

**SENATE**

*Tuesday October 19, 2021*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I have received a request for leave of absence from Sen. Damian Lyder. Hon. Senators, I am awaiting the Instrument from Her Excellency, and we will to revert to this item on the Order Paper later in the proceedings.

**PAPERS LAID**

1. Annual Administrative Report of InvesTT Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Statement of Recovery of Expenses of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for the year ended December 31, 2020. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat)*]

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

[Second Day]

*Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question* [October 18, 2021]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

*Question again proposed.*

**Madam President:** Those who have spoken in the debate are as follows: the Hon. Colm Imbert, MP, Minister of Finance who was the mover of the Motion; Sen. Wade Mark; Sen. Charrise Seepersad; the hon. Stuart Young, MP; Sen. the Hon.

Rohan Sinanan; Sen. Damian Lyder; Sen. Amrita Deonarine; Sen. the Hon. Avinash Singh; Sen. the Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon; Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy; Sen. the Hon. Kazim Hosein; Sen. Anthony Vieira; Sen. Nigel de Freitas; Sen. Ndale Young. Minister of Public Utilities.

**The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales):** Thank you very much.

**Madam President:** My apologies, Minister. Sen. Roberts. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Anil Roberts:** Thank you, Madam President. Yes, hon. Sen. Dillon-Remy, the children, my children are watching. As this PNM Government and this PNM Prime Minister have steered us into the perfect storm of a constitutional crisis of epic proportions never before seen in the English-speaking Caribbean. Yes, Ma'am, our children are watching. As a misogynist claims to be a feminist, our children are looking on. As the term "independent institutions" and the word "independent" are given new definitions by people of questionable convenient ethics, our children pay close attention.

Our children are watching as this very honourable House passed a Bill that gutted strong procurement legislation designed to protect their birth-right from would-be thieves. Our children watch as their parents suffer under the harsh austerity measures implemented by this oppressive, dictatorial, heartless PNM Government, while the hon. Prime Minister and 18 other Ministers recused themselves from Cabinet meetings a whopping 210 times due to beneficial conflicts of interest.

The children of Trinidad and Tobago watched yesterday as a Government Senator who sometimes presides over critical debates in this the honourable Senate of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, told our UNC Opposition Senators of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago who all carry passports and birth papers which

state Trinidad and Tobago, a unitary state, a twin-island paradise where every creed and race shall, not “may”, find an equal place—we were told by the hon. Senator to stay out of “Tobago people business”. Well, “half ah me” nearly fainted inside this Senate. That is like a husband who is actively abusing his female child telling his wife and mother of the said child, “stay out of daddy/daughter business”. Shame on you, Sir. Shame on the PNM.

So yes, hon. Senator, our children are certainly watching, analyzing, understanding and taking copious notes. I thought it would have been a no-brainer that sport would have been a definite area of focus for a government on the proverbial ropes. But I was wrong as the PNM has fallen prey to the rope-a-dope and has totally ignored sport as an industry; sport tourism; sport medicine tourism; sport marketing; sport media; sport merchandising; sport growth poles; sports management; sport as a unifier; health and sport. The hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development who now holds the portfolio, when she was moved from tourism to sport, posted on her public Facebook page, “when yuh own dog bite yuh, yuh very well bitten”. She then attacked the sport portfolio with the zeal of a PNM meat eater at a Divali curry-que dinner.

The Minister of Finance in his budget debate 2021/2022, mentioned construction of a pool in Morvant and I was shocked as video footage would show the hon. Prime Minister, the then Minister of Public Utilities and now Minister of National Security, and other Ministers, cutting the ribbon for this pool in Morvant on June 23, 2019, but in a budget in 2021/2022, the PNM is taking credit again for building the pool. I guess it is a 50-metre now, they built 25 twice.

The hon. Minister also said that this brand new pool was also upgraded in the same financial year. So they constructed a pool in a financial year and upgraded it. That is the efficiency of the PNM. They said that opportunities for

sport tourism were abounding, and that Trinidad and Tobago would be set to benefit from hosting of cricket matches, West Indies versus England. Well, before this budget is even passed in the Senate, yesterday the West Indies—Cricket West Indies announced the host for the series between England and the West Indies from January to March 2022, and not one game, not one ball, not one stump, not one catch for Trinidad and Tobago. Such is the policy of the PNM.

They then said that we will get World Cup Cricket Under-19 in January 2022; we wait for that. And they talked about a power boat race as sport tourism; maybe we will put some stands in the Gulf of Paria for people to buy tickets to sit down on top of a king fish. This PNM Government has no ideas, no plans, no investment, no money, and no respect for sport. On top of that, the hon. Minister of Finance said on page 107 of the budget:

“The Minister of Sport and Community Development will provide further details on our sporting programmes during the debate.”

I am waiting with bated breath. I have not heard a whisper. Maybe no one lives there. [*Desk thumping*] Twenty-six thousand words in a budget; less than 300 on sport. Three hours and 38 minutes of PNM drivel, one and a half minutes on sport. No contribution by the Minister of Sport and Community Development. PNM has no understanding of sport, no plan for sport, no respect for sport. The United National Congress understands the magic of sport, the opportunities in sport, and the power of sport. [*Desk thumping*]

I will illustrate that power here today by presenting the real sport budget since it seems that some Members of the PNM feel that it is the Opposition who does not have the Prime Minister, who does not form the Cabinet, who has control of not one red cent, that we are the ones who should carry the budget debate. Okay. I accept your challenge. I carry the budget debate here on sport today since you

have shirked your duty.

The PNM I will paint a true picture of the incompetence, lack of vision, lack of planning, lack of understanding, and lack of ability of this heartless, arrogant, failure of a PNM Government as pellucidly depicted by this inept, incomplete, contradictory budget which has been aptly described by the hon. Leader of the Opposition as a declaration of war on the people. Sport is of the people. Sport represents the hope of the people. Sport allows people to dream. Sport unites the people. Sport inspires the people. Sport disciplines generations of people. Sport increases the productivity of the people. Tolerance is engendered through sport. To disrespect sport is to disrespect all of the people. This PNM budget completely ignores sport. Therefore, it is clear that this PNM Government uplifts themselves while oppressing the people.

Sports can go where politics cannot. This Rowley-PNM has fractured our nation along multiple dimensions. Along the dimensions of race, class, haves versus have nots, religion, geographic location and now the vaccinated versus the non-vaccinated, as those with natural immunity figure out or try to feel where they belong in this society of manufactured and manipulated science.

Sport and only sport can fill the chasms of division exacerbated by this PNM Prime Minister and this PNM Government. 1989, November 19, one can remember total unity in red, white and black across Trinidad and—Sen. de Freitas—Tobago, as our “Strike Squad” prepared to take on the USA. November 2005, even though our footballers were thousands of miles away playing in Bahrain, you could feel the tension, the love, the support, across religions, races, ethnicities, people, all of Trinidad and Tobago united and went up in celebration as Dwight Yorke took the corner and Dennis “Tallest” Lawrence jumped to head home to send Trinidad and Tobago to qualify for the World Cup. The unity was

solid.

In July 2006, as our Soca Warriors played in Germany, Trinbagonians in Germany outside Germany, the diaspora and here on both islands were glued to their TVs in a feeling of patriotic love, togetherness. Businesses were flourishing, sponsorship, endorsements were occurring as we held on to the mighty Sweden of Ibrahimović and Ljungberg and held them nil-nil to a draw. We held on to the mighty United Kingdom to 83 minutes nil-nil before “ah rasta man locks were pulled” but the love, the respect, the patriotism, and the opportunity was there.

August 2012, Keshorn Walcott prepared to throw a javelin that had been handed to him purchased by the taxpayers’ money well before anyone knew him, by that then Minister of Sport of the United National Congress and of the People’s Partnership as the PNM never thought and saw it fit to outfit these athletes. And that javelin as we sat and watched him in the final of the London Olympics, flew 84 metres, 58 centimeters to bring golden glory with Trinidad and Tobago emblazoned on his chest. That was the investment of Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the People’s Partnership in their belief in sport. [*Desk thumping*]

Nelson Mandela brought a separated, divided racially, South Africa together by utilizing sport. It was rugby, a previously white Anglo-Saxon game, the team, the Proteus that the black South Africans had grown to hate. Nelson Mandela embraced them, unified the country through the World Cup rugby in 1995, by embracing the Proteus, being forgiven and hosting a World Cup and going onto victory. Mandela later said in 2000, and I quote:

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where... there was only despair.”—Nelson Mandela.

This I say is true. Unfortunately, sport does not have sufficient power to ignite a fire of love, care, respect, empathy, and patriotism in this decadent, heartless, oppressive PNM Government. It is therefore no surprise that this Government clawing its way into power on the devilish shoulders of deceit and division, would make it its mission to decimate sport.

In 1995/1996 as I coached athletes here in Trinidad and Tobago to go to the Olympics, the PNM still did not respect sport. I had to coach them in a pool in Jungle Gym on McIntyre Street in St. Augustine. In a pool that if you swim straight you would bump into the wall because the mason was not skilful and the wall was built with a curve. But when I would go to Mexico, Nelson Vargas who later became the Minister of Sport in Mexico would offer all of his facilities. He had 45 25-metre pools and 11 50-metre pools across Mexico. He allowed a Trinbagonian coach with Trinbagonian athletes preparing for the Olympics to choose what pool, at what altitude I wanted to train in for four weeks free of charge. Such is the respect for sport and the opportunities of other countries.

Sport is so powerful that some leaders will go to all sorts of nefarious means to try to show that they are a great country. The Sochi Olympics 2014 was an example of this when Vladimir Putin was trying to show the world that Russia was still great, that its economic social powers and its geopolitical position would be improved. He created such a dastardly plan to cheat, to actually build into the doping control a secret compartment where his KGB agents had invented a tool to unlock the samples of gold medal-winning athletes. And he would take dirty samples, open them and put in clean samples. Just to present an idea of power in sport. That just shows how important sport is. Yet, in Trinidad and Tobago we have to listen for three hours and 38 minutes and get a minute and a half on sport. I cry shame on this Government for not understanding.

The USA, the mighty USA, the greatest power in the world. They win at every sport except football, what they call soccer. And back in the 1970s and 1980s they tried and they knew that to be a super power you must control and be competitive in the main sport in the world, the greatest participatory sport which is football. They invested in the grassroots programmes, in the coaches, in the leagues, in the YMCA, in the States, in the communities, in the high schools. And now, the USA is a perennial qualifier. A top ranked team in the top 10, reaching the quarter final of the World Cup and having won several female World Cups and Olympic gold medals. Why? Because sport is power. Sport is hope. Sport is patriotism. Sport is diversification. Sport is economic opportunity but the PNM cannot see this.

The ethos of sport. It is a natural inculcation of values such as leadership, good health, team work, fair play, self-reliance and continuous improvement. All these facets are missing in this PNM Government. The proof is in the pudding. As I gaze at the PNM Government Bench in the Senate, I see not one single former national athlete. Zero out of 16, yet on the UNC Opposition Bench, I see two former national athletes who put blood sweat and tears for this country. Two out of six, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  per cent as opposed to zero times zero on the PNM side. Probably why this budget attempted to zero-rate curry and smoked herring twice.

The importance of sport for the development of women. This PNM cut funding to sport to the bare bones. The UNC had women in sport programmes coaching caravan, the Coaches Education and Certification Programme, the Spirit of Sport Awards, recognizing female trainers, coaches, psychologists, physiotherapists across the board. That was cancelled and shut down in 2016 by the PNM. This Minister got resources on request for women footballers back in 2013/2014. Not only did the UNC Minister of Sport then go to the Cabinet to get



the resources for the women's senior national team, he quietly without fanfare, without picture, without video, without live on Facebook, went twice a week and coached these senior women and took them to the closest they have ever come to world cup qualification. Just stumbling on the last hurdle. That is what a UNC Minister of Sport does "without picture, without big cheque, without any gallery".

This PNM put a foreign futsal coach from their PNM Normalization Committee with their PNM Chairman, and their PNM NFM Chairman on the board, they just chose, disrespected every single coach in Trinidad and Tobago and chose a man, a foreigner who is coaching futsal to coach our women football. That is like putting a coach who coaches diving to coach swimming. They are two separate different sports. And then we hear yesterday after an episode of *douglAR politics* that he has been fired, and Kenwyne Jones a proud Trinbagonian has been hired. So *douglAR politics* will run the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. I have no problem with that. [*Desk thumping*]

A misogynist will never have the advancement of women at the top of his agenda, Madam President. National pride through sport is a policy across the globe. One can think back to the East Germans. East Germany when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the world became aware of a plan so secret by the East German Government, it was as secret as their nuclear war, nuclear defence, nuclear proliferation. It was a plan to promote the socialist ideals of the Government and the policies of their politics by performance and international superiority in sport, through a systematic doping programme.

This is how far people will go. While I will never ever endorse or encourage cheating at any level, I am making these points to show you that what lengths people will go to, to emphasize sport. Yet, in Trinidad and Tobago I have to sit here and debate a budget that has ignored sport completely. Ignored our children.

Ignored the dreams of children. Ignored the talent identification, the opportunities to wear the red, white, and black proudly. To build businesses for media, for endorsement, for sport tourism, sport tourism medicine. It is all being neglected. And that is a great opportunity for diversification of the economy. Sport is a trillion-dollar a year business globally.

We can see also in 1982 in Cuba I was privileged to go to witness the Central American and Caribbean Games and Cuba was dominating in all sports because Fidel Castro had done two things on his agenda; health for his people and sport. And Cuba was winning medals in every sphere except swimming. They had one opportunity, Pedro Hernandez in the 200-metres breaststroke and I was sitting there waiting for this event to go, and before that was the 400 freestyle. At that time, I saw about 14 men in jackets looking like Sen. Wade Mark in his OWTU outfit coming and standing up and standing still. Fidel Castro came and sat about eight metres away from me. He had arrived early to see Cuba win their gold medal in the 200 breast stroke.

An unknown Cuban swimmer was in the 400-metre freestyle and he was in lane eight. Lane eight means he was supposed to come dead last by a good mile. Alberto Mestre the great Venezuelan was in lane four, a man who had won 50-metre, 100-metre, 200-metre and the 800 and 1,500-metre freestyles and this was the 400. Lopez, when they introduced him in lane eight, Fidel Castro stood up and clapped twice [*Sen. Roberts claps*] and Lopez swam 22 seconds faster than he ever swam. Passed out at the end and was taken to the hospital for oxygen winning a silver medal. Never before, never after, did he swim so fast. But this is the passion and inspiration that sports provides for a country.

Australia, the United Kingdom, the USA in Colorado have invested in their academies and their institutes of sport, with sports tie and sport testing, sports

products, sport health food. And we in Trinidad and Tobago are now sitting in the doldrums, the darkness without investment, without belief, without even a concept.

Nicholas Paul our great cyclist who looks to be the greatest fastest cyclist in the world has to train outside of Trinidad and Tobago even though he has the best cycling velodrome in the Western Hemisphere, because we have not embarked on an investment in coaches, in sports science, in massage therapy, in physiotherapy, for this great athlete.

The aquatic centre has sat there without investment during the months of November to January with the Thanksgiving and Christmas into the holidays in the winter in the north, that aquatic centre if marketed properly through our students who are abroad on scholarship, away at universities in the USA, Canada, and Europe, could generate upwards of US 2.1 million in that two-and-a-half-month period. Enough to run that facility for the entire year so our children can use it free of charge. But there is no dream, no mission.

The national tennis centre here build by the United National Congress has now been getting great acclaim, but the PNM has no plans and programmes. And yes, they will blame COVID but COVID only reached in December 2019, and arrived here on our shores in February/March 2020. What happened to 2015, '16, '17, '18 and '19?

All our stadia, recreational grounds are in a state of total disrepair. The budget is saying, the hon. Minister of Finance said that they have just undertaken an audit to see what should be done. I am telling you as Minister of Sport back in 2012, this was done for all our stadia. The Dwight Yorke Stadium, 120 million was approved for all the infrastructure that had been ravaged by the sea, sand and salt. All the electrical and the plumbing works that needed to be done, the roof that was about to collapse. The Hasely Crawford Stadium, same thing. This work had been

done.

So for a PNM Minister to come now and pretend after six years that they are now taking an assessment of what they may invest in which will take another four years is totally disrespectful and not on.

Sport is so powerful that it engenders political change. In 1980, the USA boycotted the Moscow Olympics to show the world and to put pressure on Russia to get out of Afghanistan. In 1984, many African nations boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics because Ronald Reagan, President then, was refusing to speak down and was continuing to conduct business with the apartheid regime in South Africa. The African countries sent such a powerful message through sport that Ronald Reagan within a year, capitulated and ceased relations with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Muhammad Ali fought for civil rights for black people and took himself out of the running for large moneys, world championships to fight, to use the power of sport to unite, and to alert the world about the Jim Crow civil rights abuses in the USA. And he brought sweeping change that continues in the Black Lives Matter all now.

In 1968, Mexico games, we can still see the fist. The raised fist of Tommy Smith and John Carlos after the 200 metres that sent a signal to the world that we must treat everybody equally and the fight continues. They showed solidarity at that time with that raised gloved fist which Stokely Carmichael better known as Kwame Ture, a man born in Trinidad and Tobago but who was banned by the PNM. The black leader of the Black Panthers who was hailed across the globe for fighting for black people, was banned by the People's National Movement from ever coming home. It was the East Indian Prime Minister Basdeo Panday, in 1997, who dropped that ban and allowed Stokely Carmichael to return to the land of his

birth. But yet we play race card for election. Shame, I cry shame.

This is the globally accepted manifestation and application of the phenomenon that is the power of sport. But not for this PNM, not for this Prime Minister, not for this Minister of Finance, not in this budget 2021/2022. Certainly, not for this Minister of Sport and Community Development. Like “stick break in de PNM ears”. He who feels it normally knows it. But this PNM Government feels nothing. The sting, the pain, the neglect felt by our athletes as they fell one by one in the face of insurmountable odds at the Tokyo Olympics a mere two months ago. Through no fault of their own, but due to the lack of care, thought, investment, passion and resources proffered by this neglectful PNM, our athletes were set up, even attacked by the PNM Mayor of San Fernando, Junia Regrello, who attacked the athletes and said that they were a waste of time and a waste of taxpayers’ money and they should not go.

**10.30 a.m.**

Yet, his PNM Government has wasted 59,000 on roaming bills because he did not know how to switch off the roaming; 3 million on half a golf course in Carenage; millions on paintings; 80 million on an IFC with no results whatsoever, just to give “papa small pin ah wuk”; 64 million on advice for restructuring of Petrotrin; millions to defend the Attorney General’s bad law in the courts, but they cannot invest in our athletes and our children.

The PNM nonchalantly, carelessly, heartlessly sent our warriors into battle unprepared, under-resourced and disrespected by five years of budget cuts and the Minister who power walks for exercise. Did this painful experience leave an indelible mark on the consciousness of the PNM, seeing our athletes fall without a medal in Tokyo? No. In the words of Sprangalang, “It got wus.” They blame COVID but “COVID not here six years”. COVID presented the governments of

other countries with sporting bodies, coaches, athletes with a modicum of knowledge, understanding and planning around the globe with opportunities.

COVID-19 lockdowns and COVID-19 put areas where coaches, trainers, sportsmen, scientists could try new things, could have more focus on their athletes. That was what manifested itself in the great performances we are seeing at the Olympics and in other sporting activities now. Those with brains took advantage. We in Trinidad and Tobago were stuck, unfortunately, with the PNM. As seen by—the PNM has bungled COVID-19, the PNM has bungled sport. Sporting opportunities were lost during this COVID due to porous borders here in Trinidad and Tobago. Still, the cutlass vessels are not operational even though that was the panacea for porous borders that have existed before COVID and during COVID bringing death and destruction, Brazilian variant, Delta variant and any variant that could swim across. It even brought a “boat ah dead” with whatever it came with and it is still parked up in Tobago.

Non-existent vaccination procurement earlier on, a knowledge vacuum that has created the highest level of vaccine hesitancy in the Caribbean. Only 41 per cent of our country is now fully vaccinated because there was no discussion, no education, no humility. There was arrogance and there was abuse and people are fed up. And there was a vacuum that was filled by some misinformation, some good information and a lot of information that was not directed by the Government because the Government had no plan and this budget continues, the no plan PNM.

Poor science, poor nonsensical regulations that say we can go in a water park to use recycled water also with chlorine but cannot go in the pristine sea created by God Almighty. We cannot go in the rivers, we cannot go in the open air, in the sunlight but we can go in a friend and financier’s water park to spend money. [*Desk thumping*] No organized sports for 18 months. The world

progress and we regressed. It was the worst ever Olympic performance in the history of Trinidad and Tobago dating way back to 1948 when we won our first medal with Rodney Wilkes—in 1952 with Rodney Wilkes and Lennox Kilgour, and we went on from there throughout to provide Trinidad and Tobago with a source of inspiration, pride and development. This PNM Government has overseen the most desperate performance in the history of our nation. I feel for our athletes because they went out into the world to fight without armour and without ammunition.

Netball this weekend already. We are proud world champions in netball. Some of the young people may not even remember that 1979 team that won the World Cup. Yet, our netballers have gone to Jamaica, unfortunately. Before they left I said a prayer for them but I knew what was on the cards because of lack of preparation, lack of ability to train, lack of resources, lack of planning, lack of science, lack of institutions, and they went to Jamaica and they lost the first game by 49 goals. Trinidad and Tobago, that is how deep the PNM has fallen, has taken our country, that our proud world champions are now running last.

No leagues, no schools, no sport, no leadership, just total complete capitulation by the incompetent PNM. Sport is about image, national pride. Sport is about mindshare, sport marketing. Mindshare can be monetized. If we had products to sell, if we had Petrotrin, if we had downstream products we could sell just like when the world was watching our Trinidad and Tobago Red Force in 2009, in the Champions League under Daren Ganga, when we won six games undefeated and went straight into the finals against New South Wales only to lose. But still, for three hours, 1.2 “buh-buh-billion” people looked at Trinidad and Tobago emblazoned on their chest and that was a mindshare that could have been monetized and should be monetized going forward, but not again. No one looks, no

one sees, our performances are not there because the PNM does not believe in sport.

Doping scandals damaged the image of our country. The anti-doping Bill was passed by me in the House and the Senate with unanimous approval and was proclaimed in June 2015; that was 2013. Up to now, six years later under the PNM, not one iota of that anti-doping Bill has been implemented. The PNM is boasting about paying fees for membership to the World Anti-Doping Agency, shame on the PNM. Where is our TTADO? Where is our lab? Where is our information? Where are we protecting our athletes? Our athletes are out there in a world with lots of nefarious people willing to put anything in their bodies that will damage our reputation. But the PNM does not care, just leave the Bill collecting dust wherever it is now.

In September 2015 to October 2021, nothing was done. The anti-dope Bill needs to be passed, proclaimed and enacted at Balisier House. We need an anti-dope Bill. The PNM has failed at every single aspect of sport. Even in the areas of previous success, total participation in sport. Existing facilities are in total decay before COVID, worse under COVID. Guaracara Park is a place to feed cows. All stadia in Trinidad and Tobago, the Manny Ramjohn, you can drive your car if you want to practise and see if your shocks are working. It is like a Maracas Beach in November—big waves of asphalt, the scoreboard is collapsing, the roof is collapsing, the total place is in a dilapidated mess.

Lack of maintenance of these brilliant facilities built by the United National Congress: the Aquatic Centre turned green in 2018. The cycling velodrome under the PNM had no air condition for 18 months. They cannot even service an air condition. The former Minister of Sport and Community Development's brother is an air conditioned man, they could not even do that. No astroturf for hockey. Gary



Griffith came in and built a hockey turf quicker than the PNM sports company and the PNM Minister of Sport and Community Development. Now they want to get rid of him. Total decay, devastation and deplorable depreciation of sporting assets.

The Palo Seco Velodrome and Sporting Complex is now a forest, feeding monkeys and chimps. The Palo Seco games of 1984, I remember going down there at 15 years old with my parents and when I saw Gene Samuel in the red, black and white, along with the four other Trinidad and Tobago team. The inspiration and pride that I felt seeing them beat USA around that track that is now bush, forest and razor grass under this PNM. The Southern Games is dead, PNM policy of closing facilities to the public.

The growth poles envisaged by this Minister and the People's Partnership was in Couva to have the Ato Boldon Stadium, the Aquatic Center, the cycling velodrome, a BMX centre for the hotels will be built. And then we would encourage a growth pole where private sector businessmen could go set up malls, healthy food facilities, dentists, doctors, massage therapists and create an area because that place would have been a hub of activity, as children and families come to utilize the facilities. The parents would exercise while the children would do their training, their diving, their aquatics, their synchronized swimming, and then they would all partake in smoothies and—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Thank you, Madam President. That was the vision. The PNM came and just shut it down, locked it down and the citizens cannot even use their own facilities under the PNM. And I am not talking about during COVID. COVID just reached. I am talking about since the PNM reached. The PNM is worse than COVID.

The UNC in 2013 budget, in sport—2013/2014—the hon. Minister of Finance, Larry Howai, spoke about sport in the front end of the budget, the business end of the budget, sport tourism, sport growth poles, development, sport management, sport agencies. Sport under the PNM for the last seven budgets has been relegated to a two-minute drill. I see some of the “PNM boys and dem”, they know what to do in two minutes. The UNC believes in the power of sport, understands the business of sport, was and will again assist in the diversification of the national economy through creative, careful, consistent investment in sport.

Here are some of the future plans of the UNC. And when I mean “future”, I mean near future. Football: the United National Congress will work with a newly duly elected TTFA—not the PNM normalization committee—with the duly elected, by teams under the Constitution of the TTFA to draw down and pay down the \$100 million debt because football is life, football is Trinidad and Tobago, and it is the responsibility of the Government to make sure that football can thrive and we must help football get out of the hole that it is in. [*Desk thumping*]

The UNC will support fully the TT Pro League to the tune of 11.74 million per year and the Super League to 5 million per year. They would make all of the stadia free access to the secondary schools football. Women’s team would be developed during and have local coaches of great prowess and understanding and qualification. We will focus on futsal, beach football across the board. Then the PNM normalization committee, who threatens players before they play Mexico, will be gone and will not get support from the United National Congress. We will be—we are a democracy and we thrive on democratic principles.

Cricket: cricket is our life, our lifeblood and cricket, we call the “dougla sport” because when you see a national team, it shows real unity. When you see our Red Force, our Trinidad and Tobago four-day team, it is a mix of everything

Trinidad and Tobago, and they would get the support across the board for a development academy, the coach education and certification junior team selection and equipment.

Netball: the UNC will bring a professional netball league into Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] so our athletes can play netball, live on netball and take care of their families. Too many of our players have to work hard as police officers, fire officers, army officers and after a full day's work, then they have to go and run hard and train. That cannot work in the world of netball now. So, a professional league for netball.

Track and field, and marathon: we will engender and copy Jamaica. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. We will put coaches down in the primary schools to identify talent, secondary schools and engender brilliance in track and field with the investment.

Auto sports, circuit, F3, drag racing and drifting, rallying: we will build a facility at the PNM's Caroni horse racing track that still has mud and not a horse runs. We will build a facility for auto sports that will engender brilliance, investment, science and opportunity.

Swimming, diving, water polo, synchronized swimming: the PNM has not even brought a coach to teach diving. We have diving boards: ten meters seven meters, five meters, three meters; springboards: one-meter springboards. Not a child dive yet because there is not a coach in this country to teach diving. The PNM did not even use the UNC's Cabinet Note that had Chinese coaches. China is number one in the world in diving. They won 10 out of 10 gold medals in diving. The Note is sitting there, seven years, not a coach, not a dive, but they let the pool turn green.

Triathlon, cycling, road and track: we identify performance and provide coaching and investment.

Tennis: tennis is a big money sport and we have the best facility in the western hemisphere. We will provide opportunities and tournaments looking to get an ITF and a WTA tournament.

Golf: increasing the coaches' knowledge and ability for all of our young golfers to go outside and get competition.

In Tobago, surfing, sailing, windsurfing, kitesurfing, skateboarding will be developed in sport facilities. I see the Minister laughing because she has done nothing in foreign direct investment, minus US 439 million but yet you sit there and laugh, [*Desk thumping*] Madam Minister of Trade and Industry. You keep laughing, free diving, spearfishing, scuba diving, sport fishing, marlin fishing—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Thank you, Madam President. And much, much more. [*Desk thumping*]

### SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, we will not revert to the original item on the Order Paper about which I spoke earlier. I am in receipt of the Instrument of appointment.

“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. TIM GOPEESINGH

WHEREAS Senator Damian Lyder is incapable of performing His duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, TIM GOPEESINGH to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 and continuing during the absence of Senator Damian Lyder by reason of illness.

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 19<sup>th</sup> day of October, 2021.”

### **OATH OF ALLEGIANCE**

*Senator Dr. Tim Gopeesingh took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.*

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

**Madam President:** May I please ask that Members remain quiet, please? Minister of Public Utilities. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, it gives me great honour and I feel a sense of privilege to come to this Chamber, this Upper Chamber, to make my budget contribution for the financial year 2022. Madam President, first, let me thank the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, for the confidence that he has reposed in me [*Desk thumping*] to lead the Ministry of Public Utilities

**UNREVISED**

in this very interesting and dynamic time, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but the world.

I also wish to express my sincere congratulations to the Minister of Finance and his team at the Ministry of Finance, as well as my Cabinet colleague, Minister Camille Robinson-Regis and her team at that Ministry, for the great work that they have done in providing this financial blueprint for the governance of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, I wish to thank Senators on both sides for this opportunity to come and contribute in this debate, so that I can signal to the national community my plans and the Government's plan for the public utilities sector in Trinidad and Tobago. But before I do so, Madam President, I think it is incumbent upon me to just spare a couple minutes to respond to the last speaker.

Madam President, first let me say, it is very difficult to respond to drunken ramblings. Madam President, let me also first—also apologize to the children of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] because say what you may want to say about us as a people and as a nation, Dr. Eric Williams did not live and sacrifice his life for what we have just seen in this Chamber. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, our children deserve better, our people and our citizens deserve better. We may have our political differences as a country but, Madam President, I must say that what we have seen and what we have heard by the last speaker, we can do better as a country, [*Desk thumping*] and we can do better in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

The last speaker, Madam President, gave a whole iteration about what his plans are for sports in Trinidad and Tobago, taking shots at the hon. Prime Minister; taking shots at my Cabinet colleague, Minister Shamfa Cudjoe and the Member of Parliament for Tobago West; taking shots at my colleagues on this side and that might be all right in the politics. You might accept that as part of the

politics, the adversarial nature of politics. But as I sat there, Madam President, and I listened to him, I thought I would have heard some commentary on this dastardly act and programme that we call LifeSport in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Because it was very difficult to listen to what he was saying. It was very difficult to listen and hear what he was saying, Madam President, without recalling what this country was placed through, what our young people were placed through not too long ago, under a Ministry of Sport led by the last speaker. A programme that was first designed, Madam President, to cost the taxpayers of this country 50 or \$45 million, escalated to half a billion dollars. What are the benefits for the people of Trinidad and Tobago? It left in its wake a trail of death, destruction and mayhem; [*Desk thumping*] death, destruction and mayhem. And he stands before this Senate this morning, stands before the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President, and our young people, and pretends that he is this angel coming to save this country—

**Sen. Mark:** Madam President, Standing Order 46(6) and (8) respectively.

**Madam President:** So, Minister, with respect to the Standing Order that has been invoked, you have been using some language with respect to the—a Member of this Chamber and I will ask you to just dial it back, please. Okay?

**Hon. M. Gonzales:** Thank you very much, Madam President, and I am duly guided. But Madam President, before I leave this point, I want to say that with Senators like Nigel de Freitas, Sen. Sagramsingh, Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing, all the Senators on this floor, on this side of this House, we will continue to do our work passionately. We will continue to do our work in a way that the people of Trinidad and Tobago will always be proud of. We will continue to lead our lives in ways that we can stand before any citizen and any child, any boy and any girl, and there will be nothing that we will do in our office and in response—and with our

sacred responsibilities and our oath of office, we will always do right for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and regardless whatever you may say about the PNM, regardless of whatever you may say about our great party, we will not put forward people that this country will not be proud of. [*Desk thumping*] And I wish once again; I wish once again to apologize to the people of Trinidad and Tobago for what we have just heard and seen displayed a short while ago, [*Desk thumping*] and I would say no more on that.

Madam President, we are living in a very interesting time. We just came out of an economic downturn between 2015, 2014 to 2020. The price of oil and gas plummeted and this country over the years saw dwindling financial resources at its disposal. This Government took a very difficult decision to close the gap between our revenues and expenditure because we could not have continued living our lives in such a way where we are spending more than what we are earning.

Before 2020, Madam President, this Government was able to close the gap between our revenues and our expenditure, and the fundamentals of our economy were being placed on sound footing to secure the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, Madam President, by 2020, a global pandemic hit and this Government was called into action again to protect the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And as we do so, Madam President, we have heard all kinds of attacks, we have endured all kinds of attacks. We had to engage in policies to lock down our borders, to protect our citizens, impose public health regulations on our citizens to ensure that we come out of this alive.

Madam President, in the midst of this, our public utility sector had to rise to the fore to ensure that we enjoy a level of stability in Trinidad and Tobago. The utility, Madam President, has found themselves on the frontline of the pandemic with their services being deemed essentials. They satisfy our basic wants, they



provide the basic needs of our society such as water, waste water, electricity, telecommunications, postal, and sanitation services. The utilities, Madam President, thus plays an important role in fostering improvements in the quality of life for all of our citizens and the well-being of the national population.

But, however, Madam President, the pandemic has required us to dramatically adjust how we operate. It comes at a time when utilities throughout the entire world are in the midst of a period of rapid evolution as they cope with rapid evolving market dynamics, changes in consumer habits and expectations, new technologies, new regulatory models and, of course, Madam President, the impact of climate change. The operating business models, Madam President, that satisfy consumer demands over the last years are no longer applicable. And therefore, in order for our public utilities sector to survive for the next 10, 20 or 25 years, a new business model must be adopted by T&TEC, our electricity sector, our water sector, our postal sector, the telecommunications sector, and of course, our sanitation services.

**11.00 a.m.**

The utilities sector has had to contend with the negative impacts of climate change. We would have seen, Madam President, recently, with extreme weather conditions, several of our water infrastructure around the country had to be shut down, because of the quality of water now flowing into our watersheds, now flowing into our intakes and our detention ponds and our reservoirs, et cetera. The impact of climate change is taking an untold effect on our utility sector. All across Trinidad and Tobago, especially in rural communities, our electricity infrastructure is being plummeted, is being hard hit by extreme weather patterns and extreme weather conditions and, therefore, in order to prepare and to provide a basis and a foundation so that our utility sector can operate with a robust platform, we need to

change our business model and we need to do so quickly.

Madam President, we have to look at our resilience to the impact of climate change and the changing dynamics. Resilience helped our utilities to withstand adverse weather events. It minimized damage and rapidly recovered from disruptions of service. This can be achieved through adaptable and holistic planning, adaption of automated technologies, equipment modification and upgrade of new capital investment, building resilience and adaptability into our electricity, water, waste water and coastal grids must, therefore, be addressed with the greatest sense of urgency.

Madam President, to successfully navigate through this ever-changing environment, utilities are required to create flexible and agile operations that will enable service-centric customer focus while delivering significant improvements in their services. Therefore, Madam President, the time for action in our utility sector is now.

What have we done, over the last year, in the Ministry of Public Utilities? The Government will continue to provide the enabling policy environment for our utilities to successfully navigate through these difficult times, and this is what we have done over the last year. The Ministry of Public Utilities, working in collaboration with key stakeholders, has made important strides in modernizing the policy, planning and legislative framework for our utility sector. Madam President, despite the major disruption caused by the pandemic, we were still able to record some notable achievements in the utility sector in fiscal 2021, and I will highlight just a few.

Important initiatives undertaken in this regard, include: The revision of the policy framework for an Integrated Water Resource Management Programme; energy conservation and energy efficiency policy; the Integrated Solid Waste

Resource Management Programme; the beverage container deposit refund system, and energy efficiency and energy conservation. Madam President, what we have recognized is that in the water sector, our fresh water is a renewable, but a finite and vulnerable natural resource which needs to be carefully and sustainably managed, especially given the impact of climate change and the multiple demands which are placed on this all-encompassing and universal resource by all sectors of the economy.

The fresh water ecosystem, Madam President, it consists of rivers, our streams and our ponds, our reservoirs, dams and water aquifers. But what we have recognized, Madam President, is that in tackling the water crisis in this country, there was an absence of a coordinated approach by the various sectors that impact upon our water ecosystem. The integrated water management policy that the Ministry will soon take to Cabinet in less than two weeks, will seek to bring all the various moving parts together so that as we chart our way forward to ensure that we secure our water sector in Trinidad and Tobago, all the sectors that impact upon our water resource system will be pulled together to ensure that we manage our water in a sustainable way. The policy would soon be resubmitted, as I have said, Madam President, to Cabinet, in one month's time, and the intent is to unify the various initiatives related to water and provide a strong direction and vision for the effective management of the nation's water resource in an integrated and a sustainable manner.

With respect to energy conservation and energy efficiency, Madam President, we are in the final phase of completing this policy document to be also submitted to the Cabinet and the potential benefits to be derived from a programme include: Increased revenues to the State; higher productivity of petrochemical plants; expanded opportunities for investment and foreign exchange earnings, and

reduced carbon dioxide emission. A revised energy conservation and an energy efficiency policy and an action plan has been completed and will soon be tabled for the national community to examine.

Madam President, we have also completed our national integrated solid waste management policy. Solid waste management in Trinidad and Tobago is governed by several pieces of legislation, which are implemented and enforced by a multiplicity of Government agencies, Madam President, and this has led to a fragmented system for managing the solid waste sector in Trinidad and Tobago. What we lack in Trinidad and Tobago is a single overarching entity with the necessary regulatory authority and a mandate to address all aspects of solid waste in Trinidad and Tobago, and to ensure a coordinated approach to managing the sector that has led to the slow implementation of major policies relating to solid waste in Trinidad and Tobago.

I have mandated a team from the Ministry of Public Utilities and SWMCOL to review and to revise the policy to ensure a more holistic approach to solid waste management in Trinidad and Tobago, and that amended policy will also be submitted to Cabinet within the next month. The key benefits of implementing an integrated sustainable solid waste management in Trinidad and Tobago, would be to align Trinidad and Tobago's solid waste management activities to meet national targets consistent with national policy, Sustainable Development Goals targets as well as other regional and international environmental agreements to which the country is part of.

Madam President, we are also finalizing the Beverage Container Bill. It is something that we have spoken to over the years. It is very important that we bring some kind of closure so that we can move forward with our beverage container deposit refund system. But one of the issues that has been impacting upon the

progress of this Beverage Container Bill, Madam President, is the very reason that I have explained, a short while ago, that in Trinidad and Tobago what we lack is a firm coordinated approach with respect to solid waste management in Trinidad and Tobago. And what we will do in the national integrated solid waste management policy is to ensure that SWMCOL, which is the only state agency that is responsible for solid waste management in Trinidad and Tobago, will be clothed with all the necessary legislative power to be able to implement our Beverage Container Bill and deposit refund system as well as to address all other streams of waste in Trinidad and Tobago, so that we can protect our environment and provide for a sustainable environmental future in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, we are also concluding our integrated resource and resilience plan. As a country we have not been talking a lot about the future of our electricity sector in Trinidad and Tobago. We have relied heavily on hydrocarbon and our gas to produce electricity. But as the world is moving fast towards more renewable forms of power and energy, we need to complete our integrated resource and resilience plan for Trinidad and Tobago. The Ministry of Public Utilities, I am happy to say and to report to the national community, is heading a multi-sectoral team in the development of an integrated resource and a resilience plan for this country for the power generation sector for the next 25 years. That plan, Madam President, once completed, will outline strategies and initiatives to safeguard current power distribution systems and to improve the resilience of the power sector in the face of climate change and natural or technological disasters.

There are two main objectives of this integrated resource and resilience plan. Number one, it will determine how the power generation needs of the country over the next 25 years will be consistent with climate change mitigation and, number two, it will determine the most feasible power generation mix as the country

transitions to a more sustainable and resilient energy sector.

The transformation, Madam President, of the Water and Sewerage Authority. Madam President, earlier this year, I had the opportunity to lay, in the Lower House, a plan and a statement and a report into the operations of the Water and Sewerage Authority. The Cabinet subcommittee that led the compilation of this report made certain findings and made certain recommendations to the Government. The Government did not take the recommendation and put it in a drawer and pat ourselves on the back and say that we have done our part. We laid this report in the Parliament and we signalled to the national community our determination to transform the Water and Sewerage Authority so that every single citizen of this country can enjoy a sustainable water supply 24/7.

The recommendations of the Cabinet subcommittee as contained in that report are, therefore, to be read by every single Member of this House and in the other place as well as every single citizen. And coming out of the recommendations of that report, the Government has indicated that it will put together a transformation plan for the Water and Sewerage Authority. I am happy to report to you and to this House, Madam President, that the transformation plan is completed. The Government will soon have in its possession a transformation plan and new structure for the reengineering of the Water and Sewerage Authority.

I also wish to take the opportunity to inform every single employee of WASA as well as all of the governing trade union bodies representing employees of WASA, that the board of commissioners, the Ministry of Public Utilities and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago are all cognizant that we have to abide by the collective bargaining arrangements as being governed by a lot of the employees within the Water and Sewerage Authority, and as we seek to transform the organization, the Government will comply and the Water and Sewerage Authority

will comply with its responsibilities under the respective collective bargaining agreements of the workers and the unions representing WASA workers. There is absolutely nothing to be concerned about. This is something that is very important. The national community is very invested in the outcome of the transformation process, because we are all impacted in some negative way with an unreliable supply of water and, therefore, we must go about this very important task in a very responsible manner.

Madam President, over the last three months, we have undertaken a series of projects under a programme that we refer to as the Community Water Improvement Programme in the Ministry of Public Utilities. Madam President, this programme has given me great joy as Minister, because what we have done is that we have identified 21 projects or 21 communities for short-term interventions, where a number of those communities are getting water supply two days a week or less, and we have undertaken a number of projects into those communities. And within that short period of time, Madam President, a number of communities across Trinidad and Tobago, are already experiencing an improvement in their water supply.

We recently commissioned the Pitch Road booster station in Morvant. That booster station was in a derelict state, Madam President, and with the recommissioning and the rehabilitation of that booster station, 17,000 residents of Pitch Road in Morvant are now experiencing an improvement in their water supply. The initial cost of this project was pegged at \$3 million. I am happy to report to you, Madam President, it came in at a cost of \$1.2 million, way under budget, and the people of Pitch Road in Morvant and Marry Road in Never Dirty, who have not experienced a supply of water over the last 15 years are now being very happy that water is now flowing through their taps and that they can live

comfortably as decent citizens, but we are not ending there.

We are going to be turning projects in Champ Fleurs. We are going to be moving to Tamana, into Manzanilla. We have already turned on some additional wells in Freeport and in Mayaro, and I can tell you thousands of citizens, under this programme, are experiencing an improvement in their supply of water by some of these short-term interventions. And very soon, I am going to roll out a number of other communities, a list of other communities, where these interventions would be initiated. Because we have recognized, Madam President, that whilst we transform the Water and Sewerage Authority over the next two to three years, the people of this country, transformation would only mean when water can flow through their taps and that they can get access to water. All the other complex issues—the HR issues, the technological issues, et cetera—ought to be undertaken, but we are cognizant of the fact that whilst we do so, we have to undertake a series of interventions across Trinidad and Tobago to provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with an efficient water supply.

I am very happy with the workers in the Water and Sewerage Authority, many of whom worked overtime late at nights, on weekends, and did not claim one hour in overtime, because they have demonstrated their commitment to this work. And all that was required was a sense of humility and leadership and they are working all across Trinidad and Tobago to provide this country with an efficient water supply and I congratulate them for what they are doing.

Madam President, communities like Carapichaima in Freeport; in San Rafael in Talparo; Manzanilla; Morvant; Clarke Road in Ramjattan Trace in Penal; in Cameron Road in Maraval, and La Romain, they are all beneficiaries. And within the next financial year 2022, we have identified a couple of communities in Tobago as well as in Trinidad where these interventions would be made and those



communities would start seeing an improvement in their water supply. Those are some of the short-term measures, Madam President.

As part of our medium term to long term, the Ministry of Public Utilities has already embarked upon a National Water Stabilization and Improvement Programme and that National Water Stabilization and Improvement Programme is a collaboration that has developed and we began the implementation of this programme, and the first phase has already started. And the intention of that programme, Madam President, is that we have recognized that a number of water disruptions taking place across Trinidad and Tobago is not as a result of a lack of water, but because of the state of WASA's infrastructure that has been so prone to disruption on a regular basis.

So what have we done under this programme? We have identified wells for rehabilitation and development, construction of upgrade and upgrades of intakes throughout the country, plant refurbishment, operational systems improvements, critical equipment and acquisition, and we have already identified areas in Tucker Valley, in the Savannah Wells, in Aripo, in Sangre Grande, central Trinidad, south Trinidad and Tobago, to improve our water production capacity at a minimum of 20 imperial million gallons of water per day, so that we can reduce our reliance on expensive desalinated water and to provide every community with a reliable supply of water with, at least, four days in the interim or the short to medium term. And as we seek to continue to roll out our rehabilitation of our water infrastructure optimization of the network across Trinidad and Tobago and getting additional water into the grid, all across the island—communities all across the island, I am sorry, will start seeing a more reliable supply of water. And I can give the assurance that communities like Sangre Grande, Arima, D'Abadie, Arouca, Diego Martin, north Manzanilla, in Cumuto/Manzanilla, Chaguaramas and Chaguanas,

Carlsen Field, Las Lomas, Penal, Princes Town, Cedros, Siparia, Point Fortin, Tobago, Chatham and Icacos, they all will be beneficiaries of our National Water Stabilization and Improvement Programme.

Madam President, I am happy to also report that we recognized that we have to transition our energy sector to renewable energy. The world is changing around us. Climate change is impacting upon us and, therefore, we need to examine how we produce electricity to have a blend of hydrocarbon from gas as well as solar and wind. In that regard, Trinidad and Tobago, along with the rest of the world, is moving towards the use of greener and more sustainable methods of energy generation in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission is working in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Utilities to develop a wind resource assessment project and a wind feasibility study to determine potential wind generation power in Trinidad and Tobago. The Caribbean Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency has offered technical assistance in this initiative and talks are underway. The commission has made a request to the Commissioner of State Lands and those tests would be done in Matura; in Fishing Pond; North Manzanilla; Coromandel Settlement, Cedros; Brickfield Road in Orange Field Road; Carapichaima. After these initial wind studies have been completed, it is proposed to conduct additional wind feasibility in Tobago.

With the impending introduction of this solar PV expected to complement traditional generations, harnessing of wind renewable energy will lead to the diversification of a renewable energy mix for the power generation sector in Trinidad and Tobago, and I look forward, Madam President, to this. I have a very young team, a passionate team in the Ministry of Public Utilities, pushing solar electricity and that is the reason why we have concluded our contractual discussion

to construct the Lightsource BP 112 megawatts of solar electricity, and with that, this will be complemented with other studies and projects where we can have a more healthy blend of renewable energy and hydrocarbon energy for the electricity sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

With respect to the Government's plan for electric vehicles in Trinidad and Tobago, the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, in partnership with the National Carnival Commission and Master Clean Energy from Abu Dhabi will install vehicle charging stations powered by a grid connected solar PV system, all located at a new car park near the Grand Stand Queen's Park Savannah. And this project is being funded through an agreement with the Masdar United Arab Emirates and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. The plant will be owned and operated by T&TEC with the National Carnival Commission as landlord.

With respect to the telecommunication sector, Madam President, I must say that I am very happy with the strides being made by TSTT to ensure a robust system to continue to provide telecommunication services in Trinidad and Tobago. During this pandemic, TSTT expended in excess of \$25 million on networks and initiatives to provide Internet access to various health institutions providing care to COVID-19. In addition to that, they have also provided free mobile services to frontline health care workers, free broadband service to several step-down facilities managed by the Ministry of Health. They offered zero cost on Google Suite for 90 days to TSTT enterprise customers, in conjunction with Google and a host of other support across the telecommunication sector, and I wish to thank the management and the staff of TSTT for this initiative.

TSTT continued its investment in customer enabling platforms that facilitated online billing and upgraded provisioning platforms. This has resulted in

customer service requests being provisioned with shorter time frames, in some cases, for wireless access service within 24 hours. The rollout and expansion of the various wireless networks and the technologies utilizing long-demanded spectrum assets has meant that TSTT has laid the foundational infrastructure for digital transformation with its ubiquitous mobile 4G LTE Network—

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

**Hon. M. Gonzales:** Thank you very much, Madam President—and a fixed wireless network and a fibre network along Trinidad and Tobago's 95 per cent coverage for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

With respect to solid waste management, Madam President, I am also happy to report to the national community that all the studies with respect to an engineered sanitary landfill at Forres Park are almost completed. The following components of the projects have been completed. It is a topographic and hydrographic survey. Draft cadastral survey, geotechnical study, a groundwater studies and the traffic flow analysis is close to completed and one study, which is a waste characterization study, will be completed within the next month and once that is completed, the Solid Waste Management Company of Trinidad and Tobago will begin the construction of a brand new state-of-the-art engineered sanitary landfill in Forres Park in Trinidad and Tobago thereby decommissioning the landfill at Beetham and Guanapo.

Madam President, over the last month, an MOU was also signed with NGC and SWMCOL to facilitate the exploration of opportunities for capturing and utilizing methane gas from the Forres Park landfill, and this is expected to progress Trinidad and Tobago's commitment to the reduction of greenhouse gases under the Paris Agreement.

With respect to the postal services, Madam President, I wish to let you know

that TTPost has completed its address standard and postal system as well as the installation of a track and trace parcel delivery system. I have mandated TTPost, as well as all the other public utility companies under my remit, that as Government revenue continues to dwindle, each public utility company must explore avenues and explore ways in order to become financially sustainable. And as we move towards a digitalized society, a number of revenue opportunities will be given and will be inherited by TTPost by collaborating with other government agencies by offering a number of services so that it can become financially sustainable, as with SWMCOL, WASA and the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission.

But, on the last point, Madam President—I know my time is inching closer—I wish to comment on the rate review in Trinidad and Tobago. The Government—well, first to begin, let me say that rate reviews in Trinidad and Tobago are not the remit of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The RIC is the only agency and an independent commission that has the power to review rates for electricity and water. [*Desk thumping*]

In December the 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the RIC has put forward an advertisement in the national newspapers where they have indicated that the rate review process has started. We await the outcome of that. Both T&TEC and WASA have completed their business plans in order to be submitted to the RIC. The RIC will undertake its work—it will communicate with the national population, it will do its studies, et cetera—and, at the end of the day, at the end of its process, it will make a recommendation with respect to rate reviews for WASA and for T&TEC to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Government will determine what subsidy arrangement will be put in place to protect the poor, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged groups in our society as we move forward.

The Government has indicated that it has increased the rebate system under

T&TEC from 25 per cent to 35 per cent. It will also introduce a cash card system to protect those groups, as we move towards a more marketable and a more realistic rates for water and electricity. I think, Madam President, that both utility companies are badly in need of a rate review. Because if we are talking about independence and financial sustainability, their rates must be in alignment with current market trends, so that they can raise their revenue to take care of their circumstances so that they can provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with modern utility services.

Madam President, I thank you for this opportunity and thank Members on both sides for this opportunity, so that I can come and report to the national community on what is taking place in the utility sector in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye:** Madam President, thank you for allowing me to join this debate on the 2022 Budget Statement. The hon. Minister of Finance has received more compliments than curses, fewer kicks than kisses, since presenting this budget. For the last two weeks, he has been beaming with joy and pride rather than scowling in anger. He cannot be accused of being short of ideas in this budget that has been given what I consider a provocative title, “Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic”. Resilience means the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties and one would, therefore, expect and be justified in thinking that the hon. Minister has charted for us a road map for quick recovery from the quagmire of the pandemic that from March 2020 had our economy sinking even faster, if I may borrow the hon. Finance Minister’s words, the plummeting oil and gas prices.

I must confess to some hesitancy though, not of the vaccine variety, in borrowing the hon. Minister’s words. I do not always agree with him, for example, when he starts off the debate stating that the Rowley administration first won a

convincing mandate on September 07, 2015, and that this initial mandate was reaffirmed five years later on August 10, 2020, I could not help but wonder if his understanding of the meaning of “convincing” accorded with mine.

As I recall in 2015, the results were 23/18 in the PNM’s favour and in 2020 it was 22/19. The Government has had time and time again to water down Bills to have them passed with a simple majority. Had the mandate been as convincing as the Minister would have us believe, that would not have been necessary. But this Government did win a mandate to govern and has been doing so. How well have we been served? That is a matter for debate.

**11.30 a.m.**

In presenting a budget you must tell the populace not only your plans for future governance and how you will execute the responsibility that has been entrusted to you, but you must also give an account of your stewardship. We expect you to come to us Janus-faced, one looking backward, one looking forward for the electorate to judge your credibility and determine whether we should have faith in your promises once again. “You fool me once, shame on you; you fool me twice, shame on me.” Some of the achievements of the Government are obvious, none so blind as those who will not see the improvements in the condition of some of the roads. There are still gaping potholes but we must admit that driving along the East-West Corridor, as I do daily, is much less frustrating than it was before. You now get to work feeling less tired and with your nerves less frayed. Traffic is moving much more quickly along the East-West Corridor, at times more swiftly than the Priority Bus Route. So you do not need a pass, the Minister informs me, and I agree.

Madam President, it is now a pleasant sight to enter Morvant Junction from the Eastern Main Road on your way to the Lady Young Road. It is a good

advertisement for “Government working for you”. The Minister of Works and Transport must be justly proud, and I observe he is more confident in his speech than when he first entered Parliament. Some achievements of some Ministries are not so readily discernable. Madam President, it is only when I was invited by a Member of the Government of Pakistan to present at a virtual seminar on the South-South initiative, of which I knew nothing, and sought a brief from the Ministry of Trade and Industry that I discovered how much work had been done at that Ministry. I had heard nothing, you know, about it before but I had heard the Minister being vilified and many unkind things saying said about her and written because her light has been hidden under a bushel.

Millions of dollars in trade have come into our nation’s coffers through the work of that Ministry. I note the Ministry’s plans to establish the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency to facilitate the restructuring of the country’s trade and investment in accordance with best practices. We still have some way to go with regard to the ease of doing business but at least the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs, which I have the honour to chair, has identified areas of concern and it is for the responsible agencies to move with dispatch to fix the problems.

The Minister of Health has been indefatigable. I wish to personally thank him for all that he has done for the nation’s health. He did not sign up for this you know, Mr. COVID came knocking at our door in 2020 and though we tried our utmost to keep him out, Mr. COVID barged in. He took up residence. He permanently evicted from their homes 1,600 of my fellow men and women and now he has invited his Delta cousins. As we continue to battle the real enemy for this country, I thank the stalwarts of the Health Ministry for their sterling service.

*[Desk thumping]*



Madam President, there is a fresh wind blowing in the corridors of the Ministry of Public Utilities. It seems that this young Minister is unafraid to tackle the problems and WASA and other entities under his jurisdiction. [*Desk thumping*] It appears he has also encouraged his workers to apologize when utility services fail to the detriment of long suffering consumers. Last week Sunday, shortly after I had put three dishes into the oven, the electricity supply failed. I was livid. If I was so inclined I would have uttered an expletive, similar to what I have to endure every morning from two popular radio hosts who are oblivious to the fact that the children are listening.

I was considering going to plan B, using the stovetop, when mercifully electricity returned. Shortly thereafter I heard someone in a loudspeaker apologizing to the people in my neighbourhood for the inconvenience we had suffered. I really appreciated that courtesy and thoughtfulness. [*Desk thumping*] Now, I cannot say the same with TSTT. It is a source of much frustration. And I could well understand why a former Prime Minister wanted to throw his telephone in the Gulf of Paria because with these last few months I really think that we have not been served well by TSTT and the Internet provider, bmobile.

Madam President, it is not only on the airwaves that we encounter intemperate language. There is an escalation in the verbal warfare everywhere in the streets, on platforms, various podium and in social media. This budget charts the way forward not only with fiscal and infrastructural measures but it is also about building a society and a people. As we look forward to the future we must be careful to ensure that the tenor of our public discourse does not evidence blatant disrespect for our leaders and cherished institutions. [*Desk thumping*] Shakespeare is as relevant today as yesterday when he had Michael Anthony say:

“Judgment... fled to brutish beasts and men have lost their reason.”

It would be a supreme irony if under the guise of seeking to uphold and preserve our sacred institutions we desecrate and destroy those very institutions. [*Desk thumping*] The prophet Isaiah said:

What perversity is this? These people approach me only in words, honours me only with lip service, well, their hearts are far from me.

Isaiah hoped erring spirits will learn wisdom and murmurers accept instruction. I pray to have Isaiah's faith.

Property tax: Madam President, on July 05, 2021, the Government Information Service—Barbados Government Information Service issued a notice from their Revenue Authority. It indicated that it has started issuing the land tax bills for the financial year 2021 to 2022. Property owners were reminded that electronic payment channels were available for paying the land tax. Persons were encouraged to make use of the digital options which offer convenience rather than standing in a queue. The notice advised of options for local online and over-counter payments, payments by cheque and by overseas owners. It gave the date for payments and advised of a 10 per cent discount if payment were made in full within 30 days of the due date and 5 per cent discount if made within 60 days of this date after which the principal amount was paid. Having read this notice I called a Trinidadian friend of mine living in Barbados and I asked her, "What is the reaction of the people there? All of us have pandemic, what is happening?" She said, "There was no reaction."

She added that she was appalled at the behaviour of people in Trinidad and Tobago and could not understand the reason they did not want to pay property tax. "Did they not understand that Government needed revenue to run the country, to build roads, to maintain the health care system, to pay salaries of public servants and for the many services they are providing?" She said as a pensioner she was

given, I think, a 50 per cent rebate in the property tax and she had a property in Trinidad and she wanted to pay her tax on that property here. I called a Jamaican friend of mine and I asked him the same question; I got a similar response, “No protest here”, he said, and he added in, “You Trinis are ah set ah lawless people.” Well, I cut the conversation short. I called friends in Guyana and found no protest there either.

Madam President, this property tax has been a political football being kicked down the road by successive Governments, neither of which wanted to score a goal for this country but to win votes from the electorate. The day of reckoning is here. If the Government were to announce Carnival were to be held in 2022, Madam President, as in 1972 some of the very people who claim they cannot pay property tax, they will start to jump around; they will fall down on the ground. They will be in all the all-inclusive and other fetes. My colleague who sits at my right hand tells me if the Divali Nagar is held people will come and spend what they do not have. I suggest we follow the example of Barbados, encourage people to be compliant by offering concessions for early payment of property tax and for special cases of need.

There is never going to be a right time for this tax. Government however must ensure that the tax calculation is fair and equitable. I said previously in this Parliament that I had discovered that a former high Government official living in an upper-scale Port of Spain suburb was paying less property tax than I was. I was shocked and I protested. I asked him, “How that could be?” He laughed and he said to me, “The Mayor dare not interfere with that.” Was it Prime Minister Chambers who spoke of a wrong that needs to be put right? Well, that is an injustice that needs urgent attention. I am watching and I am waiting. I am firmly of the view though that the money received from the property tax must be made available to

the regional corporations, the City Corporation, to attend to the needs of burgesses. Perhaps we may see the return of the Comfort Patrols that were unceremoniously removed from our neighbourhoods.

I turn now to some areas of interest in the Executive Summary to the *Social Sector Investment Programme 2022*. This document states that it:

“...examines the social setting of Trinidad and Tobago and it highlights all progress made toward attaining social transformation and development.

Theme 1: Putting People First: Nurturing our Greatest Asset.”

Goal 4 reads:

“The foundation of Trinidad and Tobago will be strong families and safe, sustainable communities”

Under this head reference is made to the National Child Policy (2020—2030), hereafter the NCP:

“...which was laid as a White Paper in Parliament in November 2020 by the Office of the Prime Minister.”

The NCP stated, and I am quoting from the document, that it was:

“...vital in providing long-term guidance and sets the framework to support suitable legislation, interventions and infrastructure that would further ensure the well-being of each children.”

“Each children”? Nobody proofread this report for grammatical errors? I will have more to say later on the decline or death of English grammar in Trinidad and Tobago.

It causes some of us much despair and shame to listen or read views publicly expressed by officials and ordinary citizens on television, radio, in the newspapers, in person; bad grammar, malapropisms abound. Continue on the *Social Sector Investment Programme*, the NCP discusses the age of criminal responsibility. In

annex one in its national implementation plan included among its strategies and projects it says:

“Review the age of criminal responsibility and enhance the provision of legal representation for children.”

Among its major activities for strategies and projects, it lists:

Revise the Children Act to increase the age of criminal responsibility to 12.

Now, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the body of experts to whom each country reports on the progress they have made on implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the CRC, has repeatedly called on Trinidad and Tobago to harmonize our national laws with the CRC.

In 1996, in paragraph 29, our initial reports to the Committee the Government of Trinidad and Tobago stated, under “Criminal Liability”:

“The age below which a child is conclusively presumed to be unable to commit an offence is seven years under the common law. However, legislation raising the age of criminal responsibility”—is either 10—“to either 10 or 12 is being considered”

1996. When I read this an old calypso came to mind, “Pass by, mamaguy but doh buy, if yuh want yuh could even wave bye bye, but doh buy”. That was the Bata shoe store strike; I date myself. In 2006, 10 years after the Committee again expressed its concern regarding our low age of criminal responsibility and urge that Trinidad and Tobago raise the age of criminal responsibility to an internationally acceptable standard.

The CRC does not set a specific age, it simply urges state parties to establish a minimum age below which children shall be presumed not to have the capacity to infringe the penal law, but the Beijing rules, which is the standard minimum rules for the administration of juvenile justice, gives guidance and it states that:

“...the beginning of that age shall not be fixed at too low an age level, bearing in mind the facts of emotional, mental and intellectual maturity.”

In 2007 though, the same Committee on the Rights of the Child, having reviewed reports from all over the world issued a general comment titled, “Children’s Rights in Juvenile Justice”, and it was designed to guide state parties to bring their laws in conformity with the CRC and it recommended age 12 as the absolute minimum age. That was in 2007 but in 2000 we sat down there in the descending darkness of Holiday Inn, as it was then called, and we formulated a document called the “Caribbean 2000 Consensus on Juvenile Justice”, and we came up with the age of 12 and we felt really proud to see that what we did seven years before the international community was now doing. Some countries like Belize, Dominica, Saint Lucia were already there. Soon you have other countries like Jamaica in 2005, Grenada, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis; Barbados at the age 12, moving towards they have a draft for age—their 10—their 11, sorry, moving to 12; Bahamas at age 10. Guyana changed this law to age 14 with certain stipulations and even the Judiciary confused about what was Guyana’s intention.

In 2019 the Committee, having been informed by the latest research in neuroscience which showed that brain maturation occurs around 25 and that teenagers and young adults are very susceptible to peer pressure revised the internationally acceptable minimum age to 14 years. So the Committee is now recommending that children below the age of criminal responsibility who commit offences cannot be charged, to be considered on a case-by-case basis by the appropriate civil law administrative authorities. Maintaining an age of seven is really a disgrace. The earlier a child is exposed to the child justice system the greater the likelihood of reoffending and the lesser his chances of rehabilitation

and reintegration.

The National Child Policy talks about revising the Legal Aid Advisory Act and really it is the Legal Aid Advisory Act to include legal representation for motor vehicle offences and establishing a children public defending unit and so on, and duty counsel. And we have actually moved and amended the Act to include duty counsel and that is working extremely well and I am very, very happy. So children's right to legal representation, their right to be heard, that is now being covered, whether you look at the best interest of the child or the voice of the child by not only duty counsel, private attorneys who act in that role, but the Solicitor General's Office.

So I come now to community mediation. Under Goal 4 reference is made to:  
“...promoting safe communities through the provision of community mediation services. Community Mediation promotes environments that encourage individuals to resolve disputes through the provision of Civil and Family mediation services...”

Now, all of this is in the document:

“conducted by certified mediators. Such services reduce the incidences of family and community conflict and the subsequent escalation of violence in communities, while simultaneously equipping individuals with the skills and aptitudes necessary to enhance the family and the community's ability to manage conflicts positively.”

Madam President, I am informed that the term of office of members of the mediation board expired since about February this year. A new mediation board has not been named. No new mediators are being certified. There are people anxiously waiting for this board to be put in place so the number of available mediators can be expanded to have a large cohort of mediators to perform this

important function in a society where family conflict is escalating with fatal consequences.

The stated recognition of the value of mediation services to the restoration of peace and harmony in the community is inconsistent with the lack of urgency displayed in appointing a new mediation board. Now, in 2020, I understand that the community development portfolio was transferred from a disbanded Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts to a new Ministry, Sport and Community Development, so mediation now comes under the Community Mediation Services Division of that new Ministry and it is proposed to expand the implementation of a distance learning model segment for its community training programme. Given the nature of the activities though that they are going to be engaged in, it is hoped that the Ministry would revert to interactive in-person sessions at the earliest opportunity.

Goal 5, Trinidad and Tobago will have a seamless reform high-quality education and training system. What a goal! Our education system has been subjected to challenges as never before. This pandemic put the system into disarray with some of our children suffering unprecedented hardship. The online learning used to teach children exposed to public view the inequities in the society. There are still thousands of students without devices. Although the corporate sector, the Government and many private citizens provided students with laptop and other devices, students suffer and they continue to suffer from not being able to access education. Internet services may be unavailable where they live. I am anxiously awaiting the return to school for all our children. I urge the continued encouragement to achieve herd immunity, to continue to be vaccinating.

Parents, I can only appeal, do what you must for your children in the best interest of the children. The high quality education is an elusive dream for many of



our citizens. The Ministry of Education for yet another year has received the highest allocation, the biggest slice in the shrinking pie but there is much to be desired in terms of the standard of literacy in Trinidad and Tobago. For years I bought into the narrative of this high illiteracy rate that we have until I went to a joint select committee meeting, Human Rights, Diversity and I heard ALTA and they gave me their 20-year report and I realized that adult literacy is half of it—half of the touted figure is closer to the truth.

As a former primary school teacher what was my—the Common Entrance B class—I am shocked at the level of literacy. Member of my B class did not make the kind of mistake I witness on a daily basis. What has gone wrong? My pupils knew the rules about singular subject, singular verb, prepositions governing the objective case. There was an appreciation and they knew the difference in uses such as opposed—“each” as opposed to “every”, “between”, and “among”. They would say, “as regards” and “with regard to”, “composed of” or “comprises”. Up to last night on the news I heard, “less babies dying”, and how many people did not realize that it should have been “fewer”? My pupils knew a centurion was a soldier in charge of 100 men and a centenarian was one who had attained the age of 100. So many people do not know that. I once had to send a quick email to a TV station to remove a tickertape congratulating a “centurion”; the man achieved 100 years. I pointed out years ago in the prayer that Ken Gordon says on TV6 every morning that there was an error and I was told it would cost too much to correct it.

I asked my friend who trained teachers, “What was happening in education?” She said, “The education standard of pupil-teachers that entered UTT was nothing like in the old days.” They attain a Bachelors in Education Degree, we got a teacher’s diploma. But the standard is so low. She said, “Teachers are not well paid you know so we do not get the best and the brightest,” and it was

impossible to do remedial work in the time that they had to train the teachers.

I taught law students in two regional law schools, the deficiency I observed in language among some of the Trinidad and Tobago students, I did not detect in the students from the Eastern Caribbean, Barbados or Guyana. But, I encountered it in the Bahamas. While there I designed a remedial course in English which took them back to basics, agreement of subject and verb, singular and plural, use of relative programmes. On my way to class one day two students stopped me, “Ms. Ahye, Ms. Ahye, who is the prettiest?” I told them I will answer the question when we got upstairs. That day the lesson was on comparison and adjectives. So when we reach “pretty”, “pretty, prettier, prettiest”, they smiled. One of my colleagues sought to admonish me, he said, “That teaching basic thing, that too simple.” I asked the students what they thought, they say, “Ms. Ahye, we need it, we need it.” I told them there was once a judge called Justice Deville and he would quarrel with any lawyer who had bad grammar in affidavit or any pleadings before the court. He was one of my favourite judges and I want him to rest in peace and not be turning in his grave.

Madam President, I want to know if we moved from British English to American English, including spelling. I am walking on signs which tell me to “practice social distancing” and the word “practice” spelt with a “c”. I learnt to use “c” for the noun and “s” for the verb. We gone American now? Just tell me.

Article 29 speak of the CRC speaks on an important aim of education.

“The development of the child’s personality, talents, mental and physical ability to their fullest potential.”

Each child is unique with God-given talent that we must draw out and develop. We put children in a mould and we try to fashion them in our image and likeness not that of the Lord. Many want their children to have a grammar school education

even when they are not inclined that way. I welcome plans to restructure and reopen the youth camps. When we sat as a task force to look at child protection we visited the camps and we saw those boys hanging around with nothing to do, the tutors and the tutors said, you know, “Long ago people used to come and ask me about the boys that we are training and they would get good jobs.” I wish the hon. Minister Foster Cummings well in his new Ministry. He has the opportunity to make a difference and I know his enthusiasm is boundless.

Our children have talent in sports and culture that are not being harnessed. I have seen children who apparently could not learn and they have put on such a performance for me, you know, just by doing improvisations that for the first time in their lives they got appreciation from their classmates. Many lives are lost literally while those displaced children do not have transition homes. They leave the communities, institutions at age 18; they have nowhere to go, save into a life of crime and sexual exploitation. So, please, hurry up with those transition homes.

Children with disabilities, we have ratified the convention, then what? Do we give them the attention they deserve? How much of the education budget is used for autistic children? So many parents are I know paying what they cannot afford to give the children a variety of therapeutic intervention so they could have a fighting chance in life. How are children treated at school? We abolish corporal punishment but have we abolished the harsh words, the insults, the humiliation suffered at the hands of teachers? What have we done for those children. Why we cannot have people who only love children and those who do not be banished from the system? The Tranquility rant is not an isolated case, what happened to that teacher? Is it still before this Teaching Service Commission? These emotional hurts inflicted by teachers are hardly ever forgotten and children carry them around for years.

I want to share a message from a 63-year-old man, he is well known in this country. I will tell you his name at the end. He started writing me in May 2019, sometimes five times a day I will get a WhatsApp:

Blessings and grace to you, hon. Hazel, and your family and your efforts and your work in Parliament meeting, interaction and teaching. You are in my prayers and best wishes, God bless you.

On my birthday on April 25<sup>th</sup> I received this WhatsApp from him:

I had a teacher who actually said, 'You will be nothing in life'. Others said 'You could only make noise and only pounding on the desk'. Others say, 'You cannot understand in class you are a failure, failing exam'. Others say, 'You cheat, you are always copying, you are a waste.'

He could not see the black board. Years later he was tested and found he had poor eyesight, vision, he should have been wearing glasses from small. He said he got plenty licks in school and detention punishment. He said:

They beat me. How ironic, I bless and I thank dear beloved creative, humble, faithful dad. He saw more in me and guided me and tried with me when I have cried and nurtured, encouraging my creativity, my drumming and faith and spirituality, love and service to God. Only with God I survived. I survived and came through glad but sad. I pray this helps in some way some one. God bless you from the noisemaker, good for nothing, mischief, troublemaker, lonely weird dreamer drummer.

Oh God, humble honour to be in deep prayer and reflection and appreciation and affirmation of the rhythm of the Lord's love and joy and peace on his holy spirit, wisdom, direction that saved my life and love of rhythm and rhythm of love and message and praise."

I got my last WhatsApp from him on October 7<sup>th</sup> from the ICU. He said that he

was weak; he could not breathe or talk. His prayer-filled blessings and appreciation to all.

Not sure when you would see this. Thanks again for so much you have been to me. God bless you.

His name was Peter Telfer. He died last Friday, October 15, 2021. He was a gift to this nation that the education system almost destroyed but he had a parent to rescue him. We have a society who will vilify and condemn and speak failure into children's lives. We get—a million-dollar corporation, we can get them to contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars to Soca Monarch, Machel Monday, Kes Tuesday, Iwer Wednesday, what have you. To pay for a training programme costing hundreds of dollars that would benefit the upliftment of our youth is like pulling teeth.

Many children enter the child justice system; they graduate to the adult criminal law system, you could put all the laws in place, all the plan, all the machinery, all the people and the process but people must be central to the system. I have a particular concern about child justice. Recently, we convicted two persons who have been charged with a heinous crime, the murder of an innocent child. They were children when they were charged. The case was concluded 15 years after the crime had been committed and the children arrested. Every step of the way we came to the imposition of the—before we came to the imposition of the ultimate penalty the crime overshadowed the child. So many principles and practices were violated. And I wish to remind the media that the child's right to privacy continues even after the child has become an adult once the crime was committed when they were a child. So that the newspaper that published the convicted—the faces of the men—violated their rights. Fifteen years, are we serious? We have new laws on child justice, innovative practices, a new Children

Court; millions of dollars being spent but the belly of the system is exposed by cases like this.

The DNA lab, not in operation for years, I understand it is working now. I spoke in the Parliament a few years ago about samples not being able to go forward, you know. Madam President, I advised some time ago about scholarships for training in forensic pathology being offered to our citizens. The Trinidad and Tobago Forensic Science Centre was established in 1983 and has been starved by professional trained in forensic medicine rather than forensic pathology. Mortuary attendants have to struggle to get paid on time and a temporary despite permanent positions being available. About 500 murders a year and we cannot handle it. When Mr. Chato was TT High Commissioner he was informed of a one-year fellowship in forensic pathology being offered by any graduate in the post-residency programme in anatomical pathology at UWI Mona for persons desirous of perusing a specialty. Three from Jamaica took up the scholarship, one from the Bahamas; no national from Trinidad had benefit from this training.

### **12.00 noon**

So to claim the subspecialty of the forensic pathologist as recognized in the UK, US and Canada and in most countries, one must have been trained and certified in anatomical pathology. A forensic pathologist is specifically trained to deal with medico, legal post-mortems. The last one we had here resigned last February, emigrated and now lives in Michigan. The soothsayers in Julius Caesar said, "beware the Ides of March". I say, remember Brad Boyce. Be careful that we speak with accuracy that can stand up to scrutiny. I would be happy to be wrong when I say we do not have forensic pathologists on board in this country. But I fear I am correct.

We have the opportunity to build a new Trinidad and Tobago. We are a

loving people, a gifted people, our talents abound but we are not an equitable society. Some are more equal than others. Some want not only the whole pie but to break the dish so that no others can bake too. We need to have some honest conversations around the issues of race, colour, class and creed. We need respect and a whole new understanding of what it is to love our country and our fellowmen. Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

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

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you, Madam President. It is indeed a privilege not only to add my voice to the growing chorus of persons who have expressed their support for the measures outlined in the 2021 budget but to account to the nation as well for my stewardship in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Allow me though to congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance for presenting an Appropriation Bill that touched on the salient points of this country's drive towards economic growth whilst staying true to our Government's desire to ensure that no one is left behind. It is indeed a budget for everyone. I also commend the hon. Prime Minister for his astute leadership and for facilitating the measures outlined in the budget especially on behalf of the vulnerable people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, every day I receive emails, WhatsApp messages, phone calls about the provisions made for the vulnerable in the budget. People are saying how happy they are about the measures outlined in the budget that take care of those who are experiencing tough times.

In this regard, we are very pleased to announce that the Government has not reduced the dollar value of a single grant disbursed by the Ministry of Social

Development and Family Services thus ensuring that every single person who meets the criteria for a grant will continue to receive it as they have in the past and in the same amounts and on time.

I am extremely pleased to inform this House that notwithstanding our challenging economic circumstances, the Government has maintained its commitment to the vulnerable population of Trinidad and Tobago, because we are hearing some persons saying that the budget is not for poor persons, so I will outline some of the money spent in this budget which is catered to the vulnerable.

At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services we remain committed to providing the necessary support to the people of Trinidad and Tobago as we seek to strengthen the safety net for the vulnerable and take our country forward through a path to full recovery. In other words, we are keeping faith with the people of Trinidad and Tobago, so much so that up to September the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, I can report to this House the following.

Our Food Support Programme also known as the food card or debit card provided support to 31,547 persons at a cost of \$173,551,740. The general assistance grants helped 1,057 citizens or residents with household items valued at \$5,429,184.36. An additional \$407,150 went to those in need of rental assistance.

The Public Assistance Grant provided financial aid to 18,938 persons whose existing household incomes were deemed inadequate. And these persons benefited from grants amounting to \$335,692,321. The senior citizen's pension provided financial assistance to 109,004 persons aged 65 and over who met the qualifying criteria at a cost of \$353,296,000. We remain committed to ensuring the well-being of our older persons. And in terms of the Disability Assistance Grant, Madam President, 22,933 persons received grants amounting to \$575,223,930 and this also included disability grants for minors.



Under the National Social Development Programme for fiscal 2021, \$969,000 was distributed to 61 families to complete minor house repairs. 21 beneficiaries received \$236,000 to upgrade their sanitary plumbing and \$274,000 was provided to 28 recipients for house wiring.

With regard to the VAT removal on 45 basic food items, the expansion of the list of basic food items that will be exempted from VAT from the 1<sup>st</sup> of November will ensure that many of our families will be in a better position to afford more nutritious meals.

Madam President, the efforts of the Government on behalf of citizens are being fully recognized even in the public domain and the removal of VAT on most basic food items has been noted by the Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago. Its president Mr. Rajiv Diptee remarked that VAT removal will save customers money. And I quote:

“...removing VAT from these items is removing 12.5 per cent from your bill.”

And this is taken from the daily *Express*, the 7<sup>th</sup> of October. And these sentiments were also echoed by a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, a letter to the editor on Friday, 8<sup>th</sup> of October in the *Trinidad Guardian*. And this writer indicated that it was:

“...a brilliant and welcomed budget”—presented by the Government—“to reignite productivity while enhancing the lives of all.”—As best as humanly possible.

Demonstrating, Madam President, that the man in the street recognizes what the Government is doing and supports these initiatives.

The removal of VAT and customs duties on identified devices, equipment and peripherals utilized by persons with disabilities making these items more

affordable will leave extra cash in the pockets of 52,000 persons with disabilities who are expected to benefit from this initiative. And in response to this measure, the executive officer of the Blind Welfare Association of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Kenneth Suratt stated and I quote:

“I’m seeing it’s going to benefit our community—not only the blind, but walkers, wheelchairs, hearing aids, so many things for the disabled. I’m very pleased with what the government has done from that aspect to remove taxes for special devices we...”—could—“use.”

And this taken from *Newsday*, Wednesday October the 6<sup>th</sup>. These and other measures announced by the Minister of Finance demonstrate that this Government cares about our vulnerable citizens and remains committed to their well-being. The Ministry is placing all of its resources into helping, empowering and transforming the lives of our most vulnerable family by family.

And it is precisely in this context, Madam President, that I wish to contextualize the critical role being played by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in ensuring that those who are most marginalized, those who are most deserving, those who are the most economically and socially vulnerable in our society are in receipt of goods and services which will not only impact significantly on their daily lives but ultimately move them to a place of empowerment and self-sufficiency.

And we have identified the most vulnerable segments of the population amongst us as our senior citizens, at-risk youths, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, street dwellers, single parents, single income households, widows and those families now placed on the poverty line due to COVID-19. More focus is being placed on identifying those who are in need of our support and we are working closer with non-governmental organizations, civil society

organizations, faith-based organizations and other Ministries, agencies and private entities to fulfil the needs of the vulnerable.

Madam President, we know that the outcome of all the initiatives identified earlier will be the immediate alleviation of the economic challenges being experienced by some of our citizens. In other words, they will be able to put food on the table for their children but we know that we cannot stop there. We intend to do more. We are also laying the ground work for their future prosperity so that they will become more resilient and will be able to stand on their own two feet. To do this we must gently but steadily wean them off government assistance, each according to his capacity, helping them to become more stronger, more independent and more dignified. And we know that for some persons their current situation and circumstances are temporary. They are going through a bad patch or a bad season because they have lost their job or may be ill or the breadwinner of the family passed away but they will bounce back with some help. These require some funding and psychosocial support to get back on their feet. And these are the persons that the Ministry has been assisting over the past fiscal year.

The Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development programme administered as part of our national social development programme is especially targeted to vulnerable citizens who dream of starting or improving their own business but are unable to gain access to traditional sources of funding. They may not have the necessary collateral to secure a loan. And this programme which we call SEED allows them to get started by providing up to \$15,000 in goods or equipment to establish or to expand their micro-business.

Madam President, what is unique about this programme is that it also facilitates skills development through a grant of a further \$7,500 for training at a recognized accredited institution of their choice. This combination allows young

entrepreneurs and vulnerable persons to participate in the national economy, build their skills, generate wealth and ultimately build a strong business and take care of their families.

For fiscal 2021, 107 beneficiaries have received grant funding in this programme and the Ministry will continue to encourage the use of this grant among our vulnerable citizens. We fully expect these entrepreneurs to build their businesses with the support of the Ministry. We have many success stories of which we are so proud and time does not permit for me to share some of these in the House today.

The Ministry is re-purposing its adult education programme to more effectively respond to the needs of our vulnerable clients. A new fit for purpose adult education programme will enhance our clients' ability to transition from welfare to self-sufficiency focusing on areas such as micro-enterprise, coaching, mentoring, accessing domestic and export markets and money management among others. We expect our clients participating in the SEED programme to take full advantage of this programme as well.

As the nation continues to cope with the effects of the pandemic, the Ministry continues to deliver social support measures to cushion the repercussions of the restrictive measures. Given the number of persons who were retrenched, terminated or experienced a reduced income in both fiscal 2020 and 2021, affected persons were able to receive support through the Government's grant system.

In COVID phase one, the Government spent \$347 million in about 178,000 individuals, and families who required food, rental and income support benefited from this initiative.

Phase two, just 2021, in June 2021 the income support grant phase two was opened to receive applications from eligible citizens using the Ministry's online

application platform. And a total of 1,158 applicants were approved and paid up to September the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at a cost of just over \$3 million.

Food support for vulnerable persons through faith-based organizations. The Government also partnered with 134 faith-based organizations to provide additional food support aimed at assisting families in providing the nutritional requirements for their dependents. Altogether, 81,000 hampers and food vouchers were distributed. In June of 2020, \$30 million was provided over a three-month period. And additionally in March 2021, \$10 million was provided to assist with food to vulnerable individuals and families within various communities in the country over a three-month period.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services also collaborated with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries on the market box initiative to provide emergency food support to families in need during the stay-at-home period. And the Ministry reached 24,999 families under this initiative together with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries at a cost of approximately \$15 million. And we received very positive feedback from recipients who told us that this initiative was a very welcomed support during the stay-at-home period.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has recognized and I am certain my colleagues will concur that one of the key contributors to poverty alleviation in any society is a government's ability to meaningfully engage with civil society. And we acknowledge that inherent in that body of non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, youth clubs and other specific interest groups is a level of passion and commitment to serve vulnerable populations that, when coupled with access to government's resources, can only redound to the benefit of all who may seek to serve. To this end, initiatives were undertaken to support social sector NGOs

through capacity building, partnerships collaboration and funding. Seeking to be more data driven in its approach, the Ministry has engaged the Cropper Foundation to undertake an assessment of the civil society sector with an aim of increasing the Ministry's understanding of the civil society sector and its contribution to and alignment with social protection and resilience.

The Ministry has embarked on a number of social-sector initiatives such as, a grandparents raising grandchildren programme, and this initiative is guided by the approach to national parenting and family policies of the Government. Its introduction within the Ministry has become necessary at this time due to the recognition of grandparents' critical role within the family and their contribution to the stability of the wider society. However, their increasing vulnerability in this role requires support from the Ministry bearing in mind always the best interest of the child.

In fiscal 2021, the Ministry inducted widows as recognized vulnerable group and committed to ensuring that they receive their full rights in society. The Ministry will extend its resources—excuse me, Madam President, I am getting wet here. There is a leak.

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, the sitting is suspended for 10 minutes.

**12.18 p.m.:** *Sitting suspended.*

**12.31 p.m.:** *Sitting resumed.*

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Hon. Senators, for the time being, what we are going to do, is allow Government Senators to speak from the position in their seats but you must keep your masks on when doing so. As it relates to Independent Senators and Opposition Senators, you will continue to use the booth where you can remove your masks and speak. Minister of Social Development and Family Services, you

may continue from your seat.

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** Thank you very much. How much time do I have please?

**Mr. Vice-President:** You end at 12.41. One second. So, Minister, you would have utilized 16 minutes of your time. You have 24 minutes from 12.32 p.m.

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** Thank you. I would like to speak about centenarian programme. The centenarian programme is designed to ensure all of Trinidad and Tobago's centenarians and centenarians-plus who are desirous of participating in this initiative are celebrated and honoured. And this programme officially commenced in January 2021.

Mr. Vice-President, on Sunday I visited with Ms. Marjorie Roach from Jubilee Street, Tunapuna who celebrated her 106<sup>th</sup> birthday and it was indeed a memorable experience for me. So we must continue to cherish and honour our elderly.

Citizens engagement and outreach unit: The Ministry is well on its way to establishing its citizens engagement and outreach unit. The unit will build more positive working relationships between the public and the Ministry at the highest level. It will be manned by personnel who are customer focused and results oriented. These persons will be committed to delivering only the highest levels of professional and efficient service focusing on answering questions, following up on queries and solving problems in a timely manner. And this unit will provide easier access and response times to the public, Members of Parliament, constituency offices and NGOs in response to their requests. It will be supported by the call centre and the Tobago desk initiatives which are already in place.

Outreach to organizations and promotions of the Ministry's services. As part of our outreach and deeper engagement with civil society groups, the Ministry has hosted several virtual Public Information Education Sessions which we call PIES

geared towards providing information on the social services available at the Ministry and how these can be accessed by those in need. These sessions also foster opportunities for partnership on the many and varied social issues impacting the vulnerable and contribute towards empowering them to achieve more independent living. Thus far, sessions have been held with organizations such as, Is There Not A Cause, Vision on Mission, Widows Association and Widows Support TT, Islamic Ladies Social and Cultural Association, the Bankers Association, cultural bodies such as Pan Trinbago, Copyright Organization of Trinidad and Tobago, TUCO, Autistic Society, Cerebral Palsy Association, the Judiciary and some constituency offices. So we will be moving to each constituency office. We have done Oropouche East, Oropouche West, Point Fortin, La Brea, San Fernando East, Tunapuna, Princes Town, Sangre Grande and we have also been able to meet with the Mayor of Point Fortin, aldermen and councillors of the borough.

So that what will happen now is that, the persons in the constituencies or persons who have—there are persons who would want to do business with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the offices will be able to tell them what to do, how to access it. Because what we have realized is that people would write letters and they would ask, you know, this person needs assistance. But then we realized that sometimes the person had never even gone to the office, any social welfare office and therefore, the Minister is not able to give somebody a food card. There is a process. So therefore, once we have these sessions educating persons on how to access the services offered by the Ministry, this will make it much easier so that persons will be better served. So this is what we are doing. We will continue to expand this initiative in the coming months in a virtual setting and if COVID-19 protocols allow, face to face in communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago.



We are advancing our plans to establish a dedicated no-cost telephone and online counselling hot line service to provide an additional layer of psychosocial support that is offered to the National Family Services Division of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. This service will provide prevention, rehabilitation and support interventions to persons who find themselves overwhelmed by their circumstances and are having difficulty coping with the many challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, illness, bereavement, unemployment, family disputes, relationship issues and other complex personal or professional situations, the line will connect persons to other social services and coordinate referrals as necessary to ensure that the callers receive the social support that is needed.

Mr. Vice-President, having reviewed the existing policy and solicited feedback on our special achievers grant, the Ministry will relaunch the Special Achievers Grant which was first introduced in 2005. We define a special achiever as a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago whose record of service and/or performance is publicly distinguishable as an extraordinary contribution to the international profile of the country and/or to national development. And this grant is specifically targeted to such individuals who may be experiencing financial hardships and are deemed vulnerable. And this approach is consistent with the Ministry's mandate to assist those who are in need.

So what we have is, it is a different type of grant. It is a grant for the vulnerable but persons who have distinguished themselves in society and this is what we are looking at.

**12.40 p.m.**

Notwithstanding our best efforts and our appeals to citizens to do what is right simply because it is the right thing to do, there will be always those, who for

their own selfish purposes, deliberately attempt to scam the system, and we must speak about this. And after several rounds of discussions and consultations with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and other key stakeholders, the Ministry has decided to establish an investigation and compliance unit to deal with the high incidence of irregular applications and payments. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is unique in terms of the timeliness of its payment as it services the vulnerable groups in society now estimated to be around 215,000, including approximately 30,000 temporary clients since COVID-19. And this investigative and compliance function will be deployed at all levels to ensure adherence to public service and accounting regulations at the highest level. Many of the Ministry's operations require sensitive follow-up investigations related to the financial and other affairs of our clients in order to make sound decisions on the approval or non-approval of applications for grants. And sometimes these investigations can become quite complex, prolonged and go beyond the position descriptions of the officers concerned. And sometimes these investigations can take several months to complete, causing delays in decision-making and creating anxiety and suffering among our clients who are in need of urgent support.

Mr. Vice-President, we also acknowledge that some of our processes, meant to create checks and balances in the system which provides for good governance and accountability, may actually be having the opposite effect. Let me outline for this honourable House, as I did in another place, some of the incidents of fraudulent practices which have been uncovered at the Ministry that have been occupying the attention of law enforcement officers of the financial investigative bureau, the Anti-Corruption Investigation Bureau and the Fraud Squad of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Within the last 12 months, there have been a 241 per cent increase in the

number of reports to the police, with the majority of cases, 151 per cent representing senior citizens' pension. For the year 2020, 68 such cases have already engaged the attention of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. As recently as August 2021, cheques were issued to 1,955 persons who were confirmed dead and some of the disability and pension cheques belonging to those individuals are being cashed, the most significant, 81 per cent being senior citizens' pension cheques.

A further 3,902 grants were identified for investigation and this represents a marked increase in fraudulent activities across grants. I can advise that 165 cases are already under review by the Fraud Squad. A large number of these grant recipients are residing abroad and are therefore illegible for support from the State. And we are moving with haste to ensure that incidents of irregularities, wherever they may be, are thoroughly investigated internally to determine if human error is partially responsible and to take the necessary action. A strong investigative and compliance function will reduce long delays and facilitate better and faster decision making, creating efficiency in the public spend, promoting greater confidence in the system, and enhancing and expediting the problem-solving capability and capacity of the Ministry. The Ministry has received the approval to proceed with this unit and intends to implement it by the first quarter of 2022.

Direct deposit initiative: I am certain that, like me, you have seen the long lines of our senior citizens snaking around corners outside of financial institutions on the first and 15<sup>th</sup> day of every month. And many of our elders are experiencing financial abuse such as misplaced or lost cheques, and many of these lost cheques are actually being cashed at supermarkets. Hence, as part of the thrust to reduce fraudulent conversion of pensioners' cheques, the Ministry is streamlining its efforts to make direct deposits into the banks of 63,000 clients a priority, 61 per

cent of whom are senior citizens.

Mr. Vice-President, as we look ahead, a critical element in understanding the needs of the vulnerable is identifying the levels of vulnerability amongst those deemed as such. So in short, we need to identify who are the poor amongst us. With this in mind, the Ministry is pursuing the development of a national register for vulnerable persons, which is an essential element in the overall strategy to address poverty and vulnerability in Trinidad and Tobago. This project will help to identify those who are languishing outside of the awareness of the Ministry and who are in need of our help. In fiscal 2021, our job is to go out and find these persons wherever they are and offer them our support. And I just want to say that it is not just about grants, the Ministry is not about grants, we offer other services because the main aim is to have as much persons self-sufficient. The Ministry has developed a draft document for the introduction of this register because this database, when developed, will provide for real-time information to identify and to assess the vulnerable, to address their specific needs in and out of crisis situation because some of these needs may also involve psychosocial support. The Ministry intends to build a register in the first half of fiscal 2022, with the support of other social protection agencies and the University of the West Indies.

Mr. Vice-President, all our proposed initiatives will come to naught if we continue to operate under the rubric of the same archaic and cumbersome legislation that is partly responsible for our current state. In this regard, the Ministry embarked upon a review of the main pieces of legislation governing the social sector, with a view towards their further alignment with regional and international best practice standards, and these include the following: we have almost completed the Senior Citizens' Pension Act, Chap. 32:02. We are working on the Public Assistance Act, the Socially Displaced Persons Act, No. 59 of 2000;

Homes for Older Persons Act, No. 20 of 2007. And we are also looking to introduce legislation with regard to persons with disability. The proposed amendments to the identified pieces of legislation will seek to revise the provisions in light of contemporary issues: the need for digitalization of the administrative and other processes required to fulfil the Ministry's mandate, and to ensure compliance with and enforcement of the relevant statutory provisions.

Mr. Vice-President, priority is to be placed on ensuring that no family is left behind, and as Kofi Annan once said:

“The happiness of any society begins with the well being of the families that live in it.”

And with this in mind, the Ministry's National Family Services Division has increased its outreach services to families and assists individuals, groups, couples and families through counselling, advice, advocacy, parenting, training referrals and placements. The division also disseminates information on healthy family life through community workshops; its radio programme, “It's Family Time, Let Talk”; outreaches via lectures upon request by various organizations, governmental and non-governmental, and through social media. And between July to September, the division again held online parenting workshops which involved a wider cross-section of participants. The first session was exclusively for males, addressing gender, masculinity and its impact on parenting. Parenting in a pandemic was also addressed and covered topics on strategies for managing during the pandemic: online schooling and support for children through COVID-19. A co-parenting workshop was also held which addressed the challenges in co-parenting and provided strategies to better co-parent, including stress and anger management. A workshop targeting grandparents will be held later this month.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains steadfast

in strengthening legislation to bring about greater efficacy in the system of engagement, treatment, care and rehabilitation of street dwellers. To deal effectively with the issue of street dwelling requires the collaboration of a number of important stakeholders. Although the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is the lead agency, it requires the support of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, including the mayors, regional corporations, municipal police, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the private sectors and NGOs involved in caring for street dwellers among others.

It must be noted, however, that the Ministry does not have the authority to just move persons off the street, hence the reason why this collaborative approach is so important to get the job done. The Ministry engaged stakeholders that I spoke of before, in three high-level discussions on the way forward. A technical committee was established to work out the mechanics and areas of collaboration, and they developed a plan of action. But, however, some legal matters remained to be worked out and this is high on the Ministry's legislative agenda going forward.

Our Social Displacement Unit during the last fiscal year has engaged 1,278 persons with a view to their rehabilitation and included the following activities: 13 deportees were counselled; 236 referred to rehabilitation; 45 to shelter and care referrals; 34 referrals for accommodation under community care; 225 social work interventions, and 725 investigations of persons living on the street. We continue to look for a suitable site to establish assessment facilities—

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

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** Thank you—designed to assess individuals, personal service needs and placement options once removed from the street. We are completing the evaluation of sites in Penal, Pointe-a-Pierre and Couva for

transitional homes and emergency homes for accommodation.

In further support of the services for our elderly, the Ministry instituted a Community Care Programme which facilitates the placement of vulnerable older persons aged 55 years and over who have been medically discharged from public health institutions but are in need of advance care and support. These persons are placed into homes for older persons in the community that provide living accommodation with suitable care, once the older person meets the relevant criteria for inclusion in the programme. The Ministry supports seven homes for older persons located in Toco, Sangre Grande, Couva, Point Fortin, La Brea, San Fernando, Siparia. Approximately 150 socially isolated and/or indigent older persons aged 60 years and over are provided for with residential accommodation at these homes.

The Ministry received over 377 requests with regard to information about Senior Citizens' Grant, home placements for senior citizens, referrals for geriatric services, and COVID-19 information, and questions about ageing. And there is an older persons information help desk, which is 800-6742 or call OPIC. Provisional data for fiscal 2021 revealed that there were 154 reported cases of elder abuse in private residences and 32 at home for older persons. The Ministry's referral of these abuses to the Ministry of Health, the police service, the National Family Services and homes for the aged increased by 76 per cent in fiscal 2021.

Mr. Vice-President, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago maintains its commitment to the inclusion and promotion of the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. The Ministry has continued with its assistive mobile devices initiative, which in collaboration the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, is geared towards increasing access to information through ICT for persons with disabilities. And as I seek to conclude,

because I realize my time is almost up, I would like to say there will always be those who exist on the margins and peripheries of our said society and we on this side do not believe that they should dwell there forever. While there are those who are vulnerable in our midst, consequential upon choices they might have made, our role is not to judge because we are on unaware of the options that they had. The strength of a nation is not only in terms of its gross domestic product or level of foreign reserves. The strength of a nation could also be found in the resilience of the people in the individual stories of conquest in the face of daunting challenges, in the collective will of its people to do better and be better, and in the decisions of a government that empowers.

The 2021 budget entitled: Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic, has provided us with a road map for growth, it has presented us with an opportunity to reset our economy and presents real possibilities for persons to emerge from poverty, to come out of their vulnerable positions and emerge as contributing citizens in this great Republic.

At this juncture, I would just like to thank the executive and staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their continued support and dedication to the task ahead. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services through its more robust, technological interface; through its investigation and compliance unit; through its enhanced collaboration with civil society networks; through greater networking with other Government Ministries and other key stakeholders, together with the slew of new initiatives I have outlined, and together with the fact that the plan is to move persons away from welfare into self-sufficiency. And I have outlined that we will continue to do our part to ensure that regardless of the circumstance, no one will be left behind. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]



**Sen. Yokymma Bethelmy:** Mr. Vice-President, I thank you for the opportunity to rise in this August Chamber and to join the debate of this year's financial Bill. I would like to take the opportunity to thank God for the incredible privilege he continues to bless me with in representing the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago as a Member of the Senate on the Government side in the Twelfth Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Vice-President, let me also thank our hon. Prime Minister and my political leader, Dr. the hon. Keith Christopher Rowley, who continues to be a strong voice of reason and a leader who inspires not only the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, but more specifically, the young people of our great nation.

I want to thank and congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance for all of the time and work that went into planning the 2022 budget, which captures true vision.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

I know he has one of the most challenging jobs in Government and we appreciate all of his hard work and his ability to continue moving forward, displaying exceptional leadership skills as our Minister of Finance. And it would be remiss of me if I did not also thank our brilliant and hon. Minister of Planning and Development, Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis for her role in designing outstanding and dynamic development plans that continue to navigate our country into socio-economic success.

As a first year Senator, I am extremely grateful for the warm reception and support extended to me by my colleagues and Parliament staff. But, Madam Speaker, before I get into my contribution, I just want to address a couple points made by Sen. Roberts. Sen. Roberts said that the PNM disrespects sports and oppresses people. But in that same statement, he also said that the athletes that we sent to Tokyo fell and returned with not one medal, discrediting our sterling efforts

or their sterling efforts. [*Desk thumping*] I just want to let all of the athletes who went out there—I just want to let them know that the PNM Government, that your Government, is very proud of what you went out there to do. [*Desk thumping*] He even went on to say that it was the worst performance of Trinidad and Tobago ever. The UNC government crashed sport completely, so he is very brave. [*Desk thumping*] He went on to say that the PNM stops women from advancing. I mean, Madam President, I find that he is just very brave to be making these statements knowing very well that there are Members of their team, including him, who constantly disrespects women. [*Desk thumping*]

So, let me just jump straight into my contribution. As a young Senator, I find myself being a part of many conversations with young people who are interested in developing themselves and giving back to their country. I also find myself in debates with my peers about what the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is doing for the youths and the vulnerable in our society. So, Madam President, I am here today to answer that question: What does this budget offer the young people and vulnerable members of society? You know, just to go back to Sen. Roberts, he said that he did not see what we are going to do for sport in the budget—or in this year's budget. But please correct me if I am wrong, we all received a package, a budget package, that included a *Social Sector Investment Programme* document that highlighted what we will be doing for the young people in Trinidad and Tobago in sport and in youth development.

So let me just jump in to educate him a bit. In youth development, we will be establishing a national youth development agency. The function of the NYDA will be to create and facilitate and maintain facility asset and to promote an advanced, positive youth development through various projects and programmes in the youth work sector for all youth of Trinidad and Tobago. We also have another

programme called ALLSET:

“This project will provide one hundred young persons aged 18-35 years old with introductory technical/vocational skills training in heavy equipment operations.”

We have the Re-establishment of the National Youth Council: Pillar 3 of the National Youth Policy 2020—2025:

This will be—“...Facilitating inclusive and active youth participation in the civic and democratic life of Trinidad and Tobago.’ In this regard, the re-establishment of the national youth council is expected to provide a platform for youth interaction and conversation and assist them in recognizing the value their perspectives add to the community and national landscape.”

We have the APEX programme, Advanced Proficiency Entrepreneurship Excellence Programme:

“The programme will target 100 young persons and comprises three...components: Skills Training in Innovation and Creativity for Responsible and Sustainable Business; Business...Development”—innovation—“complemented with Mentorship; and a Pop-up Entrepreneurship Market within nine...administrative districts in Trinidad and Tobago.”

We also have the Adolescent Intervention Programme:

“This initiative is designed to assist the SEA graduates (approximately 50 youth per districts between the ages of 11 to 14 years) to prepare for the development issues that are likely to be encountered in their life transition.

We also have a Barbering Training Programme for all young people who may be interested in becoming barbers. So you will be trained as a barber and then you will be given the necessary support if you are interested in opening your own

business.

We also have AMPLIFY, which I believe is a programme that is long overdue:

This—“...programme is intended to provide training in Music Production/Sound Engineering to 100 young...”—persons who are music producers and arrangers— “aged 16 to 35.”

We have the National Service Community Partnership Programme:

This—“...programme is offering a twofold benefit to participants, as young persons will access on-the-job training opportunities from skilled, experienced ‘Master’ Craftsmen within their communities.”

What are we doing in agriculture? So yesterday a couple of my colleagues covered the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, but I will still touch on it a bit. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the Ministry of Housing and Development as well as the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service for the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme. This programme is intended to create opportunities to make agriculture more attractive to our young people. But how would this benefit our country and our youths? This programme is in direct alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals No. 1, No. 2 and No. 4. So, No. 1 is No Poverty; No. 2 is Zero Hunger and No. 4 is Quality Education.

So No. 1, we are trying to teach or show young people how to develop sustainable lifestyles. No. 2, we are contributing to zero hunger both here at home and hopefully being able to export food outside—sorry, export. And No. 4, the programme consists of two years of training where they will be receiving quality education. Who is eligible? Nationals between the ages of 18 to 35. They will receive both technical and financial support. This programme will give young

people a way to build sustainable livelihoods, as said before. You see, Madam President, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago believes in empowering our young people. [*Desk thumping*] We are about creating opportunities through initiatives that are attractive to our young people.

We also have now the Moruga Farm School Project which:

“...seeks to redefine what it means to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century farmer and position young farmers as producers of high-value agricultural products whilst promoting climate...agriculture.”

I now move on to development of youth through business. So even though the small and medium enterprise business support being offered by the Ministry of Finance is not specific to young people, a lot of young people are getting into business, and they need—I see it, even as a young business owner, I see it as something necessary because a lot of people are talented but they may not necessarily have the know-how as far as business is concern. So, the Government would be providing \$50 million in professional services and support to small and medium enterprises, specifically in the areas of accounting services, record-keeping, training, management, inventory control, health and safety, and to ensure that they meet their statutory obligations. This programme will be managed by the Ministry of Finance. How will this benefit SMEs? This targeted support service will help overcome the barriers to their development and to lead to a more competitive SME sector. We understand that limited entrepreneurship skills and business capabilities are barriers to SME growth. Lack of management and technical skills, the use of sub-optimal technology and limited access to information hinder the development and growth of SMEs.

Now, I will move on to digital transformation and youth. But before I fully submerge myself into this section of my contribution, I just want to say thank you

to the hon. Minister of Digital Transformation, Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus [*Desk thumping*] for really believing in young people and giving them a listening ear. So every time I reach out to Sen. Bacchus about young tech entrepreneurs doing big things in the US, he always makes the time to meet with them. And I usually have the opportunity of sitting in on these brainstorming sessions where Sen. Bacchus will allow the young tech entrepreneurs—sorry, the young techpreneurs to present their product or service, some already running, some still in the development stages. And this is then followed by a question and answer session where Minister provides feedback and what may be needed for further development.

One case I am familiar with are some techpreneurs who sealed an arrangement for Draper Startup House to start an entrepreneurship tech hub in Trinidad and to expand across Caricom. They will then be using a space at Hyatt, in a partnership, as the initial headquarters but in the long term will develop infrastructure for a permanent hosting facility, and look forward to Government collaboration. This includes not only education of start-ups for founders and local investors to understand the mindset and approaches needed, but the opening of an investment pipeline from Silicon Valley over time, which is huge for Trinidad and Tobago, and for the Caricom region. They developed an ed-tech platform study space that is ready and about to be beta-tested.

**1.10 p.m.**

It will not only entail primary and secondary school curriculum with life teaching, one-on-one tutorship, quiz data bases, class and exam assigning, but also the artificial intelligence to guide students' lessons and career paths. The study space is designed to connect employers at home and abroad with students creating a seamless road map and pipeline for growth and employment for our future.

Product road map and deployment are being advised by Jet Teng, experienced MVP of Bubble; Andrew Choy, Microsoft Cloud and artificial intelligence senior, and Ann Hanger, UI/UX lead at Airbnb, and they are negotiating partnerships both locally and in Silicon Valley. They were also featured in a Silicon Valley publication which is really starting to make a stir.

In recognizing so many of our young people excelling both internationally and locally in the tech arena the Government of Trinidad and Tobago not only commissioned the opening of our Ministry of Digital Transformation but they also ensured that we heavily invested in the development of a tech of a digital economy that will be developed in partnership with no other than our young people.

So what does it mean? It means the launch of several initiatives to benefit our youth, such as, the digital developer hub which will be a collaboration of the private sector, academia and small local developers, including, individuals to establish a platform for the development of software and applications which meet global standards. It also means the development, of one of my favourites in this budget, the national online store.

Madam President, as you know the COVID pandemic has placed a strain on our economy and our businesses, particularly, our small businesses and such as our local artisans and cottage industries who lost several potential avenues to showcase, display and sell their craft talent. This is why the development of an online store to generate income will be basically the answer to the development of their future sales and development of their company. The entrepreneurs will be taught how to be effective business people and the Government will support them through training in the small business development.

What are the benefits of this initiative? To the seller it provides an additional sales channel to market and sell your products. The e-market place can offer

reduced marketing cost when compared to other sale channels. The use of international e-market places can provide opportunities for overseas sales that would not otherwise—that you would not otherwise be aware of.

What are the benefits for the buyer? Updated information on price and availability makes it easier to secure the best deal. It offers a convenient way to compare prices and products from a single source rather than spending time contacting each individual supplier. It will also provide a level of trust for the buyer, because you know everyone thinks once the Government is involved “we good and we safe”. And with the PNM Government you are always good and you are always safe. [*Desk thumping*]

Digital skills training: We will also be providing—so we already have access centres, right, but we would also be increasing those centres from six to 50 and we would be training 10,000 persons followed by another 2,000 under an arrangement with the Microsoft philanthropic group. The benefits of empowering our citizens with these types of skills is to ensure that they actively participate in our country’s strategic plan to move forward as a digital economy, ultimately promoting social inclusion. Our Government is focused on strategies that empowers youth to become more engaged in their local communities by forming collations of talented young leaders active in the digital space. Let me jump straight into the sport and community development of youth.

Madam President, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed restrictions on our normal way of life with the sporting industry being adversely affected. This did not however stop our Government from supporting our athletes who competed in the Tokyo Olympic Games—or construct the Moruga sporting facilities and youth multi-purpose facility or continuing the upgrade of our grounds throughout our great nation.



The Minister of Sport and Community Development is committed to the development of our youth through community initiatives and sports. The Government will build an additional Fit for Purpose Youth Facility including youth development apprenticeship centres. Why? So that our young people can be enabled to develop their skills allowing them to make informed choices. They will also appreciate and develop an understanding that others have the right to hold different views than theirs.

Another favorite of mine in this budget is the inclusion of a transition home. And I know Sen. Thompson-Ahye spoke about transition homes. Well, this will be included in our National Service Complex because many young people actually stated on a yearly basis, transitions out of the foster care system and it makes it difficult for them to be self-sufficient. Already burdened by their childhood experiences of abuse, neglect and abandonment, these young people leave the foster care system without knowledge, skills, experience, attitudes, habits and relationships that will enable them to be productive and connected members of society. The transition homes will provide accommodation and social services to young persons who were wards of the State and left community residences at the age of 18. The main objective of the transition homes is to equip young people with the necessary skills and tools needed to become independent and productive individuals of the society.

Leaving no one behind: An increase in the ICT Access Centres to continue benefiting digitally-underserved communities. These centres provide our citizens with the following: Computers, Internet access, training and scanning services. As I mentioned earlier, the facilities will be expanding from six to 50 and we will even be offering business incubation support services. Do you know what a business incubator is? It provides start up and early stage businesses with the support and

resources these young companies need or find difficult to access. Their support might involve access to networks, investors and mentors or co-working spaces alongside other businesses and experienced professionals. All of these measures are being implemented to ensure that the community participation and the digital thrust is fostered and promoted.

Another favourite in this budget, Madam President, is tax allowance for first time homeowners providing affordable and adequate housing to our low and middle income citizens. The hon. Minister of Finance proposed to increase the first time homeowner limit from 25,000 to 30,000 per household on mortgage interest paid in the year of income for first time homeowners for five years with effect from the date of acquisition. This measure will cost the Government 30 million per year in revenue foregone.

So a lot of persons approached me and asked me to explain that to them. So what I basically told them is for revenue foregone, this is revenue that the Government would have earned if the measure was not in place. So we are basically sacrificing \$30 million in revenue to make sure that first time homeowners have “ah lil” more money in their pockets to see [*Desk thumping*] about other items in these very trying times. They also asked about tax allowances for first time homeowners, which is an amount to be deducted from an individual’s annual total income earned before applying the tax rate to determine the annual PAYE tax a taxpayer must pay to the government.

So, just to break it down for you a little further. The first time homeowners will now have \$1,250 more disposable income in their hands annually to allow for meeting fixed costs, such as insurance, property tax or repairs. The Government has provided an additional indirect subsidy to first time homeowners of \$5,000. This will translate, as I said earlier, to \$1,250.

Madam President, now that I have covered all of the items that I came here to discuss I just want to talk a little about the importance of research. So I know a lot of—well, some Members of the Opposition spoke about fake news and propaganda, but no one spreads more fake news than the Opposition. [*Desk thumping*] And I think they believe it because Trinidadians do not do research. But when I was attending COSTAATT there was a course that we all tried, we all tried to get away from. The name of this course was LIBS right. But LIBS really taught us the importance of research and how to conduct proper research, not just for projects or assignments but for everyday life.

LIBS prepared me for conversations as a well-informed citizen with facts available to support my argument. And, Madam President, if I did not apply what I learned from LIBS, my company law lecturer at UTT, Dr. Persadie made sure I did. You see, I could not present a case to Dr. Persadie without all the supporting research or citations. If I tried to, she would highlight my entire paper in red or make me explain it on the spot.

Our country is being plagued with fake news by anti-vaxxers concerning vaccinations and by the Opposition Members concerning the Government. [*Desk thumping*] But I am here today to appeal to all citizens to do proper research before making any decision, whether it be personal, business or a big decision now such as being vaccinated. And no, TikTok, Facebook and any other form of social media is not a legitimate source of research to assist you in making informed decisions.

The main purpose of research is to inform, gather evidence for theories and contribute to developing knowledge on any topic or field. Conducting research is not simply important, it is imperative. It is a tool for building knowledge and facilitating learning; it is a means to understand issues and increase your

awareness; it helps us succeed in business and other aspects of our lives; it also allows you to disprove the “nancy” stories made up by the UNC; it allows you to support your truths; it is a means to find, gauge and seize opportunities. It promotes a love of and confidence in reading, writing, analyzing and sharing valuable information.

In conclusion, Madam President, before I wrap up my contribution I just want to ask the Opposition to stop telling all of these Anansi stories and desist from spreading fake news and spewing false narratives to the people of this great nation. [*Desk thumping*] To any young person watching now who may not know who Anansi is; Anansi is a Jamaican folklore character who is a mischievous spider who is always tricking persons to get what they want. How can you beat Anansi and his minions? By doing in-depth research.

And before your next speaker takes God out of their thoughts to disrespect a Member of my team or my hon. Prime Minister, who is also your Prime Minister may I add, [*Desk thumping*] let me just remind you that you have Members on your team who make men walk in wheelchairs. You have Members of your team who want Papa Bois and other folklore characters because they do not know where the Main Ridge is to be eligible voters. [*Desk thumping*] You have a Member of your team who blatantly disrespected our honourable Head of State because he is a weak man who is insecure about women in leadership. [*Desk thumping*] But then again why I expect anything more from you. With your team your only opposition is to insult our leaders. All you are talking about is alternative government. You cannot even be a proper Opposition, what you want to be in government for? What are you going to do? [*Desk thumping*] But as the old people always say, “yuh doh pelt stones at trees dat doh bear fruits”.

So you see, Madam President, only when someone sees the value of the fruit

and longs to taste its sweetness, will they make an effort to throw a stone. Well, you continue pelting and we will continue bearing. [*Desk thumping*] So let us come together Trinidad and Tobago, let us forget race, let us forget the UNC “ole talk”, just remember that we are one and we will move forward as one and no man will be left behind. With those few words, I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh:** Madam President, Members of this esteemed Chamber, it is my pleasure and considered privilege to revisit this honourable Chamber where I began my parliamentary career in 2001. Indeed, Madam President, it was in this esteemed House that you may remember that you and I would have served many years ago as Senators. I remember those wonderful times. I served here up to 2007 subsequent to which I was elected by the constituents of Caroni East up to 2020 as their Member of Parliament.

Madam President, last year I announced my retirement from representative politics to pass the baton on to our younger generation. But Madam President, over the last 18 months this country has been experiencing a state of unprecedented destruction, collapse and political and socio-economic war that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has launched against our beloved country and citizens, and if I am to quote our esteemed and distinguished Opposition Leader and former Prime Minister the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Madam President, it is truly extremely difficult for me who has served this country in various fields for over 45 years and dedicated my entire adult life to nation building in the field of sports, academia, medicine and politics to witness our country in the sad state of economic, social and political collapse, tyranny and dictatorship we are currently experiencing under this Government’s reign. It is indeed truly alarming to see corruption, tyranny, waste, mismanagement and sheer

incompetence in governance. So I decided too that I must speak out when our scared democracy, our economic survival, our lives and livelihoods and our children's future are being threatened with utter destruction under this Government.

So, at the behest of the hon. Opposition Leader, I have returned today to register my views in this august Chamber. History will record that for the last six years this is obviously the worst Government in our beloved country. [*Desk thumping*] And let me say that in putting on my political boots once more, I am deeply grateful to the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar for asking me to do so. I am proud to serve under her committed, compassionate and truly exemplary leadership. I have seen her for decades time and time again stand up and fight for our country's democracy; for our voiceless and oppressed citizens; for our very right to live in accordance to our democratic principles; for the dignity and well-being of every single citizen; for equality and justice with courage and compassion and resolve that is unparalleled by any leader in our nation's history.

It is with tremendous pride and privilege therefore that I join her as she continues this battle for the people and our democracy against this dictatorship. Even as I speak today in accordance with her own great budget response team: "Rebuilding and Restoring Trinidad and Tobago", a government at war with its own citizens, a time to take back our country from tyrants.

Madam President, today I address this honourable Senate on some extremely serious and pertinent issues with critical analysis on the continued abysmal, gross incompetence and mismanagement for our management failures in the health and education sectors. I will begin with the health sector. As a nation we continue to spiral downwards into an abyss of poverty, economic crisis, joblessness, social decay and overall ruin. I ask, Madam President, why must our people endure life

threatening medical mismanagement and receive third world medical care and in some cases none at all. Sixteen hundred unfortunate citizens have lost their lives from COVID. Families are losing loved ones every day.

Prime Minister Rowley, his administration, the Minister of Health and their seriously, clinically inexperienced medical advisory team—I can tell you I had the privilege of teaching three of them. They had not worked in hospitals for more than two years, so they do not understand clinical practice and clinical medicine so they stand guilty of failing to significantly protect and prevent the loss of lives of our loved ones. This Government has spent near 42 billion on health in the last six years and in this pandemic more than 5 billion as indicated by the Minister of Finance.

Yet today, Madam President, our country ranks in the worst, 49<sup>th</sup>—we are 49<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of deaths per million, population; 1,127 deaths per million population according to Johns Hopkins University's tally. Peru is the worst in the world. While Jamaica ranks better, far better than us, 70<sup>th</sup> with less deaths, 698 per 100,000. We are 1,127 deaths per million population. In there stands at 86 with 330 per million population, Barbados and almost all other Caribbean countries are experiencing less COVID-19 deaths per million population.

If I give you some statistics, in May we had 326 deaths; in June, 352; in July, 223; in August, 222; in September 2021, 197 deaths. One death was occurring almost every two hours in this country, average about 10 deaths per day. And when questioned on issues relating to the handling of certain matters the Minister of Health openly pronounces that his responsibility as Minister stops at the door of the hospital. One can ask then, if his actions are not tantamount to misconduct in public office. Who is running the Ministry of Health? Is it not the Minister? Why must his responsibility stop at the door of the hospital? You could

imagine when I was Minister of Education I would say that my responsibility stopped at the gate of the schools? I would be very, very callous and careless.

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

So, is it really this country is on an automatic pilot, the Ministry of Health is on automatic pilot. So with such gross irresponsibility a bewildering incompetence and serious mismanagement and hubris and that type of behaviour and attitude I call for the immediate resignation of the hon. Minister of Health or be fired. [*Desk thumping*] Some have been saying he is the worst Minister of Health this country has ever experienced since independence. [*Desk thumping*] He must resign. In Brazil three Ministers of Health have been dismissed; United Kingdom, the Minister resigned; Czechoslovakia; Scotland; Bahamas; Poland; Canada; Malaysia; India. Their Ministers of Health amongst many others have resigned. We want the resignation of this present Minister of Health. [*Desk thumping*]

South Africa, Zweli Mkhize resigned to bring stability to the health department as he was about to be fired. Minister Deyalsingh must do the honourable thing, he must do the same, resign or be fired. [*Desk thumping*] There must be continued morality and integrity in public office. Minister Deyalsingh has failed miserably to manage this COVID-19 pandemic, 1,600 deaths have occurred and many thousands more who have lifelong disabilities subsequent to the COVID. The COVID-19 deaths of over 1,600 citizens rest squarely on the hands of the Minister of Health, the hon. Prime Minister and their seriously clinically inexperienced medical advisors. They must all go. We call for them to be removed and to resign on their own.

The Minister—you would remember the Minister of Health saying at one time “doh wear mask”. Then he come back and he said, wear mask, take a “merino” and tear it up and wear your mask. And the medical doctor in the team



saying that COVID is a little thing, and then the Minister would come and say, COVID-19 is not a serious issue. His Chief Medical Officer told the Joint Select Committee of Parliament that COVID-19 is not a serious issue. January 30, 2020, I raised a Motion of urgent public importance in the other place for debate, but was refused. We raised it two other times in the other place; that is three occasions. We tried to debate this COVID-19 in the Lower House and twice it was raised in this august Chamber and nothing was—we were refused to debate it. But in March 2020 the Government claimed that it was ready to manage the pandemic but they were in a disastrous state of ill-preparedness, Mr. Vice-President.

They had insufficient personal protective equipment, masks and gowns, insufficient frontline doctors and nurses when there were nearly 300 junior doctors. House officers begging for jobs, some working in service stations, hundreds of qualified nurses unemployed actively seeking employment with reasonable contracts, not one month or three months, but contracts which can give them job security. No job security for the nurses. You could understand how they feel when they go out to save lives and they know that their jobs are not well taken care of? There was scarcity of ventilators, a few temporary ventilators were purchased many of which are now damaged and still being used today, although temporary—18 months ago temporary now 18 months.

So do you understand, Mr. Vice-President, why patients continue to die in the ICU on a daily basis? There are storages of appropriate pharmaceuticals and lab reagents, acute shortage of test kits, deliberate under testing to suit the PNM political agenda and hoodwinking the population for election purposes in August, giving the false impression that they had fantastic management of the pandemic but with dangerous misleading COVID-19 propaganda.

CARPHA alone was doing a few tests. The tracing of contacts were grossly

inadequate. The Minister kept on promising that hospitals will commence testing shortly but up to today not one test is being done in public hospitals. He ominously refused the private ISO accredited and certified private labs from testing, but the Government had their ulterior motive to win the election by false propaganda. Why is it that now the same labs have done over 160,000 COVID-19 tests by the same private labs which he refused? This of course comes at a cost to citizens, over \$250 million have been spent by citizens to pay for their own testing, whereas internationally citizens could walk or drive in anywhere for free testing. And Government is still refusing to allow the rapid antigen testing readily available in countries globally which has a 95 per cent specificity and sensitivity. It is an extremely reliable test, cheaper, faster and very convenient to be used at home. But the Government refuses this to bring in the rapid antigen testing. This is the state of affairs in this country.

The Minister of Health does not know what he is doing and he is advised and the Prime Minister is advised by a team of inexperienced young doctors who have no clinical experience, they just have a Master in public health and that is their claim to fame. When there are thousands of senior doctors who could help this country, who could help to prevent lives but they are thrown under the bus. You remember the Minister of Health saying he can only obtain 72 ventilators if required. Today we have 24 in total to be spread from Couva Hospital, Augustus Long Hospital, Arima Hospital, Tobago only has five. What a shame and disgrace. We have one of the worst in the world in terms of ICU units and we still have temporary units after 18 months, Mr. Vice-President. Ventilatory and ICU support in Trinidad and Tobago is one of the worst in the world.

Is it surprising then that the Government and the four public health doctors are refusing to provide information on the mortality in the Intensive Care Units and

High Dependency Units. They are running from that answer. I have asked that question publicly on three or four occasions. I spoke to the Chief Medical Officer to provide that information, but the question is being repeatedly, being repeatedly—but there is stony silence. No answers. They are deliberately hiding that important information from our citizens because they know that they will be shamed if they provide that information and make it public. That is why they are hiding it.

Now I challenge the Chief Medical Officer today, I challenge the Minister of Health, publish the statistics of the mortality in the intensive care unit. [*Desk thumping*] We will find that possibly 10 out of 10 patients who go in the ICU come out dead at the end of it, whereas the rest of the world, seven out of 10 patients in ICUs come out alive. You have junior doctors operating and intubating patients. Junior doctors not understanding the oxygen saturation, the intake pressure, the out take pressure. What is happening? Mr. Vice-President, this is absolutely and dangerously unacceptable, when globally the ICUs have an average success rate of about 70 per cent.

So what is the mortality rate in our ICU? When families hear their loved ones is in the ICU—

**1.40 p.m.**

**Sen. Dr. Browne:** Mr. Vice-President, Standing Order 46(1). The degree of detail being examined might be better placed in another debate.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Mark? Thank you. Hon. Senator, so continue along the line that you are going, but understand that you are going into a number of examples along a point that will start to be repeated if it runs on for 40 minutes.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Yeah, thank you.

**Mr. Vice-President:** So continue in what you are doing but just understanding that

you are talking about health and then you are going into examples as to why certain things are the way they are, but it coming into tedious repetition if you do that for 40 minutes straight.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** I am guided, Mr. Vice-President. I am elated to see my colleague, the hon. Senator and Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs standing. It is nice to see you, hon. Minister. [*Laughter*] We go a long way back. Mr. Vice-President, the hon. Opposition Leader has consistently called for a commission of enquiry into the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even up to last night the Leader of the Opposition did so again. You would have recently seen that the British Government acceded to the call for such an enquiry and that enquiry has been completed and the findings will soon be made available to the rest of the world, and this is what we want for Trinidad and Tobago.

This is how leaders operate in a democracy, not here as a dictatorship, and I continue to ask for a confidential enquiry into every COVID-19 related deaths. We have been brought up—the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs knows that, and I know we have two other medical colleagues in this House, Sen. Remy and Sen. Deyalsingh if he is still here, who would know that in Britain there is a confidential enquiry into every maternal death occurring in Britain. But we have 1,600 deaths, Mr. Vice-President, we must have a confidential enquiry. Confidential so we will know where we are going wrong. We are almost 20 months into this pandemic and we still do not know what is happening. Hundreds of grieving families have unanswered questions surrounding the unfortunate deaths of their loved ones, sometimes unable to obtain any information of their families and only to come to hear that their families have died in a mortuary somewhere; come to identify the body, only to discover at times the body is not there with questions as to where it can be found.

So we have underemployment of nurses, no contracts for nurses, no contracts for doctors, keeping the doctors gagged. Victimization issues come into play, they cannot talk. So where is the 5 billion spent on the COVID-19 pandemic? No answers. Imagine we had to receive seven ventilators from the American Embassy to assist our failures in procurement. Could we not have bought more pulse oximeters at \$40 each? We could have bought 2,000, 10,000—40 by 10,000, we will work out that figure—and oxygen concentrator which helps to save a life is over 2,000 max. Ventilators at 200,000, we could have bought the 50 ventilators which would be about 10 million. So they failed to purchase and we are still using temporary ventilators to manage infected patients.

At one time, Mr. Vice-President, there were nearly 10,000 infected patients quarantining at home, thereby infecting family members resulting in some deaths of families. No medical advice and clinical support was provided to those infected families. Imagine 10,000 quarantining at home while deaths were occurring from their households. At COVID-19 emergency tents medical staff and doctors had to wait sometimes seven days for the COVID test result of critically ill patients, and who could not have been transferred for more emergency care, dying while awaiting transfer. Many have died in their homes, in the ambulances and in the emergency tents unable to receive critical care management, and we all remember Prime Minister Rowley's invitation of Trinidad and Tobago citizens to Tobago at Easter as the Government fools the people saying it is safe to go to Tobago. And as confirmed by the Ministry of Works and Transport, more than 50,000 travelled to and from Tobago.

In the three months subsequent to Easter, Trinidad and Tobago experienced over 900 COVID-19 deaths, over 1,320 in five months from May to September and over 75 in Tobago, when prior to Easter, Tobago had less than five deaths.

Thousands of elderly citizens were invited for vaccines, standing in crowded long lines in pouring rain to come and receive your vaccine which was really unavailable in the first place, some becoming COVID-19 infected and unfortunately dying shortly after. Senior citizens had to line up. We would remember that from the newspaper, photographs and pages. Families have lost very dearly beloved mothers, fathers subsequent, and I would say deceitful and considered wilful endangerment of their sacred, cherished lives. And here we have the untouchable cultural artiste, CEO at NCRHA, Davlin Thomas, continues his highhanded malicious and spiteful tirade across the health sector. His incompetence has been condoned by the PNM's high officer holders. Why? This CEO has transferred out of six—

**Sen. Mitchell:** Mr. Vice-President, on a point of order please. 46(4), quite offensive. [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Okay, Members. Members! Senator, so in terms of the strong inflammatory language, just temper it a bit. Continue.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Right. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, the CEO of the North Central Regional Health Authority transferred out six very senior experienced consultant doctors. Intensivist, anaesthetist, pulmonologist, emergency and critical care doctors, nephrologist, all removed from Couva Hospital. So it is no mystery then that just after this their deaths multiplied, and 12 senior doctors came to their help and asked questions for them but they were then gently threatened with their jobs. So 18 senior doctors have been kept out of the mainstream provision of medical care both at Couva and Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex Hospitals, while citizens were dying and no one being held accountable.

Where are the drugs to save lives? Where are the antiviral drugs of

remdesivir, the monoclonal antibodies which one of the advisors could not pronounce? Tocilizumab, that is the name of the drug. Where is the drug from Regeneron with the antibodies in the plasma? There is no cost to a life, Mr. Vice-President. Everything should be put out there to save a life. We as senior doctors, and my colleagues in this House know, if we lose a patient that is most sacred to us. It is painful, and as I can recall in my 40 years of private medical practice, I have never lost a patient on the operating theatre table, neither have I lost a patient at delivery and that is God's work. So for us as senior doctors, our lives [*Desk thumping*]*—*patient lives are very sacred to us and we cannot lose 1,600 people like that. You have to put out your best pharmaceuticals.

I understand that the monoclonal antibodies are not available in Trinidad. You have now coming into play an oral antiviral drug that has passed through phase one and phase two and waiting for phase three trial that may save the lives of all the world, and the vaccines might be put behind the shelf. So, Mr. Vice-President, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health and his advisory team must be held accountable for this blatant pervasive issue of possibly spite by the CEO at Couva and Eric Williams and this is very serious. Some people may say it is, what we may call it, criminal negligence. You hear every day, Mr. Vice-President, parallel health system, parallel health system, but you do not really have a parallel health system in this country. It is not efficient, it is not functioning properly. [*Desk thumping*] The Government has failed to provide any research or imperial data and analysis in the health sector particularly over the last two years with comparison of non-COVID years to COVID-19 years. So what is happening in our parallel health care system?

Thousands of minor and major surgical procedures have been postponed in our hospitals. Many cancer patients have died while awaiting surgery and

chemotherapy treatments over the last 20 months. Many screening heart disease patients have died awaiting open heart bypass surgery. Many hernias have become strangulated with bowel complications. Patients are being given two-year appointments for surgical procedures. Two years to wait for a surgery? During this waiting time they die. Sometimes there is a waiting time of six months to a year for a diagnostic CT scan or an MRI. Hundreds of patients with diabetes, hypotension, asthma, heart disease, kidney disease worsened and died from their uncontrolled and untreated medical complications. So what a national disgrace and they keep talking about a parallel health system and a parallel health system.

The parallel health system has again gone through. There is no medical management there. So do not provide lip service to fool the people about a parallel health system. Where is your conscience? You know it has been in an abysmal failure.

Let me speak a bit about vaccine hesitancy. There has been and continuing an alarming absence of any carefully planned appropriate education campaign on the necessity for taking vaccines. You just cannot say vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate every day. You have to change the minds of the people. Dr. Carissa Etienne, Director of PAHO, recently emphasized this as urgent and absolutely necessary to counter the anti-vaxxers' thrust. A carefully planned education campaign published in the *Express* newspapers, Dr. Etienne's statement was published.

So, the Ministry of Health must assemble teams of experts, consultant doctors—which we have hundreds of in the country—and nurses at various media houses and designated public areas to answer direct questions and concerns from citizens who expressed reservations, apprehension, anxiety and fear of accepting the vaccines. We need to bring them in, educate them. I cannot think about any real



contraindication to the administration of the vaccine, and I want to give the Government the support in this way by saying to the people go and get your vaccines because there is really no absolute contraindication to the administration of the vaccine. I cannot think of any. If you have a cancer you are the most important person to go and get it. If you have any other disease you should get it first because you stand the risk of dying if you get the disease. But this sadly has not been contemplated and I proffer to the Government for them to consider having massive education campaigns in public places particularly.

Questions have been asked, Mr. Vice-President, on the useless, unacceptable, unjustifiable and unnecessary extended state of emergency and lockdowns. Demonstrative of a dictatorship of an autocratic Government, this state of emergency restricting citizens from doing anything, being used to prevent expressions of dissent from the citizens, and for the unjust curtailment of one's freedom, movement and freedom of association while engendering joblessness, hunger and sometimes starvation and social and economic destruction.

I call, Mr. Vice-President, on citizens, I call on citizens, all of you who are listening, to stand together and defend our constitutional rights and democracy. A time to change Prime Minister Rowley's Government now widely accepted or acknowledged as incompetent, dictatorial, arrogant, autocratic, and certainly a failed Government.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator—

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Today, I ask—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, remember the ruling that I spoke to before in relation to inflammatory comments, so just—again, once again reminding, temper them as you move forward in your contribution.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Mr. Vice-President, may I be reminded how much time I

have again?

**Mr. Vice-President:** You end at 2.05.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** 2.05?

**Mr. Vice-President:** That is right.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Right. So, Mr. Vice-President, and Members of this august House, I heard the Minister speak about maternal mortality and neonatal mortality and so on, “ratched up” figures made to suit untruths statistical information because the Central Statistical Office has no information on that.

When I asked the lead member of the CSO, he said, “Dr. Gopeesingh, I cannot give you any information because we do not have it at the moment.” So where is the Minister getting his information? He is even confusing whether it is maternal mortality ratio or maternal mortality rate, and I would not have time to explain the difference. But the hon. Minister of Health obviously remains confused as to the difference between maternal mortality rate and maternal mortality ratio, and then he speaks about screening tests, and yet again he is again providing unscientific, unresearched statistics. So I want to advise the Minister, please do not continue to fool the population with gross untruths and unscientific statement. Respect people’s knowledge, do not exaggerate untruths. You must have the integrity in the conduct of your service to the people.

So, there is a lot of information on the—

**Sen. Mitchell:** 42(6)—

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:**—statistics in relation to Trinidad in terms of—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, there is a point of order.

**Sen. Mitchell:** 42(6). How could he say that we should have integrity in his—Mr. Vice-President.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Say again, I did not hear you, Minister.

**Sen. Mitchell:** 42(6)—46(6), Mr. Vice-President. He just said that the Minister of Health should have integrity in his affairs and something like that.

**Mr. Vice-President:** So Senator, like I said, in the other rulings before, the implication of improper motives and the inflammatory comments.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** I am moving on. Yeah. No, he has a deliberate—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Members, please.

**Sen. Mark:** Sorry, sorry.

**Mr. Vice-President:** You are talking over me whilst I am ruling and the Senator is trying to hear what I have to say. Continue, Senator.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, these here are neophytes in the thing, you know. They are neophytes. I have had 21 years' experience in this business and you understand they must jump up and try to say something to waste your time.

Mr. Vice-President, there have been lots of promises by this Government on health. They said Couva Hospital, they will establish a public/private partnership in 2016. They are waiting on the Welch Report in 2016. No public health private sector partnership. They said they will open an offshore medical school for the last six years since 2015 manifesto. No offshore medical school, but near, all Caribbean countries, Grenada, Antigua, Barbados have established these offshore medical schools. My colleagues in the House will know that, but they have been talking about it for six years. They promising a national health insurance system since 2020, repeated every five years at election time.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I can speak about the six years of PNM's destruction of the health sector, suffering and death of thousands of citizens; horrible overcrowding at Accident and Emergency departments of the hospital; unacceptable waiting times for surgery; insufficient medical resources; non-

functioning diagnostic equipment; unavailable reagents for lab testing and so on; sudden closure of the Central Block at Port of Spain Hospital rendering little or no care for the people in north and west Trinidad; they maliciously terminated the construction of the National Oncology Centre putting an end to years of professional expertise and recommendations for a one site centre for the management of the near 3,000 cancer patients annually; scarcity and lack of basic pharmaceuticals and CDAP drugs at hospitals and health centres; shortage and lack of anti-cancer chemotherapy drugs causing worsening of cancers in patients needing treatment in a timely manner; no lab testing facilities at the public hospitals for suspected heart patients; over 18 babies died at the neonatal unit in 2018; deliberately refusing to act on recommendations to improve the health system as laid out in the Third and Fourth Joint Select Committee Reports of 2016 and 207 in this Parliament; non-implementation of recommendations of the Welch Report and so on; 1,300 qualified nurses remain unemployed; more than 400 doctors remain on the breadline for months and months and hospitals became killing fields; citizens admitted with curable illnesses ending up dead due to lack of medical and nursing personnel and equipment. So there is a lot more—you will remember the Zika infection recently with microcephaly babies infected and these babies are now suffering, their parents are suffering and so on; breakdown in the mortuary refrigeration at San Fernando Hospital.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I brought these issues and critical analyses of the performance of the Ministry of Health, the Minister of Health, his COVID advisory team. They have failed the citizens of this country. They must all resign or be fired immediately. [*Desk thumping*]

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

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Five more minutes. Mr. Vice-President, since March

2020, near two academic years or six educational terms have gone with no face to face education of our near quarter million students. Thousands of students lost two academic years in their educational pursuits. March '20 to June '20, September 2020 to June 2021, one full academic year; September '21 to present, another term. So even after the first 12 months since COVID-19 pandemic, over 70,000 students had no IT devices to receive online learning from the teachers on various platforms, and thousands more are without Wi-Fi connectivity.

So near 100,000 students or greater were unacceptably deprived from their constitutionally enshrined quality and equitable education even one year after the pandemic began. Today, still 40,000 students are without devices, and without Wi-Fi connectivity to thousands more. Their 18 months Wi-Fi connectivity numbers are still unknown, and about several thousands of our students. Mr. Vice-President, after 18 months in this pandemic this disgraceful state of incompetence and incapacity of governance, and yet this is a new Minister of Education. We have to give her time to settle down but it is 14 months now, but her predecessors, the two previous Ministers of Education, destroyed the entire education sector. They swiftly reversed all the significant gains we made in IT and so many other areas in their five years of governance. We have enough primary school teachers. Four hundred and eighty-five secondary school principals, secondary school teachers, they could have provided this information in two weeks about how many students are without Wi-Fi and how many students are without devices. It took this Government more than one year and they still do not know how many students are without. That is a disgrace, Mr. Vice-President.

And imagine the Government begging the corporate bodies for IT devices and we saved 221 million per year from the school feeding programme, we saved 30 million per year from school transport. So in two years they saved \$500 million,

you could not buy 70,000 laptops or IT devices for students? That is the lack of governance, capacity and capability, Mr. Vice-President. Could you imagine how successful we would have been today if Prime Minister Rowley had continued our PP successful IT programmes? But no, as soon as Prime Minister Rowley came into office in September 2015 his Government destroyed the IT education programme and laptop programme. Two generations of students have suffered as a result. Education destruction and precipitous reversal of all the significant educational gains we made in 2010 and we are now speaking about free Wi-Fi for schools and so on? We had that. We had some schools with 100 megabits per second.

The scholarships went down from 450 to 50, meritocracy destroyed. Bursaries for PNM supporters. They destroyed the Tech-Voc education system. They destroyed the Caribbean vocational qualifications one and two. Political interference in learning institutions of UTT and several lecturers dismissed. School construction has been a mess. Three schools constructed in six years, Mr. Vice-President. The performance in primary schools has been abysmal, 17 per cent of students getting less than 13 per cent; 17 per cent of—

**Sen. Mitchell:** Mr. Vice-President, 46(1), please. This has nothing to do with the Appropriation Bill.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Continue, Senator.

**Sen. Mitchell:** You are talking about the past.

**Sen. Mark:** Take your seat.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Okay, Members. Senator continue.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Mr. Vice-President, in conclusion, as I close I wish to remind the population that this war against our nation and people by this Government can only be won, and our democracy and economic and social

stability can only be rebuilt and restored if every single citizen stands up and fights for it. The Opposition Leader and our members fight tirelessly every day against the galloping dictatorship that is engulfing our nation, but it is not just the UNC fight.

Mr. Vice-President, we have remained too quiet for far too long. It is inexcusable that now in our nation's most desperate time of need when our democracy, economic standing and social stability are tethering on the brink of collapse, our country's key groups in all sectors have gone quiet and remain so for too long. Why is this so? Is it that the members of these organizations are terrified of this Government's ongoing punitive, destructive and vengeful tendencies? Are they afraid that if they speak out the Government will seek to humiliate, slander, and destroy them as it is its hallmark? Why are you silent? How much more the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are willing to take? Do your duty and stand up for your country.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Do as I do today—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator.

**Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:**—and come back into the—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Gopee-Scoon—Gopeesingh, sorry, your time is up.

[*Desk thumping*] Sen. Ibrahim. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Dr. Muhammad Yunus Ibrahim:** Mr. Vice-President, I begin in the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful. I thank you for giving me the time and the consideration to make a short contribution, what is supposed to be a contribution based upon the purse of the nation [*Desk thumping*] as opposed to what we just had to undergo, which is a continuation of last night's forum. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] Now as it stands, we have had the return of a veteran of

this House whom held two Ministries in his longstanding career as a politician under the UNC Government. Questionable in the first instance in health, being a medical doctor and coming into the third wave of his existence within the Parliament and to state comments that I have to forget my speech here and deal with—[*Desk thumping*] Now Uncle Tim, you know I have full respect for you—

**Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh:** Thank you very much.

**Sen. Dr. M. Y Ibrahim:**—and I appreciate being able to follow you in this House.

**Sen. Rambharat:** However.

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** However, [*Laughter*] I recall in 2020 a general election that videos upon videos with the yellow caravan was seen not social distancing, with the yellow caravan was seen without masks and creating, creating superspreader—possible superspreader—events. When it is that this side managed to keep it virtual just as we do responsibly [*Desk thumping*] the other side managed to keep it ad hoc. Now, why I am speaking of this? Because I recall being perturbed last year when you suffered the fate of having COVID and my heart reached out to you. But what I really remember the most was your then commendation, praise, [*Desk thumping*] and also gratitude for the same parallel health care system that you took to town in that booth, that I do not know if the long-term effects of long COVID is memory. [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

You stated and you have taken a stance against three individuals you stated to teach. That in another place across the corridor was a stance taken by the leader a few debates ago, in addition to which the hon. Minister of Health, Mr. Terrence Deyalsingh, had to defend the public service doctors and he defended to a tee. Well, Mr. Gopeesingh, doctor, colleague—

**Hon. Senator:** Senator.

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—Senator, you may have taught them, but I studied with



all three of them and I can attribute to their calibre, [*Desk thumping*] their competence, and their levels of service.

**2.10 p.m.**

We will not go into names personally but the current CMO, Mr. Avery Hinds and Mrs. Abdul-Richards and Dr. Parasram, CMO, all have excelled, [*Desk thumping*] all of their works in the Faculty of Medicine. They have gone further to be given scholarships and grants to pursue their Master's programmes and they have come back and they are perpetuating the system of the teacher teaching, being taught and then after perpetuating the system of fabulous longstanding Master's programmes in medicine in this country. To come down on them in such a manner is to breed havoc and doubt and lack of competence which undermines the "man on the street thinking" of who is responsible for their lives.

I will let you know this. In the budget, the Minister of Health in his contribution and also the Minister of Finance managed to state two things of great significance which is a key marker, it is an absolute key marker in the health care provision in a country. I do not know if you recall, and everybody in this House should, that up to a certain point in time, we had way too many neonatal deaths in this country. It was the headline every other week "baby dies", "mothers being mismanaged" and one of the key markers of success is to actually decrease those deaths, and this Government under the astute leadership of Dr. Christopher Keith Rowley [*Desk thumping*] followed by Mr. Terrence Deyalsingh has teamed up with a health care team and those figures are down. [*Desk thumping*]

So the comorbidities we speak of and the fact that COVID is amongst us, the fact that we have a pandemic which no Government in this country since independence or republic has had to manage, from the decrease in revenue to the crippling incapability of being able to perform, our Ministries and services, we

have kept this country head above water and are now in a position to move forward. [*Desk thumping*]

You stated that the CMO and the Minister of Health back in January last year before COVID reached the shores of Trinidad and Tobago, you stated that they said it poses no real threat but that was then, that was a shot in time, that was at a JSC at that moment. And you have also spoken about drugs that are in first and second trial stages which we know as professionals have to reach to third before reaching. A particular stance has been taken by the Prime Minister of this country, the leader, and that is there will be no drug going in to fight COVID and help anybody unless it is WHO certified. [*Desk thumping*] Okay? Those drugs have not reached where they are supposed to reach. Even the contribution from another Senator in the recent past asking for ivermectin to be placed upon the drugs for the thing. It is just not WHO recognized and approved. We cannot do this to our nation and our citizenry and they are not guinea pigs. We have to act responsibly and we have to go with the data that we have.

Regrettably, for everybody in this world, every nation, every state, COVID caught everyone with “dey pants down”. You speak of ventilation—

**Hon. Senator:** So to speak.

**Sen. Dr. M. Yunus Ibrahim:** Yes. You speak of ventilators but everything in the medical field turned upside down because they were now faced with supply and demand issues. Ventilators and the two or three companies internationally that produce ventilators never kept a back stock. It is not about having gloves and having masks. Even the key ingredient polypropylene which is a current and common ingredient in the making of bibs, masks and other paraphernalia for medical gowns and so on, because of the gross increase in the demand worldwide, the production could not have kept up with the demand. So when you have small

products on the medical aspect cannot keep up with the demand, how can you expect a nation which is a drop in the ocean to just pick up a phone or to make an order for a ventilator that needs six to 18 months of production and line up behind all other countries who needed it as well? We also need to take task and learn and to sit down and to plan for the event and this is what COVID has done. I rest my case when it comes to the health aspect but I will say one more thing. You speak about drugs but I remember one of the drugs that you guys were recommending was sunlight. "Sunlight kills COVID", from your esteemed leader's lips.  
[Crosstalk]

Let us move on to the Ministry of Education. In a retrograde analysis of the last 10 years of education in Trinidad and Tobago, moving forward and recognizing the role of what learning is and how much students and teachers need to be in a physical classroom, what has been realized is that you cannot put a price on physical school and online school is not a replacement for the physical classroom. You speak about devices and connectivity but I will share with you some of the statistics as provided in the national budget and through the Ministry of Education. April last year, we were faced with shutdowns. By September 2020, 50,670 laptops and devices were secured and distributed, 9,023 went to teachers, 41,647 went to students; 23,000 of which came from corporate Trinidad and Tobago. And I will let you know that that 9,023 represented 70 per cent of the teachers in this country.

You want to talk about distribution and disbanding, let us talk about the fact that in five months' time, 60 per cent of the laptops were acquired and achieved which was done in a five-year period by the previous regime. From that to now, 20,000 devices more have been acquired up to June 2021. And consistently, September last year, April this year and another time for September this year,

needs-tested and surveys with direct links from the Ministry of Education to the principals of schools throughout this nation in working hand-in-hand to actually realize the need versus the deployment of these devices. Connectivity was seen as an issue; 10,000 Mi-Fi devices were ordered, 1,100 given out so far and only last week Wednesday, 5,500 more have come in out of this 10,000 order but this is in collaboration with all.

When you take a nation who is focused from astute leadership understanding the role of education for a developing nation, recognizing the fact that an educated nation means a promissory land for our future and you take into consideration the budgetary allocation the Minister of Finance has given education this year, you would see that it is the largest of the whole bunch and that is because when it comes to spending and maintaining, the same things you spoke about and I will mention it here again: GATE has not stopped; repairs and maintenance to tertiary education institutions have not stopped; the funding to maintain salaries for teachers, 2.3 billion, has not stopped; \$645 million for bursaries to nationals who qualify, not to one side of the equation because we believe in fairness and we believe in equity.

The spending on this Ministry over the last year, even during the pandemic was realized and the following projects still occurred. We had 300-plus emergency repairs and maintenance to be done. We had four schools in the recent past after continued expenditure opened. We have 27 current emergency repairs and maintenance for the properties that are earmarked for this year and 80 of the 300 emergencies are still outgoing.

In this national budget to ensure connectivity, to ensure learning does not stop, to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago can depend on the youths who are being trained now, \$35 million has been allocated to the newly—and

being managed by the EIMS, that is the Education Information Management System. This unit is responsible for taking the task of rolling out the remaining amounts of devices and its connectivity and all other issues that follow.

I would have liked to go further into some others. Mr. Vice-President, how is my time looking?

**Mr. Vice-President:** You end at 2.46.

**Sen. Dr. M. Yunus Ibrahim:** That is great. So having responded to the best of my ability, I would then go back to script and contribute to the budget in a manner in which I had hoped for before.

My colleagues of all sides, let me first thank and congratulate the Minister of Finance on his seventh national budget, one which under astute leadership shows promise of progress and positivity [*Desk thumping*] and although it is a budget where we may realize a deficit, I pray as a citizen that we continue to grow economically annually and progressively and to close this gap. A noteworthy point is that of the last three to five budgets, this is the budget that is actually closest to a balanced budget.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in a nutshell, this budget came as a welcome breath of fresh air to the nation and in many quarters, as a surprise for it is a budget that aligns itself with the *Vision 2030* and mandate where the focus is on transforming the economy, food security whilst leaving no one behind. For the most part, the public reactions from the individuals to the interest groups have been positive. It has gotten the thumbs up from business groups, it has gotten the thumbs up from manufacturers, from the farmers and more so from the entrepreneurs.

Let me quote from a newsletter published only last week Wednesday from an association near and dear to me, the San Juan Business Association of Trinidad and Tobago and I quote from the letter "San Juan Speaks" and it goes as follows:

The San Juan Business Association rates this budget and gives the Government a score of eight out of ten.

That is a B plus on any scale. According to them—

**Hon. Senators:** That is an A. [*Laughter*]

**Sen. Dr. M. Yunus Ibrahim:** Yeah. Well, they used to mark me hard in school “eh know”. The noteworthy things that have been identified that were pointed out were the Board of Inland Revenue; SME contribution deferral, accelerated VAT reimbursements which is something that has been ongoing and is not new to this year; tax reductions for exporters, digital tech players, and for the construction sector; business loans, access and interest absorption to the tune of \$300 million; new companies being taxed 50 per cent of chargeable income; renewed efforts for exports through the proposed merger of InvesTT and exporTT; an online marketplace for arts and crafts and for cottage industry; agriculture and food security as well as the zero-rating of some important imported food items.

Mr. Vice-President, this is from an independent business body that understands the role of business and how business trickles down to the man on the street through community and national growth. This is noteworthy. The reason being is that when the nationals appreciate this budget over the cloud of doom and gloom and mischievous attempts to distract, it means that the Government is reaching its target audience and this is a hallmark of success. Others have stood in disbelief in the face of receiving the nod by our Minister of Finance after they have consulted with him, listening and delivering to their requests going so far as labelling it “the hoax”, other critics stood flatfooted in disbelief claiming that this Government is trying to do more this year than it has in the past years. But although the latter may be somewhat true, the reality is the consequence of the pandemic because for almost the last two years or so, we as a nation have kept our

head above water in survival, we have still thrived and managed to progress and create deliverables but due to health and safety restrictions, we as a nation in the best interest of the people have not been able to operate at full capacity.

However, with the increasing protection in the horizon of nationals through continued vaccination drives in sight which is currently at 3,000 shots a day and also having reached 40 per cent vaccination in the quest to achieving herd immunity, we can now sit and plan the way forward leaving no one behind. This coupled with the reopening of many sectors of the economy including physical presence of staff at Ministries would allow us to move forward swiftly and in a timely manner. I would have liked to say this is a post-pandemic PNM, “Promises Now Materializing”, but it can be likened more to a slingshot effect. What is noteworthy is that this is the only government like I said before that has had hits to hits with that, everything has been turned upside down.

Let us talk about performance under pressure under the pandemic and focus on a marker of good governance and that is the performance of the Ministry of Education. And why do I say good governance? Because it listens and it does its research and it focuses on the indigent and it focuses on those who are most needing of help. Let me quote for you what UNICEF has to say about education in this pandemic which is not to be blamed upon anyone or any government.

“We are facing an education crisis. For nearly 77 million children, the pandemic has taken away their classrooms for the past 18 months. Schoolchildren worldwide have lost 1.8 trillion hours and counting of in-person learning due to COVID-19 lockdowns.”—Internationally.

“The right to go to school and learn is central to every child’s”—holistic—“development, safety and well-being. Yet in too many countries classrooms remain closed while social gatherings continue to take

place...”

Mr. Vice-President, not in this country. In fact, the reverse has been true. Not under this administration. It has been “see about the children first”, let us get the examinations out of the way, let us move towards vaccination, get back into a state of safety and then open back up the rest of the economy. Ask yourself the question, pandemic or no pandemic, 2020, through a then formed unit called the Education District Health Unit which had one doctor and 21 nurses, we were able to complete CSEC, CAPE and SEA examinations in a pandemic. [*Desk thumping*] In 2021, the same occurred, CSEC, CAPE and SEA done and then we will move on to the rest of the opening up of the economy. The UNICEF continues to state that:

“The cost of school closures on students’ learning...and well-being has been devastating.

The repercussions for every child, their family, their community...”—the future leaders of our land—“will be felt for years to come.

School closures have led to reduced physical activity...poorer diets, increased levels of anxiety and self-harm...”—with also the—“exposure to”—the most horrific—“domestic violence.”

Although some students have been able to access remote learning during school closures but many have struggled to do so and this is because of the lack of support. Everything has been turned upside down. When I speak to my clients on a daily basis, they come in with a level of frustration and you see it on the nationals and they say, “you know, ah cannot handle it at home anymore”. “What you see in meh living room is now meh office, what is meh kitchen is now meh husband office. Meh daughter have to take one bedroom and meh son have to take the next bedroom for their classes and we have to put on devices so everybody could be on their own internal Zoom calls in the day and not be in each other’s space”. We



need to do something to maintain the movements from people from online class going to the hybrid system which is being done now and then with safety in mind, get the children back to full schooling, physical schooling.

The pandemic alone, worldwide, over 2019 to 2020 only, has shifted the average GDP of all nations from an average of 1.5 to 2.5 points and that is just the pandemic. The effects of not educating in person, according to the UNICEF, will result in catastrophic levels and reduced GDP to the tune of trillions of dollars. What we have to understand is that the Ministry of Education through a retrograde study looking over a 10-year period of the examinations that were realized and the results that were realized over the last two years, it showed yes, many more students crossed 90 per cent and they did better but the reality was that much more students who used to score between 40s, the 30 percentile, the 30 per cent score grade also increased. This means clearly that there is no replacement for the physical school and to return to school, we must. However, we are still in a state of flux. The pandemic is very far from over and as we move from online to the current hybrid to full physical school, we must take the safety and well-being of our children, teachers and parents and the needs in mind.

In the most recent talks with the Ministry and the parent bodies for teachers parents association, the cry was this. Let us forget about the online as was suggested and let us stick to real schooling, face-to-face schooling only. That should be the goal but that is far from a possibility right now. What is only possible right now is until the numbers of vaccination are up and until herd immunity and the medication that was brought in for the virus for the vaccine for the school population, 12 to 18 population, has been saturated, then and only then can we realize that the schools can actually be safe zones for the students. To state and hope that we return and do not maintain a hybrid system, it is not a tenet of this

Government because it means that people would be left behind and that is too much of a high cost to the future of the nation.

But as of last year, the Ministry of Education has hit the ground running in its attempts to creating a digital eco-system for learning to never cease. The Ministry has had to produce through needs testing the acquisition of tools, devices, connectivity, teacher training and more so mental and well supports. I have already quoted the stats based upon my first response but just remember that as we push and move towards a vaccinated nation, we will get back to where we are at.

Trinbagonians have to ask themselves the question. It is wider than just the Government pushing vaccinations at you. Trinbagonians have to change their mindset and they have to ask themselves where do I want to be in the next year. What do I want to be doing in the next year? And it is simple, you know. I can tell you what I would like to be doing. I would like to be on the beach, I would like to drop my child to school where she or he is safe. I would like to come back with them knowing that the environment has been safe for them. I would like a balanced living for nationals of this country and the only way that can happen is if we continue our vaccination drive. It is not a matter of the Prime Minister every Saturday to come up and come out and to push vaccination or for the MPs to come up with their own slogans, that is part of their jobs, yes.

But Trinbagonians have to do is say, “here is what is going on, my neighbour tell me the other day, dying to go outside ah pan yard, buy ah corn soup and chill out”. “They want to breeze dey head, dey want to be amongst people.” So everybody in this country who has been vaccinated has to be an ambassador of vaccination. Every individual who has passed the test and shown the continued safety, has to go and hold the neighbour’s hand, has to go and talk to “dey yardman”, has to go and talk to “dey boss” who has had vaccine hesitation and talk

them through it. Only as a cohesive nation and a loving and caring environment would we be able to bring everybody through this stage of existence of this pandemic. I leave it up to the people of this country to understand their role having been vaccinated, we are 40 per cent there, the math will show that for the cohort of people who can be vaccinated, we are probably 50 per cent there because the 40 per cent applies to the entire population but remember there is a certain aspect who still cannot be vaccinated. The people of Trinidad and Tobago are in control of their destiny right now and we all must take heed and be our brother's keeper and pull everybody along for the greater good.

Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**2.40 p.m.**

**Mr. Vice-President:** Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, permit me to congratulate Sen. Ibrahim on his maiden contribution in this honourable Chamber. [*Desk thumping*] Sen. Richards.

**Sen. Paul Richards:** Good afternoon, colleagues. Mr. Vice-President, thank you for recognizing me and allowing me to join this debate in what is commonly known as budget 2021/2022, and allow me to reiterate your commendations for Sen. Dr. Ibrahim's maiden contribution, which was quite impressive. [*Desk thumping*] I certainly was not that composed with my maiden contribution, so commendations. And also too, commendations to Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh back in the Senate for a fiery contribution. Congratulations and commendations to you also, Dr. Gopeesingh. Well, I think you all can thump the desk for that too, you know.

Mr. Vice-President, let me try and put my contribution into context. Let me start by saying that I would like to acknowledge that October is Down Syndrome Awareness Month and I celebrate and congratulate the NGOs, including the Down Syndrome Family Network and other NGOs who are advocating, educating us and

working on behalf of children with Down syndrome and other special needs and people with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. I think it is important in terms of laying the context for what much of my contribution will be focused on.

The hon. Minister of Finance has an unenviable task. I do not think anyone would want to run into that portfolio at this time because we are in an era where, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy was already in a very fragile state because of depressed oil and gas prices, and then the pandemic hit the globe and quite quickly we realized many of our vulnerabilities would have been exacerbated by the vagaries and circumstances of responding to a pandemic like the rest of the world. So the Minister had the very Herculean task of providing emergency support and intervention to a population, and I stress the word “emergency support” because everything changed quite rapidly around the world, as other Governments had to do. He had to continue to try to stabilize an already fragile economy and position T&T competitively because it is not just about treading water in this case. Other economies are pivoting and balancing at the same time, some seeing it as an opportunity. And also, I think very, very importantly and sometimes understated, point the way forward and provide hope and vision for Trinidad and Tobago.

And I think in the context of one of the comments from Sen. Dr. Ibrahim earlier on and several of our colleagues yesterday and today, that part of it is very often understated and very important for the psyche of the country. Because it is very easy to underestimate the psychological oppression that this pandemic has meted out on our society in many, many different ways that we are seeing playing out in public from just under two years ago. So we have to continue to keep that in mind moving forward.

Mr. Vice-President, let me start by quoting from the man widely regarded as

the “Father of the Nation”, Dr. Eric Williams in his Independence Day address in 1962, as we are on the eve now of celebrating 60 years as an independent country, and I quote:

“What use will you make of your independence? What will you transmit to your children five years from today? Other countries ceased to exist in that period. Some, in much less time, have become totally disorganised, a prey to anarchy and civil war.

The first responsibility that devolves upon you is the protection and promotion of your democracy. Democracy means more, much more, than the right to vote and one vote for every man and every woman of the prescribed age. Democracy means recognition of the rights of others.

Democracy means equality of opportunity for all in education, in the public service, and in private employment—I repeat, and in private employment. Democracy means the protection of the weak against the strong.

Democracy means the obligation of the minority to recognise the right of the majority. Democracy means responsibility of the Government to its citizens, the protection of the citizens from the exercise of arbitrary power and the violation of human freedoms and individual rights. Democracy means freedom of worship for all and the subordination of the right of any race to the overriding right of the human race. Democracy means freedom of expression and assemble and organization.”

And we all know, it goes on.

I decided to start with that today because in the context of what I have described earlier on and very limited resources, we have to guard against leaving some behind, not deliberately, and in some instances because of the limited resources and the burdens being put on the national purse. Very often, the groups

that have been vulnerable before may not be as well accommodated for when we move forward, and that would be a travesty.

Martin Luther King in December 11, 1961, uttered a very similar refrain in his, “I Have a Dream” speech to what Dr. Williams would have promoted in his Independence speech, and I quote:

“A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and poverty widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.”

That is a very important consideration because part of what my thesis is today is the issue of growing inequality in Trinidad and Tobago and whether or not the budget really addresses that. And I started by identifying Minister Imbert’s—the hon. Minister’s very, very difficult task in trying to ensure that all are catered for and all feel that they are catered for and accommodated for in a budget, because a budget is much more than arithmetic.

A budget is not simply about revenue versus expenditure. A revenue is really about the Government’s policy and plan to deal with every aspect and every demographic and every dimension and sector of society, almost equally in the utopian sense of it. It is very important because I think one of the challenges and dangers we face in Trinidad and Tobago is the issue that certain sectors feel they are being marginalized and this social division is threatening to tear our country apart. And that is quite aside from the political division.

The social segregation and social divisions are threatening to destroy this country because some feel that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and the inequality gaps, as I will go on to point out to you in some references, seem to be increasing significantly in Trinidad and Tobago, and are not being addressed adequately. Interestingly enough, our National Anthem boasts:

“Here every creed and race find an equal place.”

A profound ideal but largely remains an ideal.

In the article by Prudence L. Carter and Sean Reardon from Stanford University, 2014, titled, “Inequality Matters”, they identified several dimensions of inequality between groups: socio-economic inequality, including health inequality, educational inequality and how the issue and the problem of inequality relates to the problem of poverty in any particular country.

Mr. Vice-President, in large respect, the budget’s vision for the country is really how the Government’s policy regarding dealing with sectors is to be funded and how the country is performing against its regional, hemispheric and global counterparts. My understanding of the main mandate for the Government’s recovery committee stands on three main platforms: digital transformation, economic revitalization and stabilization, and promoting equity and equality for every sector in society. Does the budget accomplish these in measure? And I will go through some. In my estimation, it is a mixed bag. In some instances, we seem to have put provisions to certainly realize these three platforms but in some ways I think we have come up quite short.

One of the areas I think we need to look at, through you to the hon. Minister of Finance, is the area of—and I note although hon. Minister Imbert, you had over three hours in the other place—is the issue of more accountability to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So while many of the answers for the questions I am asking may reside in the several voluminous budget documents, the general population generally does not go through those documents in detail. So it stands to reason that they get the information in what is provided for in the budget and levels of accountability from what they hear from the hon. Minister when he presents in the other place and in this place, and from his colleagues, and Members of the

Opposition, and Members of the Independent Bench when they make their contributions.

But I think one of the recurring issues that we see in Trinidad and Tobago is that the budget projects—and it is a projection of expenditure and revenue—it projects that the Government has identified falling to their policy for national development. But very often, accountability to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, where a number of these projects in the budget have been announced in many previous budgets, is lacking. Because we see several projects coming back and coming back and no accountability as to why they may not have been implemented or what is the stage of implementation and execution for those projects. And as one of the speakers yesterday, I believe, it is—it escapes me who it is now—identified we are great in Trinidad and Tobago at designing. We are great at proposing. We are great at designing ideas and stuff. We have a really poor implementation record. And I think it is important to provide that kind of accountability.

When you think of projected spends of between \$51 billion and \$56 billion in the past years, and in some instances supplementary appropriations, we come up woefully short on delivery and this is even before the pandemic struck. I think it is very important to provide that kind of accountability because then you end up providing opportunities for the population to say: “Well, this is a formality exercise and it holds no real grounding in what we can really expect as a country or in terms of deliverables for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, especially when the Government is seeking to increase its revenue through more efficient tax collection.” And do not get me wrong, tax collection is very important and we have seen some inroads made, in terms of the legislative framework aimed at making more efficient tax collection. But commensurate with tax collection is the efficient delivery of services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So while we are making



inroads, in terms of the passage, in this place, of the TT Revenue Authority as one of the means of more efficient tax collection, it stands as a responsibility to the Government to deliver on the services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I will go through some of the accomplishments and some of the shortcomings that we all face every day in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister indicated that 271,631 persons have benefited from support measures, including rental grants, food grants, and the challenges in disseminating those are underscored by a lack of a proper database of those in need, those in various categories of either, those in the middle class who are doing well, those who are described as in the poverty arena, those who are indigent. And I think if we had that kind of statistical data and information digitized, we would have a lot easier time, in terms of persons getting those grants.

One of the challenges that has also been identified is while many—no one can deny that many grants had been forthcoming, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. Because of the number of job losses, which are yet to be actually quantified, it did not go very far because one or two grants for a protracted period of no work, or less work, or reduced hours of work clearly put strains on the population in very different sectors. And I think while many of the grants were welcomed, the challenges in receiving the grants—and I know there were also challenges in making sure there was accountability, in terms of persons not double-dipping, et cetera—there are many who just felt extremely frustrated by the process through which the grants were to be accessed and the eventual delivery of those grants. So I think moving forward we need to really focus on that aspect very, very efficiently.

To me, one of the most important Ministries in the Government today should be the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. I know our

colleague earlier on, Minister Cox, delivered quite a detailed account of her Ministry's interventions and her Ministry's plans. But I think, when you really think about it, this Ministry, if operating in a transformative measure, should be the Ministry at the forefront of really providing one, the interventions through the grants as it is, but also providing the way forward to weaning persons in large cadres off what could be—end up being a dependency syndrome.

I know the Minister addressed it in her contribution but I still am yet to see the kind of national effort in getting people's mindsets off—because we have become a very welfare-driven society and this level of social intervention, though necessary at this time and even before the pandemic necessary, to a large extent, we need to send a message that persons need to take advantage of many of the provisions and themselves provide a level of urgency to get off this dependency syndrome in Trinidad and Tobago.

I do not put all the blame on the population and the sectors because it has been decades-long in being developed in Trinidad and Tobago through many different administrations, because it has become a kind of social lubricant, election cycle after election cycle and what ends up happening, as the business community has identified in many occasions, is that people are tending in many sectors toward make-work programmes and low productivity programmes, as opposed to availing themselves of training and opportunities to become independent and to become more productive contributors to GDP in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister identified that through NEDCO he would provide \$20 million in grants facility to assist micro and small businesses earning less than \$1 million to recover from the effects of COVID-19. The document did not say exactly how many businesses will benefit. But I would ask the question: Given NEDCO's abysmal record and accountability when it comes to business

grants in the past, what are the mechanisms for accountability? How is NEDCO going to make this provision different to what has happened in the past? When is NEDCO going to be asked about some levels of accountability, as to how it has performed in the past in managing this kind of disbursement and how we are going to measure how successful this initiative is?

Because it is one thing too for the hon. Minister of Finance to say in the budget, "I am making the provision of \$20 million to agencies like NEDCO." The Minister cannot go in and count to see how many businesses have benefited from it. I do not think it is the Minister's responsibility to actually monitor how it is going and how many businesses have actually survived, how much training is going on. But certainly, some accountability measure should come back to the people of Trinidad and Tobago to say that, "After we have invested \$20 million for this grant facility, we have created 16 new businesses in X and Y sector that are contributing X and Y to GDP." I think that is the only way we can move forward. Otherwise, we will continue, as we have been doing in the past, in pumping money into these vast black holes and never seeing anything for it. And that is the kind of accountability we need to start seeing in various sectors in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services must also move in a tangible and measurable sense into what its mantra is to transform persons, individuals, families, and communities from dependency to independence and sustainability. Otherwise, we will continue propagating what could be described as a welfare mentality in Trinidad and Tobago.

One of the mandates that I think is important in the Ministry in moving forward is it being an agency for data collection on the states of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago. That is urgently needed because the last assessment of that was by Dr. Ralph Henry, and Kairi and Associates Limited in 2014, and before that

2004, 2005. So part of the Ministry's mandate, in its interface with persons in various aspects of society, is to collect that data so we can use empirical approaches to deciding what categories have been identified as below the poverty line, above the poverty line, in the category called indigent, et cetera. Also, to identify a more medium to long-term holistic plan that can really transform lives and communities in a sustainable way, and of course, providing to the population KPIs as to how much progress is being made and how many individuals, families and committees have been transformed and what is the methodology or what is the manifestation of that transformation.

The hon. Minister in a Trinidad *Guardian* report by Renuka Singh on October 5<sup>th</sup> identified, and I quote:

“We are well aware that businesses and individuals are struggling...”—as the Minister defended his budget presentation.

And when he was speaking:

“...was the guest speaker at the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturing Association (TTMA's) post-Budget forum and said that the Budget was evidence that the Government was 'listening' to all stakeholders.

‘It was clearly not what people expected it to be...’—Minister Imbert is quoted as saying.

Mr. Vice-President, one of the articles I would like to quote, in terms of looking at the impact of the pandemic moving forward and whether or not the budget effectively addresses what has been one of the significant negative impacts is its impact on the middle class in Trinidad and Tobago, which seems to have taken quite a significant hit because of the effects of the pandemic, and of course, because of our economic state just before the pandemic.

In the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services 2017 document,

they identified two levels of poverty and they identified poverty as:

“The condition or state in which a person or household lacks the financial resources to meet basic needs such as food, proper shelter, water, utilities and”—efficient and effective—“health care.”

They also identified “multidimensional poverty” as:

“...a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity.”

It meant a:

“...lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society.”

It meant:

“...not having enough to feed and clothe a family...”—or oneself—“not having a school or a clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one’s food or a job to earn one’s...”—living—“not having access to credit”—or some financial services.

It meant:

“...insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities.”

It meant:

“...susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal and fragile environments, without access to clean water and sanitation...”—or food.

And that is quoted as UN 1998. I think it is very important for us to look at these kinds of documents to see where we are.

Please allow me to quote an *Express* article July 04, 2021. The banner header is:

“Perspectives on Poverty”

And it quotes noted economist Dr. Marlene Attzs of UWI, St. Augustine Campus.

She is a development economist and Advisor to the Pro-Chancellor and Campus Principal. Dr. M. Attzs was asked by the *Sunday Express* for her perspective on poverty in Trinidad and Tobago and she—the article is titled and quotes Dr. Attzs as saying:

Trinidad and Tobago is hurtling toward economic catastrophe.

She said, and I quote:

To address poverty in T&T it is going to be a Herculean task and we would not like what the results say to us because what we have been measuring for years as median income, size of household, children, educational levels, is only part of the story. It is a helpful baseline but it is much more like working people, the working poor and living from pay cheque to pay cheque, add COVID-19 on top of that and we are getting a catastrophe, plain and simple; a catastrophe of unimaginable proportion.

I think this is quite instructive.

The country's high per capita GDP of US \$17,000—Dr. Attzs argued—masks deep social problems and high levels of poverty and dislocation.

She also quoted Dr. Henry and Kairi Associates' documents regarding what persons are living on, in terms of 300,000 people in the country living on \$985 or less.

Let us all in here imagine for a minute—close your eyes and imagine for a minute if you can survive on TT \$1,000 or \$33 a day. I wonder if anyone of us in here can live on \$33 a day. We may be able to do it but it would be very difficult, I might argue. So I think that is very important. And she also went on to say, Dr. Attzs that is:

The notion of poor people as those who are homeless or in shacks may not be the case as we have come to believe. So we have to re-evaluate who we

consider poor in Trinidad and Tobago and how many people have slipped below the poverty line and more importantly, what are we doing to remedy that.

And as I said before, I do not envy the Minister of Finance one bit because, I guess all eyes are on him to provide solutions to these challenging problems in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, I also would like to quote Dr. Terrence Farrell, writing in the—who was interviewed by Dr. Sheila Rampersad for the Trinidad *Express* of July 04, 2021, who also looked at the issue of poverty in Trinidad. And article is titled:

“How do we count T&T’s poor?

Though visible at hamper distribution sites and in news stories about desperate families pleading for help, poverty in Trinidad and Tobago remains a data secret.

How many are poor, how many are indigent, who are they, where do they live, in what circumstances and why have they remained poor are questions that cannot properly be answered.

...former Central Bank deputy governor Dr. Terrence Farrell is stumped.”

Quote:

“‘When I see people lining up for hampers, I must admit I struggle in my own mind with grasping that,’ he said in an interview last week.

Farrell needs data to assess the economic impact of...Covid-19...on the society.

That, he says, does not exist.”

He went on to make another startling revelation that he says the fact that we do not have the data may point to an even more sinister supposition. Do we really want to

know? Do we really want to know? Because if we found out what the extent of T&T's poor is, what would it say about us as a country? What would it say of the Government's handling of the pandemic or even before the pandemic? And these are questions we have to answer in a non-combative way, because they are questions that affect the lives of people in Trinidad and Tobago. And I think it is very important for us to go through these questions in a dispassionate way, because those persons, as the Minister identified in the article I referenced earlier on, they are struggling. They are struggling every day to make ends meet.

More and more we walk around and we drive around, those of us who are fortunate to drive, and we see people with signs in front of supermarkets, "Please, all we want is food." It takes a lot for a person to stand in front with their family and their children with a sign begging for food, and I personally, anecdotally, have seen it more and more on the increase in recent times, I am presuming because of the impact of COVID-19 on the population and some people losing their jobs or some people being able to earn less.

"...Dr. Farrell suggests that the problem is even deeper. We do not know the poverty lines in T&T"—are—"because we do not want to know."

He said:

"We don't have the data in part because we don't want to know and the reason is the narrative we've created about ourselves that we are rich, we have oil and gas, our so-called patrimony etc does not jive with the reality..."

And that means we need to take a look—a cold, hard look at ourselves.

**3.10 p.m.**

And finally, I would like to quote on this poverty issue, Mr. Vice-President, if you would allow me. It is also from the *Sunday Express* on July 18, 2021. And



this is another well-known academic in Trinidad and Tobago, Prof. Rhoda Reddock who is suggesting with the title of the article in the news analysis, also by Dr. Rampersad which is a series on poverty in Trinidad and Tobago, an investigation of poverty is there is:

“No direct link between State and the poor”

And I am quoting from the top of the article here.

“That Government had to use churches and politicians to distribute Covid-19 aid is evidence of the detachment between State and its poor. And the State gets to know the level of indigence in which people are living when they go to the media.

‘When that happens, then the minister goes to see them. In other words, there is no direct link between the Ministry of Social Development and the poor,’ observes Prof Rhoda Reddock.”

She also spoke about the:

“Seedy underbelly”

In a subtitle in the article and I quote:

“Faced with multiplying experiences of poverty bubbling to the surface of the society as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Reddock sees this as a moment of opportunity ‘that I do not know will be met’

‘If there was no Covid, we would have limped along, shooting more young boys and blaming more parents. We would not have noticed the seedy underbelly of what’s going on,’ she says.

She references a study by a US psychologist in the East Port of Spain community which found that at pre-school age, children already suffer cognitive problems.

‘It is from the violence of their daily lives, seeing family members shot and

killed in front of them, poor nutrition, being looked down upon, no opportunities for rehabilitation...”

These speak to very, very significant and wide issues in Trinidad and Tobago that need to be addressed.

Mr. Vice-President, one of the interesting identifying—articles, sorry, that I was able identify is one that I will come back to in a short while, but I want to be fair in my presentation because I want to quote from a colleague, Minister of Social Development and Family Services who identified quite a bit of work that had been done during the pandemic in terms of 178,000 persons receiving food, rent grants, et cetera. And 300 million being spent on that, 81,000 hampers and food vouchers, and 24,999 food boxes totaling \$15 million or so in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. All these are great interventions and all these are great emergency support mechanisms, but what are we doing or how are we going to address the issues related to the long-term sustainability of these people? How are we going to get them back on track and not leave them in a state where they are waiting for the next set of food vouchers, and rent intervention vouchers, and hampers? Because we know they have not in most cases moved from the need for that in this emergency situation to the ability to even access some of the provisions the Minister of Finance has put in the budget, in terms of seed grants for small and micro businesses.

Some of these people are so psychologically oppressed, unfortunately, that they do not even see themselves in a position to take advantage of many of these provisions in this budget. Now, it may be easy for the Government to say well, “That is not our problem. We provide the opportunities; it is up to the people to take them.” But there is something called, “The learned helplessness theory”, where people who are left in certain circumstances for years and decades develop a

mindset that this is what my life is supposed to be. And that also is part of the reason why we have this dependency syndrome in Trinidad and Tobago. We have seen it in the US and the UK. So it is exclusive to Trinidad and Tobago by any means, but we have to deal with it more effectively because we are a very small society.

Interestingly enough the article I would like to cite now may provide some insight, Mr. Vice-President, as to why countries like ours seem reluctant or very slow to deal with the issues of inequality in the country, or with the gaps of growing poverty and poverty levels in the country. And it is an article by Beth Ellwood, October 08, 2021, in the *Journal of Cognitive Science and Social Psychology*. And it says, it is titled—and it may really speak to if not all of us in this august House, many of us who are fortunate to be able to take care of ourselves and our families:

“People with higher socioeconomic status have lower emotional intelligence, especially at high levels of inequality”—in any society.

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

**Sen. P. Richards:** Thank you. I cannot believe that time went all ready. And it went on to indicate, Mr. Vice-President, that:

“A series of studies published in Social Psychological and Personality Science...”—magazines or journals—“...found that people of higher socioeconomic status (SES) score consistently lower on tests of emotional intelligence ...”—and empathy for persons in other social economic demographics—“...especially when they perceive high levels of inequality in their community...”

In other words, the article went on to identify that it is much more easy for persons who are doing very well to zone off those who are at the lower end of the

socioeconomic spectrum. And I do not know if that could be providing some sort of answers to the question we are looking on here.

In the next four minutes I have to go through digital transformation and education. So let me start quickly. I am very happy that the Minister identified in his budget presentation 12,000 persons will be trained for this new digital economy. I am extremely happy about that because one of the things we need to realize is we are behind the curve where this is concerned.

In an article titled: “The New Foundational Skills of the Digital Economy, Developing the Professionals of the Future” by Brian K. Fitzgerald and Matt Sigelman they identified:

“...the Business-Higher Education Forum commissioned Burning Glass Technologies to examine the new skills in the job market of the digital economy, analyzing roughly 56 million resumes...”—56 million—“...and more than 150 million unique U.S. job postings ...”

In the digital economy alone, in the last year alone. That tells you that while 12,000 is commendable in this new digital economy and digital space because of the pivot to digital provision of services and goods, we have to move a lot faster and engage a lot wider cadre of young persons in particular, and older and middle aged persons to understand the levels of availability in this new digital era.

And some of the dimensions in these are:

“Human Skills”—including:

- “• Critical thinking”—jobs
- “• Creativity
  - Analytical reasoning
  - Communication”—and
- “• Collaboration”—jobs.

In the—“Business Enabler Skills”—section in the Digital Economy:

- “• Project management
- Decision making
- Visualization”—and
- Data communication.

In the “Domain Knowledge” in Digital Economy:

- “• Strategy
- Economics
- Marketing
- Communications/PR
- Talent Development/HR
- R&D/...development.”

And the Minister has some great provisions in there.

Also, for companies and tax rebates in terms of companies engaging in R&D and entering into the world of digital communication and digital technology.

And in the “Digital Building Blocks Skills”:

- “• AI/Data analyst
- Big data and data management
- Software development”—and
- Information security”

Which I am hoping our colleague Sen. Bacchus will go into in more detail.

It would be remiss of me, Mr. Vice-President, not to deal with education. Minister Cox identified that Trinidad and Tobago is looking to do a public assistance Act, a social assistance Act and a persons with disability Act. Well, we are way behind the curve. Guyana has passed and they have already operationalized this Disability Act of 2010. The Bahamas also has the Persons with

Disability Act, Equal Opportunity Act of 2014; Jamaica has Persons with Disability Act; 2014; the Cayman Islands has its Disability Act, the Solomon Webster Act of 2016. And we have a policy document in Trinidad and Tobago. This is embarrassing for us. We need to do much better than this. And I hope that an Act dealing with persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago is fast-tracked to the Parliament of this country.

We talk about education and the issue of inequality in education in Trinidad and Tobago. I will tell you that this is down syndrome awareness month and the down syndrome family network has identified in the JSC Social Services and Public Administration, that less than 10 per cent of their students had any remediation through this pandemic in term of what they need for their special needs education.

The Support Autism T&T with Dr. Radica Mahase identified 60 per cent of their membership are persons with autism who were not enrolled in a school, 20 per cent were enrolled in a private school although we boast about an inclusive education system in Trinidad and Tobago. And we always defer to the Student Support Services, which I must congratulate their staff. But it is under-sourced—under-resourced and under-funded, and is not up to full complement with educators and remedial staff to deal with the situation.

As I close, Mr. Vice-President, I really want us to—and I hope the Minister can address this, deal with the issue of the shortcomings in the education system as it relates to persons and children with special needs. We have literally widened the gap and it will cost us developmentally significantly in the future, when we think that 15 per cent of the 18,000 students that would have written SEA are already making below a 30 per cent placement grade. I see the Vice-President looking to stand up. With those few words, Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs.

**The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal):** Mr. Vice-President, I thank you most sincerely for the opportunity to jump into this debate. Before I begin, Mr. Vice-President, I want to express a sincere gratitude and thank you to our political leader and the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, for giving me an opportunity to serve as a Senator and a Government Minister, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. Political leader, I say a sincere thank you.

I also must congratulate the Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert, I would say you are a boss. And I will tell you why you are a boss. You are a boss because when “man ha tuh come out ah retirement tuh respond to yuh budget, yuh know you are a boss”. [*Desk thumping*] And I want to also sincerely congratulate Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis, the Minister of Planning and Development. Again, Ma’am, I am sure you are locked on listening. You are a boss lady because again, we have had this failing Opposition having to repurpose politicians to come here and try and save a failing debate and their response to this debate in the Senate. To that the extent—in that event, Mr. Vice-President, I must say after listening on to this entire debate, after hearing the kind of misinformation led by the other side in the other place, and over the last two days in this honourable Chamber, it is evident that their contributions to this budget debate was never, was never in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It was wholly irrelevant just like the UNC.

Mr. Vice-President, most respectfully, their contribution to this debate was to simply fulfill their own personal agenda, as they continuously make ill-founded representations directed to Members of my bench to vilify us. The UNC, Mr.

Vice-President, in my respectful view, as I say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, is an unbelievable nuisance to this country. UNC, unbelievable nuisance to this country's development, [*Desk thumping*] unbelievable nuisance to this country's progress, unbelievable nuisance to this country's future.

But, Mr. Vice-President, you see, the thing is we at the PNM, we are held at a different standard and because we are held at a different standard, I take my responsibility very serious as I come here to report to you Trinidad and Tobago about the role and function, and my role and function and what we have been doing in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs.

But before I do that, there are certain things. I have had the benefit, Mr. Vice-President, of sitting in on this debate for the past two days. I had the benefit of looking on at the debate in the other place, and more particularly, there are things that were said during the course of this debate that I would respectfully like to address before I jump into reporting to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago on the incredible work that your Attorney General, together with myself, we have been embarking upon in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, I know the hon Sen. Richards, the speaker before me certainly spoke about the concept of social justice, equality and equity. And in my substantive contribution to this most honourable Chamber, when I look—I will address equity and equality from the Ministry of Legal Affairs and the Office of the Attorney General perspective, as I look at what our Ministry has done in the department of the Public Defenders Department and the Equal Opportunity Commission.

So, to the hon. Sen. Richards, what I will do, I would be reporting to you and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago on those policies of equity and equality,



as it relates to those particular departments that fall under the Ministry in which I have the distinct pleasure, privilege, and blessings to serve in.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, you know Sen. Mark with his usual rampage and his usual conspiracy theories and he together—and what was surprising is that he was for every Member that contributed on this—on the other side, there was a constant repetition that this budget was in some way a declaration of war on the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And all I have to say to a contribution like that, Mr. Vice-President, most respectfully, is that when we come as Senators, when we come as Members, as leaders in this country and we use such provocative language, language such as “war”, language such as “incompetent lawmaker” and “unprecedented assault”, most respectfully, Mr. Vice-President, this promotes a level of disaffection amongst our public. This is why I say, Mr. Vice-President, this is absolutely contrary to the public’s interest. And it definitely goes against what being a statesman, it goes against what being a leader is all about. And that is all I have to say. Other than that, everything else that Mr. Mark would have contributed I believe it was absolutely irrelevant. So I will leave him to “consommé” there for a bit.

As I move on to Sen. Deonarine. Now, Sen. Deonarine, the hon. Senator is always an absolute pleasure to listen to the Senator’s contribution. You know, I believe in batting in my corner and I will not pretend to be an economist specialist or an accounting specialist. So I am always very appreciative of the contributions and the slant and the perspective that the hon. Senator brings to this House.

The hon. Senator made a point relative to statistics and the role of the CSO Office and I recall the hon. Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh also brought that issue of statistics into question during his contribution as well. Now, Sen. Deonarine, as I recall she would have said that there is a need for the Ministry of Planning and

Development to support the Central Statistical Office to speed up the publishing of information data. She went on to speak about the time gap or the time lag that sometimes is faced in the receipt of information from the CSO right.

Now, I could only speak from an AGLA perspective which is Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. Now, while I do respectfully, Mr. Vice-President, hear the hon. Senator, I want to remind the citizens of this country, I want remind the hon. Senator of the legislative hindrances, and of course Dr. Gopeesingh the hon. Senator, the hindrances with which the CSO was faced with within the last couple of years. And although the Office of the Attorney General as I appreciate is not the line Ministry to the CSO. It is indirectly—we are indirectly affected on account of AGLA of being involved in every aspect of Government policy.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, the CSO as we are all are aware is governed by the Statistics Act. This Statistics Act, Mr. Vice-President, the last time it was revised was in 1981. As a consequence, I want to put on the public record when we do not have stats, it is because the CSO who depends on this 1981 statistics, they collect data, privacy data that sometimes supersedes what powers they have that exist in the current Statistics Act. And as a consequence of that, this Government has an NSITT Bill. The problem with that Bill is that we require a two-thirds majority with that current Bill. The question I have for those on the side opposite who are talking about data, who are talking about the CSO, if we are to really bring a Bill to this House that requires a two-thirds majority or special majority, are you going to support it? And the answer is no. So that is the unfortunate position that we have found ourselves in as a country, and more so as a Government.

Mr. Vice-President, I also want to respectfully make—I want to address a point that resonated with me that was made by the hon. Senator, Sen. Dr.

Dillon-Remy. You know the Senator said, “let us band together not bicker”. And that truly resonated with me as a new politician who entered into this field of politics to try to genuinely make a difference, and to genuinely make a contribution, a positive contribution, to the good governance of our country.

You know, Senator, I want to respectfully put on the record that I hear you and I fully endorse what you have said. And as a new politician, as a parliamentarian, I believe that despite what Bench we sit in, our role in making good law, our role in governing this country is paramount. And I just wanted to applaud you for making a statement such as that.

You know, I will just quickly move to comments that were made by Sen. Lyder and Sen. Roberts. I believe Mr. Mark would have also mentioned it. And they have a habit, they have a habit of constantly talking about PNM policies is in the benefit of their friends, family and financiers. And I say to these Senators, stop it. I say stop it. And let me tell you why I say stop it. Please do not judge us on this side by the same standards in which you would have run your affairs. [*Desk thumping*] It is very unfair. And I take it personally when statements like that are made. And let me tell you why I take it personally.

I take it personally because you see when I entered into this office, Mr. Vice-President, one thing my father said to me is that everything is for a season and a reason. One thing the Prime Minister said to us all was “do not fall in love with office”. And one thing my learned Senior Counsel Pamela Elder said to me is: “When you leave that office, the day you leave that office yuh will not be leaving with not even a paperclip. All you would be leaving with is your integrity.” And to me my integrity is paramount, it is important. So when the other side comes here and they talk about PNM policies to benefit family, friends, and financiers, and take that personally, and I say stop it.

Mr. Vice-President, as I move on Sen. Anil Roberts, I know my good colleague, my sister in the Senate, Sen. Bethelmy and also Mr. Gonzales dealt with him. I personally counted him saying the word “sport” about 78 times. And as they so rightfully said the only sport we did not hear about was LifeSport. Sports, you know the sports Ministry Anil Roberts style. [*Desk thumping*] But I also want to contribute to what and add to what Sen. Bethelmy would have said in her contribution and I want to of course assist the hon. Senator, maybe he is listening from one of the rooms. Because I believe is only one Opposition Senator sitting here right now in this Chamber and it is the temporary Senator. Anyway, well that is how important the country’s business is to them we could see.

But anyway, to the hon. Senator who may be listening on, I do not know, I want to also direct him, that same book that Sen. Bethelmy spoke about is the purple book in the package. And that purple book he could actually go to page 197. That book is called the *Social Sector Investment Programme 2022*. The purple book, page 197. I am assisting the Senator, and that is where this Government speaks about all of our plans for 2022 in the sphere of sport. So that was just to assist the goodly Senator.

I want to go now quickly to some of the contributions made by the hon. Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye, another contributor to this debate that I always look forward to hear what she has to say. I want to commend and I want to associate myself with a comment she would have made when she commended the Minister of Trade and Industry, and of course, the Minister of Finance, behind that concept of the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency. And I will continue to say this in this House even though I may sound like a broken record, it is no secret that I was on the Board of Directors of exporTT for a considerable period of time.

And you see because I sat there, I understand the importance of the marriage

between exporTT and InvesTT will bring to trade promotion in this country. And more so in assisting and steering the manufacturing industry in a particular direction. So again, you know to the Minister of Trade and Industry, phenomenal idea, I myself would have said that to her. And of course to Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye for recognizing it, I must say, you know, stellar.

With respect to Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye she also spoke about child justice. And she spoke from a place where child justice is very important to her. And I also want to say that as a mother of a 14-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy I understand what is—and an aunt and all of those things—I understand the importance of children and laws as it relates to children.

But I want to remind Trinidad and Tobago, social justice and the protection of children is critical to this Government. That is why we would have had the Child Marriage Act. You understand? Or we wanted to abolish, sorry, the move towards abolishing child marriage in Trinidad and Tobago, of course which the Opposition never supported. And I want to remind the hon. Senator because the protection of children is critical to us, that is why the Attorney General has always been an advocate for a package of legislation and laws. For example, the Sexual Offences Act, the domestic violence, anti-gang. All of these laws within them there are provisions and clauses that can protect our children. So to the hon. Senator, this Government hears you and certainly as the Minister sitting in this Ministry, social justice is critical, it is important, and it is important to us as it is to you.

So those were just a few of the points as I would have listened to the debate, Mr. Vice-President, that I wanted to make relative to some of the contributions my colleagues would have made.

Now, this is where the good stuff begins and because this is where I have an opportunity to stand in this most august Chamber and report to you Trinidad and

Tobago on the contribution and what has been happening in the Ministry, as I said before that I am so blessed and privileged to be a part of, where I stand beside the Attorney General of this country Mr. Faris Al-Rawi, and we definitely both are charged with the responsibility of managing in Trinidad and Tobago your affairs.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, the central theme of this year's appropriation Bill is: Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. And at the Office of the Attorney General I can boastfully say that for the most part we have been able and we have been resilient. And that is so especially because of the backbone of AGLA. And who is the backbone or what is the backbone of AGLA? At the administrative departments of our agency. Unfortunately, the Attorney General in another place because the budget was a Faris budget, he did not have the opportunity to really do what he wanted to do. So I take the opportunity on his behalf to speak now to these departments and what they have really been able to achieve, and what they have really been able to do to assist us in being resilient during this pandemic.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, first let me start from a place by sincerely thanking, because I have had the opportunity to work with her for the past year, one of the major rock stars in our Ministry, Ms. Natasha Barrow. She is the PS of our Ministry. A very tiny lady but with the might of a giant. And she has been able to really steer the Ministry in these unprecedented times. And together with her is the money lady, that is Ms. Cher Hamilton. She is the Director of Finance at our Ministry. So to these two ladies, thank you most sincerely.

I want to thank from our security guards to our MTS officers. I am one of those who would interact with them on a daily basis. And I must say these guards and these MTS workers they have really stepped up to the plate, and have done and have certainly contributed to us being able to be resilient in this pandemic.

So what I will firstly start by doing, Mr. Vice-President, is going through

some of the administrative departments and putting Trinidad Tobago through notice by virtue—of through you, Mr. Vice-President, and giving the public a sense as to what happens in our Ministry.

Now, as it relates to the information technology department, Mr. Vice-President, I want salute Mr. Roger Sealy who is the Director of Information Technology. As you would appreciate in these times the ICT Unit at AGLA they are responsible for not only the Government Campus office, but they are also responsible for all of our departments throughout Trinidad, whether it is the south, and also Tobago.

So the ICT department, Mr. Vice-President, during this pandemic we were able to be resilient because they were able to implement virtual courtrooms for the Ministry and all of the other departments. For example, the Solicitor General, the Chief State Department, and the DPP Department. And “doh” talk about in-house. They have been very, very critical and I want to thank them. The ICT infrastructure that they were also able to build out for the new location. We are hoping to move the DPP to a new location very soon. And the ICT Department in-house has already begun that work and I seriously want to thank again, Mr. Roger Sealy and his entire team.

Now I turn to the facilities management and I must recognize our Director, Mr. Kyle Thomas. Now, facilities were very critical during this time because as the Public Health Regulations change, these were the persons who were responsible for changing signage and all of that throughout the length and breadth of the Ministry. And they too would have been significant in us being resilient as a Ministry during this pandemic.

**3.40 p.m.**

It would be remiss of me not to also recognize Mr. Nazir Hosein, our Corporate Communications Director. Corporate Communications, and why I bring this in this debate is because Corporate Communications last fiscal was so critical to us because we were the hub and spoke of the legislation during the pandemic. So every time a new public health regulation was issued, it was—this particular department was responsible for taking big pieces of legislation and breaking it up into little itsy-bitsy pieces, so that the public could understand what was happening.

This department was also responsible every time there was a change in curfew hours when we became—when we went on into a state of emergency. They were also responsible for disseminating that information and therefore, I must recognize this department. They have certainly assisted us in being resilient as a Ministry during this pandemic.

Mr. Vice-President, if I could now respectfully turn and salute to our Office Management Department led by Ms. Betty Mohammed, also a very, very critical player during this unprecedented time. Contrary to what the public may think, you know I know sometimes—even I myself probably before I entered into Government, you always think, “Wow boy, ah Minister get tru. They probably living the big life”, you understand? Until you went to the Ministry and you realize the constraints that we work under and we do it because of love of country. And I remember going into the Ministry, for example, and well, the Attorney General and I always have this joke—because of the limited resources that we have and in the sense that there is just tea and coffee, we always tell our staff—he tells the staff that we are doing intermittent fasting. Well it “doh” ever work for me.

But, it is something that we always joke about because of the limited resources that we have and this office management team, they are responsible for



working with the limited resources that they have to ensure that whatever we do have is spread equally and equitably throughout our Ministry, whether it is water, whether it is Milo, and whether is coffee, because that is all we get. But as I said before, I must say kudos to them, you know, for what they have done in this, as I said, unprecedented time and helping us certainly as a Ministry, to be resilient in the face of a pandemic.

Now, one of the major areas in my contribution as I report to you, Trinidad and Tobago, on what has been happening in the Ministry in which I serve in, I want to look at Recurrent Expenditure and certain Heads under Recurrent Expenditure and what we at the Ministry has spent a lot of money on and what we have spent money on right.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, this year's budgetary allocation to the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, if we revert back to the document, the budget document is estimated sum of \$337 million. Well, actually, to be exact, if we had to go to the exact dollar figure, it is \$337,735,760 and I made sure and write it in words, because I am not too good with figures. But that is what we have been allotted, Mr. Vice-President. And in looking at what we have been allotted, what I need to look at is our Recurrent Expenditure as it relates to the payment of salaries for both of our legal and non-legal contract and permanent staff employed at AGLA. And I must spend some time looking at the amount of money we have had to spend in defending frivolous, I repeat, frivolous court actions brought on by insignificant, irrelevant, and what I would say is self-appointed political activists of those opposite.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, if I look at the area of litigation, for example, this is one of the areas as I would have indicated would have taken a considerable amount of money from us, what we would have in defending certain matters. Now,

if we are to talk about—Trinidad and Tobago if I am to explain to you where your money has been going during this Ministry, we can easily look at the Office of the Solicitor General and we can easily look at the amount of matters, as I said before, we have had to defend in the Public Health Ordinance and Quarantine Provisions.

Mr. Vice-President, you know, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, you really have to be able to sit where I sit, to see the kinds of matters that when we were in the spike of a pandemic, that “waps, waps, waps”. We were being faced constantly with litigation. Litigation threatening the Public Health Ordinance, litigation for persons who wanted to come back into the country, litigation from bar owners who wanted us to reopen bars and this is where a considerable amount of our allocations have gone and unfortunately for us, because of the UNC, this has been where our litigation has—our Recurrent Expenditure, our expenditure has gone for the past five years and continuing.

Now, if I for example, and this is—and I am not making up these facts, or I am not making this up simply because I sit in the Ministry. And for example, if we look at the case, CV 2020, that is the case of Ian Alleyne versus Michelle Trotman, the Caura Medical Director, this is where Ian Alleyne wanted to be freed after testing positive for COVID-19. That is a matter that is before us. We have Shirlanne Sasha Singh versus the Minister of National Security. That is a matter where she wanted—Sasha Singh wanted to be repatriated to Trinidad. We have Dominic Suraj, and the others versus the Attorney General, you understand, that matter now has gone to the Privy Council.

So, you are looking at extended cost and more cost as matters go to the Privy Council that we have to defend. And it is important for Trinidad and Tobago to understand that when the Office of the Attorney General, when we speak about spending money on matters, it is not that we are losing matters, and it is not that we

have nothing to do so we are taking frivolous matters to court. Once matters are brought and we are named as a party, we have no other option and choice but defending those matters. And you know, you would think those, especially, what I know they like to say we call them the UNC lawyers. But you know, you would think that lawyers on the other side would understand how litigation works sometimes—and this is what I want the people of Trinidad and Tobago to understand especially as it relates to civil litigation.

Sometimes, a matter would come before you and it is not that you lose the matter but it is because when you weigh the pros and the cons, when you look at the kind of money you have to invest in a matter, it may make more sense to the people's money to settle that matter and try to negotiate towards settling. So it is not that we are losing matters left, right and center but at the end of the day, we have the responsibility to protect the Government's and the people's purse. And because we recognize that there are certain matters that we would have had to steer in the direction of trying to settle and you know, Trinidad and Tobago, we let good sense prevail, understand that to a great extent is what happens in our Ministry.

Now, my intention Mr. Vice-President, of course, I understand the rule of sub judice, but there was another—as I am on the point of litigation, there was a matter Akili Charles, I see the Senator is now approaching here she is very familiar with, and then there is a Chandler case, but what is the surprising, I just got something in my email from the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago. It was sent by Mr. Shankar Bidaisee, as you know, he is the Secretary of the Law Association. So it was just a few minutes ago, actually, it was released, where he was putting politicians on warning about—talking about matters, he made mention to certain things that the Prime Minister would have said as it relates to those matters. And you know, he placed politicians on warning about speaking of

matters that are sub judice. So to Mr. Bidaisee, I am sure you are probably listening on, the Law Association is probably listening on, I saw the notice and therefore, I would not delve into anything that would compromise the integrity of that matter. It is very strange, but it happened that we got that notice. But what I can say, which is not sub judice, to the people of Trinidad and Tobago matters like this, is where your money goes when we are called upon to constantly defend them. [*Desk thumping*] And that is not being sub judice.

And when every Monday morning, we have to assemble a team to head to the Privy Council to defend matters brought on by those of the other side or councils—I should not say those on the other side but when it is brought on by lawyers, and we know where their affiliations are, right. But when we have to go to the Privy Council every Monday morning, because they see—they are hell bent on taking these matters to that particular level, then, of course, we are called upon to spend money to the Privy Council and of course, Mr. Bidaisee, that is not sub judice, because what I am talking about is simply accounting to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Stop crushing on them. What I am called upon is to say Trinidad and Tobago to talk to your narrative about where your money is being spent. And that is as it relates to litigation.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, one of the areas that our Recurrent Expenditure, a lot of expenditure, a lot of our money goes in our salaries as well. And this is where I am going to take the minute to talk about the Attorney General who I have the distinct pleasure and privilege of serving alongside. [*Desk thumping*] Now, the public may not be aware, but when—history has it because I had done my own homework, when I got into the Ministry, and history has it that when he would have inherited this Ministry, it was the—as we know, it is a combination of three Ministries and Legal Affairs, Justice, the Office of the Attorney General. And you

would be very surprised to know that in his unit, when he would have inherited these Ministries, he was now faced in a position where he had to build out teams and build out units to assist him in the development of law.

When I went into that Ministry, I will say when I looked at the kinds of units, so for example, when I speak about units, we are looking at our CJU Unit head by Ferzana Nazim-Hosein. I will list these ladies just now. But what I want to say to Trinidad and Tobago is you just—if you have the opportunity which I presently have, to go into that department and look at the units that the Attorney General has been able to build out, you will feel so proud as a young Trinidadian because when we sit at that table, Mr. Vice-President, not one of those lawyers, not one of those lawyers could be anything more than 40 years old [*Desk thumping*] and that is what this Attorney General has encouraged.

So I know the other side the talk might be “well that is why all you drafting bad law and whatever”. I will take that lash because if we have—because both the Attorney General and I, we are advocates for empowering young people. And when we sit at that table he—this is a mantra that he uses at that table. He tells every single young person, every single young lawyer that sits at a table, “Plug your brain into the table”, and that is what you do as a leader. What you do as a leader is that you create legacy, you empower young people just as my Prime Minister did for me, that is what the Attorney General is doing in his department. And I must, for the record and for the public, commend him publicly for the work [*Desk thumping*] that he has been doing in his departments in empowering young people. So the old talk, they will continue with the old talk but I guess that is what you get when you enter into public life.

Anyway, Mr. Vice-President, so some of the units that I am very proud of, and I am very proud of the work that our young people and our young lawyers

have been doing, we could look at the Anti-Terrorism Unit, headed by Ms. Vyana Sharma; Central Authority, Graeme Mc Clean; Chief Parliamentary Counsel. But those were in existence before him, Ian Macintyre, Chief State Solicitor, Sean Julien. Of course, Mr. Roger Gaspard, the DPP. It is a privilege to work with the Director of Public Prosecutions. He and I speak ever so often all the time, and it is an absolute pleasure to work with him—“doh” worry, one day you might get my work so, I do not know—wait, hold up.

So anyway, Mr. Vice-President, as I said, it is an absolute pleasure to work with the Director of Public Prosecutions, as we work together in improving the criminal justice system and it will come and it will happen and it will happen with Faris Al-Rawi there and with Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal there. [*Desk thumping*] And it will happen, so “doh worry, it coming”.

The HIV Coordinating Unit, Lakita Foster; Intellectual Property Office, Regan Asgarali; International Law on Human Rights, Ian Rampersad; Ravita Babwah, International Office of Child Reform; Charlene Basso-Taylor, Law Reform Commission; Ann-marie Brassington, Law Revision Commission; Carol Hernandez from Sol Gen, of course, our Registrar General Karen Bridgewater, Anrawati Maraj, our Vacation/After School Centre Unit. I had to take two minutes in this because you see, we are not “neemakharams” on this side, eh. So what I had to do was take two minutes and show appreciation for all of these persons who have allowed us as a Ministry [*Desk thumping*] to be resilient during this pandemic.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, as I said before, well I would have already gone into what our units have been able to achieve—sorry, the units that have been created, and I would have already saluted those young ladies, those young men and women who have contributed significantly to helping us build that legacy and the

vision and the mission, working with the vision and the mission of the Attorney General, together with the Prime Minister of our country.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, if I may now have the distinct pleasure to speak about the Registrar General's Department. And again, I must salute Ms. Karen Bridgewater. I want the public to be made aware of this, on any given day, any day that you walk that Ministry, you would find this Minister walking the floor of the RG Department. So we from the PNM, we have adopted approach—our modus operandi of governance is not sitting in air conditioned office and running things, just like I am sure Mr. Avinash Singh does, Mr. Rambharat would do when they go out in the fields and they meet. I have seen—as a Director in ExporTT, I would have seen Ms. Gopee-Scoon always out there on the field meeting manufacturers, talking, having conversations. That is how we operate at the PNM. I do not know about the UNC. How we operate is we go down on the ground, we meet the people and that is how we work.

And because I have been physically on the ground in the office at the Registrar General's Department, I have had the distinct pleasure of working with the department in its entirety. I know and I say to Trinidad and Tobago, I know that because those complaints have also come to me, people will private message me, direct message me about issues that they had online, in making certain online applications. But we must understand that all of these systems were pretty much new;—at least some of the systems were new to us. And like everything else, there is a period—and of course our Minister of Digital Transformation, I am sure he would be able to allude to that. Once you are establishing a new system and a new procedure there are going to be technical difficulties as you go along.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

But Trinidad and Tobago, I want you to rest assured that this Government is a Government that is performing and that is working for you. Your Minister in the Office of the Attorney General, like your Attorney General, we have heard your cries and we are working and constantly working with the Registrar General, who is a rock star in her own rights, in trying to improve our service and our systems that we offer at the Ministry and at that particular office.

Some of the things that were critical that the Attorney General's—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:** Thank you, Madam President. Some of the things that the Attorney General since in 2017, long before the pandemic hit us, that he would have been critical in establishing were things like the online appointment booking, the upgrade of the Companies Registry. This is something Trinidad and Tobago can look forward to. Just two days ago I believe I had a conversation with the Registrar General and I understand by the 11<sup>th</sup> or so of December we are going live with our companies online registry system and that is where all works and all registration that can be done as it relates to your business transactions, Trinidad and Tobago, you will be able to do it on our online system and it will save you the hassle and the time from coming into the Ministry. And those are things, Madam President, that I am particularly very, very proud of. And I am very proud of this department and the work, Ms. Bridgewater, all of her support staff, of the legal affairs side of our Ministry, thank you most sincerely. I thank you on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for being so resilient in this pandemic.

Now, two other areas that I handpicked that deals with the issue of social justice, which I will touch on very quickly. There were two areas that struck—that usually—two departments that usually struck at me, that makes an impact on me



personally, and that is the Public Defenders Department led by Ms. Hasine Shaikh. Of course, this is another brainchild of the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago, and it is something that he has to be commended for. And then we look at the Equal Opportunity Commission, which is now currently led by Ian Roach. I will get a little bit into that. And that is why I said when I deal with those two issues, generally, it would answer Mr. Richards question or concern when he raised the point about equality and equity. This is our part, our little part that we play, inequality and inequity for Trinidad and Tobago.

Now the Public Defenders Department and, of course, this means a lot because I was a defence counsel. So seeing that you have a department of legal aid created to, of course, represent prisoners who are held in remand and who could not afford competent and good representation, of course, this department and how it is now created and the achievements and headway they have been able to make is absolutely beautiful once you sit in that Ministry and you observe how the departments operate.

Today, for example, Madam President, from the inception of this particular department, there have been 593 assignments, and those were settled to the Public Defenders Department. I understand that 362 assignments were made in favour of the Public Defenders Department. So it means that, and again, coming back to the way in which we run governance in this country, I from the inception of going into that Ministry, I would have walked the floor of the Public Defenders Department trying to do my own little part by meeting our young advocates, inspiring them in whichever way I can, assuring them that at our Ministry there is an open door policy, that if they have a concern, their Ministers are accessible to them. And I could stand without fear of contradiction, that is how both the Attorney General and myself run the Ministry in which we have been charged with the responsibility

to do. And the Public Defenders Department, as I said, thank you most sincerely for the contribution you have made to social justice in this country. And finally, the Equal Opportunity Commission, which is headed by Ian Roach.

Now, some of our spends, Madam President, of course, because I said this is where our money is going, in developing these departments, paying staff and so on. At this particular department, the Commission has been constantly sensitizing the public on its powers and the functions as well as strengthening its relationship with Non-Governmental Organizations and I want to get this right so, I would read from script. For the last fiscal alone, the Commission has created a model LGBTI and workplace policy for Trinidad and Tobago. It has developed a new media and public relations policy, has held numerous presentations, made close to 22 morning show appearances and held 10 public awareness sessions.

So, what we are doing at the Ministry, we realized we are the hub and spoke of legislation and we understand that laws are never static. They are dynamic. And there would be issues that we will always have to address especially as it relates to equality and the equal opportunity, whether you are a man, whether you are a woman, irrespective of what your sexuality is, we recognize that and I must commend this department for starting the work. That was under I believe it was, yeah, it was Ms. Lynette Seebaran-Suite. When she was the head of this particular commission she would have played a critical part and Ms. Suite, I must thank you on behalf of the Government for what you have been doing.

With this being said, Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Minister of Digital Transformation. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus):**  
Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to join this debate and to

contribute in this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2021, under this great theme of Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. It is indeed an honour for me and privilege to be here today to represent the Ministry of Digital Transformation, which is charged with the critical function of our society. And it is not a task that I take lightly and I am determined to ensure that we get it right.

Over the past two weeks, I have been closely following the various discussions in the national community And the budget statement presented by my distinguished colleague, the Hon. Colm Imbert, Minister of Finance, and the detail and pragmatism enveloped therein showcases a firm action plan for the upcoming fiscal year. And I salute, nod to you, Sir, your wisdom and tireless energy that you constantly demonstrate as you try to guide us on a firm footing to keep moving forward.

In this in the same vein, I also want to acknowledge and commend the efforts of the Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis for the work of the Ministry of Planning and Developing and prioritizing our areas of focus and to ensure value and positive impact for the citizens. It seems the lades of worth here and tremendous in their power in the way in which they operate. I also have to thank, of course, the Minister of Public Administration for all her guidance during my initial foray into this, when we were previously the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, I want to thank you, as well for that.  
*[Desk thumping]*

The theme of this year's budget, Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic has sparked keen interest among citizens and obviously here today. And it is no surprise given the many challenges that we all continue to face as Trinidad and Tobago, you know, the Caribbean and the international community as we all struggle with a wide ranging effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Sen. Thompson-Ahye

gave a definition of resilience. We have heard a number of them but I have mine that says, you know, it is the ability to continue to fulfil your mandate in the face of significant operational stress. And the Government's mandate is to serve and provide for the people, and it continues to do so. But it also is doing that while it is being impacted by unprecedented levels of operational stress brought on by the incidence of COVID-19. And we must note that this situation is such that, you know, this pandemic we have is not endemic to Trinidad and Tobago alone. It is a global phenomenon. And therefore, all countries have been affected in some way by what has been happening. And we have to acknowledge that notwithstanding, all of that external pressure, the economy is still considered to be one of the better performing economies in the region and for that, I think the Minister of Finance and his team are to be congratulated. [*Desk thumping*]

It is interesting, and Sen. Richards touched on it, that much of the discussion to date has not really questioned the overall direction, or the measures proposed in the budget, but rather, the central debate has been around the challenges and concerns with the effectiveness and speed of implementation. And while this can be regarded as a validation of the Government's cost in the budget has been indeed right, the questions raised over implementation are well taken, especially in an environment that is clearly not geared towards business as usual. We are going to have to make some changes where that is concerned.

So the Ministry of Digital Transformation, we are doing things differently. Our actions will reflect a new way to achieve different types of implementation. We have been employing agile methodologies using lateral and not linear thinking. You know, this kind of transformation requires innovative and creative, solution oriented thinking. And I think many persons have commented, even here, and the absence for example of some aspects of our digital footprint, this is the Ministry,

that is. When our Ministry became a standalone Ministry a short time ago, you would know that, and staying true to our principles of custom and purpose built solutions hosted locally and locally created for us to allow to withstand some of the international turmoil that we are dealing with. We want to create a profile and a model for all Government digital solutions and the way in which is going to work. We are not going to follow the same old approaches and straight line to reach the same conclusions that we did in the past. We would be utilizing new agile terms like SCRUM, compromising on multidisciplinary resources for both the public and the private sector, to work through our emergent needs and to find new and new ways to get the resolutions that we want to. In this way, we will try and you know, try to do things fast, test things quickly, self-correct quickly and get things going as quickly as possible while at the same time adhering to significant principles of quality.

The focus that we have right now in terms of how we are going to achieve some of the things that we have to do, is really on focus on building partnerships. So, we must find ways to create levels of trust and communication with all of the stakeholders that we need to make that with for it to work. So when we start to look at it from that direction, we are saying, look, if we have to partner with the private sector, we will. If we have to partner with other stakeholders in civil society, we will. If we have to partner with as we will have to partner with Ministries and other territories, we will, international organizations, we will. So it is more along the line of making sure that we have that and create that momentum and ecosystem that is going to allow us to drive the things forward in the way in which we have to do that.

If you want to talk about how some of that has been happening already, just think about probably the latest incarnation of that. Fairly recently, the Ministry had

a meeting with AMCHAM, the American Chamber of Commerce, and we were discussing not only things that we have in directionally, that are common, but other things, how can we help each other, what are the things that are going on that would make sense. And easily, I was commending them on the work they have done with the vaccination programmes having operated one of the vaccination centres. Actually, my son was vaccinated there and I was talking about the fact that it was a complete end-to-end service that you would walk in, you would get your vaccine done, you would walk out and everything will be completed by the time you walked out.

The Ministry had been having some issues in getting that completed across all of the areas that they have. Without much prompting, Chamber asked, we put them and the Ministry together, and they now have a solution that is working, that is allowing for the immediate and quick update for all of the information that is required across all of the private sector pieces that were done before and what is currently happening now. So, it speaks to that. And by the way, this happened at no cost to the State, yeah. So these partnerships will work. We would also be focusing on local talent pools, our young people. There is so much capability within our country and the Ministry, which seeks to operate by the principles of “Made in T&T for T&T”. Yeah, capacity development and knowledge transfer, all of that is encompassed in what we are trying to do. And we will make every effort to connect with these innovators and young people, and give them the opportunity to showcase their abilities that they have for the betterment of the nation that we have as we go ahead.

**4.10 p.m.**

It is said that people lose hope long before they lose trust. And so, in my contribution, again, as I continue, I will outline why the citizens of Trinidad and

Tobago can continue to trust the Government which has successfully so far navigated us through what has to be, you know, this cruel, critical and dangerous pandemic but, more so, how we are going to build trust in the digital transformation things that we are going to do to allow more people to become part of the solutions that we are doing.

The successful development and deployment of transformation initiatives will have to be regarded as an enabler for implementation and, therefore, constitutes critical success factors for the recovery of Trinidad and Tobago from the global pandemic and beyond. This is how we are going to get to deal with some of those issues of sustainable development.

Now, we have been using some terms and I want to—I think maybe I should clear them up before I go much further. So, over the last year or so, and for some time, three terms have been used almost interchangeably and not rightly so and those would be, of course, digitization, digitalization and digital transformation. And while they are used interchangeably, they are actually quite different, though related. Digitization is about converting information into useful input in a virtual environment or for a virtual environment. It is a fundamental pillar in a broader digital government strategy. It is taking analogue stuff and creating a digital version of it. Digitalization is about reforming business processes and services by engaging higher levels of the technology itself. So it is not the same as digitization, and digitalization is that which is based on it, but does and goes a step further. Digital transformation, however, integrates elements of people, process and systems and brings the most value add when it comes to the delivery of services for citizens. So we are engaged in all three.

So, you know, to put it all in one thing, we could say, listen, when we digitize information, we digitalize processes and rules that make up the operations

of a business and then, of course, we digitally transform the business and its strategy to achieve the strategic objectives that we have.

As it would become clear, as I move on into this, fundamental change cannot be accomplished by the Government acting single-handedly, and I want to repeat that. The Government cannot do this single-handedly. Digital transformation is a journey that can only be successfully undertaken through a genuine partnership amongst civil society, private sector, the Government working with and on behalf, of course, of the citizens. The citizens cannot be left out of that.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation serves as a nexus between individual Ministries, Departments and agencies as they carry out their own digital journeys. Again, the Ministry of Digital Transformation is not here to execute all of the digital programmes and projects that are earmarked in this transformation. The work of the Ministry of Digital Transformation basically then becomes the work of all the Ministries, divisions and agencies. We represent coordinators, enablers. Our cooperating strength will be the aligning of the nation to the mandate of digital transformation. So it will require that Ministry work collaboratively with and through strategic partnerships and other mechanisms in the recognition in the fact that this collective approach, where all of us work together, is more likely to bring about the synergies required for success. So, therefore, when you look at budget allocations and you see MDT represents—what you see that is allocated to MDT, it only represents a part of the wider digital landscape. It is more to this than what has been provided for it by the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

So, this transformation is important to recognize that it does not just change how you do something, you know. It actually changes what you do in a number of cases. And so, the work of the Ministry is about people, making their lives better. And while specifically taking into account the priorities highlighted by the Prime



Minister, which are a number of them, there are things that we are going to have to do within this term and the allocations will allow us to do a significant portion of that.

The creation of a national identity and interoperability network is absolutely critical and clear. The institution of a health information system for medical records, that is already underway. We will continue with that. The strengthening of infrastructure in which our education sector is required to operate in this blended approach in which it currently has. The creation of a social services management information system. Sen. Richards and Sen. Thompson-Ahye alerted to the things that are required to that. So, it allows for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services with new and efficient automotive tools, you know, to support the significant improvements in the social service prefaces.

The stabilization of the Government platform, really creating this information super highway, we still have a lot of work to do as it relates to the actual infrastructure in which the Government IT space works, when you meet the process of accessing government services as an enjoyable experience. So, you know, what we are really trying to do is to build healthy sustainable ecosystem that is self-generating and based in Trinidad and Tobago, powered locally by locally hosted infrastructure, our own people, lessen our reliance on off-islands and other things happening around.

It would have been during the hon. Colm Imbert's presentation that we had an outage of Facebook, Instagram and other things. I was called to find out if I had done it. I know a number of people in the industry were called to find out if they had anything to do with. The Telecommunications Authority was called to find out. There were a number of things saying that we had deliberately shut down all of this to ensure that people only could focus their attention on the hon. Minister of

Finance and his presentation. I want to assure the nation that was not so. But, more than that, just think about what that did globally to operations worldwide. Think about where we sit in that function and chain. Think about the fact that many of the things that you do not know, for example, how many of the services that you are using today are based entirely in another country? Those are the things that we have to look at.

So, guided by this, what we are going to do is this. We are going to—the Ministry of Digital Transformation is really focused on three fundamental components; people, process and systems, but those relate really to three pillars of digital transformation: Digital society, digital economy and digital government.

Digital society: It is really to focus on the need to ensure citizens not only have access to digital technology, but they are able to use it effectively. One of the things that I have found is that people focus a lot on coverage. Even if you look at the Telecommunications Authority's studies, previously, they used to be coverage studies. The language has changed now. They are talking about inclusion studies, digital inclusion versus coverage of what we have. So, under that programme—notice this is programme, and I will speak to that because one of the things that Sen. Richards mentioned is the fact that you keep hearing things over and over and over—that you would have heard some of this in the last budget, you may hear some of this in the next—and because these things are programmed and they consist of projects, the projects will have finite times as the programmes will, but the projects end long before the programmes do.

So, when we talk about programmes, what are we talking about? What are the goals for those things? Citizens to have access to affordable devices is important—because if you have coverage and no device—and appropriate devices for what you are trying to do; citizens to have access to the Internet connectivity

which is affordable or free. It does not make sense having the coverage, having the capability, having the capacity and then you cannot use it because you cannot afford it; citizens to become digitally literate and use ICT effectively and safely. It was just yesterday when we had the issue down close to your offices down at the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, the amount of different things that people sent to me that were happening in Port of Spain—there was a bomb that had gone off in the Ministry of Legal Affairs; there were gunmen running through the Ministry of Legal Affairs; there was police chasing people around Port of Spain that is why they had to lock off the street. All of this was happening and being distributed by social media. An educated public that is digitally literate would understand the danger that that poses. Who do you believe? Are you sure that is so? We have to get to the point where people understand the consequences for those things and, therefore, would not do them in the first place.

The need for persons with disabilities and different needs for underserved communities and so on. Think about this—again, Sen. Richards raised it—when you are dealing in a situation where—just think about what is happening with all the fully normal capable school public and then think about what is happening with the people who have learning disabilities. What is happening to the adult literate? How have they been coping in this time? How can we fix that going forward? We will deal with that.

So, one lesson that has been reinforced by the experiences of the global pandemic has been the importance of ubiquitous broadband Internet access for the national community. Indeed, the Government considers access to broadband and Internet to be of such critical importance to citizens that it was declared, again, by the hon. Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert that a broadband is now a public good. It is similar to the essentials such as electricity, water and access to

health care. It is very difficult to have a digital society and you do not have ubiquitous coverage for what it is we need to do.

One of the recurring comments also I have noticed during the debate thus far is people saying that our citizens are underserved. Now, I have the latest results, well, not the latest results, but I have information from an ITU survey that was done in 2018. And I used it because the current version of it speaks to something that is very strange. Let us see what this says about what has happened in Trinidad and Tobago. In 2018—now, this is 2017, but the report was done in 2018—mobile cellular customers per 100 inhabitants was 148.3. We had already exceeded 100 per cent mobile phone depth penetration. To date, it is 168.

Another one you would see would be households with Internet access. It was at 77 per cent, at that time—this is places where you can get access, not necessarily that you are using it. The latest numbers I have from the Telecommunications Authority is that number is now at 87 per cent. And I am saying all of this to say that an area that was perfectly fine in 2018, even fine in December of 2020, by March of 2021—by March of 2020, when we started to deal with this pandemic, all of a sudden, because the usage, the way in which people were using the broadband service, you went from being perfectly normal and good to now becoming a place where you have congestion and so on. The classic definition of underserved, and that continues to change and evolve every day.

Part of having digital transformation be effective is that we have to be responsive to the things that are happening to the citizenry, and we must be able to do that and react appropriately to address that. So there are just a number of things. So, I just thought I would bring that out. It is a survey I would actually distribute to a number—I will send it out to a number of people so that you can have a look at it to see what we have.

So we are required to make unprecedented changes in the way in which we all live. All facets and sectors of our society are faced with new requirements for meeting citizens' expectations. Our health care system has had to do the same thing. I mean, just think about what we talked about today, the parallel health care system, the kind of strain that it has been under. I mean, it is interesting. So when we talk about the capabilities for citizens and the solutions, it is not the old way in which you could measure it. When we talk about service access and coverage for customers now, this is what we are talking about. It is not just whether or not you have broadband. It is, can you use it? Can you use it in a way that is meaningful to you as the individual? Can you afford it? Can you access it with an appropriate device? So that is why when you look at these studies, it is now an inclusion survey rather than figuring out whether or not there is coverage that sits around where you are.

Wi-Fi: Now, again, there is a significant debate that is happening relative to what is going on with the Wi-Fi. There is a TT Wi-Fi project that has been going on. Again, I would have heard it last year, I am going to hear it this year, I am going to hear it the year after that. Again, it is the same thing. The reason is that the areas that you have to cover would have changed significantly between then because of the patters of what you have. Typically, you want to cover places where people work, travel and play. Yeah, well, the play pieces would have gone away in the last year. The workplace would have changed completely. So, instead of being at work, you would be doing it at home and the place where you live has now become all, the place where you work, live and play. Therefore, we have to pivot and focus and be responsive to what is happening so that we can make the adjustments.

The idea of doing public spaces, public and communal spaces in the

community; great, but then we have issues with people coming in. But then as it changes again, you have to go back to that method. We have done hospitals, we have done libraries and we have done all kinds of public areas. There was a statement made, I remember it from the debate in the other place, where they were saying that, you know, Wi-Fi, they were supposed to put it on public service transport and so on. Sixty PTSC buses were equipped with that in the pilot phase. I did not get a chance to speak there, but I could say it here now.

What is happening with primary schools? Again, a conversation came up today, the fact that the access in schools, in general, has to change. That has to change. The initial concept of when you made connections for schools was to primarily cover the office and a computer lab. What are you covering now? The entire school. Therefore, the project associated with that has to be ongoing because now, you are not just changing how many schools are covered, but you are also changing the dimensions and the capabilities of the network. That has to continue. Again, it is funded under the allocations that we have and I could go on and on about that. The digital literacy pieces are significant. We have to. You know, there are certain segments of the population that we must bring along if we are to fully realize our vision for a digital society, and these include some of our older persons or people who just do not trust the technology. You know, we want to be able to get that segment of our people literate enough that they understand what they have to do and that they can come out and work with us.

Digital economy: This is where you heard—and, again, Sen. Bethelmy spoke about that with the young people and talked about the hubs. I mean, I can restate it, but it was already clearly stated where all of that is concerned. But this is about the digitization and the digital transformation of some of our business industry, the development of the IT sector itself by making it inclusive and

bringing it and these hubs are key to—

You heard me mention earlier the fact that a lot of people like to do their development in these enterprise-type tools that exist in these stacks abroad. AWS, they are stacks and so on. Well, actually, one of the best ways to help to make it more available to us is to bring those stacks here. We do not have any in the Caribbean. We can bring them here and we will partner with the private sector to get those things here. That is when you start to engage these young entrepreneurs and developers because now they have all of the infrastructure, a safe place to do it—it is here, it is with you all the time—and you can get up in the middle of the night and start working. It gives you the opportunity to do that, and by partnering with the private sector you will start to get to realize this is a place that I can come to find solutions. It is a place that I can come to, and you can use all of that mechanism to get your things out into the public. It only takes one spark to get to the point where it is you have created a service that creates a global phenomenon.

There are examples of it right here in Trinidad and Tobago, where services have been built that are being absorbed and used by the State, marketed as far as places as Singapore and up the islands, and this has to do with something that somebody built to solve a problem within a company. And if you want to know what I am talking about, Minister of Finance, I am talking about e-tender. The Government partnered with PRP people to create this, and now it is being sold globally. Yeah? So we could talk to that.

The other thing in that space that has not got as much play, but it is important, are these mega data centres. It is one of the things that a lot of people look at when they talk about digital transformation and its impact on digital economy, it was the fact that these people keep coming ever so often, and knocking on your door, who want to build these data centres that are measured in

megawatts. You are talking about 100-megawatt data centres; 200 megawatts and 400-megawatt data centres, and they bring with them their own small type of economy. But what we are going to have to do as a Government—and, obviously, the Ministry of Digital Transformation will contribute to it—is to evaluate whether or not these things, if we want these things here, how are we going to benefit from it. Do you partner with them? Do we build it ourselves and tell them come? Do you just build a model where all you collect is tax and rent? What is the cost of the State, for the types of concessions that these people want? But, also, what are the benefits that can be derived from the State and the industry that we are talking about should these people come here?

When we started to on board our younger people in the Ministry—and we have, just recently, we took 10 returning scholars to work with us—you would find that they are not predominantly computer science people. We have economists, we have people there from labour, we have change management people and HR people. Why? Because the transformation is about people, process and systems. We have a lot of people that could do the systems, but we do not have enough people that understand the processes. We do not understand how to measure things from an economic perspective. And that is why when Sen. Deonarine speaks, it takes a lot to absorb what she says, because unless you start getting deep into the economics of the area in which you operate, you really do not care about it, because you are so fixated on creating the entity, and not understanding its value and how it impacts on the rest of society. So, I think that is something that we are definitely going to have to look at, but those come around.

Digital government: The transformation plan includes the provision for several key digital government initiatives. You would understand that we have to create a large enough portal so that all of our government services could exist.



Currently TTConnect might be the closest thing we have to a single place where you can get your stuff and we have work to do on that. You could understand some of the frailties of that solution. It has been exposed somewhat with the work we did, but we have to build anew. It is obvious we are going to have to do that.

The development of a government cloud; I made mention of that, the fact that there has to be a secure robust place where we can house services locally. Yes, we have, we are blessed with, at least, four world-class certified data centres in Trinidad and Tobago, and we have been using them. They are owned by the private sector, but there are things that the State should have within its own confine for its own reasons. National Security would be a good example of that. The development of the national e-identity system and, of course, the necessary interconnecting network, I could spend an hour talking about the benefits of that. The reason why that is important is that it represents an underlying pillar for almost all of the services in terms of being able to do them easily.

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services, you would have heard about the type of malfeasance that is occurring within that place. She made mention of the amount of dead people for which cheques are still being issued. Some of that, a lot of that goes away when you start using and employing ICT technology to address it. When you talk about the ability to provide the appropriate subsidies to the people that need them, well, you have to know who those people are, and then you have to have an effective mechanism to deliver it. All of that is tied into what we are doing with the identity and interoperability and the connection pieces. So that is absolutely important when we do it. Notice, I am talking about programmes and things. It is not a very long and wide-ranging list. It is a focused list and it is very impactful on the citizens, as I defined them as customers of the solutions that we have. Yeah? I am not going to go through,

again, because Sen. Bethelmy did such a good job on some of the other pieces that we have, but let us get to the other part of it.

The continued ability of information and communication technology to transform our lives is something that I want people to grasp. If nothing else, the heavy reliance on ICT during the pandemic for services for work and school and so on, there is really no going back from this. I cannot see us going back to a pre-pandemic thing where we do not use ICT as much or we do not want to use it as much. The chance for that is—that horse has already bolted the cart. We have to do this. And while we have seen improvements in the capability of our broadband services being provided in hospitals and schools and so on, the thing is not just about the fact of connecting it, but you have to connect it at a capable level, to ensure that whatever the purpose for which you put it in is going to be fulfilled. So, we are going to do that and that is something, again, that is well furnished and accounted for in the allocations.

Digital transformation is not the domain of any single Ministry. It is a whole of government agenda with individual initiatives and so on, spread out across Ministries but being handled in a coordinated effort. It is timely, you know, that the Ministry of Digital Transformation has been formed as it would assist in the collaborative efforts to ensure, you know, that we have successful outcomes. I think we have currently over 80 projects, IT projects, within the State and if you would look at that in terms, of course, if you identify them line by line in the budget, we are running probably close to \$340 million. This is apart from what has been allocated for the Ministry of Digital Transformation. So there is a lot happening. So, again, do not look at the allocations for the Ministry of Digital Transformation and believe that it is all encompassing and defines what we are doing where that is. I mean, that is not a small sum and it only underlines the

Government's intent and commitment for the infusion of technology and digital transformation as it relates to the country and for the public and private sector.

One of the ways to answer the issue again that was brought up by Sen. Richards as it relates to how are we going to deal with accounting for and implementing these things, the Ministry has a mandate. I work with a team and we kind of created it. It is not that you would find it in any Google place anywhere. But what we have defined it as, as what we are trying to do with this transformation is a new way to address the end-to-end consumption and delivery of goods and services to customers using appropriate digital technology. That is what is driving this entire Ministry. That is what we have to do and that is what we are going to set out to do and accomplish that. Yeah?

In terms of, you know, what are we really going to do with it? How does it look at the end? Well, it is really to positively impact citizens and the lives by having infrastructure in place that would ensure that the services delivered by Government are operating at their optimum. It is not necessarily derived from the projects for which the Ministry itself, this Ministry of Digital Transformation has direct ownership, but through the ability to offer guidance, governance and partnership to all relevant stakeholders, and that includes the private sector, civil society and so on. But the intent of all of that is to move the whole country forward. My focus is concurrently building a healthy sustainable ecosystem—

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:**—that is self-generating, but based in Trinidad and Tobago, again, powered on local infrastructure and developed by our own people. But the challenges posed by the current resource constraints on Government to implement, and the work programme is very real. But the opportunities to explore new solutions based on collaboration and partnership amongst various national

stakeholders, again, it is the citizens, the civil society, the private sector and the Government itself. So, you heard me use the word “partnership” so many times. This is to ensure that the message is sent, quite clearly, that the Government is not trying to do this on its own, and if we try to do it on our own we would not succeed. But we do have very willing partners with what we are doing here; very, very, willing partners.

We are committed to delivering on what we have set out to do. We have garnered a lot of goodwill and volunteering support. We are also about knowledge and capacity development for sustainability. Our workforce will represent the bright sparks and minds of our young people. The generation who live in this digital life and this digital age and who represent the sustainability for any and every thing, you know, we set out to do here today and for the coming years. You know, I set out when I started, you know, this journey, to get and to get a reaffirmation that the trajectory that we have is right and built for success. And once we had identified that the idea was that we would be able to accelerate it, we have. So the journey is not a new one, but, at this time, it is sharply focused. It will be coordinated and it will be supported. We will propel this country forward into a digital age, and our *Vision 2030* objectives will be realized. This is a revolution. It is a revolution of thought and action. It is not really a continued evolution. This is a revolution of thought and action, and my commitment to you is that we will get it done and we will get it done starting this year. [*Desk thumping*] I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**4.40 p.m.**

**Madam President:** Sen. Deyalsingh. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to partake in this important budget debate this afternoon. I would like to first mention

that the actual budget itself, when we heard it and I saw some reviews, it seems to me a lot of persons were in agreement with it. There was not much negative feedback from it. And I must say, I, as an Independent Senator, try to get the views of what the Government says, what the Opposition says and what persons outside say. And some persons outside may be economists or other independent persons who are really trying to give their opinion. I heard sometimes—I heard the Minister in his presentation said some of those persons may have an agenda, a hidden agenda, and I agree that may be so. But the average person out there, I try to sift what they are saying. So I am saying it is a budget that did not bring many measures that would have brought suffering to the people. I saw it as something that had a great, you know, effect in trying to get that social network, that social, you know, net to the people who are suffering. And I am also saying that the business Chambers actually give support of it throughout the country.

Some economists like Marla Dukharan, Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie also expressed skepticism. Ancel Roget stated it was a job where they are still waiting to see if the unions would have been able to, you know—the promise of having negotiations with the unions. They are still looking to see if that will come to fruition or it is just “ole” talk because they probably heard it before, but we have to have hope. We have to have hope that the Government realizes that, you know, you have to help those people with their problems that they have, in terms of meeting their finances with salaries that are years in the past. Curtis Williams also wrote that it was a strategy to keep the population believing that the economic challenges that we face are not that bad.

But really speaking, we have to give positive messages. We have to give something positive, even though it may be bad, we have to say, “We will mobilize, as a population, to try and get us to another level.” You see, we have to realize this

was the eleventh consecutive budget in which, you know, the expenditure has exceeded the revenue, so it is really challenging. It is a really challenging job for the Minister of Finance.

The debt service is 10 billion annually and accounts for 23 per cent of revenue, so it is challenging. But most of the persons out there, they do not care about the nitty-gritty, about seeing how we are balancing the books. I mean, we have to balance the books for the persons out there looking in, the organizations who want to rate us, to give us loans and whatnot. We have to balance it for that. We also need that fact that, you know—to show that somehow we are managing the economy good, so that is important. But the average person does not really care about that. The average person wants to know they are having expensive food but we see food prices going up worldwide; shortages in even delivery of food items. This is a problem worldwide. So persons want security. Yes, I am saying Government and successive governments have given us security in this country which it takes a lot to be desired because we have to admit with the murders, the shots, what is happening in the country, it is not nice, but the basic citizen wants to talk about food security services—services offered. And there are still challenges sometimes to get services in certain Government Departments.

In COVID, it was very challenging but COVID did help the system where people online—and the Minister just spoke about the access online. And a lot of persons have been able to access different services online and this is something I congratulate the Government for, probably COVID pushed it forward but the services—the other services, you know, may be lacking in other departments.

We also—persons need basic infrastructure, water, roads, broadband, as the Minister—those are basic things that the population would need. So the population really does not care much about the financial issues but on the day-to-day life.

And, you know, the Government is really in charge of our money to achieve this for us. So if we see failure in any of these that I mentioned, it may be a failure on the part of Government, of the institutions, of the lag in getting civil servants to work. It could be the international markets. It could be shipping problems coming in here, prices of food.

We have a lot of international factors affecting us. So do not matter what we do here, we are highly dependent on the cost of oil and gas outside. And we see here now that, really, what people need and some persons outside want is really a greater degree of transparency. So they see moneys coming in, money is there, they—and the discourse outside in some persons is—and it is not just the Opposition, other persons want a level of transparency and any good government with good governance would try to get for us.

Now, we see that Government has good plans in terms of—they got the gambling legislation in, so we could gain money from that; the tax revenue departments which, again, to get personal taxation; the property tax where, I think, they may get about half a billion, you know. And even with the personal tax, there is the progressive rate of taxation that we have and it is a progressive rate according to what earnings you have and people under 7,000 are not taxed. So all these are good avenues that, you know, persons at the lower end of the economic spectrum could get that relief.

We also have revenues gained from oil, gas, and also I was very happy to hear the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries speak on the fact that what is happening to oil and gas abroad—and this will give us a little impetus, a little improvement. So therefore, the thing is we have done studied ad nauseam to determine what direction society should move on, economically, from past governments, from this Government. But we are really weighed down by partisan

politics rather than progressive discussion concerning pushing the economy forward and we really need to do that at this stage.

I heard Sen. Richards mentioned the fact that, you know, there is the gap, a disparity between the “have” and the “have-nots”. And again, part of my discussion is how could we try to get that gap—how people would get some satisfaction. Because there is a level of talk outside, people say that the 1 per cent have a lot of money, there is the rich people gaining, poor people—so this discussion is there. It is there and a Member on the other side did mention it is discriminatory to say things about the 1 per cent. They say it may be an ethnic bias also. So how could we try to get that, you know, that discussion out of the national dialogue because we are there for long?

So I listened, as I said, to both sides. I had heard the concerns. And I am thinking that, you know, I have to raise certain points that I want to raise and some points I listened to people outside and some persons outside may come and say things just because of mischief. You do not know what is true. Some may be politically motivated, some may have an engrained bias against the Government and anything they do. And, you see—so the fact is most people do not mind paying taxes but they need the services to manifest that. They need to see that there is no wastage in what the State does. There is no leakage, you know, in the state entities especially.

They have seen failure of CAL. Remember, there is BWIA; BWIA morphed into CAL; CAL came, still lost money even before. Then they looked at—you know, they said, “Why should we pay road tax, green tax, health surcharge?” Those are the arguments that are outside and these are the things, I think, any Government will have to say, “Listen, your taxes will be going into this,” but people need to see this. And as citizens we have to demand proper stewardship



from the Government funds, eh. And we have to, you know—because we do not have equitable interest in tax collected. But I say we have to say that if the Government—somehow we out there or other persons out there perceive there is a wastage in money, they need to tell the Government in a nice manner, not a disrespectful manner, “Hey, we need you to do something about this.”

Sen. Vieira in his contribution spoke about sometimes, you know, there is no long-term plan. But remember, in the late Prime Minister Patrick Manning’s day, we had the 2020, then it went to 2030. So people had plans and he had some plans. And Sen. Vieira mentioned the lack of leadership and I have to agree, if you have plans and successive governments have not seen it to a real level where it is materializing, leadership demands that, you know, you also talk to the Opposition in case they happen to come in power the next five years, they would want to carry on that plan. So it is continuity of thought, a continuity of progress. And, you see, I really was so dismayed when the late Patrick Manning’s dream of having a financial centre set up in the, you know, in the Waterfront, that was something that a lot of work went into place. We have could been that hub. We could have had such economic benefits. So I do not know with the COVID how it was affected but that was a dream. It was—something was there. But when the PP government came into power they just did not continue that. So we have to get that—the continuity.

We have to have also the challenge also from governments to get people to work efficiently; get people to work efficiently, get them to implement their ideas because we heard Sen. Richards spoke about the implementation failure is there. We have to also work on crime because I do not think we can get great financial stimulus—if I cannot open a store because I am frightened a criminal will come and kill me or kidnap my family. I do not think tourists would come here if our

crime advisory suggests that we have that level of crime. So we have to deal with crime as a priority and we need a financial ecosystem within the Caribbean where we could all look at one another and help one another.

Madam President, some points I would like go into that, I would suggest that—I would just want to touch on if I have enough time—is a wealth tax, a sugar and a salt tax. I want to speak on the Barrackpore incident that happened recently; property tax; regional health authorities; crime, the PH, I find, is a problem; camera issues; kidnapping. The fisherfolk, I am thinking, should be granted firearms to defend themselves. For too long I have been hearing fisherfolk are going out there, they are missing, they are being attacked by pirates. Just as how you have the farmer can get access to a firearm to guard his field, so fisherfolk are sitting ducks in the sea where they are there. And, you know, either we provide them with some sort of a coast guard vessel or some sort of a system where they can seek help very quickly and we can come to that scene, we need to protect them.

I also now would like to see the importation of things like alcohol and other products, if somehow we could realize that that is a drain on our forex. I also want to look at the transparency and accountability of state boards; education; tax religious bodies is something, I am thinking, the Government, it is time to do that. We saw last time when we collected the hundred-dollar notes, the amount of money one priest had. It is time the Government would realize that if you look at the Catholic Church, they have a lot of assets. So we have to say—I am talking worldwide—so if we have to say, we are taxing, those are considerations, I am thinking, we have to go to.

Also, I am of the opinion—I know others would differ but the mega projects, I am seeing, I am hoping we could put it on hold and give basic infrastructure their

day to at least get some relief rather than bid these products. I want to talk about mandatory youth camps because I really heard different Members speak about youth and I think this is something. Fix-it centres, we should have where unemployed youth could come, teach them how to fix it because we are in a society where we throw away things and we cannot afford that if we are not getting the foreign currency.

I want to see if we could probably bring back GATE for seniors because the adults and home and they have nothing to really do. Sometimes we need that level of GATE, if it permits, you know. Now, I heard Sen. Richards and also the Senator for Social Development and Family Services speak about giving out these grants, and she is doing a tremendous job. I commend her. The talk on the street—I mean, I have listened to people, tremendous job, but the fact is both she and Sen. Richards said we cannot keep people in that—in perpetuity. Sen. Richards spoke on the fact that there is the, you know, learned helplessness where people do not want to come out of that. But we have seen that in DEWD, we have seen that in CEPEP, so we have to know how we can get people out of this. I also believe that to be like a safeguard on the Government's expenditure there should be a tax union to monitor. And the other thing, Madam, even though we have this intention here, some people claim, "We have heard it all before."

So with the wealth tax, I want to go with this, Madam President. It was President Trump who had once backed a 14.25 per cent in persons who have over 10 million. Okay? So it would be a one-off. Now, if we have this talk about the 1 per cent belongs to the plantocracy class; they came with money; they used slave labour and indentureship labour; and they had that money; they are controlling society, this one-off, probably a 10 per cent on those persons who have more than 70 million—because his own was 14.25 over people with US \$10 million, so we

could consider that. Sen. Warren in the United States Congress also had a different scheme to manage that and Sen. Sanders did not believe there should be millionaires. So even within their department there were talks about it. But, you know, I recently heard somebody I admire much speak about this and this was former President Obama.

President Obama is actually backing Sen. Biden now to try to raise funds and he also suggested that even though he will have to pay, he said:

“...billionaires should ‘pay a little more in taxes’ to fund healthcare, childcare...climate crisis fight.”

And he was saying that, you know, there is an infrastructure Bill right now in the Congress in the United States where they are talking about rebuilding buildings, roads, bridges, ports—same thing we are talking about here—building of roads. They are in trouble because they realize their roads are deteriorating. Climate change is causing major potholes in certain areas. And right now, President Biden had a problem within his own democratic party where there were some of those people, like the conservatives, who want to just put that money into the Infrastructure Fund but persons who lean on the socialists’ side, like Bernie Sanders and others, they are saying, no, they want more benefits into the social aspects in the country. So he has some little trouble there to deal with. But I am thinking our social network and plans here are excellent.

I want to touch on foreign currency. We need somehow to stop our dependency on that. We have been dipping into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Some people are saying out there—the dialogue is that only certain special interest groups can get foreign currency, smaller business cannot get it. So those are talks we are hearing and these are talks we have to see how we could address. There are certain pharmaceutical companies who bring in drugs that are very

inexpensive who cannot get the money to bring it in and if they cannot get that, you find that, you know, the customer who is accustomed to buying these drugs will be lost out. And yet still you see money going out to buy all sorts of different types of alcohol and I wonder why can we not stop that alcohol input with all different sort of things? You find, you know, Johnny Walker—and Johnny Walker walking out while—walking into our country while foreign is currency walking out, so we have to see if we could stop this foreign exchange somehow. We have Angostura here. Angostura could develop our own alcohol to our own market or within the Caribbean, see if we can get beer from Guyana, beer from Barbados—but I think Barbados' Banks beer is now affiliated with the United States, eh, so somehow it was bought out. So we have to get within our Caribbean. We could have own market and if people want to drink, well, do not let that foreign currency go out. I, however, must say I was happy when I saw Carib now launching out there to get that market out there with Carib Blue and all these inputs that they are trying to give to sell their product.

So, Madam President, I want to just breach on transparency and accountability, especially in certain state enterprises. You see, if Government has money, those state enterprises cannot be like an ATM machine where they just give out and there is no accountability. Now, I remember some time ago, when the hon. Prime Minister was the Leader of the Opposition, he criticized the PP government where CAL was giving money to the Children's Life Fund. And he said, this is something, it is an incestuous relationship where you there losing money and you are giving it to a next fund, but we see the same thing happening here. We see recently NGC was the one who was giving out computers. So yet still, you have these state enterprises but you are getting money from them and yet still they are losing money. So somehow those things we have to see what is

happening.

Well, you know, when I looked at the water situation in the country, Madam, and I see WASA, it is an embarrassment to have at this time, with all that money we had and all that promises we had, in all the budgets so far, about WASA, now WASA is overpopulated. We know it is overpopulated by 2,000 workers. Recently WASA board was increased. This Government wanted to increase WASA board but yet still we saw somebody resigning. The Chairman resigned and so there were some problems there. I think the public has a right to know what goes on in these boards. Because if you have state bodies and they are mismanaged, it is the taxpayer who has to actually pay for that.

Madam President, I would like to read in, please, a letter to the Editor of the *Guardian* newspaper, Wednesday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, by Reg Porter, where he actually mentioned the fact that—he said:

What the Government will do with their constant claims and also restraints—

Saying that:

Certain matters are confidential and sensitive about every deliberation they meet—he finds that is deceptive.

So this was his opinion and this is some opinions of—this is the opinion of certain people out there that if you have NGC and other things, why can we not have transparency and when people ask for it, they do not have to go to the Freedom of Information Act to try and get the information? It is public money, let those people there see what they are going to do and—so his opinion is too long we have gotten that dialogue.

So, again, we have to look at the fact that even with Tobago, I remember they purchased two hotels at the Tobago House of Assembly and the hotels were—

we do not know if any feasibility studies were done. And afterwards, due to the Freedom of Information Act, I think Vanus James found out that those hotels were there, it was just sitting, it was a bad investment and they were still paying of guards and upkeep of that hotel going on, you know to maintain it.

A former Finance Minister, Mariano Browne, you know, he echoes the calls of certain persons out there when he said public accountability, when poor business decisions at state-owned companies, you know, resulting in wastage of public funds. So we have to say tax us more but give us more accountability. The Sunday Editorial of September the 5<sup>th</sup> raised a similar sentiment, you know. So therefore, we have to realize that persons out there are asking for accountability. And I think Sen. Richards also breached on that fact that, you know, if state enterprises are losing money, we have to know why they are doing so and what—is it that we are putting persons on certain boards that either are incapable of doing their function or they are—it is too much for them? Somehow we have to figure out: Why we put people on boards? And it is good people. People who—it is hard to get people to serve because they have to have the integrity declaration. They have to make sure they really—so to get good people to serve on boards, it is difficult but then you have to get that level of performance now. So corruption, accountability—even Archbishop Jason Gordon said recently our country has become so corrupt, it is hard for business people to live straight.

So therefore, I looked at the list that—the list of vat free items that—a lot of persons are happy about it, eh, Madam Prescient. A lot of persons were happy about it but I make mention, you know, Prime Minister George Chambers also had the Central Marketing Agency which was supposed to get rid of the middleman and bring in these things at a lower cost. And I make mention the fact that, you know, the Minister of Finance said in one of his interviews that it is riddled with

inefficiencies, cost overruns and theft, but remember, the Government is responsible to make sure it runs properly. Even Public Utilities Minister Gonzales mentioned the fact that WASA has not been able to produce audited financial statements for the last four or five years, but who appoints these people? So it is really the Ministry and the Ministers have to get a little more heavy-handed and see what they can do in terms of getting these boards to work or tell those people, “Ride out because we do not deserve that again.”

I also want to make mention of the fact that there was a report, a Farrell report, which was given to the Prime Minister on July 18, 2016, where he looked at state enterprises and he starts his report:

In the minds of many citizens, state enterprises are seen as mechanism for dispensing of political patronage as inefficient and lossmaking providers of services or as providing employment for supporters of whichever party happens to be in Government—whichever party.

So we have to look at that perception and see if we can move away from that.

I see young Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal who said that, you know, there is no corruption. You have good people there but you have to understand the history has shown there are challenges there. Sen. Richards mentioned the NEDCO accountability that he would like to get.

Madam, the incidence of crime, I am saying, we still have PH taxis on the road. We still have—I think the Minister of National Security said we have 82 per cent of the CCTV cameras working. We still need to give some sort of tax benefit to the individuals. So I can bring in a camera system in my home and I can hook up to the system but give me tax free. Paintings are tax free, so an artist could have a painting and he is tax free, 100 per cent. Give me, I can bring in a Hik system and put it up. I can now feed your system, National Security, but I can now get from



that. That will be a gain from the individuals and from also—the Government will gain from it. The police will gain from that. So you have to have little things we could put into place to help crime because if you do not attack crime, we will be in trouble.

And I am one who had mentioned that I had supported the SOE before and I was hoping it could have been extended in National Security to go after the gang persons who we know. Remember, a past Minister went dining with them in Hyatt so we know who they are. It is just to go after them and see what. But, you see, this is why mentioning that, that you have these killings and criminals, you know, and we are really sitting as sitting ducks in our homes sometimes and I—initially, earlier on, in the past, I had supported the fact that, you know, women could actually get licences for guns now and even business people. Because we are seeing now kidnapping seems to be there, coming back. We have to be very, very cautious that if you do not nip it in the bud, it will now set a whole slew of kidnapping when people get an idea, “Oh, I can gain from this.” So we have to support the police in trying to get the kidnapping or kidnappers of that recent businessman, you know, somehow to justice as quick as possible.

So people are looking on to these things. People are looking on to say, “You know, we have an Anti-Kidnapping Squad,” but we have to get results. Right? Madam, I mentioned the Barrackpore incident because when I saw the burning of the tyres on the road, we have to understand, eh, those people who are protesting months before, they had placards, so it was not to say it just suddenly came about. They were saying that they need the roads, you know—and why I mention it in this budget debate is because somebody there mentioned that they spent hours on the road to go to Port of Spain for a drive that used to take just 15 minutes, so that is lack of productivity. So we have to understand that. He said—there is a gentleman

who mentioned, who lives there, it used to take 12 minutes from Barrackpore to San Fernando just six years ago, now it takes 45 minutes to an hour just to reach. Lack of productivity would affect our citizens able.

A next one had complained, there is no water, there are bad roads. I mean, those are things that people are crying out for. And how could you have no water in COVID times? This is to me—I do not know. Those people are—and it is an easy fix you know, Madam President. You buy tanks for all these people—we know they have leaks. There are leaks. We know Minister Gonzales has a task and he is very active but how—a quick fix would be buy tanks for everybody. Give them it and have a water supply to them. You see, in Arizona there is a problem with their water drying up and they have a system where they mentioned that you give 50 gallons per person per household, they would deliver a day. So we could have these programmes implemented and people would say, “Yes, that is a Government working for me.”

So why I mentioned the Barrackpore, Madam President, it is not just that aspect—now, if the Minister of Works and Transport said that he is going after these people for—and I think it was \$375,000, persons say, “But how come you do not go after other people?” So that causes a sort of ethnic, a sort of political slant to things where they would figure other people are getting away. And I mentioned it because we do not want that to start up. Either you go after people all over if they protest but do not let it look like it is just one area.

Now, what I want to mention too, there was an individual there who said, you know, he said that police came into his home, they wore no mask, ignored COVID-19 guidelines and walked through the house with dirty shoes. And this gentleman, who is called Kishan Maharaj, he said he did not partake in any sort of activities with fire and whatnot. He said the police came to get his DVR recorder

and he said, “Look, I will drop it for you”, but they came in their house. They spent 20 minutes. And my problem is if anybody come in my house without a mask, I will be scared for—I would get acute distress disorder. And this gentleman has every right to even reach out to the Minister of Health, even the Minister of National Security to let those police officers—if they breached the regulation, to go after those officers. I mean, the Minister of Health was spying on “doubles” vendors and buyers who did not have masks, so I think he should take a great interest in going after these police officers to see if they can, you know, have those guidelines.

Now, the police officers I mentioned before, we need guidelines when people come—police are searching your homes, where the police officers have their cameras on so they cannot plant anything and the individuals are able to tape them without saying, “Take out your camera.” And, Madam, I remember a few years ago, when police actually raided and broke articles in the Minister of National Security’s—one of his constituents. He said that it was unfair how they came and broke down the door and mashed up things, and he actually mentioned that there should be some sort of fund to pay those people for their damages and I supported him years ago when he was not even Minister of National Security, but he said, “You come into my home as an officer and you break articles, you pay.” There is a fund to help those people.”

Madam President, property tax, I want to go with property tax. Yes, we need it; UK, America, we need it. But what I am saying and I mentioned sometime before, certain flood-prone areas, let those people get some sort of relief please. Let them have a relief where they pay lower property taxes. Generally, I disagree with going in people’s homes to see, you know, how much rent you could get, what is the floor made out of. I am thinking certain areas you know should have a

basic tax rate, that is what is in the States. So if you are living within Goodwood Park, it would be a certain rate. If you are living in Bangladesh in St. Joseph, it would be a certain rate. So instead of having each and every—so that would be a greater fix.

**5.10 p.m.**

And you see sometimes, you see you have to understand, I may be living in a big house. But suppose I got that because my parents handed it to me. I would not be able to maintain that. Suppose I spend my money to beautify my house and the neighbour next door just does not do that. What does that tell us? I will be taxed more because my house looks more rentable? No. Have it as an area, I am suggesting.

Madam, the youth and plenty Members here, Sen. Young, I mean, we meet at the Barataria Health Centre, we discuss things with the youths and what not. He has the heart in the right place. He has helped a lot of youths. I see he mentioned the programmes. I see Sen. Yokymma Bethelmy mentioned all the excellent programmes. But, Madam, we find the youths sometimes do not want to come. There is MiLAT and other beautiful programmes, the youth “doh” want to come. Some just want to be idle in the corner and do not access the programmes even though you have lovely things there for them. And what I am saying is that, some youths if they are idle and they are not in school and like they are not in a family business doing farming, make it mandatory that they have to do some sort of a youth camp because you are on the corner, you will be a future criminal.

Madam President, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, I was so happy when he actually told us about the prices going up. And I feel bad, eh. Because am I praying for prices of oil and gas to go up and I know it is bad for the environment. I undergo some sort of cognitive dissonance for that because I want

us to get out of this situation we are in.

The IT system we hear it was excellent. I look at health, Madam. Madam, the items on the VAT-free list, I have a little problem with it. Madam, right now in the States last week the FDA, the Food and Drug Administration, they actually said that we should have a new limit on the salt level that you have in your food and your snacks. So they give like 164 now directive to snacks and baby milk and everything that has salt, the sodium content, it is down presently. And when I look at it, I mean, people love it. People eat their pork and their, you know, the salt pig and what not and corned beef and these things. But we have to get healthy eating habits because we are going to pay down the line for those same individuals, hypertensive, heart attack, \$160,000 to do heart surgery.

So what the UK did, they had introduced also a sugar tax where they had the limits of the sugar and they are getting benefits for it because there is less sugar in households. So the companies that are making these things are really now having to put less sugar in certain—so I am calling for a salt tax, a sugar tax. It is the health of the nation that would benefit from it.

Madam, I also would like to mention the health of our system—give us, the Government has given us Diascan machines for diabetes. I would pray that the Government considers blood pressure machines. If you give us blood pressure machines, it will help the population. Plenty people come to me and you do not know how the pressure is during the day. They go home and they just have to talk with their wife, the pressure goes up. To come in my office, the pressure is good. So I am saying, give us that. If the Government could afford it, give us. You are giving the Diascan. Give us. It will help people. It will help a lot of people.

Also, start dropping CDAP drugs home for the elderly because remember some people started it, eh. Some private thing. So we could have OJTs on—where

they can go and drop these for elderly people. So again, those are some suggestions. And I always mention the fact that the regional health authorities—

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

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Madam. The regional health authority, I think, it is overfilled. I am saying that the regional healthy authority should just make it three. One in San Fernando, one in Mount Hope, one in Tobago and you have some sub-specialties so you do not have a team of neurologists in San Fernando Hospital, a team in Mount Hope, a team in Port of Spain. Those are five teams. That is a lot of doctors you are paying. You have one neurological team in either one hospital. People from south could come. We have a good ambulance service; they come down. You have one neuro team, so you will now will now disperse of some of those doctors who are there and, you know, you find that you are paying these, some of those individuals where, you know, you have consultants and there are allegations there that some consultants do not come out to work and what not.

And, you know, the report of that, the Welch Report, that Sen. Gopeesingh mentioned did say that persons should only work in hospitals or private, not both. And I want to make a plug for the young doctors. There are lot of young doctors now who do not get jobs. They get a one month, a three months, a six months. How could they get credit cards, mortgage? They are like on a 10-days job. We have to help those doctors. We have to help the nurses who are on temporary contracts. Those are essential workers. The young doctors are being overworked. I have a young son who is qualified and, you know, a lot of them are not going to get the jobs and that is a reality so we have to make that a priority.

Education, Madam, I am saying teachers are the ones who can help us because they identify children with problems. They can identify children and they

can bring them to the social services, they can bring them to child support service. I am saying, we have to realize that the teachers are the ones who can save us. Paying the teachers would solve any issues that they have. But, you see, what I saw recently in the newspaper is the EFCC said they are not even getting paid, and that is an important one to look at the infrastructure. So you have here good bodies and yet still they say that they are not paid and they were not paid before also.

Also, there was the staff in CARIRI also having a similar concern also where payments were not—those are essential things. CARIRI could develop a lot of infrastructure, things like mass testing. They are the way out of our COVID to help us. So we have to pay these. We cannot just have it there. And, you know, education—it is a pity that Scott Galloway stated in the States, a New York university professor, that there a lot of males underperforming worldwide, and they call them the broke and lonely male. We have to get the education system to get to them.

The ecosystem, Madam President, I heard the Minister Kazim mention that they were getting devices to see when they are going to have floods. Flood alert devices. I say no. “Doh” get that. Get flood barriers, you know. So I do not want to know when flood coming. I could see the weather and see. I want barriers to be there at the openings to come up. There is a system called the MOSE system in Venice where big, big buoys come up and block the input of the sea. The Minister has to realize, eh, floods are going to get worse. We are dealing with rising tides. We are dealing with rising ocean levels. Floods are going to get worse. The rains we are having. So he has a very, very hard agenda to keep there. But we need, Madam, I would have rather that instead of big projects, mega projects like airport and ports and what not, I would have rather you have retention ponds and dams. I think when you finish that, then you go out to all sorts of mega projects.

So I am thinking even Singapore has something called crest intense 10 story high concrete barriers and all these things. We need to get that. Singapore has also a desalination plant which also collects rainwater. So it is something that they developed. So they actually desalinate when it is necessary and when there is rain, they can get that rainfall and they could deliver 50 gallons. No, they can deliver, as I say, I do not have the figure right now but they are delivering a lot of—30 million gallons per day. We could tap into the Singapore experience.

Madam, I would like to thank the Minister of Social Development and Family Services for all her grants she has given. But I just want to warn, there is study done whereby in January 13, 2020, by Saunders King's College London. “..government spending goes to certain voters — and shapes inequality”. So in the UK they are having the same discussion that Sen. Richards had where they fund certain things where they fund their own voters. So it is not to say it is something that we level against you. It is happening in the UK and we have to put things in place to prevent it so everybody will feel they are now part of the business. They are getting equality and they are actually, you know, what I am saying, you know, inclusive—

**Madam President:** Sen. Deyalsingh, your time is up. Minister of Public Administration.

**The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):** Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to the debate. It is almost as though I got a premonition of the focus of Sen. Richards' contribution because my contribution in large part addresses a lot of the questions that he raised.

The theme of my contribution this afternoon will be “Excellence in Public Service”. More than 250 years ago Thomas Paine the American patriot and essayist



wrote:

“These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of...”—his “...country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of...”—men and women.

No one can doubt that the last two years have tested us as citizens of the world, as a country and as a Government. This has been the pains hour that we are called to address and stand firm in. This is the call for creative and innovative thought and leadership. This is a time when our country has faced and continues to face unprecedented challenges. This has been a time when we are all required to give our best, to be selfless, to put the needs of the collective above our own individual wants and needs. It has been an honour for me to serve in this Government and to see demonstrated up close, creative and innovative thought under the leadership of our Prime Minister, the Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, [*Desk thumping*] and to witness the selfless service of our frontline workers who have toiled tirelessly to keep us alive, healthy, fed and sane through these trying times.

Permit me to pay tribute to them, including but not limited to the Minister of Health and his very hard-working team of consultants and caregivers led by Dr. Parasram, the doctors, the nurses and other members of staff [*Desk thumping*] of the Ministry of Health and the various RHAs and their supporting cast. The Ministers of agriculture, finance and social development and their teams who have worked to provide relief. The current and previous Ministers of National Security and the members of the various protective services who have fought to keep us safe even from ourselves.

The other members of Cabinet who have toiled alongside the others to keep the country moving forward. The NGOs and other members of the private sector

who rallied to support the efforts of the Government in protecting life and limb, in support of the vaccination, laptop and other programmes. And all of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and others who have supported us in this literal battle for our lives. Trinidad and Tobago owes you a debt of gratitude that cannot adequately be repaid.

In the face of the challenges of COVID-19, our Prime Minister reached out to all patriotic citizens to contribute to the search for solutions. We are grateful that many persons, including persons who are not supporters of the PNM, recognize that some situations transcends partisan loyalties even if they are chastised by their own comrades for their patriotism.

As a result of these contributions what was produced were the Road Map to Recovery reports and the community recovery reports. The continuing impact of the pandemic has made it necessary to revisit the country's principal socioeconomic development framework, the National Development Strategy or as it is commonly known *Vision 2030*. Phase two of the Road Map to Recovery report which is consistent with vision five of the *Vision 2030* has itself three pillars: Diversifying and transforming the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, leveraging digitalization, making food security a reality in Trinidad and Tobago and leaving no one behind while creating greater equity.

The current planning horizon provides both opportunities and challenges which must be harnessed to inform the new development path. Trinidad and Tobago Government's is addressing the usual development issues such as poverty, unemployment, business creation, infrastructural development, social cohesion and environmental risks, while simultaneously creating solutions for newer challenges brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic such as the lingering socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, normalizing digital and technology-based solutions as part

of the daily life are devolving to grasp new business and market opportunities within a constricted financial space.

The Government recognizes the important role innovation has played in providing more effective, open and inclusive services to the public. Innovative solutions are providing new ways to positively impact the lives of our citizens and new approaches to activate them as partners in shaping the technologically-enhanced future society together.

Trinidad and Tobago received \$60 million in grant funding for the 11th EDF programme which lent support to building a competitive and innovative economy. This innovation programme designed and implemented as a partnership between the Ministry of Planning and Development, the European Union delegation, the Inter-American Development Bank and CARIRI supports the implementation of the national innovation policy by targeting the gaps currently existing within the innovation ecosystem. These grant resources provide access to financing, technical support and other relevant services in support of both businesses and individuals. This will enable the thrust of Government as stated in Trinidad and Tobago's development strategy to build globally competitive businesses which is also bolstered by the pillar of transforming and diversifying Trinidad and Tobago's economy through the priority areas of investing in strategic sectors to create growth and jobs, creating a digital nation, economic recovery, building lives and livelihoods, ensuring food security and safety among others.

Again, we are demonstrating the strategic approach of the Government to national development led by carefully designed and purpose-driven policy. So to those who oppose us, who keep saying, where is the plan and what are we doing, we do have a plan. It is clear and we are moving forward deliberately to achieve the objectives of the plan.

The Government is aware that there is continuing challenge for efficient implementation to the point that Sen. Richards focused on. We know that the programmes developed have a strong national consensus and are solid and in the country's interest in this defining moment of our development. We need to make sure that implementation is efficiently done. In this regard, I commend my colleague the Minister of Planning and Development the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis for the leadership role that she is taking in that regard.

As you know, project implementation is often challenging. It is even more so in the public service however, despite this fact this Government wishes to reaffirm its commitment to equality, effectiveness, timeliness and efficiency in meeting our development objectives. To this end, the Ministry of Planning and Development is strengthening its capacity in project management. The Ministry will be supporting other Ministries to review their implementation plans with a view to identifying and resolving challenges hindering the progress of their respective projects. The Ministry will report periodically to the Government, alerting members of defaulting projects in a timely manner. This approach is expected to enhance the quality and the speed of project implementation and thereby increase our implementation rate.

The Government will also continue to use mechanisms to measure performance from the Ministry level to the national level. Policies, systems and procedures to measure the performance of projects and programmes will be incorporated into the implementation process. These mechanisms will give insight into progress, signal bottleneck developments and validate the expectant results to be achieved.

One such mechanism that is already in the process of being developed is the creation of a monitoring and evaluation framework to support the effective

implementation of the recommendations made by the various committees on the Road Map to Recovery phase two report. This among other objectives will keep Government focused of what is to be accomplished over the medium term.

Additionally, to support the M&E framework for the Road Map to Recovery phase two report, the Ministry of Planning and Development has already began laying the foundation to support performance management and enhance implementation throughout the entire public sector with the development of a draft revised national monitoring and evaluation policy 2021. This policy will measure and track the implementation of policies, programmes and projects for rollout in 2022, as well as provide for the establishment and strengthening of institutional results-based management approaches, structures, systems and capacities across the public service. I now turn to the role of the public service in this transformation and the need to ensure that we are well-organized to address these challenges facing us.

The purpose of any government and the process of governance is to provide service to the population. In these challenging times the role of the public service and the performance of public officers become even more critical. This subject of this debate is, a Bill to provide for the service to Trinidad and Tobago, and I want to take the rest of my allotted time to remind this House of this administration's vision to provide Trinidad and Tobago with excellent service through an effective public administration system and to share with the House how the Ministry of Public Administration will contribute to this reality, and within its mandate, drive transformation of the public service.

I remind the Senate that theme two of *Vision 2030* is "Delivering Good Governance and Service Excellence". Next year as Sen. Richards indicated, Trinidad and Tobago will celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence. In the last

59 years successive governments have attempted to reform the public service. Indeed, we can count at least 11 different and distinct efforts or programmes for public service reform. These efforts have in common the recognition that the people of Trinidad and Tobago expect more and deserve only the best from their investment in the public service.

At present the cost of public administration as measured by the cost of wages and salaries is approximately \$9 billion a year which represents 20 per cent of the 2022 budget and covers the payments made to approximately 90,000 public servants. This does not take into account an equivalent sum for the state sector. The public service is the largest and most complex workforce in Trinidad and Tobago and the task before us to reform and modernize it is equally mammoth.

The simple question is, whether the people Trinidad and Tobago are receiving value for money from this expenditure. I am sure that we would all, including public officers themselves, agree that this is not the case. I hasten to add that as far as I am concerned, the fault for this gap is not exclusively or even mainly with the public officers. If the system is dysfunctional, then the processes will be dysfunctional and the results will be dysfunctional, and the persons who are charged with managing and operating the system will find themselves severely challenged. This is the situation in which we find ourselves.

The fact that the system is not optimal is widely recognized. Last year Sen. Vieira raised this issue here in the Senate when he signalled that there is a need for an examination of the service commission system. Interestingly just last Wednesday His Honour Justice Seepersad in a ruling related to appointments to the public service, flagged that the system is not working as well as the country needs. While there is no consensus at the moment on the exact fix, I think that we can all agree, with certain obvious exceptions, that the need for change is recognized as an

urgency.

In the recent judgment of *Lisa Thomas-Carmichael v the Attorney General and the Public Service Commission* delivered on October 13, 2021, the learned judge said as follows and I quote, Madam President:

“The court appreciates that the”—Public Service Commission—“may be inundated with paperwork and constrained by the lack of human and financial resources.

However, given the current size of the public service and the plethora of issues in relation to promotions and disciplinary matters which fall to be determined in 2021, the antiquated post-independence supervisory structure which defines service commissions and their fitness for purpose, may require re-evaluation.

...concerns”—as to—“inefficiency and lack of effectiveness of service commissions”

—have and continue to engage the attention of the court. And within the recent past, issues in relation to these bodies have garnered significant national attention. It may well be that as a developing society there is:

“...a need to evaluate and assess their utility and relevance.”—of the service commissions and—“More modern management systems may be required...  
...the moribund modus operandi of service commissions may no longer be relevant to this society and it may be that the moment has arrived where careful and considered Constitutional reform is required so as to modernise service commissions.”

—to ensure that there exists the ability to operate in a specialized management environment where bureaucracy is minimized and where the collective focus is centred upon the use of technology, adherence to and human resource best

practice, efficiency, productivity and accountability and performance.

I venture to suggest too that the recent developments which are in the public domain relating to another service commission also points to the fact that these issues really need urgent attention. All Members of this House are well aware of general contours of the governance system for the public service in Trinidad and Tobago even if they are not intimately familiar with the details of the system.

Our public administration governance system is one of divided responsibilities allocated among the service commissions, the Personnel Department, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Public Administration. Over the last 60 years, the roles of and demands on public administration and therefore the public service have become more and more complex. Whether it is the need for social protection in the face of economic uncertainty, restructuring health care, educating the next generation for the jobs of the future and up-skilling the present labour force for agility requiring—required to survive and thrive in the modern world of work or coping with and getting ahead of the changing nature of threats to citizens security with morphing to crime, in a real sense the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought all of these challenges of modern governance into sharp relief and has made us think hard about what is public service, what our people want and deserve.

I believe in the face of these realities all right-thinking persons will come together to find a solution to these challenges that is in the best interest of our country, since a large part of fundamental issue rests in the nature of the divided responsibility that is embedded in the country's constitutional arrangements. Responsible parliamentarians would join hands across the aisle to find and pursue solutions that will allow us to ensure that the country has the best options. An approach abdicated yet again by my colleague Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy and, Madam



President, I feel Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy's passion as she makes this plea time and time again because yesterday was not the first time that she has done so. But alas, Madam President, this Government cannot afford to wait for this Opposition to see the light, put country first and come to the table to assist in solving the programmes that plague our nation in general and our public service in particular.

So while as an eternal optimist, I continue to pray for change in the hearts and minds of my colleagues on the other side, as a realist, I press on with the work of public service reform [*Desk thumping*] within the ambit of the authority of the Ministry that I have been given the privilege to lead and the Government of which I am honoured to be a part.

**5.40 p.m.**

It is in these circumstances that the Ministry of Public Administration has developed its work programme for fiscal 2022. We have identified the priorities outlined below, which we believe will contribute to improving the level of service delivered to our citizens and increase the value for money and return on investment the country makes a disservice.

Firstly, the focus will be on supporting digital transformation. Supporting the process of digital transformation is the core framing of our programme. As the House is aware, the hon. Prime Minister has articulated a vision that the future and governance in Trinidad and Tobago is to enable by information technology. We are also aware that you can deploy the best technology, but unless there exists the right skills and attitudes to support the process of digitalization, you are probably creating a white elephant in which the unintended consequence might be worse in terms of increased transaction and hassle cost, as digital processes hit the bottleneck of being manualized.

We recognize that any process of transformation is inherently disruptive, and

one might say digitalization of the national public bureaucracy may well be one of the most disruptive. The Government's plans for digital transformation will affect both the back office of the operation of the public service as well as the front facing customer service delivery. At the heart of the Ministry's programme, therefore, is preparing public officers within various Ministries, Departments and agencies to manage the disruptions that holistic digital transformation generates and actively participate in shaping the future of these institutions. Of particular importance will be ensuring that the leadership as well as middle management in the public service understand and are empowered in their roles.

The foregoing issue raises the issue of leadership, leadership development and leadership succession in the public service—which is focus No. II—and it brings into sharp relief another weakness of the present system. An example will demonstrate this. The particular ethos in the public service is of years of service as a senior manager, and more so holding or acting as a Deputy Permanent Secretary does not merely make you eligible for promotion to the job of Permanent Secretary, but entitled to that job. This may account for the apparent lack of preparedness exhibited by many candidates at assessment stage for the job.

The last recruitment exercise for the appointment of DPSs commenced in 2014, and appointments were not made until 2017. The process took three years; 211 persons applied, 116 were found to be eligible for consideration, and the next 16 were eventually found to be successful. There were 18 vacancies at the time, and so the entire three-year process did not provide the sufficient pool to fill the vacancies that existed. Even the successful candidates for the DPS positions were recommended for training in the areas of leadership development, public service laws and regulations, financial management, procurement legislation, project management and international relations.

The interplay between the length of time the process of selection took and the state of readiness, or lack thereof of the candidates to perform the jobs which they were selected are a good indication that the country is not being well served in delivering the leadership that is required for the increasingly complex task of public administration. We propose therefore, again, within the constraints of the Executive's constitutional authority, to address the issue of recruitment and selection processes for senior leadership in the public service. The processes for the development of leadership competence, the processes for planning and measurement of performance of senior leadership, and the whole issue of succession planning.

Again, I want to provide an example of how the system is not working currently. Let us start with the basis of the position of Permanent Secretary, that is to say the job specification. The position of PS is the pinnacle of leadership in the public service. The PS is supposed to be the principal policy advisor to the Minister in the relevant Ministry, in addition to his or her operational management responsibilities. However, the job of PS in the Ministry of Finance is very different to the job of PS in the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, who, by law, is the Head of the foreign service, which is very different to the PS in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, who is expected to provide high-level technical and policy advice to the very important energy sector.

Yet, in spite of an inherent requirement for very different competencies and different Ministries, there is one generic job description for the position of PS. Moreover, one can say that the system is stacked against persons with technical skills relevant to the respective Ministries. An examination of the present class of Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Permanent Secretaries would show that the significant over-representation of persons who have come through the human

sector management of the public service prevails. This is a result of a system that is not responding to the needs of the changing environment of the public service, but is stuck in a situation of bureaucratic tradition and rigidity. It not only robs the service itself of the robustness required in the environment, but I venture to suggest that it is demoralizing to technical officers who are excluded as a result of a flawed process.

Let us turn to the issue of accountability in the public service, another issue referred to by Sen. Richards. We hear ad nauseam about low productivity and low levels of accountability. Once again I note that if a system is not properly constructed you cannot expect to get optimal results. I firmly believe that change must start at the top. It may surprise the Senate to know that there is no structured system and process to measure the performance and provide professional development for senior leadership in the service. This is another one of those areas that is critical for an agile, flexible and anticipatory public service that seems to have fallen between the cracks of our disjointed public service governance system. It is the Ministry's intention to start to address these gaps in fiscal 2022.

Focus No. IV: Members of the public may not be aware that we have within the public service a unit charged with the responsibility of training and developing public servants so that they can efficiently carry out their duties. That unit is called the Public Service Academy. Training and capacity development is a critical element in ensuring that there is improvement in the public service, not only in terms of service delivery, especially in the context of digital transformation, but also in the improvement in the morale of public officers. We intend to reorient the Public Service Academy so that it can provide the cadre of public servants with competency based training and capacity development to meet the needs of transformation. It is also our intention in this reorientation to position the Academy

as a technology and abled institution with the ability to deliver blended capacity development solutions. Accordingly, in this fiscal year we will be establishing a robust learning management system, and we will be exploring partnerships for both curricula and content. We will be developing and offering training solutions in technical skills to allow public officers to take advantage of, and leverage the Government's investment in technology, and to be able to contribute to the transformation process. Indeed, the Ministry has already started engaging international development partners to identify such options, and these discussions are bearing fruit.

The next focus is e-human resource management. Trinidad and Tobago has invested in a Human Resource Information System at some considerable expense. However, to date we have not maximized the use of that system. Moreover, in light of the increasing complexity of public administration, we need to ensure that we move away from a mere personal administration and embrace the concept and processes of strategic human resource management. Strategic human resource management processes will benefit immensely from leveraging information technology. The present human resource information system has been used to date, mainly, and with considerable benefit to facilitate the processing of salaries and other forms of remuneration in the public service. It is the Ministry's intention to exploit the other functions of good human resource management information service. We will start with the clear identification what we want to get out of such a system, including understanding and positioning the country for digital transformation policies in human resource management, professionalization of management talents, and innovation of mobility policies.

Change management is another focus of the Ministry this year. Change is stressful, and people threatened by change will resist it. However, as one very

renowned and respected local expert has pointed out, it is important to note that not all resistance to change is conscious or deliberate. Bureaucracies tends to be rules-based, cautious and conformist, and by their nature resist change. The challenge is to move from inertia to momentum by engaging, persuading and exciting persons to be change agents through distributed leadership. It is our intention to develop a vigorous framework to manage the change process and create momentum for public officers to own the change required. We believe that it is also important for persons to own the change process, and we are well aware that even in a single Trinidad and Tobago Public Service, a one-size-fits-all change process will not meet the requirements of every Ministry, Department and agency. It is therefore our intention to identify and empower change leaders across the service.

Madam President, my colleague Minister Bacchus and I have often stated, especially when we shared a Ministry, that the hardest part of digital transformation is the people element, which is the element that largely falls under the remit of the Ministry of Public Administration. It is a difficult task, but one that must be tackled and conquered.

The Ministers of Finance and Planning and Development have seen it fit—*[Turns to the back]*—*[Laughs]* he is not there to get my kudos. The Ministers of Finance and Planning and Development have seen it fit to allocate the funds in this budget to allow us to make a significant dent in fiscal 2022 in this process, and for that I thank them. That allocation, along with the assistance we expect to receive from the international development bodies, which I referred to earlier, will allow us to start this year to bring about the change we require—

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

**Sen. The Hon. A. West:** Thank you, Madam President. That allocation along with the assistance, we expect to receive from international development bodies, will

allow us to start this year to bring about the change we require to create an efficient citizen-centric public service. The citizens of the Republic demand and deserve it. We are certainly paying top dollar for it, and it is way past time that their demand is satisfied. As I indicated earlier, we are approaching our 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and I with my team at the Ministry of Public Administration, will be working towards creating a gift for the nation of an enhanced more citizen-centric public service that we can tangibly measure by the time we get to that date. Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Evans Welch:** Madam President, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the appropriation revenue Bill, 2022. Madam President, during my maiden contribution to a budget debate last year I began by making the point that a budget, a country's national budget cannot be approached like a forecast of a financial statement for a company for the year that is coming up, because companies are concerned with profits, they are concerned with equilibrium, ensuring revenue exceeds expenses, et cetera.

However, a budget is concerned with livelihood and citizens and their sustenance, and their comfort of living, and therefore no doubt at some point in time the Minister of Finance, in carrying out his planning, would have recognized when arriving at his expenditure figures that they were 52 million approximately, as he indicated, whereas revenue was projected at some 42 million. He had a choice, and that choice was to cut expenditure, his proposed expenditure, the projected expenditure by 10 million to bring it down to the levels of the revenue and have them equal. That sounds nice, a balanced budget. It only sounds nice in principle, however a deficit, to use the term of a calypsonian once, who said a deputy is essential. Well, when it comes to the economy and people, a deficit can sometimes be essential. Therefore, I see no criticism, and I do not regard a

deficit—a projected deficit—of some 9 million as bad planning or lack of foresight, or with any such negative view. It is sometimes essential, especially having regard to the year that we have been through, the fall in revenues, but people continue to live and need to survive, and expenditure is essential and cannot be so readily cut.

Now, Madam President, perhaps the Minister of Finance took some comfort— Let me confess, I am not an economist, I am not a professional economist, at best an A level economist I would describe it, but no doubt the Minister of Finance may have taken some comfort in the fact that we do have what is called a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and perhaps contemplated that that in some way can be partly used with respect to the financing of any deficit. Not that it should be depleted on a deficit, but can be used in some way with respect to it. And I mention that because I recognize that in the past there have been a lot of severe criticism of the use of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for these purposes, because it has been used, that has been documented, it is a fact, and it is also a fact that economists and political rivals might have made it the subject of intense criticism. Perhaps in my non-professional economic view, my response to that, and I simply see it as that is what it is therefore. That is one of the reasons why it is called Stabilisation Fund. It is not there to simply look at it and admire it and count the figures and feel satisfied. Someone once told me, if you have a little bit of extra money or something of that nature, putting it in the bank and admiring the figures you derive nothing from it. You have it, spend it, that is what it is there for. Especially, when that spending is for the larger benefit of the country and its people, so I have no difficulty if that is what was part of the contemplation of the Minister of Finance.

Madam President, I would also—there is an empathic point with which the



Minister of Finance also indicated he has adopted as policy with respect to the budget statement and philosophy with which I also tend to agree, when he stated in no uncertain terms that resort to the IMF is going to be resisted, not only in the past, but for the foreseeable future. It ought to be a last resort, and I can agree and identify with that, because while it is a fund available to countries to help to bail them out in severe economic circumstances, it comes with its consequences, and therefore it is a measure which I support as well. Because I do recall in, I believe it was 1988 under an administration, the then administration, where resort was had to the IMF and it dictated what was then called a cut in the Cost of Living Allowance as well a 10 per cent salary deduction to public servants. I recall I was a student during those times. I recall the impact it had on the national community as a whole. The impact it had on my household as a whole where I was then a dependent, and it was a severe one, and it led to total dissatisfaction. So much dissatisfaction that the largest majority that has ever been won in this country politically, 33:3, by the time the election came around that margin, that majority margin was completely eroded as an indication, a manifestation of the total dissatisfaction and the adverse consequences people felt by reason of the adoption of that measure.

Similarly, Madam President, I also agree with the philosophy that devaluation, which also appears in the Minister of Finance's budget presentation and in the statement, which is a reduction in writing of his budget statement, should also be a last resort. Because, devaluation as we know leads to inflation, and one does not have to be an economist to understand why. Because approximately if we say our present rate of exchange is \$1 US equal \$7 TT, if you are going to devalue, you cannot devalue by 25 cents, you have to devalue by something of significance. So I would imagine what the critics have said and what they have promulgated when they speak of devaluation, would at least mean a

devaluation of \$1 US to \$10 TT. It means we have to now put out \$10 TT to get the value of \$1 US.

In an economy like ours, which is so heavily import-dependent, it means the cost of everything that has to be imported would be increased by a margin of one-third per cent. That will impact on fuel cost, since we are now a major importer of fuel, and it also means construction cost, and every other imaginable cost, and therefore it is a philosophy which has been identified in that statement, and which I fully agree with as a matter of the economic policy. However, Madam President, I do have my views and critiques of some of the measures, or lack of measures as well. And it would seem to me that we cannot sustain a deficit forever unless we do two things, in which I consider there has been some level of failure when it comes to the management of the economy, and that is with respect to diversification and self-sufficiency. First of all, because if we are self-sufficient then we depend less on imports, and we have the talent to be self-sufficient. And therefore, if we have the talent to be self-sufficient then the Government needs to initiate and push persons to develop that talent.

I recall there was a time when there was something called “the negative list”, where you could not import a whole lot of items, clothing, television, shoes, whatever it was. And the importance of recalling that time is not because I am suggesting that we take that approach again, because that approach is quite clearly contrary to the modern idea of liberalization of trade, and free trade between countries, et cetera. So I am not promulgating that as an idea, but I identify that period, that era, because during that era it demonstrated the talent that we had. People used to go, because of the restrictions on importation, people used to go to the seamstress then, people used to go to the tailor. The televisions I watched at my home during those times were all locally assembled. They may not have been the

greatest in quality, but had we continued along that path, we would have developed and improved it as we go along. Similarly, it is the same way, there was a time when we used to assemble the cars in Trinidad. It was not homemade because the materials were imported, but nevertheless it showed a certain level of talent, which if it had continued to develop.

So, the Government must stimulate, I submit, self-sufficiency. You cannot do it by banning imports, but certainly you can encourage and have buy local campaigns, and support advertisements of local products. And in the groceries when it comes to meats and various things, you have imported section—encourage them—and local section. Keep them apart and let people see, and let people develop a certain level of patriotism and pride, and encourage them to go local as much as possible. That way one would reduce our import bill without violating the principles of free trade, and no one can complain about that. So, there is a lack of self-sufficiency in the approach, and I also said there is a lack of diversification. Diversification, lip service, has been paid to it by this administration and many previous administrations, because we are still heavily oil and energy dependent, and in the Minister of Finance's own presentation, which, as I have said, has been reduced to writing, so I can quote for it, there is a recognition it would seem to me, of a lack of diversification of the economy and a failure in that regard, and if I may just quote very quickly. Now, the Minister had expressed the view that he is:

“...committed to reducing our dependence on oil and subsequently gas in our drive to diversification”—I am quoting his words—“this being a central goal of successive economic plans since the release of the first one in 1969...”

We wish to develop a non-oil sector and lower oil financial dependency, creating in the process a viable non-oil modern economy...”

I take note of the tense of the Minister of Finance's language. Since 1969 we have been speaking about such plans, but in 2001 the Ministry of Finance says, we wish to develop. That is futuristic thinking, which means that it has not been developed, and it speaks for itself. Because every time we hear the price of oil or gas fall internationally, we go into a state of panic.

**6.10 p.m.**

And it is noteworthy that while the Minister of Finance is talking ahead about these plans in the future he has not in the presentation pointed in any real sense to examples of diversification that have taken place. Hence, the resort to language such as, "we wish to develop", which is an acknowledgement of failure in that regard. And if that failure continues then we would have no choice but eventually perhaps find ourselves one day resorting to outside assistance with the conditions, the adverse conditions with which it comes.

Madam President, if I may now continue by looking at the budget statement further, the expression, "live with the virus", appears in the hon. Minister of Finance's presentation as a means of how our economy should be managed and go forward. I agree with that. We have reached the stage where we have to learn to live with COVID and not keep running from it, because we may die, our economy and us may die from our attempts at trying to escape from COVID if we do not take the alternative approach of living with it. Living with it means in my perspective, and perhaps it is a little wider than that of the Minister even though it may be along the same trend, living with it means opening the economy back up to its fullest. The lockdown must stop. The gradualism of opening has become too gradual and too meandering in pace.

Businesses have been affected, people's livelihoods have been affected, and therefore we need to open back the economy, allow businesses to operate, allow

persons to continue with their livelihoods in full and put measures in place which I agree with the concept of the safe zones. I know there has been an argument that it is discriminatory against the unvaccinated, but it is not like if people are unvaccinated because vaccinations were not available to them or they do not have a choice, except in the rare case where it is medically demonstrably to be adverse to such a person.

There are persons who are hiding behind—I am not saying they are not genuine cases, but there are persons who, hiding behind the principle are really not vaccinated because of lethargy. They are not making the effort to go and get vaccinated. But then there are also persons whose circumstances, social and economic and perhaps number of children and the struggle for a daily living as such that they have no choice but vaccination is left not very high on their priority list. And we have to recognize both categories of persons.

So if we are to continue, if we are to live with COVID, which is continue life as normal as possible as I have suggested, then it also would involve reaching out to those persons far more than advertising a vaccination drive in a centre somewhere where they have to drive to, get into the crevasses, get into where they live, because there are some who genuinely do not have the time or do not have the wherewithal to do it. Let us reach out to those persons.

The Minister has indicated that it is as much as 5 billion was spent by way of emergency relief grants, fuel grants, rent relief, salary relief, humanitarian support to persons abroad. And while I recognize this was necessary over the past year, this is not something which can be sustained. In any event, a lot of persons rather be independent than dependent on such a system. It is not like if people are happy to be lining up for salary relief and lining up for hampers and lining up for rent. No one is satisfied with that. So it cannot be sustained and that is the reason why we

have to move forward with the economy and live with COVID. That form of lining up and dependency is almost a form of communism by COVID. People want to work, they want to get out there and continue to earn their livelihood rather than be coming cap-in-hand begging. And, Madam President, therefore, I suggest we let people return to their independence and open the economy.

And the last thing which I would want to say about that is that in the event that there is a spike or in the event that the Delta variant comes into play in a big way, retreat ought not to be our first option, lockdown again ought not to be our first option. It ought to be a last resort or I would go as far as to say a no resort at all. That would be—another lockdown and another train of restrictions is going to kill off the survivors, and I am talking about the businesses that survived, the ones that came through. Because there are many that have closed down and closed permanently. So we must not retreat to that position. If we have to take additional measures, then try and take additional measures. As draconian as it may sound, I prefer an approach of mandatory vaccination as opposed to another lockdown. And what has not yet been opened, open it now. Open the beaches.

Tobago is heavily dependent on the beach activity for tourism. You cannot be speaking of, well, KLM has returned and this one has returned and who is flying to Tobago tomorrow and which airline is coming from Europe, and the beaches continue to be closed. It is a major part of the economy. And I do not have to specify, things like Buccoo Reef and trips and so on, and so on and so on, they go hand in hand with an expansion of tourism. Because if there is nothing for people to do, KLM will turn back and go straight back to Amsterdam.

Madam President, let me commend, because I am doing both, commending and criticizing. Let me commend the Minister of Finance for the fact that we have no new burdens imposed. There is no increase in taxes, no further cuts in existing

subsidies, because we simply cannot afford to put people through this at this stage. And I suggest in that same breath that the question of utilities stay where they are in terms of their rate perhaps for another year at least. And I say that against the backdrop that I read in the newspaper where Minister Gonzales said: the utility—to quote him exactly, or to quote the newspaper report of his words, because we know the newspaper and what somebody said might diverge. Mr. Gonzales:

The utility hike review is near completion.

Well, fine, complete the review, but when it comes to its implementation, completion and implementation do not have to go hand in hand. Now is simply not the time for it. It is the same that applies to property tax. In principle I support property tax, put everything that is in place, but allow people to exhale at least for one more year before it is imposed.

I was alarmed to learn that while we speak and pay lip service to health workers and they are the first in frontline and they are struggling for us and they are putting their lives at risk, et cetera, I was alarmed to learn that a number of nurses in the regional health authorities are on very short contracts and every time they have to go through this process of renewal in addition to fighting for our lives as has been put by the Minister of Finance. Therefore, if as the Minister of Finance says they are going to be regularized and he has given the Chief Personnel Officer a time period by which to ensure that it is done, let it not be one of these things where you set a goal of December 2022, and the goal takes forever and it keeps getting extended and there is a whole lot of red tape, et cetera. Because a large percent of our national budget seems to go on either the importation or production of red tape when it comes to government processes. And that needs to stop.

I note that there is the question of removal of VAT on food items and that is fine. But I would like to suggest to the hon. Minister of Finance to consider the

removal of VAT as well on security apparatus, because we live in fear and we live in danger. And if the national security apparatus, police, the Ministry, whatever, have not afforded us enough protection, then show that you are concerned and consider the removal of VAT on such things as alarm systems for homes, for cars, cameras, et cetera. Because nearly everyone has to get a camera now and it is not a symbol of status. It is a necessity because not only does it provide you with some measure of seeing who a perpetrator of a burglary is, et cetera, but it is a measure which one can argue, dissuades criminals to some extent, when they see it they avoid properties which carry it. GPS systems for cars as well and companies which offer services, such security services for vehicles and so on, we should look at such services being non-vatable in recognition of the failure of administration after administration to protect us. At least that can be done for the citizens of the country; a show of concern.

Madam President, some of the fiscal measures—what are of concern to me, for instance, I have heard the Minister of Finance and I can have no criticism of this, speak of 5 per cent reduction of tax for companies concerned with technology, digitization, construction, et cetera, the manufacturing sector, new companies that are coming into it, reduction in tax in the rate of taxes, et cetera. Nothing is wrong with that. I fully advance that. My difficulty is when the statement of the Minister of Finance stops there, because such measures need not be concerned or they may be interpreted as being concerned with the businesses only and promotion of the business as an addendum to that statement.

Businesses should be told and let it redound, the benefits, not only to yourselves, but trickle down to those who are less fortunate than yourselves. If you are actually receiving and experiencing tangible financial benefits as a result of such measures and largesse on the part of the government, then spread a bit of it,



spread a small percentage of the benefit to others. Take on that extra employee or two; create a greater employment; add on \$100 to that weekly wage or that fortnightly wage; stabilize your price a bit. When the citizen who is feeling hardship comes to you, you can apply the benefits, the tangible financial benefits you are experiencing to perhaps, even the slight reduction of price which may not mean much to yourself as a business, but may carry significance to the man at large who has a family to mind, who is not experiencing the levels of employment he had before or who is now being employed on a roster basis in the private sector. And that is what my complaint with the Minister of Finance's statement is. Because he should be the one not to leave it for implication but to say it out loud to businesses, we hope and expect you would pass on these benefits as well and not just retain them for yourselves.

Madam President, I come to the issue of VAT refunds because I know there is a tendency of the Minister to speak glowingly about the amount of VAT refunds that are paid. And the Minister, for instance, because he regards this as some level of promotion of business and returning funds so that businesses can use their funds effectively, et cetera, on time. And he quotes in his achievement column, 511 cheques totalling 460 million. Madam President, that is fine, however in my—

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

**Sen. E. Welch:**—in my budget contribution last year I spoke of the fact that there is a lot of fraud in the system. And persons who are not even registered sit in a room and generate VAT refunds and they get it automatically because this system depends on the honesty of persons. Well, since we are speaking of digitization I suggest that we find a way that when someone becomes VAT registered, tying their system to the revenue system whereby their sales can be monitored. That is not a violation of privacy because they are presenting those sales as genuine and

claiming refunds.

Without saying much more, a refund of over seven figures had to be stopped on the basis of strong evidence and suspicion of fraud. And that was between last year's budget statement and this year's budget statement, and that was because of the excellence and the dedication to duty of the Criminal Tax Investigation Unit which operates within the revenue division and which unfortunately has had its problems with getting its contract renewed notwithstanding. But you need to strengthen that unit and encourage them and incentivize them so that they continue their good work and not discourage them by having to struggle over issues of contract.

Madam President, I have a lot more which I know I will not be able to get into. One, I wanted to deal with the Revenue Authority because unfortunately during the debate on that Bill I had a certain personal medical constraint which prevented me from dealing with it, but I have serious issues with it.

Madam President, I looked at the Estimate regarding the Judiciary and I looked steadfastly at Head 3: *Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the Financial Year 2022* and I saw with no reference to the configuration of the courts for jury trials to have a new norm whereby jury trials can take place. We were informed that the courts are being reconfigured so that even in the face of a pandemic in new normal jury trials can be taking place. I saw no estimate for that and I wondered, has it been achieved already? Is that the reason? I rather think not because we keep asking as practitioners when is it going to be resumed and there is no indication, not even from judicial officers—they will tell you they do not know. I saw all kinds of things:

“Rehabilitation of the Hall of Justice in Tobago

Construction of Judges' and Magistrates' Housing in Tobago”—in the

Estimates—

“Provision of Accommodation for a...Family Court

Outfitting”—a—“building”—in—“Naparima...Road”—et cetera, et cetera,  
et cetera.

But no reference to that.

It is a violation of the rights of an accused person if he is going to be forced to choose judge alone trials simply because there is no—nothing has been put in place for jury trials, because that is what accused are being told. People who have been locked up for, in excess of 15 years and who say I want a jury trial, they are now being forced to choose judge alone trials. That is not the real existence of a right if people are being forced into a certain position. So I would hope to hear and wish steadfastly to hear something about what has become of this building and why is it not catered for and if it is because it has already been reconfigured and if so, why not there is no prospect of jury trials resuming.

Madam President, I see with respect to the Golden Grove Prison, the allocation speaks to all kinds of things to improve the security measures, the perimeters, the cameras, et cetera. Nothing about the conditions of the prisoners and such.

**Madam President:** Sen. Welch, your time has expired.

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

### ADJOURNMENT

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

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> October, at 1.00 p.m. and we propose to continue this debate on that day. Thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 6.35 p.m.*