sup>, and the 8<sup>th</sup> of October after stakeholders would have had enough time to digest this budget.

Mr. Vice-President, those headlines tell a tale of a complete failure at economic management by this Government. You just look on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, let me quote a few:

“...NOT GOOD ENOUGH”

Diane Hadad, Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce President, *Newsday*.

“...hoteliers: No innovative marketing for tourism sector...”

Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association, *Newsday*.

“Mixed views on budget from the agricultural sector”

*Newsday*.

“Govt now introducing policies from years ago”

Terrence Farrell, *Express*.

“Govt for the rich and powerful”

Would you believe it, Mr. Vice-President, the ex-finance Minister under the PNM, Mrs. Karen Nunez-Tesheira? *Express*.

“...Budget lacked transparency, accountability”

Economist, Marla Dukharan, *Guardian*.

“Former...Tobago member slams budget”

*Guardian*.

PriceWaterhouse—“Budget did not address forex problem”

*Guardian*.

We look on the 7<sup>th</sup>:

“It’s clear there is no economic strategy”

Curtis Williams.

“Tourism stakeholders...say more must be done”

*Guardian*.

We look on October the 8<sup>th</sup>, and I will leave it there at the 8<sup>th</sup>:

“Economist foresees future income tax hike”

*Express.*

“...Implementation plan needed...”

—by the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Commerce”, *Newsday*. When we saw on that article it began by stating:

“An implementation plan is what is missing from budget 2022.” “Tobago Business Chamber: Be transparent in \$50 million investment for hoteliers”.

Martin George, *Newsday*.

“Lots of ‘maybes’ in budget”

*Newsday*.

Tobago farmers—“...Budget lacks direction for”—agricultural—“sector”  
 President of the Agricultural Society, *Newsday*.

And the list goes on. I mean, I asked myself: Is there an upcoming election in Tobago? It seems that many Tobagonians, from what I see in the papers is unhappy with this budget and with this current PNM administration. But you know, Mr. Vice-President, even in those cases where the headlines appear to be in favour of the Government, when you read the articles, you see that almost every interest group without exception, has criticized the State for not addressing fundamental issues that continue to send our economy into decline.

I have shown you the macroeconomic indicators. I have read for you comments coming from the stakeholders representing the industries that have been earmarked by this Government for diversification of the economy outside of energy. But once again, Mr. Vice-President, we see a budget that is predicated mainly on oil and gas, a Government depending on an energy sector to bail them

out of this crashed economy. We know that the energy sector is a volatile sector. It is hard to predict yet this Government has done nothing to take us out of the clutches and dependency of the energy sector.

When we hear the hon. Ministry of Finance speak of diversification, outside of the energy sector, we hear him mention industries such as tourism, trade, and manufacturing, and we hear him talk about agriculture. But as it stands, however, we hear nothing of substance coming out of these three key areas. And I would now like to take this opportunity to say a few words on these industries as I see it in the budget.

Mr. Vice-President, I look at tourism and the main issue with tourism is the Government has failed to produce a proper master plan for tourism in Trinidad and Tobago. We see a hodgepodge of projects that seem to follow no plan. They appear to fly in the face of transparency and accountability, and seem to be a departure from the practice of a feasibility study outlining a return on investment. For example, we are looking at this airport costing \$1.2 billion. I ask myself: Where is the cost benefit analysis to show the taxpayers of this country that the Government is justified to spend one of the largest capital expenditure items during their entire tenure?

Mr. Vice-President, in last year's budget speech the PNM stated and I quote: "the ANR Robinson International Airport upon completion will provide a state-of-the-art passenger terminal"—eh, not "ah airport inno, ah terminal"—"with a capacity of three million passengers per year;"

It was the Prime Minister of this country that stated that they were expecting an influx of tourists to Tobago and as a result, the airport is earmarked to support such. This project has been on the card since October 2020 but it was in February

2020 that the Tobago Tourism Agency Limited had announced that there were a mere 19, 942 international stayover arrivals in 2019, and this was before the COVID pandemic, eh—the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in regular times. So where is the plan of action? Where is the marketing plan to attract tourists into Trinidad and Tobago? Where are the meetings held with confirmations from various airlines with estimated headcounts of persons entering from year one to year five, moving us from 20,000 to a million tourists entering, where you can then put a revenue amount per head to know if you are getting a return on investment for this \$1.2 billion being spent?

In other words, where are the million tourists coming from? Which airlines are conducting this airlift? I have heard the Minister of Finance speak of KLM Airlines, one airline. Then in Saturday's *Express*, we note that KLM is set to land in Piarco, not Tobago. Maybe that could be clarified? But I ask myself the question: Where are the ramped up flights from Virgin? The additional seats from British Airways committed? New routes from the Emirates airlifting tourists from the Orient, the Middle East and Africa? Did they discuss anything with airlines out of China, India? I would like to know. Which tour operators are preparing tourists packages for Tobago today? Where is the transparency and accountability in awarding this \$1.2 billion contract?

You see, this is important, especially when we know that that procurement legislation was gutted by this Government, where deals are being made from recusal from Cabinet. How will we know that we are getting value for money with this \$1.2 billion expense that taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago are going to have to foot?

So I say this, on behalf of those same said citizens and taxpayers of this

country, we demand that this Government undertake a forensic audit into the details of this contract and the expenditure to date on this airport, Mr. Vice-President. We demand transparency and accountability when you commit taxpayers to this level of spend at a time when people are suffering under this administration.

You know, Mr. Vice-President, here we are, embarking on spending \$1.2 billion on a terminal and by contrast, we look at our brothers and sister in Antigua and Barbuda where they built a state-of-the-art international airport for \$600 million, which included—listen what they got: four jet bridges, 46 check-in counters, 15 self check-in kiosks, a large departure lounge with 30 retail units, free Wi-Fi, restaurants, three lounges. What are we getting for twice the price? A terminal? I mean, where are the details? Where is the transparency? Antigua and Barbuda currently facilitates more than one million passengers passing through the airport on an annual basis. Antigua and Barbuda gets more long-stay visitors in one month than Tobago experiences in an entire year. I mean, there is much we could learn from them but we have heard nothing. But, Mr. Vice-President, let me be clear, we have nothing against a terminal in Tobago, you know, but as we consider this project, we have to ask ourselves: Where is the hotel room stock to accommodate this influx of tourists?

The Government speaks of putting about—and I estimated from reading the budget—somewhere around 300 rooms. But can that accommodate three million-plus tourists claimed by this Government? So there is no feasibility study done here or that has been presented to this population.

And you know what that reminds me of, Mr. Vice-President? In June 2020, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that the THA spent \$40 million on two hotels.

Those are the Manta Lodge and the Sanctuary Villas. These are failed projects with profligate spending with no accountability nor transparency on those items of expenditure. And hear this, after purchasing the properties, they are set to spend—I read it in a *Newsday* article, the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 2021—they are going to spend another 70 million, making a total cost of \$110 million on purchase and renovations of these two hotels. And we note of some of it in this budget this year. But it was the Chief Secretary Ancil Dennis that disclosed that there were no feasibility studies done when they purchased these two hotels. He admitted it. And then we come and we note that \$50 million being thrown around, once more like they did before the last THA elections.

In May 2020, it was reported by CNC3 that Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association, when asked about the 50 million bailout for Tobago hotel, here is what they say stated, and I quote:

“...of the list of 449 businesses many are unknown to the hotel industry.

The group also accused the Tobago Tourism Agency Limited...of listing unregistered businesses to collect State money.

‘116 listed have no room count and 154 listed have no online content, many are unknown to us.’”

So we saw the Government’s plans now to give out another 50 million for upgrades in this budget. Is this 50 million for working capital support going to go the same way to some of these none bona fide hoteliers? Is this yet another election gimmick besides gerrymandering? Is this another election gimmick? How is this a plan for diversification? Where is the consultation with the stakeholders such as tour guides, chartered yachts, diving shops and the taxi association, tourism operators in Tobago? All the Government comes to tell us about is a bunch of

hotels that they have been spending millions on for years and 1.2 billion on “ah” terminal.

Mr. Vice-President, we heard very little about carnival and culture in this budget, so I am not going to spend time there. I do not want to spend time on—too much more time on tourism because there is really not much to speak about. There is no master plan. We have seen nothing coming out of the Road Map to Recovery in tourism being implemented here except a bunch of questionable deals that seem to be reaching friends, family and financiers of the PNM.

We see deals such as the PPP, like the one with eTeck and a private sector company at Rockly Point done without transparency and accountability, designating hundreds of millions in value in prime land and taxpayers’ dollars in a joint venture.

Now, let me make it clear to my hon. colleague, there is nothing wrong with Government and private sector investment. However, it must be done with proper transparency because word has it that the THA does not even have full disclosure on all the details of this deal. So maybe the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry can share the details in her most esteemed contribution coming up. And to top it off, Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, we have not seen him much this year except when he stands on frivolous Standing Orders in this Senate.

So, I will move on, Mr. Vice President. So, I turn now to the next pillar of transformation of the economy which is the manufacturing sector. So what we are seeing is that manufacturing has declined by over 16 per cent overall from 2016—2020. This Government’s policy and agenda has not resulted in positive results for domestic manufacturers. The hon. Minister of Trade and Industry is reported to have stated that manufacturing over the first seven months of this year returned to



the levels of the first seven months of 2019. Interesting. But the full year of manufacturing output of 2019 was less than the output of 2018, output in 2018 was less than 2016 and 2016 output was less than 2015, the year when the United National Congress demitted office. So there is not much for the Government to celebrate here, you know.

And when we examine the performance of manufactured exports, the story does not show any improvement either. The non-energy exports have shrunk by more than \$14 billion between 2015 and 2020. This decline in export was considered together with the stark decline in manufacturing sector output and means that the economy has collapsed under this PNM Government.

The Minister of Finance said in his budget presentation, and I quote:

“We are supporting the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers’ Association in its drive to double by 2025...non-energy manufacturing exports.”

However, when we look at the total manufacturing and exports, they have both declined as outlined by about 16 per cent and 37 per cent respectively from 2015—2020. Does that sound like support for the TTMA? The Minister of Finance said he wants to support manufacturers but based on our consultations with the sector, the Minister of Finance has not taken on board their agenda. In this budget statement, the hon. Minister of Finance continues to peddle nice-to-have measures for SMEs and policy treats for the big boy businesses. However, the Minister fails to address the core issues impacting on the success of an already beleaguered manufacturing sector.

The three core issues are namely: VAT refunds, foreign exchange availability, and the ease of doing business. And unless the Minister addresses these issues, SMEs and businesses will not benefit from the fiscal measures in the

budget and foreign direct investment will not be attracted into Trinidad and Tobago. So I will focus on these issues now, Mr. Vice-President.

The Minister of Finance failed. When we look at VAT refunds, the Minister of Finance failed to inform this Parliament how much VAT refunds were paid in fiscal year 2021 and what is the total amount of VAT refunds owed to date. The Minister boasted about a windfall received via the tax amnesty in excess of \$1 billion. Yet, he is still not forthcoming on the specifics of outstanding VAT refunds and when the balances will be settled. These are some points you must note you know, Mr. Vice-President. VAT refunds are owed to businesses. They do not belong to the State. They must pay back the manufactures. You see, Government withholding value added tax refunds amounts to a forced interest-free loan to the State from the private sector which, in fact, adds to the overall debt of this Government.

Mr. Vice-President, it was reported that 3.8 billion in VAT refunds and VAT bonds were issued in 2020, yet no disclosure on the amount owed to companies and no information on balances owed in 2021. Furthermore, the Minister did not inform of total payments made in 2021 nor the quantum accrued this year. I think some of the Chambers were estimating that it was in the sum of billions being owed.

The Minister of Finance in his budget stated that they are ensuring a timely release of VAT funds. This has to be a misprint, another one in fact. You see, in the current tax amnesty, the Government is focused on effecting payment of taxes to the State. But at the same time, the State is holding back VAT owed to the private sector.

Mr. Vice-President, it was on May 2021 when we see the Trinidad and

Tobago Chamber of Commerce, via a letter, clamouring for the Minister of Finance to keep VAT bonds current and consistent. The CEO of the T&T Chamber spoke at length regarding the lack of VAT refunds after they held out such great hope in the aftermath of the October 2020 budget presentation. And I hope they are not holding their breath this year.

So I put it to you that the Government must stop operating as though they are giving some favours in paying back VAT refunds in this COVID time. VAT belongs by law to the businesses in this country which the Government is obligated to pay. You see, when you turn to VAT Act, Chap. 75:06 in section 35(3), it clearly states, the Government is obligated by law to pay one per cent per month interest on any outstanding VAT refunds that have exceeded six months from the date of owing. So I ask the Government: How much interest have you paid to the private sector due to your delinquency in paying VAT? Because we know if the business people are late by one month, they will attract interest and be mandated to pay it.

You see, it is the Trinidad and Tobago Manufactures' Association who had put in a request to the Government to remove vat from the Consolidated Fund to ensure it is not commingled with the funds meant for other categories of expenditure. So given the delays in these VAT refunds, as a company increases and expands on its exports, they are punished by the increased VAT refund claim that the Government fails to pay on a timely basis. This disincentivizes manufacturers and it affects our ability to grow domestic exports. The recommendation seems to have fallen on deaf ears even though the Minister says he wants to support in doubling the business.

But then we turn on now to the ease of doing business, Mr. Vice-President.

And the Minister of Finance in his budget indicated they were focusing on improving the relative ease of doing business and stated, and I quote:

“We were assured that we would improve our current position of 105 out of 150”—economies—“in the World Bank Doing Business Report 2020.”

However, the hon. Minister of Finance, in a futile attempt to dodge a bullet, stated that just three weeks ago the World Bank cancelled the Doing Business Series on country business climates citing findings from internal audits that staff were pressured to alter data in favour of several countries. Be that as it may, Mr. Vice-President, this does not negate the fact that Trinidad and Tobago’s decline in the ease of doing business was accurately stated in terms of its decline in key measures of ease of doing business within the last six years under this PNM administration.

See, every person in this country, even without data, will agree that almost every aspect of doing business has become more difficult since this Government came into office. The nation must recall that under a Kamal Persad-Bissessar-led government, we reached the heights of 66 in the world. However, by 2020, we dropped to 105 in the ranking. So under the PNM, we declined in areas such as starting a business, dealing with construction permits, getting electricity, getting credit, paying taxes, trading across borders, resolving insolvency, just to name a few. But under a UNC-led government, our country was singled out for commendations where the World Bank in the 2015 ease of Doing Business Report stated, and I quote:

“Among the 21 economies with most reforms making it easier to do business in 2012/14, 10 stand out as having improved the most in performance on the Doing Business indicators.”

Mr. Vice-President, it was a UNC-led government that ranked in this 10. So now, in 2021, every businessman and manufacturer can identify key stakeholders in this country that are relevant in delivering the ease of doing business and that have declined in their ability to do such. So we have seen Government do little or nothing to improve these agencies and stakeholders, except to promise digitization. A promise that is repeated budget after budget. I sincerely hope that my colleague responsible for that is successful because it is getting worse and worse, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, a promise that is repeated. Stakeholders such as eTeck, exporTT, InvesTT, EximBank, Port Authority, customs, amongst others, there are billions of dollars spent in these agencies and we still cannot seem to get the ease of doing business right. You see, in the context of the business environment, we look at the foreign direct investment record under this PNM administration. You see, it was the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development that reported under Kamla Persad-Bissessar-led government, US \$7.1 billion in foreign direct investment came into Trinidad and Tobago.

In contrast, from 2015—2020, US \$1.4 billion left our shores. This means that under a UNC, over TT \$48 billion came in but under a Rowley-led PNM, \$10 billion has skedaddled. Investors, both local and foreign, have lost faith in Trinidad and Tobago as an investment destination. So until this Government throws serious resource and has the political will to fix the ease of doing business with these stakeholders, manufacturers and exporters will never return to the levels of 2015 when the UNC left office. Investment will continue to leave our shores such as Lever Brothers and ArcelorMittal, and prospective investors will face insurmountable barriers to entry or be disincentivized to invest in this economy.

Mr. Vice-President, a third major problem in business is the accessibility to forex. Businesses are struggling to get access to foreign exchange. Every businessman can attest it being an onerous task to access small amounts of forex on a weekly basis. They now have to open accounts with virtually every bank. However, they are still not getting the amount they need or the sufficient amounts of forex to fulfil their business needs. We are still not seeing enough being done to assist importers of finished goods. This could be the major reason why the Chambers reported that more than 6,000 SMEs have closed their doors. You see, from the information we got from the TTMA, there are approximately 550 total manufacturers in this country. From the 550, roughly 215 are actual exporters. The balance is manufacturers for domestic sales.

We see the Minister of Finance boasting that the 100 million they have placed in the EximBank has been accessed by 97 exporters and now increased to 107. If this is the case, why are the other 100-odd exporters not getting access to forex via this EximBank? You see, when we look into this we found out that the criteria seems to be prohibitive to many of the small manufacturers in this country. For example, there is a criterion that 30 per cent of their manufacturing must go to export, unless that has changed recently. This becomes very prohibitive to small manufactures who may not have the capacity and the market to supply 30 per cent of their products to the export market. So only the big boys can get access at the expense of the SMEs.

What we have found recently is Government is now opening up the EximBank as a cambio. We have noted that as late some of the largest manufacturers who may be friends, family, and financiers of the PNM, are also using the EximBank facility to bring in finished goods, essential food items and

pharmaceuticals. So we ask ourselves the question: What percentage of this US \$100 million, that is meant for export, is being used for bona fide manufacturing export? And what per cent is getting into the big boy's hands, the importers of finished goods that gives these large conglomerates an unfair advantage over SMEs in accessing foreign exchange to bring in essential food items and pharmaceuticals?

We note that the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry indicated in July that the food import bill stands at \$5.7 billion per annum. So if the Government is serious about promoting local manufacturing, it begs the question: Would not this US dollars given to these big boys be better used by local manufacturers who are not in the export business but engaged in local distribution and contribute to the reduction of the food import bill? If the Government is seeking to assist companies to import basic food items and pharmaceuticals, they could consider creating a separate fund for this that will not be interfering with the funds put aside to support the manufacturing export.

And now we see this Government in this budget wanting to open up the cambio again to the service industry, further diluting the availability of funds for bona fide manufacturers who want to get in to the export business.

So I believe I have raised—these points I raise should be of value to the nation when asking the question: Why manufacturing and non-energy exports have declined over the last six years?

**2.00 p.m.**

And you know, Mr. Vice-President, despite the praises the Government received from specific Chambers on fiscal measures such as \$50 million in professional services to support the SMEs, the innovation incubator projects, the

junior stock exchange and the tax holiday, the SME loans, none of these initiatives will work if you do not address the key issues for SMEs that I just discussed.

I just turn now, Mr. Vice-President, to eTeck. An important aspect of our nation's industrialization agenda has to do with the 20 or more eTeck Parks. The tenants of the eTeck Parks contribute to this economy. The broader manufacturing sector contributes approximately 60,000 jobs. There are an approximate 30,000 that work in the eTeck Parks. And according to the Minister of Finance, the overall manufacturing sector contributes to 19.3 per cent of GDP. But you have to remember, Mr. Vice-President, these parks were established since 1970—in the 1970s, sorry. And according to some of the park stakeholders that I have spoken to, the infrastructure has been rundown and the current state of these parks call for an annual funding in the tune of close to 50 million to bring them all up to the level of updated status. However, in the Infrastructure Development Fund, allocated for eTeck, it is a mere 5.6 million. This is after removing estimates from the Single Electronic Window and the Magdalena Grand. From this figure 3 million is reserved for one park in Factory Road—

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, and a paltry sum of two million is earmarked for drainage, and fire hydrants, which works out to less than 100,000 per park, which cannot achieve anything, especially as nothing was spent in the past two years in these line items. Amazingly, though, we see 600 million is earmarked to construct a transit hub. So we ask if this is another bus shelter or some feasibility study. You see, the various income streams for eTeck, especially since COVID, and Hilton no longer contributing have been reduced and are insufficient to resolve the park issues, such as roadworks, utilities, parking,



security. You know, some of the tenants had suggested that the eTeck could sell 99 year leases to tenants currently holding the 30 year leases, and they estimated that this could generate at least up to a billion dollars, which would give them the earnings to make the upgrades needed. If this Government is serious about the interest of stakeholders in eTeck Park, they should also consider putting summary tenants on the board of directors.

Mr. Vice-President, in with my limited time I have left to agriculture. I do not intend to spend much time there. You know, what is there to speak about in agriculture? We have read in all the newspaper articles, the disappointment from stakeholders. We have listened to the hon. Minister of Finance, regurgitating the same speech from 2020 where he stated that agriculture is a tax free industry, even though we know that that is not entirely true. Once more, pie in the sky promises of grants and initiatives, nothing that would promote the diversification of this economy outside of the energy sector through agriculture. What we did observe though, Mr. Vice-President, is a decline in budget allocation to agriculture, namely, a cut in the agriculture stimulus package fund in the Ministry of Finance, which they boasted about in the last budget of \$500 million now being reduced to 300 million. And, Mr. Vice-President, this is after only 10 million was spent directly from last year's allocation, and a further approximate 62.31 million was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries under the reoccurring expenditure and spent under this notorious food box programme. This means for the \$500 million earmarked for agricultural diversification, we can account for only 72.31 million spent unless the hon. Minister could show us where it is. This means that 427.69 million in last year's budget promise to the farmers was a mamaguy and was not utilized while farmers suffered from flooding, no

access roads, praedial larceny. And when we question the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in a previous debate earlier this year, the hon. Minister had stated that this 500 would roll over into next year's financial. And so this begs the question, given that only 72.3 million was spent, is the Government being genuine to the nation by promising 300 million in this financial year? Well, it is my belief, Mr. Vice-President, that the Minister of Finance will once again throw my good friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries under the bus, and this money will be a mamaguy to the farming community. If the Minister of Finance is serious about agriculture, then he must stop paying lip service and put the \$300 million squarely on the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Give my friend a fair chance, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, for this Government or any Government to be successful in the diversification of the economy outside the energy sector, it requires an economy that is safe. It requires a Trinidad and Tobago Police Service that is efficient and effective. But what we see now is this Government ushering the nation into a constitutional crisis in Trinidad Tobago Police Service, a constitutional crisis that has caused the country to lose one of the best and most effective commissioners of police in our history. For the first time in our history, the police is without leadership. And today we see what has happened in town, in Port of Spain, this is a time we need leadership. And all this while the TTPS has been under-resourced over the last three years, with budgets being slashed every year from estimated allocation. The capital expenditure cuts total 144 million in Gary Griffith's three years, a slash of 30 per cent.

And as I close, Mr. Vice-President, the evidence is clear. This is not a budget. This is an open war on the economy of the people of Trinidad Tobago.

This is a Government more interested in advancing people than advancing economic prosperity for all. This Government should hang—all of them should hang their heads in shame. They should feel shame for the pain and suffering they have inflicted on the citizens while their friends, family and financiers enrichment themselves. They have no vision. They have no plan, and they have no concern for the people of Trinidad Tobago. This Government has recused itself from tackling the serious problems which face this nation. And I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

*[Desk thumping]*

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Deonarine. *[Desk thumping]*

**Sen. Amrita Deonarine:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Appropriation Bill for the financial year 2022. Mr. Vice-President, it is always a pleasure to have the opportunity to comment and advise on the fiscal policy directive of the country. I hope that my contribution today in this honourable House sets the stage for some fruitful discussion, not only for sustainably building our capacity to revert to a favourable growth trajectory but also building the capacity of our economy to resist future shocks. After all, that is what we are referring to when we speak about economic resilience. Mr. Vice-President, I have a lot to say today, and allow me to give you a snapshot of what I intend to cover. I want to look at the global context in which we are experiencing the rise in energy prices. Then I want to look at the feasibility of the medium-term fiscal framework that the Minister of Finance has projected. And then I want to look at the urgency and the need for us to respond to the potential inflationary concerns that are affecting us globally, taking into consideration domestic factors as well. Time permitting, I would also want to look at the future of natural gas in

Trinidad and Tobago, and whether we are really prepared for global shift in renewable energy.

The resumption of commercial activity worldwide has contributed to significant increases in productivity and significant increases in—apologies, Mr. Vice-President. The budgeted revenue is prime, is premised on a crude oil price of \$65 per barrel, and a natural gas price of \$3.75 per MMBtu. This is actually the highest gas price we have used since we started budgeting revenue from natural gas in 2007. In the global context in which we are operating right now, I think this is both conservative and reasonable. To understand why I am saying this, it is very important that we understand how the energy market is evolving internationally. Now, I know the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have touched on these global developments, but I think it is important to reemphasize the point. Just like we had a sudden stop in demand at the onset of the pandemic that led to surplus oil and gas causing prices to plummet, now what the world market is experiencing is the opposite.

As countries ramped up their vaccination drives, and began reopening their economies towards the end of last year and the beginning of this year, it has contributed to a sudden return in demand that cannot yet be matched by supply. Even though we are still forecasted to contract by 1 per cent in this fiscal year, the surge in demand in the rest of the world is contributing to a projected growth of 6 per cent and 5 per cent respectively in both 2022 and 2023.

The resumption of this commercial activity worldwide has contributed to significant increases in electricity demand, and we all know electricity is a function of natural gas. So, the world market for natural gas is in such a position where everyone basically wants natural gas but global production levels simply just

cannot meet the demand right now. And this is causing a ripple effect across multiple industries in the world, causing global shortages, supply bottlenecks and price increases. But, Mr. Vice-President, this is not the only reason why natural gas prices are increasing. At the same time, what we have happening is a global energy transition taking place, causing many countries such as Europe and China to be more dependent on natural gas and less dependent on crude oil and coal. Germany, for example, has shut down several nuclear plants. China is dealing with a major pollution crisis right now and has been winding down coal power plants and ramping up natural gas plants while they shut down steel mills.

Mr. Vice-President, all these factors are contributing into increased prices we are experiencing for commodities such as steel, and natural gas, amongst other commodities. Henry Hub actually in the US is currently about \$6 per MMBtu, whilst prices in Europe and Asia are through the roof. The last I checked, it ranged between \$30 and US \$40 per MMBtu. On the natural gas front this is good news for Trinidad and Tobago, at least in the short term but it is highly uncertain how long these prices for natural gas are going to continue.

So, it is in that context, Mr. Vice-President, we have the Minister of Finance has the task of pitching a price of natural gas and oil on which to base the budget. However, even with favourable outcomes of four to five major natural gas projects coming on stream, production is still estimated to be below pre pandemic levels at about 2.8 billion cubic feet per day. These are production levels that the country had way back in 2003 and 2004, some 17 years ago. So, even us here in Trinidad and Tobago, are struggling to ramp up the supply for natural gas as we continue to be faced with production challenges.

The heightened uncertainty in global development makes medium-term fiscal planning a difficult exercise. Whilst the budgeted prices are conservative for this fiscal year, the forecast for real economic growth of 5 per cent in 2022 and 3 per cent subsequently is largely based on favourable outcomes in production. Mr. Vice-President, forecasting during such high levels of uncertainty calls for the country to be presented with multiple scenarios for this medium-term fiscal framework. This is why I have continuously asked and requested from the Minister to publish the country's medium-term fiscal framework because there is one that the Minister is working with. And I honestly do believe that the country has the right to understand the plans that the governing structure of the country has in the event of downside risks occurring, especially after we are just coming out of two years of significant risks and a significant crisis.

So, Mr. Vice-President, having recognized the uncertainty we are subjected to, I would caution the optimism to return to a primary surplus in fiscal 2023. Now, the Minister of Finance did not mention this while he was piloting the Bill today, however, this forecast is available in the budget document and so I would speak on it. If we—and the reason why I am saying that, it is too optimistic to return to this primary surplus by fiscal 2023, is simply because if it is we run the numbers to stabilize the depth at the existing levels by 2023 and attain a primary surplus of 1 per cent of GDP, then we will need to either one, generate an additional \$9 billion in revenue, or two, have a combination of cutting expenditure and generating revenue amounting to \$9 billion by 2023. For this to even be anywhere close to achievable, the latter approach would have to be taken rather than the former.

The budget outlined fiscal consolidation measures which include tax reform measures to improve public revenue, such as the TTRA, the Gaming Commission,

and the property tax. Although, I will not be too reliant on the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority in this fiscal year for generating sufficient additional revenues because the structure, the institution, is still being put in place and evidence has shown that revenue authorities take at least two to three years before they start to develop any sort of results, which reflect increases in tax revenue.

So, the other fiscal consolidation measures that were identified in the budget dealt with the rationalization of state enterprises in the form of restructuring of the Housing Development Corporation, the merger of exporTT and InvesTT, we have the WASA restructuring exercise that is ongoing. There were multiple state owned enterprise rationalization exercises that were mentioned in the budget. But what we did not hear is, what are the expectations in dollar value from these rationalization exercises for state owned enterprises? Or rather, how much of these rationalization exercises are going to contribute to narrowing the deficit, or in turn, reducing that deficit to achieve that fiscal surplus in 2023?

Now, as much as some may think that balancing the budget is largely a theoretical exercise, when I looked at the budget document it appears to me that the adoption of these fiscal consolidation measures and structural reform measures in the form of tax reform are all aimed towards achieving an overall balance in the medium-term. As a matter of fact, this is how you go about these exercises and it comes under strong consideration and scrutiny when credit rating agencies have to investigate and look into our books, our revenue structure and our expenditure structure in determining our risk profile and our investment grade for our country.

So, Mr. Vice-President, as I was saying, natural gas is good and the Minister of Energy did allude to this as well, he reminded the country that natural gas is going to continue to play a pivotal role in the revenue base of the economy. But if

the surge in demand continues to be or met by supply, prices may very well persist above this conservatively budgeted \$65 a barrel and \$3.75 per MMBtu for natural gas. Remember, earlier on I said these prices are extremely conservative, right now the prices are through the roof. The Minister of Finance told us today that the price of Brent Crude is actually around US \$85. So, in such an instance what is really going to happen according to the Heritage and Stabilisation Act is that 60 per cent of the excess revenues would have to be placed in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, if these favourable prices continue.

After a total of \$12 billion was withdrawn in the last two fiscal years, and 16 billion between fiscal 2016 and 2020, I think serious consideration needs to be given into revising the rule structure that governs the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund at the soonest. And I say this because we are talking about building resilience. We are talking about building our capacity to resist future shocks. We see how devastating this pandemic has been on Trinidad and Tobago. As commendable as it is that we were able to maintain the net asset value of the fund at the same levels in 2015, which is US \$5.6 billion, the reality is that under enhanced revenue structure, where 25 per cent of annual energy revenues are deposited into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, if we limit withdrawals to 10 per cent of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and we introduce an expenditure fiscal rule which limits the growth of annual expenditure to no more than seven per cent, the Heritage and Stabilisation account would have been accounting for more than 26 per cent of GDP today. It would have been larger today, even if we had still continued to withdraw in 2016, 2017, 2020 and 2021. Mr. Vice-President, I believe that there is room to make the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund more resilient.



So, Mr. Vice-President, I would move on to my second point on the need to address the concerns of rising food prices and cost of living in Trinidad and Tobago. Now, I know the Minister of Finance's expectation is that transitory disturbances in inflation will subside by the end of 2022 at a level of at about 2 per cent. Even the IMF initially expected price pressures to subside in most countries by 2022. But in their recent World Economic Outlook, having held their position on this forecast, what they alluded to and cautioned economies, especially economies who are not entirely food secure, is that inflationary forecasts are highly uncertain at this point. So, I would not be so quick to dismiss international inflationary pressures as largely temporary. We need to be prepared to respond, and to have a coordinated response with the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, to ensure that both fiscal policy and monetary policy are intertwined.

Import inflation is already at our doorstep—imported inflation, and it is being reflected in our headline inflation figures. Food price inflation, I believe was increased by 5.4 per cent in July. Right now, supply bottlenecks have inflated freight and charges on clearing containers by more than 300 per cent, sending up prices of almost everything imported in the country. More than 50 per cent of our imports come from countries that are experiencing high and growing levels of inflation. The USA, 34 per cent of our imports come from there. China, 10 per cent of our imports come from there. Brazil, 7 per cent; Germany, 3 per cent and this is for the period January to June 2021 according to the Central Statistical Office.

All these countries that I have mentioned, Mr. Vice-President, are countries that are battling with high inflationary pressures right now. And we are noticing a trend at home many manufacturers of staple products have increased prices, citing higher costs for raw materials. Many retailers, manufacturers, distributors, farmers

have cited that they are feeling a general increase in the cost of doing business. Farmers are paying higher prices for chemicals and fertilizers. The construction sector is being braced with exorbitant price increases, especially in steel. The food and beverage sector is also dealing with price increases on many products. Most recently taxi fares have gone up. And all these sectors with the exception of taxis, Mr. Vice-President, are sectors that we have been continuously trying to incentivize since the last fiscal budget and we went further even in this fiscal year to introduce incentives to incentivize these sectors.

You see, when retailers, manufacturers, distributors and so on are braced with these higher costs, they have two options. It is either they absorb the costs, which affects their profitability, or two, they pass on the cost to consumers. Current economic conditions make it difficult for businesses to absorb cost, so that the likelihood of higher cost of production being absorbed by these manufacturers, retailers and distributors are pretty much slim. And it may very well mean that these prices will be passed on and probably already are being passed on to consumers.

Now, the Minister of Finance announced the removal of VAT on a basket of goods which is most purchased by consumers. As global developments continue, especially with respect to supply chain bottlenecks in the short-term until 2022, at least, VAT exemptions, I would not be surprised if the VAT exemptions on these selected foods do not result in prices being reduced. We are susceptible because the reality is that we still do not have food security as I mentioned before, and until we become food secure importers will continue to be exposed to the external price shocks which can be very well transferred to the population.

With that being said, I really think that the Minister of Finance should go a little further than exempting these commonly consumed food items from VAT. If it is that you really, strongly believe and expect that food price inflation would resolve itself by 2022, then, until then, in the short-term, why do we not extend some relief by waiving taxes, duties and rents on the freight for containers being imported for maybe, for food and other items that are not really produced in Trinidad and Tobago, those essential items with the exception of the luxury foods, Mr. Vice-President. It will be interesting to know how much revenues you would have to give up to offer this kind of relief to businesses and the population. I actually heard it being announced and being requested by multiple stakeholders in the past couple months. I am not too sure why it is not an option and I hope to get an explanation.

The voluntary compliance programme was also mentioned in the budget document and it may very well help with the speed in which importers clear goods on the port and assist them in avoiding rents or paying customs officers overtime.

**2.30 p.m.**

But, from what I understand, Mr. Vice-President, this programme has not been entirely functional, and when I looked at the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, I see that there is still 44 million that is still being allocated to overtime for custom officers. If this Voluntary Compliance Programme was really working well then, perhaps, that should be reflected in these overtime figures, and I have not seen any reduction in these figures. So it would be interesting to know how many businesses are now participating in the Voluntary Compliance Programme and how much we intend to increase that by.

So, what I am saying, Mr. Vice-President, is that, all-in-all, we need to

create some more fiscal space for interventions, fiscal space for making food for affordable, and we need to do so for several reasons. Right now, we are not entirely food secure, despite having a lot of projects as was mentioned in the budget coming on stream. These are medium to long term and may not necessarily contribute to relieving the pressures—the inflationary pressures that the population is feeling right now. And the other reason is because more persons have practically entered the social safety net; the Minister of Social Development and Family Services keeps telling us that on a regular basis.

Unemployment and poverty has risen. And what happens is when households become poorer, Mr. Vice-President, their household income fall, obviously, but food expenditure which becomes a larger part of their entire household expenditure. What does this mean? It means that the poor feels the pinch the most. And, it is important that we strategically choose where to give up revenues and sacrifice not very high priority infrastructure projects at this point in time, in this fiscal year, in the short term, to alleviate these immediate pressures affecting multiple sectors and individuals in the country. It is not as simple as saying, let citizens who cannot afford the higher food prices, for example, be captured in the social safety net, because even then, in that case, the Government would be the one who has to bear the brunt of the higher food prices.

So, so far, I have been referring to the external inflationary pressures. Now, despite—and now what I want to allude to is the fact that we have some domestic factors that are into play right now that we need to look at carefully. Despite having sufficient international buffers and having intervened via the EximBank facility, the special forex window facility and now the commendable Catalytic Fund which will extend support to service exporters, we still have a large number

of businesses that are typically, import to sell—import finished product—and their businesses are practically made of selling that finished product. For these businesses, Mr. Vice-President, accessing foreign exchange continues to be a major constraint in their viability. These businesses also pay taxes. They also contribute to the revenue base of the country. As much as we want to place them in a category and consider them as persons who are draining foreign exchange from the country, the fact is that they continue to pay taxes. They continue to finance public goods and services in this country.

Even Moody's, in their August 2021 report, reported that foreign exchange shortages continue to affect the import capacity of businesses, particularly small and medium-sized businesses, manufacturers and retailers. So, we cannot deny that accessing foreign exchange continues to be a challenge, and we also cannot deny the fact that a parallel market exists for foreign exchange which is, at least, 20 per cent above the official exchange rate, and all of these are contributing in some way to the higher prices that we, as citizens, are feeling.

And, with that being said, we also have inflation expectations that are being built up, and it is being built up not only from current development, but also from forthcoming fiscal consolidation measures that both this year's budget and last year's budget have been preparing us for. We have the increases of fuel prices due to the liberalization of the fuel market. I heard the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries say that they are monitoring the current economic circumstances closely before they roll out this exercise, and that is important. Because if we do not do that, once we liberalize the fuel market, we are going to be subjected to those—remember those earlier on very high natural gas and crude oil prices that I was talking about—that is what we are going to be exposed to here in Trinidad and

Tobago. And, interestingly, once fuel prices increase, transportation cost also increases, and when transportation cost increases, it has a ripple effect throughout the entire economy.

The second thing is the rise in utility rates that are also forthcoming upon the completion of the RIC rate review exercise. We also have the introduction of property tax collection by 2022, as the Minister of Finance had said, starting with residential property and coupled with that we have the residential housing sector that is being braced with high construction-sector prices. All of these would make homeownership more costly and less affordable, despite the incentives you have here for homeownership through the Home Mortgage Bank and whatnot.

So to put this into perspective, right? Let us look at the weight in the basket of goods that is used to calculate the inflation rate: Food, transport, homeownership, water utilities, gas and other fuels. All of these, Mr. Vice-President, account for 60 per cent of the weight of calculating inflation. This is 60 per cent, 60 per cent of what we consume, Mr. Vice-President, is going to be affected. And I am saying this not to paint no negative picture or anything like that. I am saying this to caution the Government that we should not be too quick on brushing off these inflationary pressures as largely temporary, because when you take domestic conditions into consideration, inflation may actually be here to stay for a much longer period that we expect. Therefore, we really should be careful with the pace at which we introduce these fiscal consolidation measures, as difficult as it is, given the medium-term fiscal framework that I outlined earlier on.

The impact of both international and external conditions must be monitored closely to ensure swift and coordinated, fiscal and monetary response to avoid self-fulfilling inflationary spirals, but also to respond to any international interest rate

increases that would have consequences in terms of our foreign direct invest outflows and also our external debt. We must be prepared to act quickly. I cannot emphasize that more. And this is where I bring in the Ministry of Planning and Development, and the need for them to support the Central Statistical Office to speed up the publishing of this inflation data. We are in October and the latest inflation figures that are published is in July. I think the end of this month, we are going to have the August inflation rate. How quickly things are progressing internationally, it is simply this time gap, this lag that we are receiving inflation data is simply not acceptable.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Vice-President, I wondered why when the VAT exception list for the most commonly produced items was announced, the Minister of Finance did announce that he collaborated with the Supermarket Association to get this list, to come up with this list. And as much as I encourage collaboration with the private sector, it really caused me to question why the CSO was not the go-to for such a list? Do they not compute the inflation rate on a monthly basis and should very well be informed on the basket of goods that is consumed by the population? And if they do not have that list, which I am sure they do not, because the household budgetary survey continues to be outdated for some 15 years, then, how accurate is the inflation rate? I am just asking so one of the policymakers could answer these questions for me. Could the inflation rate actually be higher than what is actually being published? Could headline inflation already be seeping into core inflation?

So, again, I am glad, I am happy that I see that an allocation is being placed again in the PSIP for the household budgetary survey. I see that the intention is to continue with the exercise, and when I looked at the PSIP I see that enumerators

have already been trained and they are going to conduct the survey in a hybrid method. This is very important, because we really cannot continue making policy decisions without essential data. And know the establishment of the National Statistical Institute and COVID is not an excuse for the dilapidated state of data availability when it comes to—and I am saying this carefully—the dilapidated data availability when it comes to the incidents of poverty, the distribution of income and unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago. As a nation, we cannot be comfortable and contented with making policy decisions with questionable statistics. It contributes to a feeling of disconnectedness with the reality of the population, and a general sense of lack of transparency and erosion of trust in governance and institutions in the country.

So, Vice-President, as I draw to an end, the last thing I want to speak about is with respect to the future of natural gas, and how prepared are we to transition into the renewable space of energy. And as natural gas continues to play a pivotal role in the future, we cannot ignore the fact that two largest investors and producers of national gas in Trinidad and Tobago, that is, Shell and BP, have clearly signalled a transition to investments on renewables and hydrogen by 2050, which is largely driven by the global climate change policy. Sen. Seepersad would have mentioned this and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have alluded to some of this as well. But what this means, Mr. Vice-President, is that the capital expenditure profile would be shifting away from oil and gas. Natural gas is really in the medium term just a transitional bridge to the ultimate end game of hydrogen and renewables. And just like Sen. Seepersad, I believe that we need to develop a long-term strategy towards decarbonization. Just saying that the reduction in carbon emissions continues to be at the forefront of the Government's



agenda is not enough.

In creating a future decarbonized world, we need to be creating an enabling environment for investment in green jobs and green industries. Right now, with CNG, the environment is not entirely enabling. There has been an uptick in the ownership of CNG vehicles, but we do not have adequate CNG filling stations to service the growing demand for CNG, in south Trinidad, at least. I am tired of having to see long lines of vehicles trying to fill their tanks in the Mon Repos Gas Station in San Fernando.

This move to incorporate renewable energy in the local energy supply grid via the solar photovoltaic project, I am not sure that it is the best move, and I stand corrected. Because from my understanding, is there a guarantee that natural gas consumption for electricity is going to be reduced with this solar plant? I have not seen any models that evaluate the natural gas savings from this initiative. The intention is to move to renewables. The intention to move to renewables is to try to get a meaningful reduction in natural gas consumption, eventually. Right? This project will cause natural gas consumption to be increased to support variability in solar production. Also, from my understanding, the grid already has excess capacity.

Now, we are going to go into another purchasing power agreement to add more capacity on this grid? Could we not have found renewable energy solutions where the financial benefits stay in the country? What about a rooftop solar programme with a net metering arrangement? This can, one, reduce congestion on the grid; two, improve resilience of the grid in the event of a natural disaster, which we should not really be underestimating—the occurrence of the potential of natural disasters affecting us and; three, reduce natural gas consumption in the electricity

sector.

Mr. Vice-President, another alternative could be a large-scale solar park where T&TEC own and operate it. This is so that foreign exchange does not flow out of the country and into an international company. Is it that we do not believe we have the capacity to do it ourselves?

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sorry. Senator, you have about three more minutes.

**Sen. A. Deonarine:** Okay. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. So, Mr. Vice-President, as I wrap up, there is so much more that I would like to say, especially in the areas of manufacturing, digitalization and SME development, but I know many of these measures would present itself in the Finance Act at the end of the year, so I will reserve my comments until then on these and, of course, time is practically out.

I must say though that I hope that the efforts to collaborate with the private sector stakeholders in Trinidad and Tobago to come up with solutions to our development challenges continues. Further, we have to realize that the pandemic has created massive gaps in inequalities that must be tackled now. I do not believe that these were adequately addressed in the budget. If these problems are left to fester, it can hamper a sustainable and resilient post-pandemic recovery. I hope that my other colleagues cover these issues, and I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Avinash Singh):** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for recognizing me at this point in time, and it is a pleasure to join in this debate in contributing to the national budget of 2022. Let me take this opportunity to thank the hon. Minister of Finance and congratulate him for a job well done in putting together this package for Trinidad and Tobago. Also, I would also like to commend the Minister of

Planning and Development and her team for working assiduously to get this country back on its feet in terms of moving to where we would like to be in stabilizing our economy and moving forward.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to also thank the hon. Prime Minister for steering this country in these difficult times with sound discipline and sober leadership, which is needed more critically now more than ever. Mr. Vice-President, I also wish to thank the hon. Prime Minister for allowing me, once again, the opportunity to work alongside my colleague, the hon Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat, a man who has significantly moved the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago forward, at least, in our administration.

I would take a couple minutes, Mr. Vice-President, as I go through a couple points, trying to account to the nation, the population, in terms of what we have been doing and what we will continue to do for the agricultural sector. As was said earlier, the \$1.24 billion allocated to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, I am going to try to break down and go into some of the details and I know my colleague, when he speaks, will also give further clarification and details in terms of the budget presentation.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to start off by turning to a topic that a lot of us seem not the pay much attention to and, in fact, I have stood here in almost every budget contribution that I have made since 2013, to this date, and I have spoken to incentives and subsidies. And while I listened to all Members of the Opposition in the other place and here and some of the Members who have spoken on the Independent Bench, asking for more subsidies and incentives in the agricultural sector, Mr. Vice-President, you will be shocked to know the level of incentives and

subsidies you and the rest of the nation, our taxpayers, fund on a yearly basis is significant.

And just to understand by way of dollar value, in this fiscal ending September 2021, we would have already been, you know, accrued \$60 million in terms of payments to farmers, and this comes via the way of cash. And I called it cash because it is a direct payment to farmers, and you would be shocked to know, Mr. Vice-President, that since 2015 since, you know, this administration assumed office, we have made over \$120 million—and I want to repeat that—\$120 million paid to farmers since 2015. And, again, by way of cash, via cheques, that goes directly in the pockets of our hard-working farmers and producers of this country.

But, Mr. Vice-President, we are always asked by persons, we have always had to grapple with: Are we getting value for money? And I am saying to the population, there will come a time when we must be able to link our payment to production. And in determining value for money paid by the taxpayers, it is time we try to link these payments to production. In fact, it is already done in some of the avenues in the agricultural sector.

And, Mr. Vice-President, while we are heavily subsidized, a review of all the contributions I have said earlier, I actually listed the figures in almost every contribution. And when you look at the in-depth figure, you will be shocked to know that vehicles take the largest chunk of the budget that goes for the Agricultural Incentives Programme. And some people, you know, Mr. Vice-President, even claimed that some of these vehicles that you and the taxpayers are fitting, sometimes never even touch the soil in the garden and it is to understand where we are with respect to affordability.

Some of the other incentives and subsidies that we also fit include: tools,

machinery, irrigation, water pumps, IPM—integrated pest management—chemicals, tractors, ponds water management, fencing, security camera animal pens and the list goes on and on. It is quite extensive, Mr. Vice-President. And when you look at the agricultural sector in the eyes of us, the technocrats, Mr. Vice-President, we want to be able to understand, you know, the value for money, as I have indicated earlier. I have been called by a number of farmers after they listened to hon. Minister of Finance in presenting the budget, in the other place, about the statement of the tax-free environment and I want to spend two minutes just to clarify what we refer to when we talk about the tax-free environment.

Mr. Vice-President, as you would know, coming from the agricultural sector more, in particular, the fisheries sector, earnings from agriculture in this country is totally tax free. And when we speak to agriculture and its facets as a tax-free environment, we speak about farmers being able to put all their earnings into their pockets and into their bank accounts being a tax-free environment. But I want to also indicate to farmers who have expressed concerns to us about elements in that Customs and Excise Act, Chap. 78:01, and elements in the Value Added Tax Act, Chap. 75:06, because I, too, have gone through these legislation and, for example, agriculture and agricultural systems continue to evolve with time.

We have heard Sen. Seepersad mention about technology-driven agriculture and technology continues to be upgraded in all facets. So, no longer does some agricultural systems require soil or sunlight, Mr. Vice-President. So, we really need to review our legislation, and I want to report to the population that Minister Rambharat in his wisdom has already done that and put people to work to review the legislation and the laws of our country to bring it in line with modern-day society and getting some of these elements off.

So, some of these technologies and some of these elements, Mr. President: hydroponics, LED technology, we have stackable pots and we are seeing more and more of these intensive-type agricultural systems being utilized by our citizenry and population, especially by people who are in high-rise building. They do not have land, but you are seeing they are participating in agricultural production in whatever small way or in whatever way they can, and we want to be able to say to the population that all of these elements, we are currently reviewing and we will be looking at making recommendations to the hon. Minister of Finance where those are concerned, and the list goes on, because I have looked at it, Mr. Vice-President—greenhouses, shadehouses, vertical farming systems, irrigation systems, specialized tool and machines designated to be used in the agricultural sector. So all of these, as I have indicated, these agricultural inputs that are listed under the Schedules, we are looking at the review and we will be making those recommendations to the hon. Minister of Finance in due course.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to turn a little bit to the agricultural sector in terms of the signs of improvements and the investment in the sector. We have all heard and we have heard in the other place, over 200 million in private sector investment has been made in livestock production, poultry production, including duck farming and processing, rabbit rearing and processing, hatcheries, greenhouses agro-processing, seafood processing and agro-processing for export markets. What this tells us, Mr. Vice-President, what I have just outlined is not pie in the sky dreams or fairy tales as we would have the Opposition make us believe, but this is the robust private sector having full confidence in the governance, stability and leadership of this country by putting their money, Mr. Vice-President, into action and making those investments in the agricultural sector. None of this

200 million investment, Mr. Vice-President, or I should say most of that 200 million is private sector funding. So, it was not a drain on the taxpayers. The Government has no cause to pay. These are business people, entrepreneurs, farmers, utilizing their resources because of the level of confidence they have in this economy, at this point in time. And, Mr. Vice-President, that is to say the least. Because, as I said, it is their own money and they see the value in diversification.

We are having a lot of conversations with so many persons who are now wanting to get in the sector. I am so happy and proud to see the level of young people coming, writing and visiting the Ministry asking for opportunities in the agricultural sector, willing to put their time, effort and resource in building this nation, block by block, and getting involved in the food production arms, because it is attractive, it is good business and it has return. We know that more so than ever with this global pandemic, COVID-19—disruptions in the supply chain and a whole range of issues where food is concerned.

**3.00 p.m.**

Mr. Vice-President, next time you shop or make reference, and I should say, many persons in the Opposition always speak to the food import bill, and I always comically sometimes have to go back and say, you all must pay attention to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. He always says when you speak about the food import bill, you individually, personally, look at your own fridge, look at your own pantry. You determine what goes on your plate. So we talk about the food import bill, but we have the power and we have a degree to dictate what we feed ourselves with. We always say, grow what you eat, eat what you grow, visit our farmers' markets. I am coming to the farmers' markets in due course, but this is to say, Mr. Vice-President, that we have some degree of control on the food

import bill.

There are so many elements on the food import bill. There are so many alternative products grown and processed right here in Trinidad and Tobago, and without calling any brands, I am so happy to eat guava jam as opposed to blueberry jam, and these are some of the examples you can look at. This is what we speak about, learning to change our culture, learning to change our dynamics in terms of the foods that we eat.

When people complain about the agricultural sector not receiving the due share and all of that, as Minister Rambharat always says, it is not how much you get, but how you spend the little and stretch that little to take it in the distance that you would like it to go, and we have been doing so. No longer are the days where we are wasting or you are seeing levels of corruption in any of these programmes. We are running this country with less, and doing more.

Mr. Vice-President, with private sector investments and the additional avenues for fresh produce, the farmers are called upon to continue producing, and to continue with respect to producing good quality, consistent supply, because we are seeing a lot of investment requiring fresh produce now. One company was launched recently, requiring a lot of local produce for processing. What that in a sense means, is that more of the commodities on the regional and local markets will be taken off and go to processing, which means our local farmers will benefit from the economics of the day, supply and demand. They would get a better price.

People always complain when farmers get a better price. We all heard earlier, Sen. Deonarine alluded to it, the price of fertilizer, chemical inputs, and some of these. While people might point fingers and say the Government is to be blamed, we all understand here in this room the whole supply chain logistics, and



what is going on beyond our shores with respect to shortages of containers, shipping routes that changed, that increased the shipping costs and things like that, that, in effect, goes to the prices of the commodities and things like that.

Mr. Vice-President, we have heard, and I listened carefully, Sen. Seepersad in dealing with the agricultural sector in her contribution, as I have indicated, recommended technology-based farming. Mr. Vice-President, one such option we are proposing is the need to invest in greenhouses in this country, and I will let you know why. This initiative is designed to capitalize on technology, to capitalize on production systems that could withstand climate change, because climate change is no longer a subject or a topic taught in schools or read about some far, far place. We are experiencing it right here in Trinidad and Tobago: Unpredictable rainfall, rise in temperatures, sea level rise, coastal degradation, in some areas saltwater intrusion. Mr. Vice-President, with the rise in temperatures due to climate change, agriculture has and continues to suffer.

Another major challenge remains the proliferation of new and existing pests and diseases, because the research shows in most countries where the temperature rises, the increase in temperature has also contributed to a rise in pests and diseases. The actions of a few lawbreakers, bringing in foreign fauna and flora, has almost caused irreparable pest infestation, and some of the examples we can turn to, the sweet potato weevil. A couple of years ago we did not have that pest in this country, and sad to say it was brought in by whatever means, and now it has almost decimated the sweet potato industry in central and south Trinidad.

Mr. Vice-President, I know some people see it as a wildlife and as a pet, but the growing capybara population is something of concern, especially to the farmers in the Caroni area—again, a pest brought in by lawbreakers in this country. Mr.

Vice-President, the dreaded giant African snail is now in almost every community in this country. When we were following this story a couple of years ago, it tied back to some individual or persons, I do not know, bringing it in, whether by what means, but it was done illegally, and now the giant African snail is highly invasive, adaptable, feeds on over 500 varieties of plants. The Ministry continues to work with farmers and citizens in eradicating this pest, but we need the support of everyone. Persons are reminded to please keep their personal space and surroundings clean of rubbish and overgrown grass, because the rate at which this pest spreads and multiplies is phenomenal. We all know about the locust invasion and the plague in south Trinidad. I am raising these elements that exist in Trinidad and Tobago, to underscore the critical need to move in the direction of intensive agriculture, protected agricultural models.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has already announced in the public domain the intention of this Government to introduce greenhouse parks at designated locations, where the State will finance the construction of these greenhouses, that will be made available to new and existing farmers, especially the young people who want to get involved in the active production, using these modern technologies. But in doing so we recognize the cost to erect a greenhouse could be unattractive, hence we will be making the investment, and that is the Ministry, to try to get more people involved in these protective forms of agriculture. We see this initiative as a step in the right direction, since every year the State, via the taxpayers, is called upon to pay millions of dollars in flood-incurred damage, flood compensation due to flooding.

We have also announced an agricultural homestead programme in this budget. We recognize the number one issue facing farmers, and especially new

entrances into agriculture, particularly youth participation in agriculture, is access to land. That word “land” is synonymous with agriculture and always raises its head in almost every administration, in terms of dealing with land tenure and the issues surrounding land. Mr. Vice-President, this programme will give persons the opportunity to not only practise meaningfully, and to practise agriculture, but also erect a dwelling house or a structure and to be close to where they farm, because we all know the constraints and we all know the issues surrounding praedial larceny.

I have alluded to incentives and subsidies. I want to put the farmers—to let them understand that part of the \$100,000 grant funding that the Ministry has made available, can be utilized for security systems and fencing, and protecting their agricultural commodities and possessions. We are trying to help the farmers to help themselves as well, but I would also say the good star farmer—and I have said it on the last occasion here for the midterm review—the good star farmer, that bunch of plantain to a farmer is no different from a nice sports car in somebody’s showroom, in terms of the value and the responsibility by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, in responding and dealing with those matters.

We have the Praedial Larceny Squad to supplement and assist the police in terms of doing their work. But I want to also, and I have said it many times—because a farmer, looking at that bunch of plantain is an accountant, and he does everything possible to make sure that he gets and he harvests, and he reaps that commodity to be able to send his children to school, buy books and so on. Likewise a businessman or entrepreneur in a mall or wherever, shoplifters going to his establishment and stealing something, the response by the police, I am trying to allude, is also important.

Mr. Vice-President, this leads me to the signs of increasing interest among the young people. I am particularly pleased to report that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has already processed 67 applicants under the \$100,000 grant Agricultural Finance Support Programme, also called the Agro Incentive Grant, and there are hundreds, if not probably about 1,000 applicants and applications waiting to be processed. But we have already dispensed \$5.69 million to these applicants. A point that must be noted is the level of young people accessing this grant. It is very promising to the future of agricultural production in Trinidad and Tobago under this administration.

When I talk about the grants, Mr. Vice-President, some of these projects that we have approved, and the committee via the Ministry, it deals with greenhouse construction, hydroponics systems, irrigation systems, free-range poultry systems, root crop processing facilities, livestock production models, cocoa and coffee value added systems, citrus and exotic fruit juicing systems, security and infrastructural upgrades on farms, post-harvest production facilities. Clearly you can see, very attractive projects being undertaken by private citizens and farmers with the assistance and direct injection of funding from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, to assist them in achieving their goals.

The participation of young people, Mr. Vice-President, in our NAMDEVCO Farmers' Markets is very promising and phenomenal. I could remember when Minister Rambharat designed the farm-to-table model, and he asked NAMDEVCO to host the first farmers' market at the Queen's Park Savannah, persons were skeptical. In fact, NAMDEVCO was asked to buy some fresh produce and offer for sale at the cost price, to advertise and market this opportunity for farmers and consumers. Today, Queen's Park Savannah is booming since over 3,000 persons

pass through that location each Saturday. [*Desk thumping*]

In fact, the programme has been such success, now replications of the Queen's Park Savannah Farmers' Market are in Point Fortin, Rio Claro, Couva, Diego Martin, Macoya, Arima, San Fernando, and right underneath the headquarters of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in Chaguanas. If not this, putting the farmers first, putting the consumers first, understanding that we have developed a farm-to-table model where consumers can go directly to the farmers, and now would you imagine there exists a list of farmers now waiting to get into those markets, to be able to sell their produce. So times have really, really changed. In fact, we have seen so many young people participating in these markets. It is very, very promising.

So, Mr. Vice-President, when the Opposition continues to preach doom and gloom, about nothing is happening in the agricultural sector, go and speak to those farmers selling at the markets. Ask why there exists a list of names of people waiting to get into the farmers' markets to sell. This is the level of confidence the productive society in agricultural production entrepreneurs, persons in the artifact industry, persons are making with their hands their pepper sauce, their achar, their cuchela, you name it, and coming to our local farmers' markets, and meeting and greeting with consumers, and giving them value for money at the best price. [*Desk thumping*] So they deserve recognition and also deserve respect.

The Opposition is unkind in saying nothing is happening. I continue to commend and salute the hard-working men and women, the farmers, the fishermen that fed us throughout this pandemic and continue to do so. Millions of pounds of fresh produce, fresh poultry, eggs and meat, not once did we ever run out of food, notwithstanding the global supply chain disruption.

This to somebody might just go in passing, but that is the degree of the production levels of our farmers. Not one day can any Member in this Chamber say with confidence that they went to the market, they went to a supermarket, they went to the grocery, and the farmers did not deliver. Not a single Opposition Member in here or the other place, took the liberty to thank their own farmers, their own constituents in supplying the bulk of produce to NAMDEVCO, to assist the vulnerable in society.

Mr. Vice-President, 185,000 families touched by the food baskets. All 41 MPs, all councillors and Assemblymen in the THA were given these hampers, these food boxes to distribute, NGOs shared. This effort by NAMDEVCO must be commended, and the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries must be commended because this programme has opened the eyes of what we as a people can do, even in difficult times. Even as we are suffering the pandemic, food is one of the most important commodities, and almost every farmer delivered. It was well received, as most vulnerable in society were assisted with the most basic necessity.

I must report that the real beneficiaries were our deserving hard-working farmers, all 300-plus of them, that rose to the occasion and supplied with quality and quantity. I hope those farmers and producers understand the level of disrespect shown by the Opposition, when they continue to say nothing in agriculture is happening. They continue to preach nothing is happening. So where did the millions of pounds of produce come from? I would dare say, without fear, most of these hard-working, productive farmers are based in UNC constituencies. [*Desk thumping*] So when these Opposition MPs come and say nothing is happening, you are demeaning your own constituents. You are putting down your own farmers, the persons that fed us. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, I want to turn now to land tenure. In almost all, as I have indicated, almost all my budget contributions since 2013, I have spoken about land tenure. Land tenure still remains the number one issue for this Government. We continue to grant leases, Cabinet approval, lease renewals and make land available to farmers, but it would be interesting to know that most of the real producers continue to produce although they have no leases.

When you look around this country, there are so many good farmers, good people producing without land tenure, and we recognize that issue. In fact, that is what led to the whole transformation of the Ministry in digitizing our records, spending money in digital transformation. In fact, now we have an entire Ministry that is designated to assist us, and it is to help, it is to regularize, it is to get those farmers on board, get them registered, bring them into the system so that they all benefit.

Mr. Vice-President, as the hon. Prime Minister alluded to in a public meeting, at every Cabinet meeting leases are approved, if not thousands of leases have been delivered by this Government. In fact, maybe we should really do a ribbon-cutting press release, like the UNC would have done when they opened the Brickfield Packing House. Big fanfare, \$80 million facility, but it did not even have an electricity connection, but that is what they would have done. Maybe we should do something like that, so the population knows how many leases. Every week, every week Minister Rambharat is there handing out personally, giving out leases, giving out Cabinet approval, lease letters to these persons who require it.  
*[Desk thumping]*

In fact, the statistics would show differently. As a matter of fact, Mr. Vice-President, year on year since we assumed office, the number of registered farmers

grew by hundreds. If not that, that alone can tell you that persons' leases are being dealt with, but we are not going to make any fanfare. We do our work, we pay attention and sometimes, as Minister Rambharat says, he has to do the work of the Opposition MPs too. [*Desk thumping*]

I did not mean to politicize the issue where land tenure and that is concerned, but I had to express my disappointment on the comments being made by Opposition Members, when they should be proud of their farmers and work with them to be better farmers. Every letter that leaves the hand of the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, it reads: Let us make our good farmers better. And likewise Opposition, hear me, let us make our farmers better, let us make our people better, rather than condemning and opposing for opposing's sake.

When you look at the criteria to become a farmer, land tenure is critical. I want to also indicate that while you must be the owner of that parcel, and a lot of persons do not know, but you do not have to be the owner of that parcel to be able to be granted registration status, and to be able to benefit from the host of incentives and subsidies that the Government offers. You could be the occupier of that parcel, simply get a permission to cultivate for a minimum of five years on that parcel. It could be a rented parcel—a rented parcel as well. You can occupy state lands for more than five years, with the exception of forest reserve, environmentally sensitive areas and road reserves, things like that.

So land tenure remains the number one focus by this Ministry. You have heard on almost all the occasions that we get to speak, land tenure remains the number one issue that we are dealing with head on. I have said this in the last opportunity I had to speak in the midterm review. I have spoken to the fact that you need somebody like Sen. Rambharat, who has the institutional knowledge on land



matters. You need somebody like Minister Rambharat, who was born in an agricultural community, who understands agriculture and does not just talk agriculture with one side of his mouth. That is what we need. We need sober, sound, principled leaders in our society, which only the PNM has, I must say.  
*[Desk thumping]*

I want to touch on the success of the Grow Trinbago Seed distribution programme.

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

**Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

When you look at this programme, the ability of this one programme, again initiated by the visionary Clarence Rambharat, my colleague in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the Minister that is, he wanted to make sure everybody knows how to plant their own food, grow what they eat and eat what they grow. I am not “mamaguying nobody”, Mr. Vice-President, Minister Rambharat deserves recognition, because at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, I would be the first to oppose, because I have always indicated my interest. Being a farmer by profession, coming into this Government, I have received respect, I have received the luxury of being in an administration who really cares about the farmers and the people in this country. Not like the talkers. Not like those who have not even given out a single lease in their own constituency like Orange Grove.

Mr. Vice-President, 50,000 seed packages were distributed to every single one of the 41 MPs. We have also distributed seed packages to all local government representatives, and we have also given out to NGOs and to persons at our Ministry’s head office and so on.

Mr. Vice-President, somebody might see it as just a seed package, but this is our heritage. This is genetic material. This is genetic diversity that we grow here in Trinidad. You might not find it—in fact, the variety of pumpkin you get, that former Member of Parliament Rambachan took a picture of his car trunk. One plant, he picked nearly over 100 pounds. The genetic material that we gave to the population is our heritage, that we saw it fit, at this point in time, to let everybody plant something. Eat what they grow, and grow what they eat. So that programme has been extremely successful and it is continuing.

Mr. Vice-President, in wrapping up, I am happy to associate myself with this administration, and I say that for many reasons, especially at a time where we have never been exposed to a global pandemic. At this time, we are in critical need for a sober and visionary leader, and in looking around the only person that fits that criteria is hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, nobody else. [*Desk thumping*]

I commend the hon. Prime Minister and the team at the helm, as I know my future is certainly guaranteed, and we will get over these challenging times. We are a resilient people, Mr. Vice-President. With those few words, I thank you.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Trade and Industry.

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the 2022 fiscal Appropriation Bill. Let me say as I speak, I recognize all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who continue to weather through these very trying times. At the end of the day, we are all going to come out stronger for it.

I wish to thank the hon. Minister of Finance and his team for the immense hard work that they have put into this budget and, of course, we also commend the

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

work of the Minister of Planning and Development and her team for their contribution to the budget outcomes as well. But, again, always the hon. Prime Minister, to thank him for his total support, and for his vision, his wisdom, his guidance, his leadership in navigating this country through the very difficult times.

Overall, Mr. Vice-President, the review of the budget has been quite positive, and I am pleased by all of the responses echoed by the business houses in particular, in response to the budget. Therefore, on behalf of the Government, I wish to thank the private sector and, in particular, all of the business houses for their understanding and their continued collaboration with the Government, and also for supporting Trinidad and Tobago, the well-being of the population, and really showing their support in these very trying times. They have really worked very hard to maintain a resilient economy, despite the challenges that we would have inherited on account of the ravages of the pandemic.

So I also commiserate at the same time with those particular sectors and businesses that have not done very well. Perhaps the entertainment and tourism sectors and so on, and other businesses which have been affected in some way or the other on account of the pandemic. Of course, through the efforts of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, we have made several interventions, and with the passage of time and also with the new budget recommendations, I am sure that they would find various ways in which they can strengthen themselves, get back on their feet and be ready for the growth that is going to come in this economy.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Now, there were several things which I spoke about in the Lower House which I will not expand on here, but I will still speak to it because, of course, it is

of great importance, but I will try to focus on other areas.

**3.30 p.m.**

I did speak about inflation and I am responding to it because, in particular, Sen. Deonarine had quite a discussion on this subject. In the Lower House, I would have spoken to the whole question of inflation, headline food price inflation, core inflation and addressed the whole question of global prices rising on account of a whole lot of factors including: disruptions in supply chains, shortages in shipping containers where the cost has tripled. And the answer cannot be that the Government pays the shipping costs at all but the shortages in shipping containers, adverse weather conditions and also the decline in industrial output leading the economies. Some of them indeed took decisions that they would keep their production for their own citizens to ensure food security in their particular countries.

So that, we understand what has happened globally with regard to food prices. They have gone up by something like 33 per cent when compared to September 2022 and these are levels which the world has not seen for decades. But coming close to home, the Central Bank would have reported a figure of 4.9 per cent in September of this year. The global situation is in Canada, it was 4.1 per cent which is the highest figure that they had seen since 2003; the UK, 3.2 per cent which is the highest since 1997; the US, 5.3 which is the largest surge that have seen since—for the last 13 years, and looking at home in Barbados, 5.88 per cent and in Jamaica, just over 4 cent. But our Government has really come forward and introduced several inflation containment measures including the zero-rating of basic food items. And I do not intend to go into list all of those but including the zero-rating of basic food items which is really meant to assist the vulnerable more

than ever.

Again, the continuing suspension of the CET on basic food items, at least 20 of them. And I think Sen. Deonarine was questioning: What is the cost of that? And I can tell you, just to cater to the suspension, the CET on those 20 basic items would cost this country \$164 million annually. And, of course, I have not quantified what the zero-rating of the basic food items, that is the 45-plus whatever was existing on the list before.

But how we have also assisted is through making available to the population more than US \$650 million in foreign exchange. And, I mean, I wish to let Sen. Lyder know that there are, in fact, two different pockets of assistance with foreign exchange through the EximBank. One, for manufactures in terms of their inputs into manufacturing and the second one, for support for the basic foods that we do not manufacture which we need for the population. So there are two separate funds, Sen. Lyder. And of course, the implementation of the \$500 million agricultural stimulus package, which I do not need to talk about anymore after the fine contribution from my colleague, Sen. Avinash Singh, on the hundreds of thousands of pounds of produce that we have supplied the nation with during this COVID period to the extent where there was no food shortage in Trinidad and Tobago.

And, of course, through the strengthening of linkages between industry and agriculture and building sustainable food support systems and, of course, support for items which would fall under import substitution. And, again, the other containment measure is the monitoring of prices and the publishing by the Consumer Affairs Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry which we continue to do on a monthly basis largely through social media but once a quarter

in the newspapers.

I spoke about that zero-rating of basic food items and, again, I made the point that the UNC was trying to confuse the population by saying that they had, in fact, zero-rated 7,000 items. That is not so. That is—what they are talking about is the stock keeping units and the breakouts under the HS code. So I clarified all of that as well. And the point is that this Government is doing all within its power to ensure that the prices of goods, particularly the basic goods, are contained and remain reasonable enough to the consumer. Of course, remembering our last speaker, we must grow what we eat, and that is something that we must focus on as well.

Again, I give every assurance from the Ministry of Trade and Industry's perspective that the Consumer Affairs Division will continue to do their work, monitoring not only food but also poultry items, hardware items as well, anything that the consumers would require in terms of a basic item.

Looking at the trade performance—and, again, I have to correct Sen. Lyder once again. I spoke—yes, according to the 2021 *Review of the Economy*, Trinidad and Tobago registered \$36.6 billion in total exports for the nine-month period, October 2020 to June 2021, which was TT \$7 billion more or 25 per cent more than the corresponding nine-month period in 2020. But I did say that looking at our TTBizLink stats for the remaining period and the next few months, July and August after, that there were increases in our exports by \$6.1 billion and showing, therefore, a much stronger export base. So—and then, looking back at our figures as well, we said that our exports are now trending to our pre-COVID export levels which is what we want.

But looking specifically at the non-energy exports—and let me say to Sen.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Lyder—let me correct up front, when—I think you are mixing up core manufacturing which excludes petrochemicals. So when you say—when you just say that, “Oh, manufacturing has not grown since 2015,” you have to come better than that and speak about what aspects of manufacturing you are talking about. I can tell you that if we look at core manufacturing, which excludes the petrochemicals and includes food and beverage and textiles, we have grown from \$8.7 billion to \$9.3 billion. And, of course, the downside you would have seen would have been the departure of ArcelorMittal. And I can tell you that we are working hard to find a replacement so that although I cannot commit to anything—but I can say that we are working and you are going to see the continued improvements in our export figures—our production figures and our exports figures.

But I will just say a little bit more about it but, again, according to the *Review of the Economy*—and I think it was Sen. Mark who spoke about all these sectors that went down. My goodness, we are in a pandemic. What did you expect to happen? Whatever happened in Trinidad, you better believe that it happened across the world globally, in some cases, much worse. So it did decline during the first quarter of calendar 2021 but that is first quarter contracted by 10.5 per cent. But, of course, we know that is on account of the COVID-related issues which affected general trade.

What I hasten to say is that we have seen a rebound in the growth of our non-energy exports. With January to—and again, using both CSO and TTBizLink data. And I went on to say that from January to August 2021, you were actually seeing non-energy exports averaging \$1.3 billion per month which is an estimated 43 per cent higher compared to 2020 and an estimated 14 per cent higher compared

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

to 2019. I mean, who would quarrel with growth figures? But he is going back to 2015 and, again, he is muddling up core manufacturing, total manufacturing including petrochemicals and, of course, he did not mention anything about ArcelorMittal. But these figures that I am talking about excludes all the ammonia, urea, ammonia nitrate and so on.

So we are very pleased with the performance in the non-energy sector; very pleased for the hard work of all our manufacturers who continue to invest in their plant and equipment, and there have been new entrances into the sector and also new exporters, in terms of not those producing just for Trinidad and Tobago but there have been new exporters in the marketplace.

I want to—well, I did speak about those products that were doing well: the iron and steel, the food and beverage, cereals, bitters, non-alcoholic beverages, glass products, plastic and rubber products and so on. But when I spoke, I sort of rushed through and this is one area that I wanted to really expand a little bit more, and this is the whole question of SMEs and the current entrepreneurial ecosystem within Trinidad and Tobago. I say so because this is—I must give the credit to the Minister of Finance who has really introduced a range of commercial incentives in this last budget which would really support entrepreneurs. And I use the word “entrepreneurs” to mean all businesses: small, medium and large. And it is very important because these are the very firms that are going to play an increasingly important role in this recovery process. And therefore, it means—if we are talking recovery of the business sector, it means that businesses must be equipped with all of the necessary tools and resources to enable them to innovate and to adapt and to grow at every stage of the development process.

So usually the cry for businesses—the cries are: access to finance, capacity



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building, market access. We have done the research and those are the three main ones. And I can assure the population that, through this medium, that we are going everything on the front via exporTT to improve market access out of Trinidad and Tobago. And in terms capacity building and access to finance, that is where a number of budget measures have come in this year to bolster their ability to not only exist but to grow. So public policies are important to address the various stages of the business development holistically and completely and, therefore, I am quite pleased with the measures which are now introduced.

And, of course, I have to hasten to say that it is not just Government that is doing its part in ensuring that this ecosystem is one that will cause businesses to thrive and grow, but I also laud the initiatives of academia and firms like the Stock Exchange and the Unit Trust Corporation and so on. And it is this holistic approach across the country that would cause all of the actors within the system to really perform to the levels expected or the levels which we would want. So, I had gone through the entrepreneurial ecosystem, citing those possibilities for start-ups for the early-stage firms and for the mature firms, and I wish to give a little bit and—to give a bit more explanation where we are.

So start-ups have really very special needs and in particular—so if you want to get into a business, many people need advisory services and support and business incubators, and this is what is now available for anyone wishing to get into manufacturing, into the services sector, into agriculture, and into tourism, and into all of the areas that are earmarked for development in Trinidad and Tobago, and I could only mention some of them here. But, for instance, already existing in the Ministry of Trade and Industry through exporTT is the research and development programme which is making available \$1 million to firms who have

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an idea and are ready to move from that idea stage to the product development stage to the commercialization stage, and with certain amounts broken out for the various stages.

There is also, soon to be launched under the Export Booster Initiative, an innovation envelope which is an amount of a voucher of \$200,000, again, to drive and to promote research and development and innovation at the firm level. And this is the offering of a line of credit so that the new entrepreneur can foster and develop linkages with the private sector knowledge providers, public sector knowledge providers, I am talking about our universities and any private research centre. Again, the idea is to boost the production of new goods and new services as well and, of course, keeping in mind innovation.

There are several business incubators including CARIRI. CARIRI provides modern laboratories with state-of-the-art equipment, together with specialist programmes, providing services to the micro-entrepreneur and, of course, for the larger firms attending to their testing research and development and innovation needs. There is UWI Ventures which also supports and accelerates innovation and entrepreneurship. There is the innovation incubator project, now launched during this budget, for the manufacturing sector so that Government will establish this incubator innovation project in collaboration with the University of the West Indies, again, to provide support for entrepreneurs in various sectors now starting their businesses.

There is also the tax incentive for start-ups, meaning that the Government will promote start-ups and entrepreneurships. And the Minister of Finance went on to spell out in the IT sector, in digitization and in the construction sectors through a reduction in corporation tax by 5 per cent.

Additionally, new SMEs with core business activities related to digitization and technology solutions will be granted a 50 per cent exemption on the first 100,000 of chargeable income for the first year and another—and the first 200,000 of chargeable income for the second year as well. So that, that tax incentive is also an enticement, an inducement to enter those particular sectors.

For the early stage firms, you would note, apart from the—NEDCO is available, but you would know that during the COVID that a \$30-million facility was allocated to NEDCO for micro-enterprises that are generating less than \$1million in revenues. This—through this particular facility, which was presented at COVID—at the time of COVID, sorry, \$20,000 in grant funding is to be registered to business owners. And I saying “is to be” because this grant funding will be extended to 2022, and this is funding for entrepreneurs that are existing and, of course, other products are also available through NEDCO.

There is also—Government—the Minister of Finance announced—and this is so helpful—an SME capacity building and training facility where the Government will allocate \$50 million to introduce enhancement programmes targeted to building SME competency in the areas of accounting, record keeping, training, management, inventory control, health and safety. And I will tell you why this is important. Because so many people are able to do—probably manufacture a product that is of great quality that it can be introduced into the marketplace and exported, but they do not know anything else that comes with it. In other words, they can produce the product but they do not know anything about the recordkeeping, they do not know anything about accounting and, of course, they stay in the informal sector. That will never help them to grow. It does not help them access government facilities and other facilities as well. So this is a sound

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facility offered by the Government for this period going forward. We are going to work—this is through the Ministry of Finance—work with firms—entrepreneurs and firms and allow them to take advantage of the opportunities that are before them so that they can become very stable organizations and that they can grow.

Another programme that we will launch in the Ministry of Trade and Industry pretty soon is the Scale Up Trinidad and Tobago programme which is a business acceleration—business accelerator programme and it is really for small and medium-sized enterprises. I would have seen this, I would have been party to this programme because the Unit Trust Corporation through their corporate social responsibility introduced this for 15 firms within Trinidad and Tobago and the results were really astounding for a four-month period of work. The programme really entails innovative methods tailored to improve the entrepreneurial mindset. It focuses on business experience, customer base and improving operational skills to drive economic growth.

And, Madam President, I can tell you, the results were such that these firms that participated in that short period, they were able to see 25 to 75 per cent growth in revenues, 25 to 80 per cent growth in exports—measurable results—and one SME experience of 50 per cent growth in online sales within three months. And, of course, within these firms they were able to—because of their successes during that short period, there were 13 jobs—new jobs created in that short period. We found this was really very good. And what we are doing is we are going to sign an MOU and collaborate with the Unit Trust Corporation who will engage with the foreign firm that is doing the programme and we are introducing this—two new cohorts of this during fiscal 2022.

The credit unions soft loans: another \$100 million provided to credit unions

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to create products not just for individuals but also for firms. So, I would be happy as Minister of Trade and Industry to participate in that as well.

The junior—much has been said about the junior stock exchange. Again, we know access to funding is a problem. This is going to allow firms, small firms, medium-sized firms to get on the junior stock exchange and to benefit from injections of capital which will come their way. Again, we have seen Jamaica's own, it has done very, very well and I think what we will be doing through this junior stock exchange programme is promoting the entrepreneurship and growth and, of course, general economic development, employment, et cetera.

The Minister of Finance would have spoken to the five-year tax holiday; the five-year tax holiday in terms of tax and business levy and Green Fund Levy as well. And again, the—no, I think five-year period, tax exemptions on the business level and Green Fund, I correct myself there. And for the—sorry. For the second five-year period, new SME listings will be taxed at a rate of 50 per cent.

So we associate ourselves with this programme, in particular, the mentoring side of it. I am mentioning mentoring several times and it is that in order for businesses to grow, mentoring is extremely important and I therefore take the opportunity to issue this call to all the business leaders that are out there in the business community and so on to make sure and volunteer and to lend their expertise to this mentorship programme. I think I have a bit of a business mind and I can tell you that, notwithstanding my portfolio, I will become a mentor on this programme.

Again, we continue to do work through our grant fund facilities. Despite the COVID period, we would have granted assistance to 12 companies during this period and made—provided them with additional funders to the point of \$2.3

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million and through this—and through our intervention, 55 new jobs were created. And I will tell you that many of them are now enabled to export. Many of them exported their products to the Caricom market, to Cuba, to Puerto Rico, to Canada, the USA and so on. And upon completion of their particular projects, I can see them going out to the more—to the extra-regional territories.

We continue to do much work in terms of e-commerce, our national SheTrades Hub is doing very well. I can tell you that there are now 474 women-owned businesses in Trinidad and Tobago that are on this platform, and this we are doing in conjunction with the International Trade Centre in Geneva. And this year we have—our Trinidad and Tobago hub has been revamped. This is with the assistance with the ICT to better align it to meet the needs of our local registered businesses. So we now have a programme that is designed for our businesses and we understand where the needs of the Trinidad and Tobago women are, and therefore, it has been redesigned.

So I can tell you that currently exporTT is coordinating the attendance of 10 female-owned businesses to exhibit virtually at the SheTrades Global Dubai and I think we are going to one physical one as well.

I must speak about steel pan because during this period, fiscal 2021, again, during the pandemic we assisted eight steel pan manufacturers, pan crafters, Perfect Steel, Noel's Steelpan Productions, innovative steel pan instrument services, RS Sweet Pans Limited, Codrington Family Institute, Panland Trinidad and Tobago, Harrigan instruments, all of them got assistance under this programmed to the tune of \$2.1 million. And what this has enabled them to do is to begin to export and some of them continued to export to the regional markets, so that our pans have gone to Barbados and Martinique, Guadeloupe, Jamaica and

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Cuba and so on, and we are looking at expanding that. And we thank the Minister of Finance for a further injection of \$2 million for this particular facility. And we want to make sure that we capture the full value chain. So I am talking about the pan tuners and so on being assisted. If you are making the sticks or so, the packaging, you are going to get assistance from this Government.

And for the more mature firms, of course, there is expansion of the Government guaranteed loan programme. Phase 2 is now recapitalized to the amount of \$196 million. The Minister of Finance has reworked the programme so that the government guarantee is now gone from 75 per cent to 100 per cent and the loan repayment period is now extended to seven years and with a 24-month moratorium and, of course, it is now going to cover the purchase of—it is not just about working capital but also the purchase of fixed assets. I “ain’t” talking about their residential property but certainly the good—the properties for business, for vehicles, for business and so on.

And again, some businesses were having problems with meeting their up-to-date BIR and NIB payments, and the Minister of Finance has gladly said that, “Look, you will qualify once you have met up to December 2018 in terms of satisfying your statutory requirements.” So I think we have done very well.

For mature firms as well, the Minister introduced the research and development capital allowance and also gave—which is, I think, up to 40 per cent of expenditure incurred by companies engaged in research and development, again, once you are talking new products, new markets, research and development. And also, the Minister has given his commitment to expediting VAT refunds and also disbursing through the VAT bonds as well in this coming system.

Our Export Booster Initiative—and I will talk a little bit more, depending on

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the time that I have—continues; \$37 million has been provided within our recurrent in the Ministry of Trade and Industry to ensure that we can carry out our 16 programmes that we have planned.

Again, Sen. Lyder talked about the EximBank not being for the small businesses. And I want to tell you that in 2020, 97 manufacturing businesses had access to an estimated \$100 million at that time from the foreign facility, while another—and I am talking about manufacturing and foreign exchange here, so I am not mixing up this and basic food items. But I can say that another \$81 million was dispersed to 107 businesses for the period January to August 2021; 107 businesses benefited from that forex facility through EximBank and these are the manufacturers. And Minister has now introduced the Catalytic Fund at the EximBank, again, which is to assist both manufactures and service sectors. And Sen. Lyder wants us to keep it as it is. No. We have to think of increasing our exports of services and so the Minister has committed to supporting the export of services through this Catalytic Fund as well.

And again, the manufacturing sector tax allowance has also been introduced. There is a reduction in tax rate to 25 per cent. So what I can say from this is that what Trinidad and Tobago now has is a very healthy entrepreneurial ecosystem with very little gaps but it is well-designed and suited for small, micro, and medium, and large businesses as well. When I spoke—Madam President, I cannot see the clock from here. How much time?

**Madam President:** You have—you finish at six minutes past four and it is 3.57 now.

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Good. Thank you. Right. So in order for manufacturers, in particular—I ended talking about the manufacturing sector—it



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means that they must include their competitiveness, it is the only way. It is a fiercely, fiercely different global world out there. The only way that they can export is to—or even compete with imports is to improve their competitiveness. And I spoke about the several ways in which we were doing it, in terms of expanding our trading relationships with market access and I spoke about market access a lot on the last occasion to the extent that during 2020—during the last fiscal period, we actually rolled over and legislated the Caribbean Basin Initiative which is excellent. And the Caribbean Basin Initiative—and the US has just said that Trinidad and Tobago is on record for diversifying its exports to the US and I am very pleased about that. We would have concluded our Cariforum-UK EPA. We are at this time doing our Chile Partial Scope Agreement, negotiating that. And we continue to work on our other agreements with Colombia, Panama, Caricom, et cetera.

And I want to say, I am not going to go—I am going to skip further discussions on these agreements because I think said enough about it on the last occasion. But I want to just say, again, our Export Booster Initiative is doing very well and we will continue to provide for manufacturers the capability to be able to become certified so that they can enter, in particular, the extra-regional market. I spoke a lot about that on the last occasion as well.

I had said that I will take the time on this occasion just to talk about the trade and investment promotion agency for Trinidad and Tobago. And that is yet another initiative which is intended to give institutional support to our entire effort of boosting competitiveness and boosting our exports, and also our investments into Trinidad and Tobago.

**4.00 p.m.**

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And that TIPA the acronym for Trade and Investment Promotion Agency, I am not here saying that this is the name. So it is really about strengthening and modernizing our institutional framework in terms of increasing our exports, our investments promotions and so on. It is enabling us now to be more high profiled and more on par with regional and international agencies. And I had the good fortune of having discussions with these promotional agencies in Spain, in Jamaica, in Costa Rica, and in Colombia I think, and it is that every few years, five or six years, all of these agencies actually remake themselves in terms of being more flexible and in terms of being more relevant to what is happening in the global world.

So, we are very happy about this promotional agency so that there is going to be this singular interface, particularly for our exports and for our investments creation. And it really creates less muddling in the minds of let us say an investor who wants to come in to Trinidad and Tobago. So the focus is on getting this going in this fiscal, on establishing these commercial offices in several of our missions abroad so that we can strengthen the work that we are doing in terms of imports and exports in those particular countries, Jamaica, Guyana, the UK, the US, the African continent, China and so on. And I spoke about—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Yeah. I spoke about the readiness exercise that we did in particular where InvesTT and exporTT to—what we were trying to do is to test their leadership and their governance and their resources and processes, their product and service delivery, and their measurement results and so on. We did all of that and we are satisfied that both of these institutions are in good standing for the merger of these particular promotional activities. Mind you, in the first

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instance the Minister would have said InvestTT and exportTT, but I can tell you from the 13 agencies that we scanned that there may be an extra one or two in the beginning to come over into this promotional agency.

So overall, we are going to see greater impact and results. We are going to see the country's export and investment promotional institutional arrangements strengthened and modernized. Of course it will simplify doing business with Trinidad and Tobago, as there is this particular interface, and of course there will be a coordinated and streamlined approach to country imaging and country branding. The Special Economic Zones Bill, I know that the Leader of the Opposition said, "Oh, you all just saying that again." I can tell you, that we will come to the House either this quarter or first quarter, 2022, but I am hoping that it is this particular quarter to debate the Special Economic Zones Bill which has been replaced—which has already been prepared at the level of the AG's office and the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and there is a draft Bill and it will replace our free zone regime which is now noted by Global Forum as being harmful. But again, which we always knew to be unworkable.

So we are very pleased, and I know—I think Minister, MP who thinks he is going to be the next Minister of Foreign Affairs. I want to tell him that he said he made a big brouhaha about Denmark and the fact that Denmark withdrew its double taxation agreement. That would be so, but I want to tell him that that does not impact our exports and imports of goods into and from Denmark. And of course it is a concern for us, but I want to say that it does not impact our trade because we have coverage under our EUEPA, and I checked up to 2021, goods are coming in and out of Denmark, but we are going to work on fixing this. I am really looking forward to further expansion in the manufacturing sector. There are two

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technical programmes that we would do in this fiscal which is a study on the strengthening of sectoral linkages in Trinidad and Tobago, which is examining our manufacturing sector with the other sectors, energy, agriculture, maritime and so on, so that we can get out of it the potential forward and backward linkages.

At the end of the day we would have clear advantages with regard to new product development and sharpened competitiveness and export and all sorts of possibilities. We would also do a technical study on the regional value chains for the manufacturing sector, which is, that would involve the splitting of production processes in stages in different locations. We think this fragmentation of production really embraces value added contributions from different territories within the region, and I think this is what we have to look at in terms of enhancing the manufacturing sector in Trinidad and Tobago, but creating opportunities all across the region in terms of coming together with this value chain exercise, Madam President.

I will have to wrap up, I know time is not with me, but I will do a release on the services sector, because we must improve the services sector to the extent that it contributes greatly to our economy, but at the same time they export very little and work is going to be done on the services sector. I would have said enough about investments and job creation if the Lower House. But, again, I want to say that our investments down the line are looking good, local and foreign investments, and that there are a number of jobs to be created in the near future. I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy:** I am privileged to contribute to the Appropriation Bill for the fiscal year 2021/2022 presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, on October 4<sup>th</sup> 2021 with a statement of hope and motivation, captioned

“Resilience in the face of a global pandemic.”

Madam President, as I engage the Senate, I want to add to the discussion of resilience of our country. I want to first take the opportunity to commend the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It has been 18 months since the COVID-19 virus was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. And within these 18 months many have struggled financially in a new and desperate way, some have become homeless, children have dropped out of school, students have seen their grades take a nose dive as they grappled with online school. We all have had to acclimatize to the new normal of social distancing in a culture that is demonstratively warm and embracing. Some have lost their jobs, some have lost their loved ones. Many businesses have closed, and the list goes on. In an article in the *Guardian* newspaper on August 10, 2021, the Confederation of Regional Business Chambers reported that approximately 6,000 businesses around the country will remain permanently closed. Yes, our people have experienced a year of many trials, but as various sectors of Trinidad and Tobago gradually reopen, I note the effort and the tenacity of individuals and the business sector who have refused to be defeated by the effect of the virus. I commend you. Your resilience is truly inspiring. I congratulate our frontline workers and there are many, we will name them again, health care, teachers, police officers, fire, sanitation, the WASA, the T&TEC, and all other workers who have kept us afloat during this difficult time.

Madam President, I want to make an appeal to our citizens to utilize another opportunity to strengthen our resilience. Another tool to strengthen our resilience. And that is, the tool that we have of vaccination. I know it has brought a lot of division within our society, as it has worldwide. But as a medical professional, I

said it before publicly and I am saying it again, I am taking this opportunity to implore all of us who can be vaccinated to get vaccinated, and where applicable vaccinate our children also. An article entitled “Getting the COVID-19 vaccine” from the World Health Organization’s website explains how critical vaccines are to ending the COVID-19 pandemic. It relayed that safe and effective vaccines are making a significant contribution in preventing severe disease and death from COVID-19. The vaccines currently offered in Trinidad and Tobago have all been approved by the World Health Organization, namely Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and Sinopharm. The article also reminded us that being vaccinated does not mean that we can throw caution to the wind and put ourselves and others at risk, and as the vaccines are rolling out and our immunity is building it is important to continue to follow the recommended measures that reduce the spread of COVID-19. I would like to indicate that we have enough data now to show that there is a decreased number of persons who are hospitalized or are in critical care as a result of vaccination. Less people are dying as a result of vaccination. Now, I am not denying that there are other methods that need to be utilized. And I must say, I will talk a little further again, a little further along about the need to do things like the contact tracing, testing, et cetera. These are all key in the fight against COVID. But vaccination is very important, and there is enough confusion and divisiveness around vaccination. I just think I need to make it clear, my position again on this.

Madam President, the Minister of Finance has presented a budget with an expenditure of 52.429 billion, with a revenue of 43.33 billion, and a fiscal deficit of 9.09 billion. The Minister of Finance and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries today have spoken very glowingly about what is happening with the

rebounding of prices of oil and natural gas. And Minister, while I am happy to hear about literally a reprieve that we are getting in terms of these prices, I would like to encourage us as a people and encourage the Government that we should not get complacent with the plan for restructuring the economy. I am saying this because it is easier to not to do anything as we are getting the increased amount of money more than we expected from oil. And I would really hope that this does not slow our transition to other means of income earning for our country. We know that we cannot continue to depend on oil and natural gas as we have been doing. I note what the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries said about the fact that we will have these resources for a long time in the future, but we have to start planning now.

Madam President, I would like to turn my attention to the budget allocation for the Ministry of Education, the largest for fiscal 2022 of \$6.886 billion. After the onset of the pandemic there was drastic shift to online learning in the education sector to ensure that our nation's children were educated, needless to say the concentration of resources towards this sector is needed and understood. There will be additional need to sanitize, to make preparation for physical distancing in the classroom, the need for additional Internet access, et cetera, in the schools as we continue to roll out the plan for online learning. Madam President, I have questioned the performance of our students in school, both in Trinidad and in Tobago, and asked myself, are our children performing to their optimum? And I ask these questions because I understand how valuable our young citizens are for the future of our nation. This is why we must not just be concerned about spending money, but about spending the money on the right things. I echo the sentiments of Sen. Seepersad in her contribution as she talked about the lack of adequate services

in the education sector for children with disabilities, especially during this pandemic, and I would encourage the Minister of Education to please make sure that the increased resources now to the Ministry of Education be used to consider improving the attention that is given to our children with disabilities.

Madam President, I want to put on record a grave concern that I have right now, with the current policy of the Ministry of Education where face to face schooling is reserved for vaccinated children. As I said before, I understand that vaccination of children is important, and as a paediatrician I have been recommending to my parents that their children should get vaccinated. However, we are in a situation where the majority of the children are currently not vaccinated. We know that there are issues in terms of what the parents understand, what they believe, et cetera. I would just like to read a report from the CNN Health where a Mr. William Moss, the Executive Director of the International Vaccine Access Centre, stated that:

There is a perception that COVID-19 is not a severe disease in children, and there is no doubt that the risk of severe disease is much lower in children than in adults, but it is not zero, and many children have been hospitalized with COVID-19.

So I understand that COVID-19 is not just a normal flu for the most part. It cannot be taken as that. So I understand that there must be consideration of what happens to our children when they go face-to-face. Dr. David Bratt in an article on the *Guardian* newspaper on October the 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021, he put forward the view that children should be out to school since the disease is not severe in children. However, I have a report from a paediatrician at the paediatric hospital at Mount Hope, where there have been two deaths so far as a result of COVID and 56 cases



of Multi-Inflammatory Syndrome in children, MIS-C, which is a condition that tends to affect the joints and heart and other important organs in the body. So I understand that the disease is not without issues.

While I understand the aim and objectives of the measures to restrict access to face-to-face learning probably as a means of trying to get the parents to vaccinate their children, I worry about the fallout and the disadvantage and collateral effect of unvaccinated that it is having on the children who are not vaccinated. Children who are not vaccinated are at the mercy of their parents' decisions. Therefore, what is happening is that they are in the middle of a situation where the Government says this and the parents are doing something entirely different, and the children are in the middle and they have, for instance, the children in Fourth and Fifth and Sixth Forms they are in a time sensitive situation where if they do not do certain things like their SBAs by a certain time, CXC is not waiting for them to get accustomed to what is happening, or what is happening here.

I am saying this because it was only in August that the vaccines, the Pfizer vaccines, became available. So it was not really a long time between August to now for people to make up their minds to vaccinate their children. So the decision came quickly, and I am not in any way saying that the Government should not do what they are doing in terms of trying to get parents to vaccinate their children. However, we are now in October, we are in a situation where many of the children are not vaccinated—I do not have the actual figures, but we know the majority of them are not. And right now it is as though the only provisions are being made for ones who are vaccinated to come to school, and that is great, however, what are we doing about the other children who are at home?

I heard the TUTA saying that teachers will not be teaching children who are online if they are in school, because they cannot do the same things. I am asking the Minister to reconsider the decision that has been made now. I am suggesting that we either have vaccinated and unvaccinated children in school, since we know that they all have to be physically distanced, they all have to be wearing masks, they all have to be sanitizing their hands, et cetera. They either should be in school or they all should be online. I am asking the Minister, please to reconsider the decision that is being made right now. Think about the children, not later, right now, according to the calypsonians.

Madam President, I turn my attention to the allocations to the Tobago House of Assembly. An allocation of 2.7 billion for Recurrent Expenditure, which is an increase of \$157,145,232, and 264 million for DP and 18 million for the Unemployment Relief Programme. During the budget presentation in the House, the Minister made the statement—the Finance Minister made the statement, and I quote:

“...the Constitution (Amdt.) Tobago Self-Government Bill, 2021 and the Tobago Island Government Bill, 2021 are currently before the Parliament. These pieces of legislation offer significant possibilities for Tobago for greater self-determination. These Bills are also important for Tobago’s development and we seek bipartisan support from the Opposition to collectively work together to assist in the passage of these Bills.”

Madam President, I do endorse that statement from the Minister. It is the first time since the reinstatement of the Tobago House of Assembly in 1980 that a budget is brought to the Parliament without first being discussed widely in Tobago, and that is because there is no Tobago House of Assembly in place because of the

6:6 tie and what is going on in Tobago. The internal self-government Bill recommends that the allocation for Tobago be a fixed percentage, and that the debate would now occur in Tobago so that we would not have, if the Bill is passed, they would not have to have a discussion within the Parliament in Trinidad and Tobago, but within the Assembly Legislature on the budget in Tobago.

The Tobago Self-Government Bill also seeks to amend the Constitution to confer self-government to Tobago by providing the creation of the island government which would have the power to make laws and an executive body called the Tobago Executive Council. I am just saying these things, Madam President, because we are at the situation now where in Tobago on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, there will be an election where there will be 15 seats now for the assembly since the change of the legislation on the Tobago House of Assembly (Amdt.) Act was proclaimed on July 26<sup>th</sup>, and we know that the Elections and Boundaries Commission changed the number of electoral districts, et cetera.

I am saying all this to say, Madam President, I am making a plea today, the plea is being made that the election that is happening on December the 6<sup>th</sup> should happen with the self-government Bill being debated, or finished debating and passed in the House and in the Senate. Right now as we know the Bill is in committee stage in the House, and I am making an appeal to both the Government and the Opposition, bring the Bill back on the agenda to continue the committee stage so that we can aim for a resolution before December 6<sup>th</sup>. I do not think that it is too much to ask, as Tobago deserves no less. We should not be doing an election in Tobago for 15 Assemblymen to do the same thing that is being done right now. As we know, that part of the Bill was pulled out, but the Bill, the Tobago (Amendment) (Self-Government) Bill was intended to do far more, and we are

asking for that to be—on behalf of the people of Tobago, I am making a plea here, during this budget debate, because it is significant that we are talking here about the allocation to Tobago, and what is going to happen to Tobago after December the 6<sup>th</sup> is of importance.

As far as the expenditure for this fiscal year, I am making a demand again on behalf of the people of Tobago, that the Roxborough Hospital be made operational. At the mid-year review for fiscal 2021 there was an increased allocation of 80 million of the Tobago House of Assembly. I think 25 million of which was supposed to have gone to health for the expenses, and the Roxborough Hospital was a part of what needed to be done. Currently the Roxborough Hospital is still not operationalized. They need equipment still, there is need for an oxygen concentrator, furniture and fixtures, and not least the staffing that is necessary for the operationalization of that hospital. The Tobago Regional Health Authority was allocated \$472,728,430, an increase of about 20 million over last year's Revised Estimates. I trust, Madam President, that the moneys that are provided are going to be necessary to make sure that the services are provided appropriately at Roxborough and at the other facilities in Tobago.

Currently, we have a situation where the COVID-19 is a significant concern in Tobago. As at Saturday, October the 16<sup>th</sup> there were a total of 3,092 cases of the total—3,092 in Tobago of a total of 54,114 for all of Trinidad and Tobago. Giving us about 5.7 per cent of the cases, and 92 deaths in Tobago out of 1,600; about 5.75 per cent of the deaths. And as at October the 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, there were 19,561 persons fully vaccinated. And if we are assuming that the number that was supposed to be fully vaccinated would be about 45,000; that means that we have about 43.4 per cent of the persons in Tobago fully vaccinated. It is not bad, but it is not good

either. The reason I am saying that is that the tourism product is what will bring Tobago its moneys, its finances, the jobs. And the tourism product to open the tourism industry requires the people to be vaccinated. The people in the industry and also the people generally speaking in Tobago. As we hear many of the tour operators are asking about the vaccination status of the persons within the facilities, and therefore we really need to improve our vaccination rates in order to ramp up and reopen the tourism industry in Tobago. The season is coming up and we are going to be starting to have the airlifts coming in soon.

Continuing with the COVID response in Tobago, I note the decision to build another ICU at Fort King George to increase the capacity for the for the critically ill COVID-19 patients, planning for the increased number of ill patients with the Delta variant. Madam President, there is also need for more efficient contact tracing and also testing in Tobago, Currently there is the gene expert machine at the Scarborough General Hospital that does the rapid PCR testing, but the other samples come to Trinidad, and the turnaround time right now is not appropriate. I have heard about many people sitting, waiting at home in the first place for someone to call them to be tested, and that has to do with the people who are doing the contact tracing. And then when they get the test they have been waiting a long time for the results. That has to do with the results of the test coming back to them. I am asking for additional resources to be made available to this area, because if resources are spent in contact tracing and testing, it is likely we are going to have less people being critically ill outside and requiring hospital care. That is my “profferance” for that. If we boost testing and contact tracing, we may have less need for ICU care. So it is important that we get that organized.

Madam President, the development of the tourism product to Tobago post

pandemic is very important, I said that already. The change of the policy of the loans granted to the SMEs is welcome by the persons within the tourism sector in Tobago. As we know, when policies are put at the time of a budget we have to wait to see what will happen. So it is a hope that as many people as possible will be able to access these loans so they would be able to use it in the refurbishment of their business places.

**4.30 p.m.**

I do have some questions to ask the Minister and even though he would probably say that these questions should be asked to the Tobago House of Assembly we are in the National Parliament. Minister, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January there was a development of a \$350 million Argyle Fall Resort that was announced in January and we heard nothing about that project in this budget. Now, I know it is a private investment, however it is related to the tourism sector and the Comfort Inn was mentioned in the budget speech. Comfort Inn is also a private development. So I am just asking because it was seen as one of the things that was going to be done for the east of Tobago and I am just asking, what has happened to that project?—if we have any update as to what is happening with it.

Minister also on October the 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, at the budget speech then, mention was made that there was going to be a private developer that was going to have an investment into the Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort. That developer was supposed to be bringing in airlifts, they were supposed to be managing the hotel, refurbishing and managing the hotel and many other things. However, I certainly have not heard what has happened to that after 2019. Probably it had to do with COVID, I do not know, but we have not heard anything about it and that was projected to be something that was going to help with not just the product of the

managing and repairing the hotel but also bringing in airlifts. We are happy for the progress of the work being undertaken at the new airport in spite of what people are saying and the purchase of the new ferries has also brought a lot of predictability on the sea bridge, and we are happy for that.

I would like to ask a question about the preparation of the staff to service the tourism sector. Are the funds allocated to the Tobago Hotel School and the Tobago Tourism Agency Limited sufficient? Minister, I ask. My questions also continue as far as Tobago is concerned in terms of the business sector development. Plans for agro-processing that was supposed to be done at Cove, what is happening with that initiative? The plans for development of the agricultural sector—I know every year these projects are mentioned in the Development Programme but what is happening in terms of overall? And, yes, I know we have had COVID-19 but I am hoping that it is something that when these things are put in the budget that they are done and sustained over time, because we are saying that the development of Tobago, the economy, is important.

I now turn to the allocation of the Ministry of Health. Madam President, given the ongoing pandemic it is understood why the Ministry of Health would be afforded the second largest apportionment of the budget with an allocation of 6.395 billion. I do commend the intention of the Government to tackle the chronic non-communicable diseases in the same way that they tackled mental health and maternal health as incidences of diabetes and hypertension are simply too high.

It is also commendable that the Cabinet has approved a national coordinator for the non-communicable disease response—that was said by the Minister of Health—who will then chair—this national coordinator will then chair the Food Advisory Committee to help drive the country towards better eating habits. I also

commend the implementation of the screening programme to detect diabetes in pregnancy and the efforts geared towards the reduction of maternal and infant mortality.

However, again I must put some questions as far as what happens in terms of spending in health. I am placing on record again, I did it before, there must be a robust plan for preventive maintenance of our buildings and equipment within the health sector. This is a perennial problem. And it is not good enough to have these things, spend great money, and put them down and then when it is time to be used you cannot use them because not enough was put in terms of preventive maintenance. Madam President, I am pleading with the Minister, I am pleading with the regional health authorities to make sure that these things are done.

The Minister spoke about increase in the staff that was employed during the pandemic, both nurses and doctors because that was needed. However, we have the issues that are well ventilated about the tenure of service for many of the staff. And the Minister has indicated that he has mandated the resolution of these issues related to the employment of the staff in the health sector. I note though that it was mainly dealing with the nursing personnel and I am not too sure if that was because they were the ones making the most—being most vocal about what was happening with them. But I must say on behalf of the Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association, I make a plea for a similar consideration for the doctors who are on short-term contracts and many of them are in the same position as their counterparts and nurses. They cannot get loans, they cannot get—it is just impossible and we know what is happening and we know why.

And I must commend the Government for what they have done over the pandemic for trying to keep the public servants employed. It has kept a lot of



people afloat and we know that that has come at a great cost. And having said that though we are saying that these people who have worked so hard in the front line something more needs to be done for them. I must use this opportunity again to thank the Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association for their sterling contribution in assisting with the mass vaccination sites. Doctors have truly come out and supported this activity.

Madam President, this is my final point. This is my third budget contribution and I remember last year, I pleaded with our leaders to work together during this time of a pandemic. It was a difficult time for the nation and we would have put out a lot in terms of trying to pull our nation together. However, this is not yet a reality. In fact, I would say that our divisiveness right now between the Government and Opposition is greater now than it was last year. So, Madam President, I am making another appeal. I plead with the Government and the Opposition that this is the time to sit together and work the issues out that are facing our nation. Many other nations have done just that, especially during this pandemic. We know that you will not agree on everything, however, can we unite for the good of the country, for the good of Trinidad and Tobago? [*Desk thumping*] This is a decision that has to come from within. The change has to come from within in terms of our hearts. It is not pointing fingers at one another. We have had enough of that. It is not me, is them, we have enough of that. I just quote from an article. It is entitled:

“COVID-19, Governance and the Role of the Opposition”

It is dated, May 20<sup>th</sup> from the Griffith Institute of Griffith University Australia. And I quote:

“The health and economic crises unleashed by the spread of the Covid-19

have required extraordinary measures by governments and political leaders to address the situation.

In democratic countries, the leaders in government and opposition usually team up and work together to address any major crisis, including to enact laws and policies to deal with it.

In extraordinary circumstances, the reasons for working as a team are many, and so are the benefits. There is one goal, some of the country's best minds are pulling together, rather than sitting on opposite sides and pulling in different directions. Working together not only ensures best outcomes, but it also gives hope and encouragement to the electorate who witness their politicians leading by example.

At times of crisis, we need to band, not to bicker.”

Senators, leaders, our children are looking on. They would be modelling our behaviour. Can we seek to change so that we give them a good example of what our country can do in a crisis?

Madam President, I end with the words of a song by Merchant entitled:

“Come leh we build a nation together.

Now the election bacchanal die away,

In short, this is what I have to say

Let us forget spites and grudges and concentrate

Come, let us sit and try to relate

Because now, more than ever, we must show

Discipline, Tolerance and Production

To build a strong and better nation

I say that is the main foundation.”

Appropriation (Financial Year 2022)  
Bill, 2021  
Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy (cont'd)

2021.10.18

Chorus:

“So, come let us work hand in hand  
Because this is OUR land  
Come, my brother, come my sister  
...let us build a nation together.”

Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein):** Thank you very much, Madam President. It is my humble pleasure to join in this 2022 budget debate. I want to begin by congratulating the Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert—[*Desk thumping*] in his unique style of delivering this 2022 budget. This is his seventh budget for this PNM administration geared towards: Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. I would like also to thank my other colleague, the Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis for her continued guidance in dealing with the 14 corporations [*Desk thumping*] and the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

Madam President, I would like to let the public know, and I want to say it here, I always say it every year and I will continue to say it because I want to motivate the people who look on. I have served local government for 40 years, both in the administrative arm and the political arm and I want to say to the people looking on, as a daily-paid worker from the San Fernando City Corporation that, where I can reach you can reach also. I want to also thank the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley because I sat in this House, in this Senate, for four years and I heard my colleagues keep saying call the election now, call the election now. But my father used to always tell me, be careful for what you ask for. We

asked for the election, we got the election, and I am here again today.

**Hon. Senators:** “Yay!” [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:** I want to thank the hon. Prime Minister for having the continued faith in me to serve as a second term as the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. But I always referred to myself as the first servant and not as the Minister, because to me this is a humbling job and this job is a very temporary job, not only for me but for all of us sitting in this Chamber today.

Madam President, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government plays a critical role in bringing the much needed goods and services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It is in my humble view that the Ministry, through the 14 corporations and the two special purpose companies, CEPEP and RDC, has a more direct and constant connection to the citizenry than many other arms of central government. The consciousness not only makes our Ministry pivotal in the effective execution of citizen centric national initiatives but also remind us how important our role is in improving the lives of our citizens.

Madam President, in 2015 this Government gave a commitment to citizens that we will have local government reform to improve our landscape so that goods and services could be delivered efficiently to the citizens of this country. As such, for the last six years the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has been reforming its approach to doing things while the former legislation will take place. The Ministry continues to develop and implement projects, programmes to ensure the much needed goods and services reach the burgesses and citizens no matter which Borough or which region you come from.

I at the Ministry have 14 corporations to deal with, seven belong to the

People's National Movement and seven belong to the United National Congress. And, Madam President, not one single Member on both sides could say I have discriminated against anyone of them anytime and I stand by my word. Madam President, I wish to take this opportunity to highlight the many major projects and programmes implemented under my tenure as the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government.

Madam President, I begin with a vision that our Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley shared with the population in 2015, transforming and modernizing the local government system. Local government reform has been on the political agenda for over 50 years, almost the same length of time that we have been an independent nation. This reform is critical in order to improve services across the municipal corporations. Under this Government, Madam President, we will continue to make steps in the right direction to ensure that this comes to fruition. There have been two Joint Select Committees of the Parliament, one convened in the Eleventh Parliament and the other in the Twelfth Parliament which resulted in 21 meetings and over 90 written submissions on consultations, with over 61 key stakeholders from every level of society.

This clearly demonstrates that extensive deliberations and public engagements took place to ensure that local government reform is all encompassing. I would like to thank the members of the Committee for their invaluable contributions and dedication moving us one step closer to making reform a reality. I would like to remember the late Sen. Franklin Khan who started this process in 2015—and I joined the Government in 2016, one year after, and he must not be forgotten. I will always mention his name when coming to this local government reform, because under this Government and under my watch local

government reform will happen. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government we have taken proactive measures to facilitate the reform through capacity building and institutional strengthening at the level of the municipal corporation. A strategic implementation plan entitled: Planning Ahead for Local Government Reform was formulated in 2020 and subsequently received the approval of Cabinet in 2021. In this plan the Ministry has identified four objectives which would be focused in areas over the next fiscal year. This include:

1. Strengthening our financial and support systems at municipal corporations;
2. Development and implementation of ICT systems and digital transformation strategies and the municipal corporation by analyzing current ICT infrastructure at municipal corporation and continuing the implementation of the automatic and construction permit system at municipal corporations;
3. Organizational capacity building at municipal corporations for effective governance organizational success and sustainability by conducting human resource needs analysis and designing a proposed organizational structure for municipal corporations. Developing a transition policy and recruitment strategy for corporations in preparation for local government reform, developing and implementing a transformation plan; and
4. Organizational capacity building at the municipal police service for effective community policing.

Madam President, at present the Ministry has established a Technical

Steering Committee to guide and oversee the implementation of this plan. Madam President, the PNM-led Government stands by their mantra: “Putting people first”, through good governance, accountability and transparency. We do not just talk the talk but we deliver. During my tenure we have completed, through the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and also the 14 corporations, over 2,800 projects under drainage and irrigation; over 1,300 projects under local roads and bridges; over 210 recreational grounds and an average of over 20 crucial landslips through the Ministry and the 14 corporations.

Much more could have been done but the situation with funding, it is not as it used to be before, so we have to prioritize how we handle these projects. These development projects, Madam President, have benefited hundreds of thousands across the length and breadth of our beloved country and in turn improve productivity through quality infrastructure and transportation. Madam President, we know there is a lot more could be done but we can only do some with the resources given to us.

As a people we must be mindful of the times we are living in where there is a global pandemic affecting every country across the world, not just our twin island Republic. Notwithstanding this, the Government continues to place the needs of the citizens at the forefront by prioritizing key projects to ensure that critical works are performed in a timely manner. This will not last forever. As a country we will overcome these trying times. We have to remain positive and trust in the Almighty that this too shall pass.

More effective municipal policing remains one of the major priorities of this Government because, Madam President, the safety and security of our beloved citizens will not become compromised. We at the Ministry of Rural Development

and Local Government, we continue on the path of progress as we consistently increase the complement of municipal police officers across the 14 municipal corporations. Before the Government's mandate to increase municipal police officers across all corporations to 100 in 13 corporations and 200 in Port of Spain, there were only 216 officers in the service. To date I am pleased to inform there are 705 officers, 317 male and 388 female municipal police officers across the 14 municipal corporations.

Madam President, the COVID-19 pandemic would have deterred the progress of recruitment and filling of vacancies. However, continuous training with the current compliment of officers have been ongoing. At present, 92 applicants are currently being processed for the next intake which will form batch 1 of 2021 commencing by November this year, which is next month.

Madam President, I am pleased to inform this honourable House, to date, we are nearing 800 municipal police officers who are being trained and assigned across the 14 municipal corporations; indeed a tremendous milestone. Port of Spain has 171, close to their 200 mark, 89 male and 82 female; Arima Borough Corporation has 87, 46 male and 41 female and I could go down straight, Arima, San Fernando, Point Fortin Toco, Sangre Grande, Mayaro, Princes Town. But I want to highlight here, most of the officers that are coming into the municipal police are females and I want to take the opportunity to thank them for coming to serve at this level. Great strides have also been made to the standardize operational issues existing between the Statutory Authorities Service Commission and the Public Service Commission which would pave the way for the recruitment of a further 373 officers by the end of September 2022. So we will have the full batch by that time.



A next major accomplishment which is ongoing also, we all can agree with the inadequacy of signage within this country especially in the rural communities; has posed tremendous challenges to the commuting public, to the essential service and to the local and foreign tourist.

In fiscal year 2019 the National Local Roads and Street Signage Programme was successfully implemented through a collaborative effort with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and the Ministry of Works and Transport and the 14 municipal corporations. This ongoing project which conform the international best practices is already yielding tremendous benefit to road users nationwide. I am very pleased to say we did it. Phase one of this programme has been completed with an average of 250 signs manufactured and installed per municipality. And when you drive around the country you will see the new green signs installing in every community. This project is improving accessibility as well as the safety of the commuting public in Trinidad. It has been facilitating a quicker response by emergency services through the installation of prominent signage. Ultimately, this initiative will stimulate the efficiency in the service delivery by municipal corporations and other government agencies.

Furthermore, this street signage programme will promote a sense of community spirit throughout the country and enhance the marketability of rural communities. I am very happy to say while the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government purchased these base materials these signs were actually being manufactured by the Ministry of Works and Transport. The partnership between the two Ministries has been a tremendous success story and I wish to congratulate everyone who played an important role in this initiative. We took a whole of government approach and we have saved thousands of dollars. We anxiously await

the commencement of the second phase of this initiative coming in the next financial year.

Madam President, it gives me great pleasure to report on the strides this Ministry has made and continues to make in the area of the disaster management preparedness. While we may not have all the answers to deal with ravages of modern nature this Government is committed to doing all they can do to provide the support necessary to citizens threatened or directly affected by natural disasters. Following the unprecedented flooding events in many communities over the past years, the Ministry has strengthened its position and the coordinating entity over the disaster management units regarding the 14 corporations.

Madam President, some of key implementations in disaster management have been: Procurement of three 20 by 20 feet containers in the last fiscal year for disaster relief supplies and equipment formulation and response in the case of natural disasters. These containers are strategically placed in the following locations: Kent House, Sangre Grande and Couva. The establishment of a municipal emergency operations and training centre at head office. While this project involves the retrofitting of the existing infrastructure it also includes significant capacity building and institutional strengthening.

To date over 200 employees of the Ministry and the municipal corporations have been trained in disaster management ICT-based programmes inclusive of WebEOC incident command system and emergency operations interface.

### **5.00 p.m.**

Installation of flood early warning systems. The Ministry in collaboration with the Water and Sewerage Authority and the Met Office are in the process of installing these systems in areas throughout the country. Installation of 13 systems

thus far, six systems are in operation in the areas of Arouca, Manuel Congo, North Oropouche, Caparo, South Oropouche and Caroni. With this measure we anticipate that citizens will be provided with adequate notification of a major flooding event and enable them to evacuate their homes well ahead of time. Establishment of a standardized operation procedure through remote for hazards and disaster. Online training workshop for shelters and shelter management with Red Cross Society. Approximately 300 persons have completed this training and received certification.

CERT Programme. This Government sought to empower the citizens whom we see as the true first responders in times of disaster. In 2019, the Ministry rolled out its first national CERT Programme in collaboration with the 14 municipal corporations as well as state and non-state agencies. To date, we have over 300 CERT volunteers and it is increasing. Even in the light of COVID we have created innovative avenues to ensure continuity in essential training such as CERTs at absolutely no expense to the State. We often hear that nothing is being done to equip the population for handling disasters or there is no assistance when there is flood or strong winds. These claims are indeed false as we continuously see measures being implemented. In the instance of flooding, blown off roofs, structural damage following disaster hazard, our Disaster Management Units are immediately activated, ready and equipped. Not to forget that they are always available in the case of emergencies via the disaster management hotlines that are accessible to the public 24/7.

I want to inform you all also that as a disaster happens, the Disaster Management Units throughout the 14 corporations get involved immediately overnight. Nobody hears about these people. They just know things are happening. And I want to thank and recognize the Head of the Disaster Management Unit, Mr.

Jerry David, and the 14 corporation disaster management officers who continue to assist the public in whatever way they can. They do not—nothing is too hard for them to do. They go out there in the flood, they go out there to help citizens in providing whatever help and assistance they need. So I want to thank them, and we must recognize the good work that people do. They get no recognition. It is just like councillors. Councillors do not get any recognition but they do a lot of hard work.

Madam President, as the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago moves towards transforming a new economy and a new society, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government plays a critical role in achieving this goal. Accordingly, this Ministry has aligned its plans, projects, and programmes to the pillars of transformation under the following priority headings: Transforming the Economy; Making Food Security a Reality; Leaving No One Behind: Making Equity and Equality Central. In transforming the economy we continue to make steps to improve the way we perform our roles and functions. In fiscal 2022, we propose to implement onsite backup solutions and offsite backup and disaster recovery solutions at iGovTT data farm. This would mitigate the shortcomings of the Ministry's current backup system. We are on a continuous drive to upgrade the current operations across the 14 municipal corporations and state agencies, and in doing so we will make changes to our ICT and implement a digital platform that can be easily accessed by all citizens.

Pillar 2: Making Food Security a Reality. A National Reforestation and Watershed Rehabilitation Programme which falls under the remit of the Rural Development Company following a transfer in April 2020 from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is aimed at increasing the rate of forest

regeneration. Madam President, in doing so the project is expected to produce a number of additional benefits which include an increase in the value of forest capital; preservation of biodiversity; enhanced watersheds; increased aquaflora recharge; flood reduction; increased food production throughout agroforestry; environmental enhancement; the alleviation of poverty through sustainable employment opportunities particularly among women and the young people.

I am pleased to inform that under this programme approximately 1,800 individuals in Trinidad and 200 in Tobago comprising of young entrepreneurs and single-parent families have been employed and benefiting from this initiative. This programme is critical to the development of our country and will assist greatly in the alleviation of flooding and its core responsibility lies with replanting of the forest, trimming and cutting of trees on state lands. In years to come, this programme will evolve producing young farmers and sustainable businessmen. It is our hope that we will teach individuals to grow nature and sell their own crops, thereby sustaining their families.

Under this programme, food security will be made a reality. Nurseries have been established across the country and the programme continues to be expanded with increased food production through agroforestry. There is a lot of hope and potential emerging from this programme and employees are very dedicated and willing to improve their livelihoods.

Pillar 3: Leaving No One Behind: Making Equity and Equality Central. At the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government we stand by our motto “Putting people first”, and in doing so we continue to create avenues for equality and equity among all. The Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) is another state agency under our remit. There

is one such example of us leaving no one behind.

Firstly, I want to commend all the hard-working employees of the CEPEP Company Limited who continue to do an excellent job in keeping our environment clean and healthy for citizens. These workers are among the most dedicated and hard-working across our country and I want to let them know that we appreciate their service to this country. They are single mothers and they give their commitment. You will see them there early in the morning saying their prayers before they start to work. You could imagine this country without CEPEP? We all see what happened when we had the pandemic, everywhere was overgrown. These ladies and hard-working servicemen continue to do this country service, and I want to personally congratulate and thank each one of them for giving service to this country.

There are over 9,000 persons that are currently employed at CEPEP. These individuals similar to those in the NRWPR comprise of single parents. The incubator programme not only provides an avenue for employment for persons from a low income bracket, but provide training and development to the said individuals. This is in keeping with CEPEP's mandate to making individuals self-sufficient and able to continue their trades even after the end of the contract period.

Madam President, another initiative that demonstrates equity and equality for all is the national Latrine Eradication Programme which falls under the remit of the RDC. This initiative is geared towards eliminating the use of pit latrines throughout Trinidad. Phase one: I commenced in fiscal 2020 in four corporations namely the Port of Spain, San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, Sangre Grande Regional Corporation and the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation. Thus far, 58 units have been completed across four corporations, and in fiscal 2022

we intend to complete a further 40 units. The Ministry also intends to expand the programme to include the remaining 10 corporations in phase two. It is our hope that we can achieve the complete eradication of latrines across the country in the near future. Madam President, in addition to the above, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government continues with the implementation of the following programmes in fiscal 2022: transformation programme and change management unit, local support for automation and the construction permit printing process, design of a complete local area and regional planning process.

In conclusion, Madam President, I stand here, as I said before, as a former daily-paid worker at the San Fernando City Corporation; as an alderman; as a councillor for 13 years, as an alderman for three years and the first citizen in San Fernando; and now in this humble position as the first servant in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and I would like to thank, because I have been there and I continue to walk with them and talk to them. I would like to thank all the mayors in this country, all the deputy mayors, all the chairmen in the corporation, all the vice-chairmen, all the aldermen, and all of the councillors for their invaluable service and undying commitment to their burgesses especially during this global pandemic.

I would also like to thank the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, the Deputy Permanent Secretary, the Chief Executive Officers at the 14 corporations for their continued hard work and support. Madam President, with these few words and this commitment, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Sen. Vieira.

**Sen. Anthony Vieira:** Thank you, Madam President. Let me start by saying that

there are positives to this budget. I would like to believe that its architects have tried to be fair under trying circumstances. Notwithstanding this simultaneous economic and health crisis, Government has sought to provide some food support, some relief for small and medium-sized business, and some help for the less fortunate. There are aspects of this budget that resonate with me, for example, the removal of all import duties and taxes on computer hardware, software and peripherals; VAT removal on basic food items; the removal of customs duties and taxes on the importation of electric vehicles; the research and development capital allowance; and the proposed establishment of a national statistical institute.

I am hoping that we can use the proposed ship repair and maintenance facility in the western peninsula to recycle and to get rid of the derelict boats that clutter the Gulf of Paria. It is reassuring to be reminded that we continue to have a low inflation rate, no real or potential balance of payment difficulties, no problem accessing financing whether locally or internationally, and that we are not about to run out of foreign exchange. Our currency is not under threat. It is reassuring to hear that our net reserves are over US 7.1 billion, and that between the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and bank reserves there is a significant financial buffer of US 16.4 billion. On paper we are better off than most. More so, given the expected rise in oil prices and the favourable impact this is expected to have on the domestic economy. Nonetheless, I am concerned that the budget falls short in critical areas.

Accordingly, my focus is going to be on some important matters which are conspicuously absent: Government's failure to address the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution; shortcomings in the proposed expansion of the highway network; the failure to address the challenges of climate change; shortcomings in the health and safety measures being implemented to deal with COVID and what I



see as a lack of leadership. Now, I recognize this is a budget and not a manifesto, but it is being put forward as a design of Government's plans for the post-pandemic recovery, and it comes at a time of increasing hardship, alienation, and tremendous uncertainty for citizens. I recognize that in the middle of a crisis it can be hard to think past a short-term response, but that is exactly when one's primary focus should be on the long-term.

This budget falls short because it only responds to the moment when it should be striving to lead all citizens into the best possible future. This budget fails to cater for predictable obstacles and challenges lying ahead. Challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, I am not impressed with the Minister of Finance's agenda for resetting the economy for growth and transformation even as he bemoans the shuttering of businesses and loss of income. Now, I have no problem with doling out emergency hampers, foods vouchers and food baskets, all with the provision of economic support to households and financial aid to small business. But those are drop in the bucket measures which are short-lived. COVID has shown us what can happen in a contracted economy, and if you think COVID's impact on jobs and the flat-lining of business was bad, worse is to come.

This budget fails to consider the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in particular the increasing use of artificial intelligence, robotics, automation, and digitization. How these emerging technologies are going to displace workers en masse, and how they will widen the gap between the haves and the have nots. If we are to save livelihoods not just for the moment but for the future, we need to be rethinking jobs, the kind of work that our people can do and how to best position ourselves to avoid a dystopian future. The thinking applied in this budget is mired in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is too narrow and too limited. The eyes

in the front of our head are for looking ahead. We need to be planning ahead to be assessing and prioritizing sectors, and for the education system to focus on making citizens creative and self-sufficient.

The road network programme. The budget proposes to expand Trinidad's road network among other things by expanding the Churchill Roosevelt Highway to Manzanilla, the Valencia to Toco Road, and the Solomon Hochoy Highway to Point Fortin. The cost will be in the billions starting with an estimated 1.7 billion for five additional kilometres to the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway. Transportation is a basic requirement, a public good which must meet the needs of the future and must be sustainable. Is this the best we can do? Will these road expansion projects offer better mobility to citizens and meet user needs? I do not think so. I would ask you to recall the situation on our roads pre-COVID. Families having to wake up in the wee hours to get to work and to get their children to school without traffic, and for those caught in traffic, hours lost on the roads; people having to carry containers so that their children can relieve themselves on the long haul. In what universe can this be an acceptable norm?

Gridlock on city streets during work hours; parking horrors, both from the point of view of being unable to find parking as well as having to navigate potholed and congested streets because vehicles are parked on both sides of the road; cars being towed for improper parking and the hefty consequential fines; people stranded in the hundreds forlornly waiting on a bus or a taxi to take them home during heavy rain and after flash floods, drenched to the bone waiting for hours. These examples should not be dismissed as minor inconveniences or as a normal consequence of inclement weather. They affect health and wellness, job productivity and quality of life. Invariably it is the poor and the vulnerable who are

the most affected and the worst affected.

COVID was a wakeup call. The restrictions gave people a chance to spend quality time at home. Hours lost in frustrating slow moving traffic were avoided. I do not think anyone wants to go back there, and yet Government is committed to road expansion, and the use of motor vehicles as the primary means of transport; more cars, more traffic, more pollution. We need a new paradigm for transport, one that optimizes public transport; one that meets user needs; one that can be powered by green renewable energy thereby reducing pollution and harmful carbon emissions; and one which offers easy, swift and safe mobility. I am talking about sustainable transport. The United Nations defines sustainable transport as:

“...the provision of services and infrastructure for the mobility of people and goods advancing economic and social development to benefit today’s and future generations in a manner that is safe, affordable, accessible, efficient, and resilient, while minimizing carbon and other emissions and environmental impacts.”

Today, all over the world governments are actively pursuing steps to develop sustainable transport and to decarbonize the transport sector. Where are the initiatives on sustainable transport in this budget? Where are the priority options, the policies, the measures for achieving an efficient safe resilient low-carbon and environmentally-friendly transport system? I was hoping Government would meet this moment with bold forward-looking initiatives. Why do we not nurture grand ambitions by having a mass transit system using rapid rail or maglev trains? Transportation is a basic requirement, a public good. We should not be playing catch-up. We should be aiming to meet the needs of the future. Mass transit can be a magic bullet for rebooting the economy and improving the lives of

citizens. High-speed rail is safer. It can be powered by green renewable energy. It offers an alternative for light freight. It will better connect the country. It can revitalize rural communities and ports of the country. It can boost productivity and can be a tool for economic development. It can initiate a nationwide construction boom.

Infrastructure development under this budget is pedestrian at best. It promises more cars, more traffic, people spending more time on the roads getting to and from work, and more pollution. It is time to phase out the internal combustion vehicle. Mass transit can be integrated with other forms of transport. It will offer better mobility for citizens and more transportation choices. A modernized transportation system can be transformative for Trinidad. Further, the expanded road network is going to cut through already fragile and endangered woodlands, marsh lands and forest. But I see no provision, no allocation for restoration assuming protection of the environment is even on Government's radar which leads me to the need to address climate change. This Government appears to be wed to 20<sup>th</sup> Century thinking and old patterns of behaviour, in particular the emphasis and continuing reliance on road transport and the energy sector.

The hon. Minister of Finance stated as an aside in his budget statement without details and without conviction, that steps will be taken to ensure that greenhouse gases are appropriately reduced from activities in the energy sector under our Paris commitments. A bare statement without any evidence in support amounting more to a wish than to a commitment. I wonder, I wonder if Government is aware of recent warnings from the UK environmental agency about the need to cope with the many different risks of climate change; that we are running out of time to implement effective adaptation measures; that all our lives

are going to change; that people will die unless we make the places where we live, work, and travel resilient to the effects of the more violent weather that climate emergency is bringing; about the need for a radical rethink about flood protection and massive investments in coastal and other defences; that our ecosystems cannot adapt as fast as the climate is changing; that it is now a case of adapt or die.

Indeed, a recent UN report on the science of climate change warns it is code red for humanity. Catastrophe can only be avoided if the world acts fast. Where are the allocations, the measures for combating climate change in this budget? We are told that oil and gas is of little practical use to anyone. It must be produced and sold profitably to have any intrinsic value. And we are reminded that as a mature oil province the country is committed to discovering, developing, exploiting our oil and gas fields. But even though the 2020s will see the end of the fossil fuel industry as we know it, it is clear to me that this Government is addicted to oil and gas, and that the energy sector remains unchallenged as the paramount driver of our economy. Minister Young confirmed that our oil and gas sector is here to stay.

**5.30 p.m.**

Now, I have no problem with the proposed tax credits for companies investing in carbon capture and storage, and I have no problem with the view that the energy sector should be seen as part of the solution. But when one thinks in boxes—one box for national security, one box for agriculture, another box for health and so on—one also tends to think in terms of zero-sum equation. As there is a limited amount of money, we can only afford so much for each Ministry or sector and there is little or nothing left over for the environment. But when one considers that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, that is short-sighted, myopic and dangerous thinking.

The environment is all round us. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat. Man is a part of the environment, not apart from it. We share this sacred Earth with other living creatures, trees, birds, insects, fish and animals. They too have a right to exist. The natural world is under threat and we must unite to protect the environment. Platitudes about green spaces, for example, in Tobago and the bare promise to use natural gas in support of diversification and the renewable goals just do not cut it.

This moment; this moment requires robust measures for combating climate change and protection of the environment. Such measures with appropriate allocations should be integrated in policies throughout Government. What is the cost in future budgets when people fall sick because of foul air and bad water? What is the cost to future generations when they inherit bad roads and concrete jungles instead of the paradise we are destroying? Preserving the environment, protecting biodiversity and guarding against the challenges of climate change must be front and centre of our policies.

Response to the pandemic. Turning now to the pandemic and the Government proposed measures towards reopening the economy and building resilience. The hon. Minister of Finance spent much time on Government's response to the virus. In fact, the theme of the budget is: Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. Unlike other countries, for example, the United Kingdom, Trinidad and Tobago lost no time in taking decisive actions and Government was lauded for its efforts, at least in the early stages when we knew little about the virus, and the wisest course of action was better to be safe than to be sorry.

But it seems to me that somewhere along the line, the powers that be has lost the plot. I particularly bemoan the overreliance on vaccines as though vaccination

is the only magic bullet. Not long ago in this very House, I asked the hon. Minister of Health about ivermectin, a question he pooh-poohed. But what is the harm with the Minister of Health or the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Caricom checking with their counterparts in India, Africa and elsewhere to see if there is any truth to the reports about ivermectin being used effectively against COVID in those countries? If it turns out that such claims are just fake news, Government can report accordingly but if it turns out that there is validity to those claims, then surely that must be good news. Surely because it gives us an additional weapon in the fight against COVID.

Why the blind adherence to the WHO, especially when there is potential for conflicts of interest due to the influence that WHO funders have on that organization? Why when institutions like the WHO, IMF and WTO, World Trade Organization, who are forever pontificating about the need for transparency and accountability? Was it necessary for the country to sign non-disclosure agreements? When the Leader of the Opposition asked the Minister of Health about these non-disclosure agreements, his response was that it is part of the standard negotiating process. Well, I do not accept that. I do not accept that response, not after spending over US 18.1 million or how much? This is after all of the gifted vaccines to us. Trinidad and Tobago, 123.1 million; 123.1 million of our general revenues on vaccines after these same institutions have committed another US 50 billion to deploy vaccines worldwide. In my experience, when big money is involved, companies prioritize profits over people. The argument that disclosure would harm the general public's prospects of obtaining vaccines by limiting the Government's ability to negotiating effectively with the pharmaceutical companies, that just does not hold water with me.

First, vaccines are a public health good and secondly, as a matter of public interest, the public has a right to such information. Thirdly, and as I have said before, I do not see how publication of the vaccine contracts can prejudice Government's ability to procure vaccines or harm the interest of the pharmaceutical companies. Transparency over contract details does not amount to the exposure of any trade or intellectual property secrets. Surely in a global crisis of this nature, we all want the same thing: to cure people as quickly as possible using all available means at our disposal. So why ignore ivermectin if it offers a fighting chance? What is the harm in investigating? Why is WHO pushing governments all around the world to put all our eggs in the vaccination basket? And what recourse is there for those who have suffered or died from the vaccines? Will government accept responsibility?

In the earlies, when we did not know much about the virus, closing our borders and imposing lockdowns made sense, but today after having vaccinated hundreds of thousands, why are we still under a state of emergency? Why does the vaccine narrative keep changing? Why does the virus continue to spread and kill people? We were told that vaccines are the only solution. Then we heard that even though vaccinated, "yuh could still get COVID but the virus would not kill yuh". Now we are hearing that even vaccinated people can die from the virus and that all the vaccines are not equally effective. In some cases, boosters—the Minister of Health says not boosters, third shots may be required. The goalpost seems to keep shifting.

Government has signalled in this budget that it will continue on the pathway to reopening our economy through a safe zone initiative. Now, I am perplexed. I am perplexed that while one can get immunity after being vaccinated with a



weakened strain of the virus, apparently one does not acquire immunity after recovering from the virus. Why does natural immunity not count? Why do persons who have beaten the virus still need to be vaccinated? That does not make sense. Only the fully vaccinated and persons who have a medical exemption/deferral certificate issued by a public medical officer are permitted on the premises of a safe zone. But if I am vaccinated and I am protected, why do I need to be in a safe zone? It seems to me that the people who most need protection are the unvaccinated.

The notion of a safe zone sounds so alluring. But is this a case of good intentions, bad logic? Are we institutionalizing segregation? How long are these safe zones expected to last? Weeks? Months? Years? Indefinitely? COVID is not going away. We have to learn how to live with it but I want to say this, that in responding to COVID and living with it, we must be very, very careful. We must be careful when restricting civil liberties and human movement, when creating new legal boundaries between exercising rights and breaking the law.

When criminalizing ordinary conduct such as going to the restaurant, the movies, the beach and social events, we must be careful not to ostracize those who are unable or unwilling to be vaccinated. We must be careful not to institutionalize unequal treatment. We must be careful not to deny citizens the right to make voluntary medical decisions for themselves? Living with COVID may require us to continue wearing masks, to continue washing our hands and to continue social distancing. Vaccines have been on offer. For those who choose not to be vaccinated, I say let them take responsibility for their own health and well-being. It is time for the State to step back.

The need for a grand strategy and a shared unifying vision: the framers of

this budget claim to offer a wide-ranging and broad-based response to the economic crisis and virus, including institutional building, digital transformation, safety and security, and social development. Lots of buzz words and impressive sounding initiatives but what I find lacking is a grand strategy and unifying vision.

At the end of August, a friend of mine committed suicide. He was a strong man, a mentor to many, loved by all. Yet, he succumbed to depression brought on by the COVID restrictions and his inability to work, to interact with people, to do what he loved best. My heart breaks for his family and friends and I wonder how many other people are similarly affected? How many have used their hard-earned and scarce life savings just to get by, just to get by during this difficult and uncertain time? How many are experiencing feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, fear at the thought of being unable to provide for their loved ones? We are living in a state of uncertainty and some of have hit rock bottom even while others appear to be doing well. We cannot be blind to this.

People are trying to make sense of this budget, to understand how it impacts them and wondering what the future holds. If ever there was a time for caring, a time for a competent and compassionate leadership, this is it. How we handle this moment will echo for generations. It will define who we are as a people and as a country. This is not a time for arrogance, bellicose language and grandstanding. It is a time for healing, reorienting and recalibrating. The failures of the current system have been thrown into stark relief by COVID. What is needed now; what is needed now are new ideas and a corresponding sense of purpose. What is needed are leaders with the right vision and perspective who are willing to listen, leaders who can inspire us with a road map for the future, one that will get us to a good destination. But since the streets are not numbered, we need groundbreaking

leadership to get us to that good destination.

If we hope to come out stronger and ready to face the future, we need to restructure the economy and we need to change how we operate. Our leaders must be able to identify potential problems and try to resolve them before they reach a crisis point. A leader must be the voice of calm in a turbulent world. Our leaders must stop engaging in destructive behaviour and petty squabbling. It is holding us back. At a time when people need to hear clearly what needs to be done, all they are hearing is cacophony. We need leaders who will plant flowers instead of sowing the seeds of discord and policies that will leave people feeling uplifted. We are living in epoch changing times and must be alive to the moment. All of us here are privileged to be at the helm of this turning point. There is little difference between obstacle and opportunity. There are choices to make, let us not miss the opportunities. If COVID has taught us anything, it is that our collective health and prosperity requires working together.

Pandemic recovery spending gives us an opportunity. If we have over US 7.1 billion in net reserves, part of that should be used for investing in our future. We should be bold and ambitious. Let us make our twin islands two of the best places to live on this planet: smart cities, a healthy and striving ecosystem with modern sophisticated and integrated transport systems, harnessing renewable energy, new technologies and meeting all of the Sustainable Development Goals. The business-as-usual approach is no longer adequate. We need to design and invest in better education systems, workplaces, institutions and infrastructure. If we can enable our citizens to live productive lives in a wholesome, safe and green environment, everyone will benefit. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Nigel de Freitas:** Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to

contribute in this budget debate 2021/2022. Now, like my colleagues before me, I wish to congratulate the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Planning and Development, and the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago on the budget presentation put forward for the next fiscal year. But I want to go a little bit further, specifically because I am listening to the contributions that have gone so far for the day and I am starting to realize that there is somewhat of a disconnect from the context of what has been occurring from 2015 to now. And so, instead of just congratulating them, I am going to go a bit further and actually put them in what I would call legendary status.

Now, as I do that, there are some who might say it is a bit premature. You have to understand that when you say something is legendary or someone is legendary, you usually have the benefit of hindsight, usually it comes from descendants or descendants of descendants and they are looking back at a particular time period and they are looking back at it holistically understanding what took place and then having the ability to analyze the response to what took place.

The way you have to think about it is like this. If you have a captain and a crew on a ship sailing and they find themselves in a category 4 hurricane, you immediately start to think, "Well, it is highly unlikely that they will survive." And then when they come out of that storm, you say to yourself "Well, those are good sailors". They survived something that you did not think they would survive. Now add to that, as soon as they come out of that category 4 storm, they head right into a category 5 hurricane. What are you saying to yourself? "Well, now they sure to dead because what happened before was lucky. Let us see if they can do it again." And as soon as you start to see that ship emerge from that second storm, what is

the sentiment that most people will have? My God, those sailors are legendary. And in the context of what the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development, and this Prime Minister of this country had to face between 2015 and now, you understand that there were two storms that nobody expected us to come out of in the way that we did.

If you listen to Sen. Vieira's contribution, when he started, he indicated that all of the economic indicators showed that we are still at a certain level of stability. Go back to that period of 2015, the Minister of Finance did not mince words as to the situation that we were heading into. He indicated that he did not have any wiggle room whatsoever. The wiggle room that he did have was tight that we as a country locally had to engage in what is called a paradigm shift in order to navigate that situation and that paradigm shift meant that we had to change the way we think, we had to change the way we behaved and we had to change the way we operated.

And you would understand based on the erroneous utterances of the Opposition here today that they themselves admitted that that particular period was a bad one because it was economic downturn, budget deficits and decreased growth. But what they would not tell you is that was due to external pressures. And what the Minister of Finance and the team had to do was to lead this country out of that and he put forward a plan to get us back to a level where we could balance a budget by 2019/2020 and we were on track to do that. So much so that if you go back to 2019/2020 budget presentation, there were no allocations in relation to any COVID-19 pandemic. We were planning move to forward towards a brighter future having gone through that paradigm shift. And it is because of that, I can say thank God we went through that because when the COVID-19 impact hit,

we were already at a jogging pace moving forward in terms of what needed to happen to be able to brace the impact of COVID-19. We did not name it digitization and digitalization, we named it moving financial aspects online.

When you listen to the Attorney General repeatedly during that Eleventh Parliament, he said it, that we were going to do things in the AG's Office to make it easier for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Had we not started that process, we would have been starting from scratch when the entire world had to move online because of a pandemic nobody expected. And so, we engaged in that first paradigm shift which allowed us to be able to go further along with the paradigm shift that the entire planet had to go through when we discovered that COVID-19 pandemic and the effects it would have on economies across the world.

So, Madam President, let me create the context in which we found ourselves in. The first thing we had to do, and the first thing the Minister of Finance did during that period was break it down so that all the citizens could understand because it required us to walk alongside him in order to get to where we are today. The first thing you had understand is that you have an energy sector and you have a non-energy sector, and what occurred was a reduction in revenues from the energy sector and once that started to happen, you needed to find revenues from elsewhere to offset that loss so you look to the non-energy sector. But in the non-energy sector, we were accustomed to, as citizens, certain things happening like leakages in the system which could not continue if it is that we were to survive. And so, you started to hear comments coming from the Government indicating that we had to restructure this and we had to restructure that and we had to stop this leakage here because we could no longer carry the weight like we used to, hence the reason you had to change your mindset. Because go back to the 2016/2017

period—and Sen. Mark raised it here today when he was talking about Petrotrin—what was the sentiment around that? Do not touch it, it is an iconic state enterprise. We were talking patriotism while we were trying to survive.

And so, as we try to bolster the revenues in the non-energy sector, whilst revenues were declining in the energy sector, that started, that mindset change, to ensure that going forward in the future, we could begin to have the ability to get revenues from elsewhere. And I said it then and I will say it again today because in this budget presentation put forward by this Minister of Finance, you are actually seeing that coming to fruition. And what I said then was this, that if we can stop the leakages in the non-energy sector and increase the revenues there, that at some point in the future when the revenues in the energy sector returns, what is going to happen? What you are going to get is the revenues in the energy sectors, as it increases, would join the increasing revenue in the non-energy sector to ensure that we have money coming in from the different sources. And if we were able to maintain our prudent expenditure and the way we operated and stopping the leakages in the non-energy sector, then we will be good going forward. And you heard Sen. Dillon-Remy speak to that in her contribution where she asked, do not change back to old habits, let us keep going the way we are going to our benefit and to the benefit of our children in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is exactly what we intend to do.

So, Madam President, you have to understand that if you are truly going to grasp this budget and what it intends to do, then you too have to engage in a paradigm shift and you have to make the leap from what you are accustomed to, to what you are not accustomed to because at the end of the day, unprecedented times calls unprecedented measures. I heard Sen. Vieira speak to several instances saying

that the budget does not go far enough. Sen. Vieira, I humbly disagree, it does but you have to look at it from a certain perspective and when I get to that part of my contribution, I will go deeper to explain what I mean by that.

But I just to respond to Sen. Deonarine's contribution because I usually listen to her very closely in budget debates because she makes some very good points. And one of the points that she made was that the production levels in the energy sector is ramping up but it is still lower than the previous years and she gave the example of 2003. The fact is, Sen. Deonarine, that the production levels relate to oil and gas, these are limited resources. They are not infinite like renewable resources such as sunlight and hydroelectric power.

**6.00 p.m.**

So I do not expect that as years roll on, that you are going to have the same production levels. But what you had to listen to, when the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries spoke, is that we are able to ramp up production in the oncoming years. And the reason that that is important is because when we encountered 2015, two things happened. One, the prices in the energy sector started to drop and production also started to drop. So we got a double whammy hit in relation to that. Now, that is turning around, where we are able to ramp up production, even though it is not to the 2003 levels, but on top of that the prices are also increasing. So we are getting a double benefit and that is what is important. And I think that is the point that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries was trying to bring across.

One of the other things Sen. Deonarine mentioned was that the return to surplus that the Minister of Finance mentioned in this budget presentation is optimistic. She indicated that, to do that, you would have to cut expenditure and generate revenue to the tune of \$9 billion and she went in to the items that the



Minister of Finance spoke to, in terms of where we are closing the gap and stopping leakages, Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority, restructuring of certain entities, and so forth.

Sen. Deonarine would remember, right before this budget debate when we debated that Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Bill, you would remember that the Minister of Finance indicated that in doing so we would you be able to collect \$5 billion that was left off of the table. And in my contribution on that particular Bill I also indicated that if you went back to the 2019/2020 period, the budget deficit was, I think \$3 billion or \$3.2 billion. And had we had the TTRA at that point in time and collected that, we would have been able to balance the budget in that period. So when you speak to \$9 billion here and the TTRA coming on stream, you can see where we start to close the very gap that you are indicating we need to close. And that is just one of the initiatives that the Minister of Finance pointed out.

So, yes, we can do it and he is not being optimistic when he says he wants to get to a surplus by 2023. What he is doing is managing as best as he can and managing prudently. And as I said, closing those leakages and those gaps in the non-energy sector to increase the amount of revenue received, whilst also collecting more revenue in that energy sector.

So, Madam President, let me move forward to the meat of my contribution, based on the theme that we are engaging in a paradigm shift right now; the second one in the last six years; something that does not normally occur. Because when you talk about a paradigm shift, it is something that usually occurs several years apart. And most human beings would only ever encounter such a thing once in their lifetime. If it is you live, or you are lucky enough to live to 100 years, you

might encounter two. And to understand what I am talking about think of the movement from television to the cell phone, cell phone to Internet, personal computers, that kind of thing, years apart between them. But in this particular situation we had two. One was local to us during that 2015 to 2020 period and now one is global in nature, as the whole entire world needs to change the way it thinks because of this COVID-19 pandemic.

And so I move forward to national security and what is occurring there. The Minister of Finance mentioned that we are able to acquire two new Cape-class vessels which came in in July of 2021, to add to our fleet with enhanced capabilities. Added to that, he spoke to the upgrade of the coastal radar system with improved surveillance equipment. One of the problems that we keep indicating, as it relates to national security in this country, is that we are saying that the borders are porous, the borders are porous, we need to secure our borders. By the mention of these two things in this budget presentation, you begin to see whereas we are strengthening the number of vessels that we have, that can patrol our borders and upgrading that coastal radar system, you begin to understand that working in tandem, together, we are now able to properly and better secure our borders utilizing those two systems. Continuing on, we have the digitization thrust that he also announced in terms of full digitization of service divisions throughout the TTPS and throughout the national security network, thereby improving the efficiency of operations.

And if you were listening to the Standing Finance Committee in the other place, you heard the Minister of National Security speak to, in response to questions about the electronic monitoring programme, indicate that it is operational now; something that we did not have in this country before. And I stand proud,

along with every other member of the Joint Select Committee of National Security, because I remember, when we pulled up that legislation and we indicated that we are going to follow through on this, until this thing became operational. And now I am happy to hear the Minister of Finance indicate that the Judiciary is utilizing that system towards the better management of domestic violence cases and sexual offences cases; something that is completely new to Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, as I move off national security, I want to talk about the development of a technology industry in Trinidad and Tobago. Now Sen. Vieira in his contribution spoke to the lack of vision, because we are not talking about AI, artificial intelligence, robotics, automation and digitization. That is not true. You see, when you are developing a technology industry you have to do this in a layered fashion. You would notice that this process started last year with the initiatives put forward in relation to the importation of computers, its accessories to startup companies and the tax breaks that they received. And in this particular budget presentation you saw that the Minister of Finance went even further as he spoke to the development of certain areas that would work in tandem with those incentives that were put forward last year.

But I want you to understand something. When we talk about diversification in development of other industries, we usually compare it to the energy sector and the amount of money you make there. But the problem is, when you are developing those sectors, the length of time it would take to really generate revenue, or the kind of revenue that you would like, is lengthy. Think of the tourism sector. It will take you three to five years to build a decent sized hotel. After that, you have to do your branding and you have to get people to come into the country to visit that hotel. In terms of the agricultural sector, you have to

develop your farms to get to a certain size in order to develop the kind of money that you would want.

Add all of those together in those various sectors and you still would not meet the kind of revenues that you would get in the energy sector. That is not the case in the technology sector. The technology sector is a bit different. And if you want to understand what I mean just think of the Silicon Valley that we all hear about in the US, and the importance of that place to the US economy.

That type of incubator is what I pulled out of this budget presentation, in terms of what the Minister of Finance is speaking to when he talks about developing Wi-Fi, developing ICT centres, developing a digital developer hub. That type of incubator environment is important, because it takes one, just one development of key piece of software or an app that has a global impact to change the game in Trinidad and Tobago.

And if you understand the kind of benefit that can come out of that. We heard it repeatedly here today in the contributions of others, both on the Independent Bench and the Opposition Bench, that one of the problems we have in Trinidad and Tobago still going is access to foreign exchange. I am sure the Minister of Digitization and Digital Transformation will back me up on this. Once you go in to the technology industry and you go and present yourself online, you are presenting yourself globally. It means you now have access to the global market. It means that you have access to foreign direct investment. What are two of the things you will always find around a Silicon Valley-type incubator system? You would find angel investors and you would find venture capitalists, Madam President.

Now, imagine that in our very own incubator system in Trinidad and

Tobago, that a piece of software is developed that attracts venture capitalists and angel investors. That is direct investment into the Trinidad and Tobago economy. And we can go further, because if an app is developed right here in Trinidad and Tobago, and that app is loaded on to the Apple app store or the Android app store. Then that app is sold in US dollars. And it means that the developer who resides right here in Trinidad and Tobago now has access to earn US dollars. And that is why it is so important that this technology industry is given the kind of incentives that the Minister of Finance is indicating in this budget.

And it does not stop there. Because what I would say to Sen. Vieira and Sen. Deonarine, I think Sen. Seepersad mentioned it in relation to electric vehicles. Last year I spoke about that, in terms of where the world was going and that is where we needed to go because they were closing off combustible engines in relation to automation. But what I did not say at the time is that the world is going even further, in relation to smart vehicles.

So whereas we are now giving the incentives for bringing in electric vehicles in Trinidad and Tobago, it is not going to stop there. It is going to go even further and that is why the development, Sen. Vieira, of this technology industry and these hubs and this incubator-type environment becomes very important. Because we do not have that in Trinidad and Tobago right now, and you are going to need it going forward in the future. And you need to create that environment where people from all walks of life can come and use their creativity, their minds to come up with apps and software programmes that would be able to tie in to the development of those industries.

And it does not just stop there. Because most people do not seem to understand that once you bring in electric vehicles into this country and we start to

move from the combustible engines to predominantly electric vehicles, there are other industries that are going to develop. That model that was developed for combustible engines where you have your gas station to store the liquid, the fuel that you put into your car is also going to change. You can charge your vehicles at home. Who is installing that? You can charge your cars in your workplace. Who is going to install that in the workplace?

Your whole structure of maintenance of these vehicles are going to change as well. You are going to need training and development of the human resources in these areas. So you understand, Sen. Vieira, it is not a matter of lack of vision and we are not thinking about robotics and we are not thinking about AI automation. We are, but you have to build the foundation and the layers first to give the people that incubator setting, so that they can develop the technology, so that when the industry reaches its maximum peak we have the requisite human resources to grow that industry even further.

So Madam President, I want now to move on to Tobago. And what I would say, as I always do, because he has remained true to form, from 2015 to now, since I have been in this Parliament, is that he continues to be committed to Tobago by way of the allocation that he gives and the added benefits that come with it. We all heard of the added benefits, \$50million to the tourism sector, which is a continuation of the programme he started last year. Added to that, this year you have \$30million for farmland development, which is important because if you are trying to develop a tourism sector in Tobago, and as hotels are built, you are going to need the food to supply these hotels. So \$30million for farmland development actually works in tandem with the \$50million for the tourism sector.

He then goes on to add \$20million for the development of green spaces

which, again is part of the entire tourism package and brand that Tobago is putting forward to the outside world to help to be able to attract individuals. Now, those things are all well and good. And that is coming from the Government side in Trinidad. But, Madam President, every single time—

As a matter of fact before I go there, let me just say this to all Tobagonians listening, and I know why I am saying this and I am going to explain it shortly, do not take for granted any opportunity to take charge of your own affairs. [*Desk thumping*] Do not take for granted any opportunity that brings benefit to Tobago. Let me explain why. Madam President, every single time I listen to the proceedings in the other place, as it relates to Tobago, and I heard it right here today in the contribution from Sen. Lyder, I cringe. Year after year it is the same thing. They go through that process in that other place, and every single time it is a question: Why is this dollar being spent here? Why is this dollar being spent there? Why so much? And every single time the poor Minister of Finance under frustration has to explain: Well, this is for agricultural development in Tobago. This is for tourism development in Tobago. This is for cultural development in Tobago. And every single time he has to ask them: Is it that you do not care about Tobago? And today I sat here again in this budget presentation in this Senate to hear Sen. Lyder question the amount of money being used to build an airport. And while he is saying that out of one side of his mouth and comparing it to some other island, then comes to say: What are we doing to diversify the economy? Well, we are developing the tourist industry using Tobago as the forefront. But you are asking why we are spending \$1.2 billion to build an A-class airport in Tobago? Well, let me just say this here today, that the money allocated to Tobago is money that Tobago is entitled to, as part of this union. I do not know how many times I

need to say that again.

You would notice that when other Ministries come up for questioning in Standing Finance Committee, the questions usually go like this: Why is there an increase here? Why is there a decrease here? What is going on with this project? And that question is usually asked in the context of whether there is going to be any decrease in benefit or increase in benefit, as it relates to the constituencies under which the Opposition controls. But when it comes to Tobago, “why yuh spending so much money?”

And let me say this, because, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy was absolutely correct, and I understand why she pleaded for that, because there was a legislative process that started earlier this year that would have treated with that particular embarrassment that Tobago has to go through once and for all. And the way that that piece of legislation was set up, it meant that the Minister of Finance, all he had to do was, after reading the budget, instruct the Central Bank to send the requisite amount of money to Tobago. Transfer it from the Consolidated Fund to the bank account set up in the Central Bank specifically for Tobago. And what it meant is that the Secretary of Finance in Tobago will then begin the conversation with the Central Bank as to how the money is to be sent and any criticism or oversight of money spent would have come from a duly-elected Opposition in Tobago, utilizing oversight mechanisms put forward in that legislation. Because it is only Tobagonians resident in Tobago that would know if a project started, if a project is midway, or if a project is finished.

And to understand what I am talking about, I am certain that you never heard any politician or political entity resident in the Tobago House of Assembly ever ask about any dollar spent in Toco, Mayaro, or Siparia. And they would not do



that, because in order to criticize such expenditure they would need to know what is taking place in those particular constituencies. And that is why it was important in that legislative process to ensure that the money spent in Tobago was criticized by Tobagonians, all duly elected.

Now, we all know what has happened when that process went to the Parliament, Madam President. Members opposite who come here today and say they care about Tobago, walked out. Why? Because the Prime Minister had extra time. One hundred and twenty years have elapsed in the fight for autonomy in Tobago. When small steps were taken in 1980, further progress in 1996, by a previous incarnation of that political party, and you walk out because of 60 minutes of extra time after 120 years of fighting? Seriously? Really? On a Tobagonian no less? And to make matters worse, Madam President, and to add insult to injury, every Tobagonian had to wake up Sunday morning, before they would wipe “de yampee from dey eye” to hear that Members opposite, all up in the EBC filing a pre-action protocol letter questioning 15 seats?

All kinds of political parties in Tobago are “gearsing” up right now putting on political armour, getting ready to mount the political platform to speak to Tobago as to why they are the best choice to govern the island. None of them are questioning the EBC report and the 15 seats, because they know and they are focused on December 6<sup>th</sup>, when they all will engage in political war. But Members opposite are all up in the EBC with pre-action protocol questioning 15 seats.

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

**Sen. N. de Freitas:** Thank you, Madam President. Well, I have two questions. “How you reach dey? Who send fuh you?” I am certain that Sen. John and Sen. Roberts would have advised you that if it is you do not have Tobago's best interest

at heart, if it is you walked out on Tobago earlier on this year, then do not do that, and if it is that you did not want to listen to them, listen to me here today and take my stupid advice that if it is you cannot give Tobago its autonomy, if it is you do not care about Tobago “stay out of Tobago people business”. [*Desk thumping*]

And my last statement on that, in this particular topic, Madam President, would be this, come sun, rain or hail, drunk or sober, when it comes to the Tobago House of Assembly and the betterment of Tobago, you the Opposition, “mind yuh business”. [*Desk thumping*] And if anybody on that side thinks that they are coming to respond to me tomorrow morning to tell me that the party of the rising sun represents everybody, let me tell you something here today: number one, you are not a congress. Number two, you have not been national since “19 how long”. And number three, based on what took place in the House of Representatives two weeks ago, “all ah we know yuh definitely not united”. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam President, as I end, this budget is one that provides opportunities and benefits for those who wish to be visionaries or adapt quickly to the shifting paradigm that we are engaged in. The future going forward, in spite of the continuing pandemic, looks bright, as we all grow accustomed to the pace of adjustment. One day this pandemic will end and with the capitalization of the initiatives put forward by this team, we will not just be all better for it physically, we would be better for it economically as well. With those few words, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Ndale Young:** Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill for fiscal 2022. Now, Madam President, permit me to commend the hon. Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, on the delivery of his seventh successive presentation of well-laid out measures to

encourage robust economic activity and financial security for not only the citizens but for the nation's youth.

Now, Madam President, it is my intention to be short in this contribution. But I want to take the time out to look at the budget as it pertains to what it provides for the nation's youth in particular. And it is upon that note I would like to fully commend the hon. Leader of this side of the Bench, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley for just about a year ago establishing the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. That Ministry's focus on the development of youth has made a difference and will make a difference in the future of the youth of Trinidad and Tobago. And it is not without doubt that it is that focus that will make a difference in all of the aspects that we have laid out here today, because continuity is of the utmost importance. So we can all stand and speak about the things that we have engaged and all the things that we think need to be better on each side of the Bench, but if the nation's youth are not involved or if they are despondent, it will go nowhere and would fall on dry ground.

Now, Madam President, in that regard, since the inception of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, there has always been this question of whether the fund should be disaggregated, if we should look at the stabilization aspect that would have mechanisms to be triggered such as in these times, to look at stabilizing the economy in times of, you know, fiscal troubles such as a global pandemic, and the heritage aspect of that that deals with equity of distribution of the derivatives of the resources of the land from generation to generation.

**6.30 p.m.**

Now, I want to proffer to this place that this budget seeks to do both in one. Not only the reduction of VAT items on the shelf contrary to what the Opposition

continue to try to bamboozle the public and say otherwise. The provision of soft loans and grants to micro industries, to small businesses, to jump start this economy as we open back up gently in this pandemic and increase economic activity. There is also the fact that this fiscal package seeks to give to the nation's youth TT \$467,100,210, a 717 per cent increase in budgetary allocations to our nation's youth. That is significant, Madam President. That I believe will make a significant difference in the nation to come, in Trinidad that is yet not made.

It is my opinion that in this time the programmes that are in this fiscal package have the ability and gives the opportunity to make serious differences at all strata of our nation's youth. Take for example, the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, YAHP, not to be confused with another acronym. But the YAHP programme seeks to give \$100 million annually for the next three years to provide financial support, to provide land and also to provide technical support to create a new generation of agrobusiness.

Now, in the year 2013, youth not in employment and education training stood at 52.5 per cent. Now we have come a long way since then but there are still a number of our youth that are disaggregated and—often when we speak we only speak about the unattached youth or the disenfranchised youth but there are many youths who have graduated with their bachelors and their masters but do not understand business. I talk to many of my friends that hold a master's in business, and they do not have one or know what it is to run one. I speak to many of the youths on the street that simply do not know what direction to go in because they have not been exposed to the industries that we have at our disposal in this country.

I often wonder why the petrochemical industry is filled with expats that we can build right here in the country. But the programmes that I see here seek to

separate those that are interested in business, those that may be unattached, but things like the global business park. The youth commercial hub—the Youth Business Park sorry, the Youth Commercial Hub, Youth Business Incubators, these programmes each one being a separate programme targeted to a separate bracket of the youth, gives an opportunity not just for the unattached, not just for those sitting on the street, but for those who think that they can make no difference, for those who are underutilized. Because you know, it is often said that when the purpose of something is not known abuse is inevitable.

And many of these youths, because they do not know their purpose, they abuse themselves in accepting that that they should not accept, in getting involved in things that they have no place in. Not all were brought up under conditions that they had to turn to a life of crime; some of them were just influenced that way. And for those types of unattached youths there is also a place in this package for them. In the establishment of the Youth Development Centres, also, in the establishment of the present youth facilities, those that are established now, and over the next three to four years 15 youth centres are to be established under this Government. From Beetham to Claxton Bay, from Moruga to Mayaro, from Maloney to Fyzabad, 15 centres. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, one would argue when all of these centres and all of this youth activity what would we be teaching them? Now, I promised to be short, but I must say that the People's National Movement has always been one of discipline, tolerance, and production. And we intend to teach our youth that you ought to respect your elders and those in authority, Madam President, even the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. We should respect her. Those of us in this House. We ought to teach our youth that they ought to be God fearing. We ought to teach our youth

that working hard is not a curse. Having hardship is not that you do not have opportunities because you see, establishing all of these things without having a sense of self and a sense of purpose would be untoward. And that is why I thank my God that the People's National Movement has brought this now and we are moving forward with it.

We on this side, we also believe in the Almighty God and that is why in this time, although all of the financial pundits would have said we are not too sure about this period and no one could have seen the forecast, we are now experiencing some amount of lift with our oil and gas. As a matter of fact, to that point every oil boom that we have experienced has been under the People's National Movement. That is because it is clearly written that when the righteous are in power the people rejoice, but when the wicked stand at the helm the people shall mourn. This is not only a government working for you, but this is a government working for the youth. Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

### **ADJOURNMENT**

**Madam President:** Leader of Government Business.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Madam President, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Tuesday 19 October 2021, at 10.00 a.m. where we continue the debate on this Bill. Thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 6.37 p.m.*