

SENATE

Wednesday October 20, 2021

The Senate met at 1.00 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

Madam President: Hon. Senators. Sen. Evan Welch required leave of absence from today's sitting. The leave the Member seeks is granted. Hon. Senators, I have also granted leave of absence to Sen. the Hon. Avinash Singh, who is ill. Hon. Senators, I am awaiting the instrument and we will revert to this item on the Order Paper at a later stage.

PAPERS LAID

1. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Follow-up Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial years 2012 to 2017. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat)*]
2. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Second Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Vehicle Management Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial years 2013 and 2014. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2022) BILL, 2021

[Third Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 19, 2021]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

UNREVISED

Question again proposed.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, there have been 27 contributions thus far including that of the Minister of Finance who is the mover of the Motion. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): I wish to thank you, Madam President, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this my seventh budget debate, five in other place and the second one in this honourable Senate. And, of course, I wish to thank the hon. Prime Minister for the continued opportunity that he has given me to serve this country as the Minister with the responsibility for Tourism, Culture and the Arts.

Madam President, having listened to the debate over the last two days, yesterday as the debate began was perhaps the most startling to me, and still I stand here today, Madam President, confused, befuddled, confuffled, perplexed, discombobulated. I could not understand the contribution from Sen. Roberts. I could not understand it.

Madam President: Members, I will ask all to remain quiet while the contribution is being made.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Because, Madam President, it came across to me that Sen. Roberts on behalf of the UNC was describing himself and his party as the panacea, as the silver bullet, the cure-all for sport in Trinidad and Tobago. And, Madam President, it is almost as though Sen. Roberts expected us to forget the most scandalous and tumultuous period in sport in this country over the period 2010—2015. We did not forget. We do not have gold fish memories in this place, but I would not start at the usual place, Madam President. The usual place to start, of course, is Life Sport and some of my colleagues Senators dealt with the matter. I

would not start there. I would remind this country, Madam President, of the name Jack Warner. During the period 2010 when the UNC came into office, although he was not the Minister of Sport, he was the President of CONCACAF and Vice-President of the FIFA international body and left there in pure scandal, and not only bringing the international body of football into disrepute, but in Trinidad and Tobago, small island as we are, into complete and utter odium and disrepute.

We developed the Hyatt building, Madam President, the good, good Hyatt building, and the Hyatt building while it should be known for being a high quality product, the Hyatt building during that period of time was known for the place where a meeting was held, where Jack Warner addressed the crowd and sought to lecture the crowd on morality and the distinction between a gift and a bribe. Madam President, in the end he was banned from football and I believed from sporting activities for life. And the UNC comes here in this place to advise us and to tell the nation that they are to be trusted with the administration of sport in this country?

And, Madam President, Sen. Roberts spoke about TTFA and the state of football in this country, leaving out that his colleague Minister was special adviser to TTFA at that time and is now suing the TTFA for \$16 million in unpaid loans, and that Senator is trying to cast blame on this Government, on this Minister of Sport, for the state of football and the state of football administration in this country. The unmitigated gull to do that as though we forget, and says he could fix FIFA. He could fix not FIFA, he could fix TTFA, but we all know TTFA is governed by the rules and the Constitution of FIFA. The Government has no business in the TTFA.

Sen. Roberts also spoke about sport tourism and the cluster of facilities that

now exist in Couva. They have built the cycling velodrome down in Couva and they have built the aquatic centre down in Couva, but every time he is given the opportunity to speak, and his leader, is always, “We was going to do this, and we was going to build that, and we was going to put down hotel.” Because he is right. Those things are missing from the cluster that occurs in Couva to truly market a comprehensive sport tourism product. There is no facility for physiotherapy, there is no advanced gym or sports medicine, or recovery centre, or anything like that. None of it. But every time he speaks it is always, “We was going to do this, and we would ah do this if we were still there.” But I will ask the Senator today, Madam President, because we “doh” forget.

The PNM today, we are building community centres, we have reduced the price tremendously to about \$8 million to \$9 million per community centre. So let us imagine that the facility to support the sport tourism there could have been the size of let us say three community centres. Could \$34 million not pay for all those ancillary facilities needed in the Couva cluster area to truly support sport tourism in Trinidad and Tobago? And I know the answer to be yes. But, Madam President, \$34 million grew about 64 million little legs and walked from the Ministry of Sport into the pocket of Adolphus Daniel for absolutely nothing, and yet the UNC expects us and expects the population to forget and to believe that Sen. Roberts, as he proposing himself there as the next Sport Minister if they get into office, as the panacea for sport.

And then Sen. Roberts boasted about oh on the Opposition side there are two former national athletes, and therefore, is trying to make the argument that having two former national athletes that they can fix sport in this country. But by Sen. Roberts’ record we know that being a former national athlete does not guarantee

you any success in sport management or sports administration in this country, and the American University knows that too. The American University in Washington knows that not to be true. And I will say this thorough you, Madam President, to Sen. Nakhid, all the recruiters at American University have to do is just to look at your social media post to determine within themselves that they were right to reject you from that job as coach [*Desk thumping*] of the national football team. And I will acknowledge Sen. Nakhid. I was once a footballer and I would acknowledge that Sen. Nakhid was a legend in the American University—once a legend—but have now collapsed his legendary status.

Madam President, Sen. Lyder spoke a lot about the tourism sector, and Sen. Lyder spoke about asking for forensic audits for the award of an airport in Tobago—forensic audits. The contract has barely started. They are just clearing the land, putting up hoarding and so on, but he is asking for forensic audits. Madam President, should Sen. Lyder not be calling a forensic audit into the award of gas stations? And I would ask Sen. Lyder since they are talking about recusals and conflicts of interest, whether his very close relative, being a member of Government, or the Cabinet, or whatever, did she recused herself when Sen. Lyder was awarded a contract like that NP gas station? Because, Madam President, they are talking about a lot of rentals—

Sen. Lyder: Madam President, 46(6). The Minister needs to study the facts before he make statements like that.

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, you have invoked the Standing Order, may I please be allowed to rule? Thank you. Minister, continue.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Thank you very much, Madam President. Because, Madam President, they are talking a lot about rentals and about the AG and the AG

gets \$400,000 or \$450,000 in rentals—

Madam President: Just a second. I cautioned Members, I have done it already once. I cautioned Members from the crosstalk and I ask that all remain silent while a contribution is being made.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Thank you, Madam President. These are simple facts. They are questioning the rentals, but, Madam President, one of those gas stations, one of those gas stations awarded to friends and financiers of the UNC earns, I am certain, over \$1 million in revenue per month but they “doh” talk about that. They are talking about rentals.

And, Sen. Mark. Madam President, I am not sure when Sen. Mark will stop his attack on these countries most valued institutions, and his latest attack is on the First Citizens Bank. Now I could understand Sen. Mark’s attack. Well I cannot understand it, but it is a different scenario when Sen. Mark attacks this Parliament, when he attacks the EBC.

Madam President: One second. Sen. Lyder, I would ask you to leave the Chamber. You can return when the Minister is finished with contribution. Please leave the Chamber now. I am not going to warn you again. Continue, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I am sure he could listen on YouTube. But Sen. Mark, your attack on the EBC and your attack on other institutions in this country, attacking our own indigenous First Citizens Bank in the way that you have is a whole different prospect all together, and I declare my interest, Madam President, I am a depositor in that bank, I am also a proud shareholder of our own indigenous bank. And, Madam President, I am surprised that Sen. Mark gets up and has the understanding of the very complexed financial affairs of the First Citizens Bank in its quest to, of course, expand and

expand the profitability of its organizations. Because I know Sen. Mark from in the past had a very difficult time with management accounting in a certain place. But that was sorted it out, he was allowed to go into the room with his book bag and he sat there with no invigilator and he passed. Okay.

But through you, to Sen. Mark, Madam President, attacking a financial institution is something that you should be very, very, very cautious about, and I will not even express what could happen, because even the very expression of what could happen could damage the future of that bank. So I would ask, Madam President, that we all exercise care and caution when dealing with these very important institutions in our country. [*Desk thumping*]

That out of the way, Madam President, let me say on the last occasion we met to debate this Appropriation Bill we were just seven months into a pandemic, and at that time we did not think or rather, Madam President, we hoped that 12 months later in a following Appropriation Bill, as we are now, we would not have been in the same situation and that we would have at least been able to get on with our lives. But 19 months later into a pandemic, Madam President, we are still here and we are reopening the economy, reopening the sectors slowly, but carefully taking regard to life and livelihoods. And during the last debate I got the opportunity to account for the Ministry's plans going forward, accepting, of course, that the travel tourism and the creative industries were some of the hardest hit by the pandemic.

And on that last occasion I indicated that with visitor comfort and peace of mind at the forefront of restoring confidence in our economy, and restoring confidence in the travel sector, one of the things that we did to prepare ourselves for the reopening of the travel and tourism and hospitality sectors was to engage

with the Ministry of Health and other agencies to develop a comprehensive set of protocols in anticipation of that reopening. And we did just that, Madam President. Today I can report that both destinations, destination Trinidad, and Tobago, were awarded the travel and tourism council safety stamp which is an international recognition of the development and significant roll out of our comprehensive protocols.

And to date, over 1,000 tourism operators have been trained. Our tour operators, our transportation operators and personnel, and our accommodation providers were all trained. So, our stakeholders are in the main prepared to deal with the reopening of the sectors and the restart of the travel and tourism industry where safety issues are concerned, and we will continue to do our safety checks, we will continue to train our tourism stakeholders to prepare for that reopening.

The second matter, Madam President, that I spoke about was that this Government and this Ministry in acknowledging that the severe hardships felt by the creative sector and by the tourism sector, we did what we could to minimize the hardships felt by our sectors. And therefore, Madam President, over the last financial year we distributed over—well we distributed approximately \$25 million in COVID relief grants specifically for the creative sector, along with, of course, other salary reliefs and income relief grants that the Ministry of Finance distributed. Fifty million dollars was allocated to grant funding for the Tobago accommodation providers, and a further \$5 million by Tobago for small and medium operators in the tourism sector and that was done.

Madam President, we extended our tour programme our Tourism Accommodation Upgrade Programme which is a reimbursable programme where tourism accommodation providers are allowed to participate in the programme and

upgrade their properties and receive a 50 per cent rebate on the completion of the accommodation upgrades. And over the last financial year Trinidad Hotels Limited, which is the Holiday Inn Express and Suites at Trincity, completed its first phase of accommodation upgrade, upgrade to their rooms, et cetera, and they received their reimbursements in the amount of \$1.2 million.

Madam President, over the last financial year we have also received applications from the Royal Hotel, San Fernando, Pamaleya's Inn, Sun Deck Suites, and also the Trade Winds Hotel. So we expect to support those accommodation providers next year. And, Madam President, when there was a brief respite in December and for the first three months in 2021 we supported the performance sector with subsidizing the rental cost for these performing spaces, and over those months quite a number of performances were held, and promoted, and produced, and the creatives were allowed some ability to earn during that time. Towards the middle of 2021 as the entertainment sectors reopened in North America, Madam President, this Government quickly arranged for some vaccinations for our cultural workers and for our artistes, and we vaccinated over 2,000 of them and they were able to go abroad into North America and to continue to earn as they do in all the different events and festivals.

Recently, we saw the Miami Carnival being held and they were able to do that, and they continue to earn abroad and they continue to fly the flag and to export our culture as they are want to do and we are very thankful and grateful for having assisted them. And the third thing, Madam President, what we said is that because of the closure of the borders we would encourage a domestic tourism campaign, so that locals could rediscover the beauty that is Trinidad and Tobago. And this turned out to be quite successful, Madam President, I must report for a

number of guest houses, villas and small properties in Trinidad and in Tobago, and we will continue to push our domestic tourism product because we have a lot to offer.

Over the last financial year we continue to support the investment and development in the accommodation sector with respect to the hotels that are presently under construction, Madam President. Of course, those hotels presently under construction have been delayed by the construction restrictions owing to the pandemic, but they are all on the cusp of reopening as soon as the travel and tourism industry picks up. So we have the Radisson Blue, 79 styled rooms. That is delayed it is carded to open next year; we also have the Bricks, 161 rooms and that is 90 per cent complete and is scheduled to open by the end of this year; Comfort-Inn Suites. Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy asked about the Comfort-Inn Suites. The Comfort-Inn Suites, 74 rooms located in Scarborough, that is around 80 per cent complete and it is also scheduled to open before the end of 2021.

So we look forward to the opening of these new hotels under construction with the hope that, of course, they would add quality room stock to our accommodation sector, but also we look forward to the spinoff activity that would occur in the agricultural sector, in the manufacturing sector, as they produce to support the operations of these hotels. And, Madam President, I had the distinct honour and privilege, along with the Minister of Trade and Industry, to be a part of the award to a local consortium, Superior Hotels Limited of Rocky Point Site after a very competitive RFP, and that award, Madam President, is to construct an integrated resort development in Tobago which encompasses a 200-room Marriott Hotel, additional villas, town houses and condos for approximately \$500 million. And this 200-room Marriott Hotel is what we, of course, would depend on and

would emerged to be our anchor property there in Tobago. It would be a Four-Star—at least a Four-Star hotel.

Marriott is the largest hotel brand in the world, and therefore, Madam President, the hotel, and by extension Tobago, would benefit from the Marriott's extensive marketing reach and their extensive guest list in terms of getting tourist and getting persons into Tobago to experience. And we say that the rising tides floats all boats. So with the Marriott and with the Comfort-Inn Suites, along with our plans to construct the Tobago airport terminal building, Madam President, there are a lot of positive news and a lot of hope and expectation for tourism in Tobago going forward. And, Madam President, with all these hotels that I have just described, by 2025 we expect 852 brand new high quality rooms and approximately 1,000 new jobs in permanent employment during the operation phases of these hotels.

Madam President, just to go back to the Marriott in Tobago, during construction 750 persons will be employed, and during the operations approximately 250 persons from Tobago will be trained and employed at the Marriott Hotel. But, Madam President, we are also treating with an application for yet another hotel and this hotel is the Hampton by Hilton, and this hotel will be constructed in the Piarco area.

1.30 p.m.

It is a 103-room hotel with coffee shop, restaurant, conference meeting room and this hotel, the developers have all their approvals and this hotel is carded to commence construction in January of 2022 and it will cost approximately \$65 million and about 250 persons will be employed during the construction phase and 70 persons during the operational phase.

And, Madam President, over the next financial year, we will go on our road show to ensure that tourism entrepreneurs and tourism operators understand all the incentives that are available for any planned investment. And I want to make it pellucidly clear that all these hotel accommodation projects and tourism projects are being undertaken by the private sector interest. Not by Government, it is by private sector interest. Having full confidence in Government's management of the economy in these difficult economic times, these tourism projects are being funded by private investment and private interest.

Madam President, we have also consumed a lot of productive time and effort over the last two years in engaging with the Airports Authority and KLM Airlines and last Saturday, I had the honour and the privilege, along with the Minister of Works and Transport, to welcome back to this country from an absence of over 20 years KLM Airlines with a route from Amsterdam. [*Desk thumping*] And, Madam President, this route from Amsterdam reopens the possibilities for the expansion for our manufacturing and trade sector as well as our tourism sector to the Netherlands and other surrounding markets. It also opens up faster connections for the majority of Trinbagonians from the West African—as we count ourselves, from the West African and the Indian diaspora for faster connections through Amsterdam to the West African continent as well as to India. And we have entered into a joint marketing arrangement with KLM to build that route. It is a winter flight so it is for the winter season and there are tremendous possibilities for us here in Trinidad to market our Carnival offerings during the months of January and February to those Europeans looking for that type of experience as well as for a quick flight or ferry to the sister isle for those who are looking for that sun, sand and sea experience.

So over the next financial year, Madam President, we are looking at engaging with some of our stakeholders to do a familiarization tour, perhaps go to Amsterdam with our Carnival entrepreneurs, our tourism stakeholders, perhaps some of our trade stakeholders as well, to meet with tour operators and other interested parties in Amsterdam and in the nearby cities to see whether there are possibilities that we can glean and we can get from there. And that in itself, Madam President, will build the route so that we would no longer have to expend moneys on joint marketing efforts. The route would be sustainably built on its own through the bonds that we would have developed with markets over in the continental Europe.

So, Madam President, at the same time, we are encouraging our Carnival stakeholders to look at the Rotterdam Carnival in terms of deepening our involvement and deepening our culture into that Carnival, our unique Trini Carnival experience, so that we can export our culture, export our cultural workers, our artistes, our musicians when they host their Rotterdam Carnival so that our cultural export can increase from this flight.

Madam President, we are also collaborating with Caribbean Airlines and the Tobago Tourism Agency to open up a direct route to Tobago from New York City with a direct flight and it would be marketed jointly so that we can bring some additional visitors from the North American market, from the diaspora directly to Tobago to enjoy a quick vacation, visit some relatives and families. Of course, the opportunity is always there. The Government has invested over a billion dollars in new fast ferries and has kept Caribbean Airlines whole, has added some more flights so they can always hop on a flight or a ferry and come to Trinidad to visit friends and family and then return to New York. So we are working with the

Caribbean Airlines and the Tobago Tourism Agency to build that new route. And we are also doing work to attract new airlift to the islands as the travel and tourism industry reopens slowly.

Madam President, over the next financial year, we also see the opportunity to improve upon and build new festivals. We see festivals as something that can create and contribute tremendous economic value to our economy and Trinidad and Tobago, as we know and as we are, we are a melting pot of creeds and races. A melting pot of cultures that feeds into a number of different national festivals: Carnival, Emancipation, Divali, Phagwa, et cetera, and there is no denying that there is vast economic impact for successful festivals because Carnival alone, the direct economic value from visitor spend is around \$450 million annually and that is just counting the 10 days leading up to Carnival Monday and Tuesday and of course, there are tremendous benefits to all the persons who are involved—the promoters, the artistes, other stakeholders, service providers, mas makers, musicians, vendors, taxi drivers, et cetera. So we see tremendous value in building upon and the creation of new festivals in Trinidad and Tobago.

So over the next financial year, we intend on improving our Carnival offerings, improving on how we operate during that Carnival period. Carnival alone accounts for 10 per cent of our visitor arrivals and of course, Madam President, we will build upon an improved Carnival while remaining true to its roots and that is what differentiates our Carnival from other Carnivals across the world.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Madam President, can I ask a question please of the Minister?

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Yep.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2022)
Bill, 2021
Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell (cont'd)

2021.10.20

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Minister, there was a weekly flight from JFK to Tobago before. Is it that you are restarting or are there other routes coming from the States?

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: No, it is the same Caribbean Airlines flight from New York City directly to Tobago. I understand for the flight, the route occurred a decade or so ago, that is the flight that we are looking at restarting from JFK.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Okay, thanks.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Yes, Madam President. Earlier this year as Carnival—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Yeah. Earlier this year as Carnival was cancelled, we saw different creative expressions coming out. We saw Carnival products being produced in the area of theatre. We saw the mas production. We saw Carnival productions being produced in the area of film and intend to build upon those things and to engage those different Carnival products being produced.

Emancipation, Madam President, as I hurry up, we see opportunities to work with the Emancipation Support Committee and to explore any opportunities that might arise from the declaration of Juneteenth in the United States as a federal national holiday in the United States and we can work with persons in that source market as members of the African diaspora to see if we could perhaps improve our festivals and attract those visitors from the diaspora into Trinidad during the Emancipation celebrations. And there are other opportunities for Divali and Phagwa from the Indian diaspora in this region: Guyana, Suriname, et cetera.

And there are opportunities for new festivals, Madam President. There is what exists right now an organically-built jazz season which occurs after the Carnival period. There are also band launches. We can market, package properly and advertise and attract visitors to our band launch season and other opportunities

for festivals because the idea is to build successful festivals, to market them to the diaspora, to market them abroad and to get visitors on the island to increase visitor spend and to contribute to the economy.

Madam President, we are also engaged in spreading and sharing our culture and we have developed a diaspora strategy with the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. We are linking up with the Missions abroad, we are linking up with the diaspora associations abroad so that we can directly market to them and we can directly engage these diaspora associations and our Missions in spreading the culture, in marketing the destinations that are Trinidad and Tobago. So over the next financial year, we are building upon those plans.

And of course, Madam President, we have a Cabinet-approved Cultural Ambassador Programme which over the next year, we will have some of our very talented cultural workers, artistes, et cetera, with tremendous reach on their social media and large followings and fan bases, we will engage them as our culture ambassadors so that we go and we relentlessly spread our culture across the world. The US does it, Jamaica does it to great effect and Trinidad and Tobago must do it because we are very unique in our culture, we have developed our own music, we have developed our own musical instrument, our Trini Carnival, the limbo and we will market our cultural offerings across the world so that we could get more and more persons to fall in love.

Very quickly, Madam President, we have a number of sporting events that we expect—large sporting tourism events that we expect over the next year: the ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup, the P1 Offshore Powerboat circuit and of course, the International Interhash Meet which we expect to receive 4,000 visitors from the across the world.

So, Madam President, while we still are in a pandemic, we are not going to let a good crisis waste. We are preparing for the reopening of the tourism and travel sectors. We are preparing for the reopening of the entertainment sector and we are working to ensure that all these sectors contribute to an improved and increased GDP. Thank you very much, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Thank you, Madam President, for recognizing me to contribute in this debate in relation to the budget presentation for the financial year 2021/2022 entitled “Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic”.

Madam President, to the friends, family and financiers who have experienced resilience while the rest and the majority of the population are suffering under the strain caused by mismanagement of the pandemic, I say to them congratulations, this is probably a budget for you, probably you can relate to it. People taking offence to the use of friends, family and financiers but I do not know that they are really in rank as yet, I do not know that they have any buildings to rent and so on that they could really take offence so stay the course, you might end up there.

But whilst many people are struggling to hold on to find employment, to live off their savings, to juggle their work duties, their home schooling duties and all the while, what they have to turn on the news and witness every night is “ah frontal attack” on our democracy. I say to them the longest rope has an end and we in the Opposition stand firm in our defence of those against whom the Government has declared war. [*Desk thumping*] We remain committed to rescuing, rebuilding and restoring Trinidad and Tobago under the astute leadership of the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar who I have to congratulate for her fearlessness and her dedication to this nation and its people. [*Desk thumping*]

In the last few weeks, I have never seen someone exhibit such bravery and

such courage [*Desk thumping*] in fighting for what is right for the people of this country. We stand with her in defence of the poor. We stand with her in defence of those who have their rights and freedoms curtailed by the Government and we stand in defence of the rule of law. [*Desk thumping*] We will not sit quietly while wives get legal briefs, merit lists are withdrawn, secret indemnities are signed with promises that we would not assist foreign law enforcement.

The People's National Movement, on the one hand, want to bring a politically appointed Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority as a private tax army against our citizens but they are signing agreements to help a Queen's Counsel escape tax authorities in the UK. I wonder how the Caribbean Financial Action Taskforce and the EU who still have us blacklisted for tax compliance and other foreign organizations will view this development.

Madam President, I have sat here for three days almost, this is the third day. I also listened to the budget debate in the other place very intently and the Standing Finance Committee. I have not heard one single Minister who has honestly and truly said anything that could give comfort to those who are presently experiencing hardship. They have stood here and they have praised themselves while the population crying out for relief. The hon. Leader of the Opposition, in her brilliant and hard-hitting response to this paltry excuse of "ah" budget—[*Desk thumping and interruption*] I am sorry, I am hearing, you know, the Senator interrupting. I think maybe she wants to speak as she has not spoken as yet but you will get your chance to talk about the PNM slush fund scholarship and all that.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, how about you address me. Okay? Thank you.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yes, Madam. I am proud to serve this country alongside

fearless and true patriots who expose the incompetence, the wrongdoing and the illegality of this PNM Government. People like Ravi Balgobin Maharaj who not for the first time had to take on a fight on behalf of the people of this country to uphold our Constitution because the PNM Members of this House failed to do so.

If I was the Minister of Health, I would hand in my resignation and carbon copy it to a real doctor like Dr. Gopeesingh after that stellar contribution here yesterday. [*Desk thumping*] One Dr. Gopeesingh could replace the whole Saturday line up and sorry to say, in order to keep their jobs, they flip-flop all over the place like fish out of water. I know how hard it is to be a public servant but to them I say professional integrity is something that no salary or job title could compensate for.

Madam President: All right, Sen. Lutchmedial, I always urge Members when you are speaking about persons who are not within this Chamber to be careful. All right, so I am asking you to move on from that line.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, the best that the Government could offer as a comeback to the brilliance of Dr. Gopeesingh was the contribution of Sen. Ibrahim who confessed that he spends a lot of his time watching UNC rallies and Monday Night Forum. He could tell you about people, how many did or did not wear mask at rallies last year before it was the law but he neglected to say whether or not he had watched the Attorney General's arm wrestling match where he perhaps, and it was the view of many, breached the Public Health Regulations and congregated without mask with many people.

Madam President, the Government has publicly stated or the Prime Minister has publicly stated that he lost confidence in the Commissioner of Police a year ago, perhaps for not wanting to enter private property in order to enforce regulations that they themselves could not comply with. But through you, Madam

President, I will encourage Sen. Ibrahim, I know he will watch later—oh no, he is here now, he has arrived just in time. I will encourage him to continue to watch UNC rallies and Monday Night Forum. You know, do not just look with your eyes, listen with your ears, open your mind to the truth, you know, salvation and redemption available to everyone, as long as there is life, there is hope and you might still see the light of the rising sun and come to your senses. He actually was not able to refute any of the salient points raised by Dr. Gopeesingh with respect to the failure of the Government to manage this COVID pandemic. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, if I was the Minister of Sport, I would probably go hide in Main Ridge and never show my face again because people who understand sport, people who love sport, people who have a true passion for the development of sport, have exposed the failures. But, Madam President, like education, sport is the stepping stone out of poverty. If we truly develop sport in this country, we would not have to give the lion's share of almost every single budget to National Security. In a country where you are struggling to reduce our balance of payments, the one thing that we are exporting now might be bandits because our Caricom neighbours are now, you know, seeing the effects of our poor management of the crime situation here in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, God help us but it appears that this is where we have reached, we are exporting crime. No amount of old talk about research and footnoting could hide the fact that the Government has failed the people of this country.

They praised themselves for saving money on this Red House and today, we need an umbrella so that we could stand here and speak; \$400 million plus the cost of buckets and mop. The legacy of Las Alturas has arrived at Abercromby Street. The Red House perhaps is a reflection of the country as a whole. Everything

leaking, falling down like that little piece of ceiling there. And you know why? Because the PNM cannot get it right. They cut and slash spending on important things that would make meaningful impacts on the lives of people and instead they invest in paintings.

Madam President, what we witnessed here yesterday was no coincidence. We saw yesterday that when the rain fell, it was perhaps a metaphor for the tears of poor people crying out for food being called greedy. It fell at the right place in the right time but it was also proof that in this country, you never get value for money. The only thing that we have seen done with proficiency in this budget exercise is the regurgitation of excuses and the recycling of old plans. [*Desk thumping*] No new ideas to generate income except the collection of property tax. No new ideas for diversification.

I heard someone mention that they will now try to develop medical tourism using the Couva children's hospital which they have rebranded because that is the one thing that they also do well, they rename things. They renamed a bus shed, a transportation hub. I understand they cut ribbons to open a mail centre which is a collection of mail boxes and also there is something now that the social media is referring to, a multiuser hydration facility also called "ah stand pipe" but that is where the PNM has taken us back to, [*Desk thumping*] that these are the things we celebrate in our communities today under this Government.

Madam President, the only thing that probably excited me a little bit in this whole debate was when I heard the Minister of Works and Transport say that they were making Licensing Office digital so you could transact business online. I know somebody who has been trying to transfer "ah Porsche Cayenne" since 2016 and he has been unable to do so, so I hope that this will make an impact and assist him

in that regard. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, you ever heard about half ah story? People in our local parlance, “they like to say that yuh giving them half the story”. We always getting half the story sometimes in here. They boast about a completely digitalized system for this and a completely digitalized system for that, but everything that you do online now, for the Companies Registry for example, you have to go and take it to TTPOST, you have to buy two envelopes, not one, two envelopes and send it into them. When you sign up for the service, let us say for example, through TTConnect, when the pandemic started, you had to sign up for TTConnect. Do you know that in the whole of San Fernando, there is not a TTConnect office? You have to go to Princes Town in “ah side street” where there is no parking. The entire legal profession, every lawyer in San Fernando complained that they could not do business through the Companies Registry without this TTConnect connection and we had to journey to Princes Town and it was a nightmare. It was a complete and utter nightmare.

Even now, the new service that they have in the Registrar General’s Department, I do not know if the next time the hon. Minister is walking the floor, if she could verify this or not but when you sign up for it, you have to complete the registration, print everything from your birth certificate, your last receipt for your legal fees, your practicing certificate, two forms of ID, the forms, your National Insurance Registration, your VAT registration, all of that after you scan it and upload it on the system, you print all of it and you still have to carry it into the Registrar General’s Department. What is the digitalization that they are talking about? That is what is the purely 100 per cent digitalized environment that we are operating in? So as I said, Madam President, we only getting half the story that

they are boasting about here.

They will tell us the whole education history and about researching and footnoting but they cannot tell us why, in the year 2021, the leaders who they praise so much will not come out and speak definitively on issues like gender-based violence. They are the ones who propagate toxic masculinity amongst our society. So they could come here and tell us that they are allocating millions of dollars for gender-based violence unit, domestic violence hotline, social safety net for the vulnerable in our society. That means nothing. It means nothing if your leaders do not set an example and attack the source of all these crimes that occur against women in our society. [*Desk thumping*]

They will tell you that the answer to everything, every crime problem that we have in this country is to restrict bail. That is the only solution that they have eh know, restrictions on bail for people are presumed innocent but they will not come here and tell us how they will improve the detection and conviction rate in relation to criminal offences. They cannot tell us why they do not think every child in this country should have had a laptop in “dey hand” when they enter secondary school. They cannot tell us why they support a leader who snatched those laptops out of the hands of the children when he entered into office [*Desk thumping*] but they will come here to tell us how they learn to do research while thousands of our children remain under oppression because they are deprived from education.

The Attorney General in the other place, Madam President, started to talk about I cannot step outside of Gulf View. Well, I want to tell him I did not land in Gulf View by accident or luck or by anyone getting any lucrative rental agreements. I got there because of the sacrifices made by others to get an education. [*Desk thumping*] I ended up there because the Concordat that their

Government want to mash up now help poor people to get an education. Instead of trying to replicate the formula and raise the bar for everyone, they want to lower the bar and call that equality, because you see, the PNM is all about lifting themselves over and above the people that they rule. They believe in divide and conquer. They believe in keeping people oppressed while they lift themselves. [*Desk thumping*] They want a bigger piece of the pie for themselves but would not grow the size of the pie so that everyone could have a bigger slice. That is PNM plans and policies. They have spent millions of dollars and plundered the savings account of this country known as the HSF only to have 1,600 people perish under their watch.

You want to talk about fake news. Fake news is that we have a parallel health care system. [*Desk thumping*] Fake news is that we are not interfering with our independent institutions. Fake news is that we need a state of emergency to contain the spread of a virus when what the Government wants to do is stifle the voice of the people and apparently, according to the Attorney General, we need a state of emergency so people could give injection. They cannot come here and explain to people what they are really doing to relieve us from the strain of the COVID pandemic both on “ah health front” as well as on “ah economic front”. They cannot even get people to come and take the injection because the population does not trust them. “They bullying and ranting and raving” and secrecy and non-disclosure agreements have created a level of distrust and that is the reason for vaccine hesitancy. But they want to say that they have to have a state of emergency so that regulations could let “dentist and vet and medical interns administer ah vaccine that we buy with ah loan from China” and up to now, nobody knows the price per jab.

And even when people come to take the vaccine, if the PNM cannot get “ah photo-op” or a chance to promote themselves, they will cancel it. Attorney General Al-Rawi seems to be so afraid of this little girl from Gulf View and “ah lil counsellor” that “he rather corral people into like cattle into Gulf City Mall with central air-conditioning so that he can gallery himself at ah super-spreader event in San Fernando West” and—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Madam President, Standing Order 46(6).

Madam President: Yes. Sen. Lutchmedial.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I will withdraw it, Madam President.

Madam President: Please. It is one thing I understand this is a budget debate and I have given a lot of leeway but I will ask you to not personalize things as much as you are right now.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, those who hold office would perhaps prefer to see chaos that we have seen ensue in many instances at vaccine sites in this country, all round this country, including when it deals with our most vulnerable and elderly people in society rather than seeing well organized events because the vaccines are handed out as though they are some sort of gift and it is an opportunity for public relations. When you have no accomplishments of substance to speak of that you are stealing credit for projects done by UNC councillors and you cancel vaccination drives which are organized at the behest of your own Cabinet colleagues, Madam President, contrary to what some people may think, not everybody is crushing on them.

Nowhere is it more evident that we do not get value for money than when one looks at the conduct of litigation. In 2021, the person who drafted the Order that resulted in the unconstitutional acting appointment of a Police Commissioner

spent \$75 million on fees. The budgeted amount for 2021 was 33 and a half million dollars but he had to come for more in the midterm review. Thirty-three and a half million dollars is not enough to defend the incompetence of the State in the management of legal affairs. The actual expenditure almost doubled.

2.00 p.m.

They could spin it however they want, Madam President. On two occasions they had to be taken to court for passing an Order that was offensive to the Constitution with respect to the appointment of a Commissioner of Police. And I had the privilege of standing in court on both occasions and [*Desk thumping*] driving the point home, that it is not open to the Attorney General to simply ignore our Constitution and pass Orders, subsidiary legislation, to do as he please.

It is costing the taxpayers' money, Madam President. The lawyers who are being hired by the State to defend his sloppy work are certainly resilient under this budget. But they are collecting fees and all that they are doing is coming to court sometimes to concede in the matter because somebody who clearly does not have faith in the management of the legal affairs of the State leaked an opinion that basically rubbished all the claims that were made to the media. And I have it here, as much as they want to deny it, as much as they try to forget it exists. Attorneys wrong about errors made in the appointment of Griffith as Acting COP.

Madam President, when the legal advisor to the State will stand up and say that he had the benefit of drafting an Order, updating it, bringing it to the Parliament and so on, and defends what turns out to be the unconstitutional actions of the Police Service Commission, and then only has to recoil, and resile, and retract when somebody leaks an opinion also paid for by the taxpayer. And still the taxpayer is paying two Senior Counsels, one to represent him and one to represent

the Police Service Commission to lose, to lose, on something that an attorney raised for free in the public domain. And they could have come to the Parliament and they could have corrected it and before the implosion of the Police Service Commission they could have corrected it and done the appointment properly and brought the appointment to the Parliament. But instead, they study to interfere in the appointment of the Commissioner of Police so they could not get the procedure correct.

It is costing the taxpayers of this country money. So when everybody has to line up and file or go online and file their valuation return form to pay property tax, they deserve to know why. They deserve to know why. It is because moneys are being spent irresponsibly in the conduct of litigation in the State.

Madam President, I cannot believe that I heard the Minister in the Office of the Attorney General stand here and try to blame—and she tried to soften the blow but you know, your Senior uses all the time, the UNC lawyers for taking people to court. Madam President, I am proud to say here we got a whole “katar” the other day about the origins of gambling in the Mahabharat and all of that. But you know I am proud to say that I stand here defending people who want to have open pyre cremations because it is consistent with their religious beliefs while the Office of the Attorney General is spending taxpayers’ dollars to suppress those rights.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, are you referring by chance to any matter that is before the court?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, I am not getting into the details of the matter.

Madam President: Yes. But yes—

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I will move on. But, Madam President, you cannot stand

here and say that you are forced to spend fees when you are trying to defend sometimes things that are indefensible.

Let me talk about a matter that—they want to boast about winning. They try to claim victory in the Police Service Commission matter. But let us talk about a matter that is completed. Reported in the media:

“Appeal Court slashes \$2 m award for abused boy”

They spend the money of the taxpayers to pay Senior Counsel to appeal the award of damages for a child physically and sexually abused at the hands of the State. That is how the taxpayers’ dollars are being managed under the Office of the Attorney General. And they want to come here and say that is lawyers affiliated with the UNC. Yes. Lawyers affiliated with the UNC, we stand up every day and we fight for the rights of people. That is what we do, and we are very proud of it. And we will continue to do so. [*Desk thumping*]

We have reached the stage right now, Madam President, where people who I never thought I could agree with in life have come out and talked about the management of the state of legal affairs in this country. And I will quote from an article dated October 2021, by one Prof. Selwyn Cudjoe. In speaking about certain things that were leaked into the public domain again—I find is plenty leaks taking place. I do not know; somebody obviously wants to expose the incompetence more than us. But in relation to some of those leaked documents he says:

“All it does is expose the taxpayer to a claim to indemnity by...”—a person, I would not call the name—“...if he suffers certain losses.”

And Prof. Cudjoe writes:

“Another distinguished attorney noted that Al-Rawi ‘is a hindrance to the law because he does not understand the basic principles of the law.’”

Madam President: Now, Sen. Lutchmedial, you are quoting from the article, but you are quoting from the article you are now—it is deemed to be yours. All right. And therefore you are imputing, you are using insulting language about a Member of the Parliament. Okay? So I will ask you please to move on.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: But, Madam President, I will suffice by saying that this article caption, “Has the People’s Lawyer lost his way?” could be read by anyone who wants to go on the *Express* online and it is—

Madam President: And Sen. Lutchmedial, I have just asked you to move on.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I am moving on, Madam President.

Madam President: Thank you very much.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: But Madam President, the clear and sentiments of the public is that they have no confidence in the management of legal affairs of this country.

[*Desk thumping*]

Now, I want to know which part of the budget really caters for all of the contingent liabilities that the taxpayers are going to have to undertake because of the poor management of legal affairs in this country?—and litigation, particularly. Because recently, the President of the Contractors Association talked about the amount of matters in court right now. The amount of people that are suing various agencies of the State, EMBD, EFCL, all of them, for moneys owed to them. And that litigation is dragging on for years. And it is not only causing contractors to be under financial pressure, but what is going happen if the State loses? Who is going to foot the bill for all the legal cost? Who is footing the bill for the legal cost now? Are we getting value for money in how the Office of the Attorney General is spending our money? And I think the clear answer is no.

Madam President, when we see the state of national insecurity due to the

fact that we have no Commissioner of Police or Acting Commissioner of Police, because of the positions endorsed by the Attorney General, we have to really wonder if this is what passes for legal advice. Focusing on being the landlord and not a good lawyer for the State is really something that is costing us.

Madam President, it is also very troubling that we see interference now with independent institutions and independent functions under the State. I have read in the newspaper about legal advice on criminal matters being sent to the police from the Office of the Attorney General. I want to know under what authority that is being done?

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Madam President, I rise on a point of order, 46(6).

Madam President: Yes. Sen. Lutchmedial, you need to just dial it back a little bit. All right. Make your point and move on please.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Well, Madam President, I ask the question here today and I am sure the Attorney General will come and respond, and perhaps he could advise us under what authority his office embarks upon giving advice in criminal law matters to the TTPS? I do not know if he is looking for an alternative career in law enforcement. But you know, I want to find out then, since he is so interested in law enforcement and I understand he, the Prime Minister has cleared him—

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, could I ask you when you are referring to the Attorney General that you accord the office—

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Sure.

Madam President:—the proper respect. Okay, in terms of the title of the office.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: The Prime Minister has indicated that the Attorney General is under attack because he is going after white collar crime. So I want to highlight a particular case that I feel should engage the attention of the Attorney General. I

will refer to an article on June 14, 2021, titled: “A&V probe not over for cops, investigators coming to help”. Madam President, in that particular matter the then Commissioner of Police is quoted as saying that the end of arbitration proceedings in relation to this matter is not the end of the matter.

Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing: Madam President, on a point of order please. Standing Order 46(1), I am trying to follow the presenter and I am not sure what she is replying to, and what remark she is replying to in the budget debate because I did not hear the Prime Minister speak here.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, in a budget debate a lot of leeway is given, quite a bit. I will allow you to finish your point and then I will ask you to move on.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I will move on very quickly and you will see the relevance very shortly please, Madam President. Yes. The Commissioner of Police said that he was receiving an update and he was seeking independent investigators. Now, that cost money. I hope it is budgeted for. He said, and it is quoted here:

We are looking for an independent reservoir engineer expert that is going to assist us to ascertain certain things, and also forensic investigation will take place. And this is to validate the legitimacy of crude quantities.

He said:

TTPS legal department was doing letters of engagement to retain the services of these experts.

Now, I certainly hope that part of the allocations budgeted to the TTPS, budgeted to the Office of the Attorney General and so on in this budget will be used to pursue this matter. [*Desk thumping*] Because there were many other matters involving investigations of this nature. In fact, just last year, right before the election, we heard about the approval, and it was reported in the newspaper of

some \$66 million additionally being approved by Cabinet to pay a firm in the United Kingdom to investigate criminal matters. So I certainly hope that the same amount of resources in all of the budgeting exercises that have been allocated to EMBD and so on for the political, what I term to be the political witch hunts, would also be allocated to A&V Drilling matter. And that is the point, Madam.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, yes. I have to caution you at this stage. In your very wide sweeping contribution you are making references to matters that are before the court, then you are moving on to something else. I am going to caution you. Please do not make references to matters that are currently before the court. Thank you very much.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Sure. Just for the record there are no criminal matters involving EMBD before the court. But—

Madam President: Thank you very much, Sen. Lutchmedial, for the enlightenment, but could you move on please.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, we heard from the Minister in the Office of the Attorney General about all of the work that is being done and they called the names, name by name of every head of department and so on in the Office of the Attorney General. Well, I hope that the next time—because the Minister says she speaks very regularly with him—I hope that she could ask him or maybe she can tell us, the Minister can tell us, why despite the allocation for the outfitting of new premises in the 2019 budget in San Fernando, there are still—and according to one of my former colleagues—they are still housed in the OSHA forgotten dump. That is how they describe the premises upon which the Office of the DPP is located in San Fernando.

Again, Madam President, in July 2020, right before the election, photo op in

the newspapers, keys handed over by NIDCO for the new accommodation for the Port of Spain office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. They are still in their cramped quarters on Richmond Street up to today more than a year later.

Again, perhaps we would find out why it is opinions are being drafted on Public Health Regulations and the breaches. Discuss that as well the next meeting that you have with the DPP's Office.

Madam President, they boast about their accomplishments and they are calling the name of every department. One department that comes under that Office is the Law Revision Commission. Since 2016 we cannot get access to the revised laws on the website that was put up there. That is the efficiency with which we are conducting, you know, and managing the Office? The revised laws are placed there for the use of everybody, citizens, the man on the street, access to the law, even parliamentarians.

It is very difficult sometimes when we come here to amend Bills when they bring these miscellaneous provisions Bills and so on, and we want to have the updated laws. We have to wait until we are sitting there sometimes to get an unofficial update. But the provision exists on a website created by the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs and something called the Digital Legislative Library, where you can have all of the updated laws available to us, nothing. Madam President, 2016 is the last time we have seen an update and none of the amendments have been worked into the laws since then under the tenure of this Attorney General.

So, Madam President, when they want to talk about boasting about the Equal Opportunity Commission and so on, I want remind them it was a UNC Government that brought equal opportunities legislation to this country. [*Desk*

thumping] It was the UNC Government that had to do that because—and again, do the research. In the face of things and case like the Maha Sabha radio license case and the cases of Ganga Persad Bissoon, and Feroza Ramjohn, and people who were discriminated against in this country under the tenure of PNM Governments that the Equal Opportunity Commission came into existence.

I cannot say, Madam President, anybody in this country has confidence in the conduct of affairs, the legal affairs of the State. How the moneys of the taxpayers are being spent? Is the only thing—I mean it is horrendous. And the defence that they come with is UNC lawyers cause us to spend that money. Well, the truth of the matter is yes, UNC lawyers like Lutchmedial, Ramlogan, Ramdeen, Rambally, Hosein, all of them, that is who people come to for help when they need it, when their rights are being curtailed, when their rights are being trampled upon. That is who they come to.

The Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs called the name of Akili Charles. Well, Madam President, if they are so concerned about the amount of fees that they have to pay in relation to cases, they could come to court themselves and defend the matter. Put on your robes and your bands and meet us in the Hall of Justice, because you could save some money in relation to those claims. We are fighting and you could come and fight us as well.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, are you referring to matters which are before the court?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, I am responding to a comment made by the Minister in her contribution.

Madam President: But I am asking you, are you referring to matters which are before the court?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I only called the name, yes, Madam President, of a matter before the court.

Madam President: Then, can I ask you please to move on. I made an earlier ruling on it. Thank you.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Attorneys General in the past with legal proficiency like Anand Ramlogan and Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj put on their robes and their bands and they came to court and stood and defended the State in matters. So I could challenge them to do the same thing instead of spending the taxpayers' dollars hiding behind expensive Senior Counsel, and then come here to talk about the cases that we take up in defence of the rule of law. They could come and defend it themselves. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, the other only defence that I think the Attorney General has proffered in relation to all the criticism against him is that everyone is crushing on him, and his junior Minister came here yesterday to propagate that fallacy. Again, I wonder if they inspire confidence in the people of this country if that is the best that they could do and come here with.

He is the one calling the name of the street that I live on in the other place. Well, I will tell him that that is where I got my foundation in law. That is where I learnt how to read and interpret legislation. I even learnt quite a bit about legislative drafting from my mother who was a drafter and a researcher from 1978 to 2017 in the Ministry that he is now leading, but cannot even produce proper order before this Parliament. So maybe I will invite him to come to Beatrice Avenue at some point in time because the—

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, who is the he that I am hearing over and over?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Sorry, Madam President. I will invite the Attorney General to walk on Beatrice Avenue where he seems to think I cannot step out of, and he could learn a little bit more about the flawed legal instruments that he brings to Parliament. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing: Madam President, on a point of order. Standing Order 53(4)(c), the Senator is repeatedly disregarding your rulings over, and over, and over, throughout the duration of her contribution.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, just remember what I told you before.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yes, Madam President. Madam President, all of our institutions are also being destroyed by the legislation that is brought here by various Ministers and piloted by various Ministers. But all legislative matters fall under the purview of the Attorney General. In this budget they are talking about institutional building, but it is really institutional destruction. Institutional destruction of the Board of Inland Revenue and Customs to create the politically appointed Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority, the decimation of the office of the Procurement Regulator, amongst others.

Let us go back in history of budget debates. Madam President, 2018 the budget statement read:

“...the Procurement Regulator has been actively building capacity within the Office of Procurement Regulation.

I am advised that staffing and training is in progress, and barring unforeseen circumstances, the new procurement regime utilizing best practice could be in place in the first quarter of calendar 2019....”

The budget statement of 2019:

“...with the soon to be proclaimed sections of the procurement Act, and the

issuance of the associated regulations with”—approximately—“six-month transition period as requested by the Regulator, we expect to be in a position of fully implementing the new public procurement arrangements in 2020.”

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Sure. Madam President, in 2020 what we saw is legislation being brought to the Parliament to take away oversight from key areas that require oversight in this regime, Madam President. They have found ways to facilitate the lack of transparency and accountability in the expenditure of funds. I will very quickly mention property tax because I think that Sen. Welch it was that said that he is calling upon the Government to hold back on property tax.

Madam President, property tax takes no account of generational wealth at a time like this when people are struggling in this country. To insist that they are going to roll out this property tax regime is uncaring. I know one Member of Parliament who said in 2009 that \$100 is a lot of money for people. So all of the calculations put forward by the Minister of Finance of how little it would cost people in property tax, maybe he should refer to what the state of the economy was like in 2009 when a \$100 was held to be a lot of money by persons for the Member of Diego Martin West.

Madam President, with respect to national security we have not heard any real plans to deal with our border security issues. We still have Damen vessels that are not being fully deployed. We still have a problem that poses both a national security crisis and also a health crisis with respect to our porous borders. Two Cape-class vessels cannot patrol our borders and we know that because they are not doing it properly.

We are hearing reports over and over in the media about vessels not being

available to come to the rescue of persons and so on because of a lack of fuel. Madam President, that is like buying a fancy vehicle but you cannot afford to buy the gas. It is like telling people to buy electric cars and giving them exemptions to do so, but there is not enough gas stations that you could pull up to with charging ports. That is like saying convert to CNG but there are long lines outside the one gas station in a large city area that you need to go and full your CNG.

We need proper plans, Madam President. We need plans that are holistic and a whole-of-government approach, because in the education system where they are failing our children right now, they are making a future for children who would be ripe for the picking for the gangs in the country. And that is the evidence that comes before every joint select committee and every other institution. And when children are deprived of education and they live in poverty, the gang life becomes attractive to them, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*] And if you want to do anything about crime in this country it is not to lock them up and throw away the key with no bail. It is to address the underlying issues that result in children being drawn towards the gang life in this country, Madam President. And with those few words, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I will now revert to the earlier item in the Order Paper because 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.

UNREVISED

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: MR. NDALE YOUNG

WHEREAS Senator Avinash Singh 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)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, NDALE YOUNG to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 20th October, 2021 and continuing during the absence of Senator The Honourable Avinash Sing 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 20th day of
October, 2021."

OATH OF AFFIRMATION

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

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2022) BILL, 2021

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

Sen. Deeroop Teemal: I thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to present on the Bill that is before us. Adapt or die. This statement may sound rather melodramatic with regard to the possible impact of climate change. But based on what we have seen globally over the past year with regard to floods, drought, forest

fires, rising sea level, and rising sea temperatures, Madam President, it may not seem that far-fetched. We can successfully tackle the climate emergency if we do the right things, but we are running out of time in my opinion, to implement effective adaptation and mitigation measures.

In his budget presentation the hon. Minister of Finance made no specific mention of climate change. And as a result, I was looking forward to the contribution of the Minister of Planning and Development in the other place to hear from that hon. Minister Government's action plan to effectively treat with climate change adaptation and mitigation measures, but unfortunately this was not to be. The hon. Minister of Works and Transport in his contribution did briefly mention the possible impacts of climate change with regard to flooding in particular.

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, hon. Avinash Singh, also mentioned about the possible impacts of climate change on agriculture. And the hon. Minister of Public Utilities in his contribution in this House also mentioned about some of the negative impacts of climate change on some of the freshwater intakes and the storage reservoirs of WASA.

While it is understandable, Madam President, that the focus is on the ravaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for our economic recovery, we must bear in mind it is also a pivotal and opportune moment for us to also put climate change front and centre in the recovery from the pandemic and our present economic difficulties. In other words, Madam President, I am of the view it should not be separated at this stage but it should be integrated into the overall view and the overall action that we are looking post-pandemic, and getting out of our economic difficulties.

Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago, we would know, is a ratified signatory to many multilateral environment agreements related to climate change. From as far back as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; the Paris Agreement; the Convention of Biological Diversity; the Basil Convention; the Stockholm Convention related to chemicals and waste; and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. And obligations are being met through actions taken and culminated by the Multilateral Environmental Agreements Unit at the Ministry of Planning and Development, through project implementation with funding source from various multilateral donors and international funds.

Madam President, however, in my view the primary focus of this Multilateral Environment Agreements Unit has been looking primarily at our compliance requirements regarding the reduction of the carbon footprint and carbon and greenhouse gas emissions. Where are we with the identification of specific climate adaptation strategies, mitigation measures, and vulnerability studies with regard to food security, water security, flood defense, environmental degradation, and loss of biodiversity?

2.30 p.m.

As we have heard, climate change is attracting the attention of the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Ministry of Public Utilities, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and other Ministries. But out of all of these entities, who has the primary responsibility for pulling all of this together, to ensure direction, consistency, and, above all, to avoid duplication of effort and cost?

I would like to make a case for a national climate change policy, with emphasis not only on just greenhouse gas emissions, and the control of it, but one that addresses sectoral vulnerability with regard to agriculture, human health, human settlements and infrastructure, coastal zones, water resources and tourism, and as such, encompasses key issues of water and food security.

Madam President, these vulnerabilities are seen from the potential impacts of certain projected climate changes, such as temperature increases, extreme events, such as floods, droughts and earthquakes, sea surface temperature increases, sea level rise and changes in rainfall precipitation.

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

The policy should also guide the formation of clear climate change adaptation and mitigation measures. Mr. Vice-President, given that climate change is a multifaceted and multi sectoral issue, any climate change policy would of necessity have implications for the revision of other sectoral policies in order to integrate and place into relevant context, the climate change issue in the relevant, sectoral policy. This will warrant a revision of the National Climate Change Policy of 2011, since we have not come back to that policy since the year 2011.

An examination of the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* expenditure for fiscal 2022, Mr. Vice-President, does not reveal—at least I have not seen it—a clear allocation for the development of any policy, specifically dealing with climate change under any Ministry. Of course, there may be possibilities that aspects of climate change are being addressed, as we have heard from the various Ministers, but if so, they are not mentioned in any specific subject heading of the draft expenditures. Mr. Vice-President, in addition, climate change is not specifically addressed in any existing sectoral policies, although there are

broad references to mitigation and adaptation in the National Environmental Policy of 2006 of Trinidad and Tobago, and other related national environment policies, rules and regulations.

Vision 2030, goal three, of the short-term goals states that climate vulnerability would be assessed, and goes on to identify two action items that are, determine areas of greatest climate risk and design and implement adaptive actions for vulnerable sectors.

Mr. Vice-President, we are starting to see globally the destructive potential of climate change. And these impacts, if not mitigated efficiently, bring about natural disasters which can wreak havoc to agriculture, infrastructure, human life, tourism, life itself and the economy. We are seeing the rapid acceleration of some of these impacts. And it is therefore imperative that we become exceedingly proactive regarding this trend, and a key step in the establishment of a definitive policy on climate change. And I strongly urge that funding be allocated for this.

The sectoral approach to climate change has its limitations, we must stop working in silos so that a clear and definitive multi sectoral policy on climate change is achievable. In working towards the establishment of a national climate change policy, I am recommending, I am suggesting that consideration be given to the establishment of a multi sectoral climate change task force charged with the responsibility for the establishment of this policy.

Mr. Vice-President, I would just like to turn attention to the issue of water security. And despite being a relatively water abundant country, Trinidad and Tobago, as you know, has its fair share of water sector problems. Supplies are intermittent, leakage levels are high and demand is suppressed due to restricted supplies. Notwithstanding tens of billions of dollars of expenditure over the past

decades, we are still faced with the situation of over 50 per cent of the population receiving a supply of water for less than three days per week. The many, many, many studies undertaken have identified challenges such as, in appropriate governance arrangements, deficient legislation, and regulations, ageing infrastructure, high levels of non-revenue water, unaccounted for water, which is almost 40 per cent in our case, concerns over potable water quality and poor infrastructure management. Other than WASA, there are several agencies and institutions involved in the planning, management and execution of water resources management functions. And these include the Environmental Management Authority, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Tobago House of Assembly, Ministry of Planning and Development, Ministry of Works and Transport Drainage Division, Water Resources Agency, Institute of Marine Affairs and others.

It is worth noting that there is an absence of a coordinating agency and coordinating mechanism to facilitate effective water resources management. And as a result, it is not surprising that Trinidad and Tobago currently lack a coherent policy and institutional framework for water resources management.

Mr. Vice-President, when we look at the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* expenditure for fiscal 2022, on page 89, Item 005. Sub-Item 055: Adopt and Implement Integrated Water Resources Management as an expenditure Item, one would recognize that no moneys were spent on this Item in 2019, 2020 and 2021, and a rather miniscule amount of \$500,000 has been allocated for fiscal 2022. I really hoped that this is not an indication that the Government is placing the implementation of this policy, which is vital to the pursuance of water security on the back burner, yet again. And so, I was greatly relieved to hear the hon.

Minister of Public Utilities in his contribution in this House, state that the National Integrated Water Resources Management Policy, or the IWRM Policy, would be going to Cabinet in about a month's time for approval. Great news.

There is indeed a checkered history with regard to the development of this policy, Mr. Vice-President. A degree of impetus for water sector reform coming out of the World Bank institutional strengthening exercise since the 1990s. One of the outcomes was the Water Resources Management Strategy Study, completed in the year 2000. This recommended adoption of IWRM and the need to establish an effective and financially autonomous institutional framework was then recommended. In order to address these problems, the then Ministry of Public Utilities and the Environment, drafted a National Water Resources Management Policy in 2003, with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank.

Since the National Water Resources Management policy was adopted in the year 2005, there have been several changes of Government. It would appear it had contributed significantly to a lack of continuity in the pursuit of water security based on the principles of IWRM. And what we have seen subsequently is mainly a supply driven, sectoral approach through WASA to solve the nation's water woes.

The latest draft document regarding Integrated Water Resources Management was prepared under the guidance of the Cabinet-appointed Technical Steering Committee for the Review and Revision of the National IWRM Policy in March of 2017. And that is where it is. The Cabinet Committee Strategy Report on WASA's Transformation, December 2020, in appendix 2 under Strategic Pillar (a) Restructuring of the Water Sector identified the need for the approval of the IWRM Policy. And this is why I was very happy to hear the Minister of Public

Utilities indicate that this policy is finally reaching Cabinet in about some months' time. But against such a background, Mr. Vice-President, I questioned the sufficiency of the allocation of \$500,000 for the implementation of this policy.

The Minister of Public Utilities in his contribution did not go into the details of how this policy would be implemented once approved. In my opinion, a well-resourced dedicated IWRM unit within his Ministry, the Ministry of Public Utilities would be necessary to expeditiously implement this vital and crucial IWRM policy, once it is approved by Cabinet. And I am sure that this allocation of \$500,000 would have to be reviewed by the Minister, since it will not suffice. Really, after such a checkered history, and such being a vital clog in the whole question of water security, we just cannot afford for this policy to lapse—the implementation of this policy to lapse, we need to get it accelerated, since it forms one of the base aspects of our water security for the country.

Mr. Vice-President, on page 247 of the PSIP 2020, mention is made of the National Water Sector Transformation Programme, the NWSTP, which is a new project proposed by WASA for fiscal 2022 with a 25 million allocation for 2022 and a projected expenditure of 122.5 million each for 2023 and 2024. However, no details of this programme have been provided. And in his contribution the Minister of Public Utilities did not provide much details of this programme. And I am therefore looking forward to the Government making details available of this programme in the immediate future and particularly how this project is going to be integrated with the findings of the Cabinet Committee Strategy Report on WASA's Transformation, December 2020.

Mr. Vice-President, in the *Vision 2030 National Development Strategy 2016 to 2030*, one of the goals for improved public utilities, goal 3.2, page 101, the

intention is to adopt an integrated planning approach to flood mitigation. And it states in that respective document on page 101:

“The piecemeal and localised approach in addressing flooding is uneconomical and unsustainable. Through the development and implementation of an Integrated Flood Management Plan, strategies to maintain or augment the productivity of floodplains while providing protective measures against losses due to flooding, will be adopted.”

Mr. Vice-President, the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure, Tenth Report, Fifth Session, Twelfth Parliament, “An Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago Subjected to Major Flooding Over the Past Years”. General Finding 25, on page 23 states, and I quote:

“In seeking to expedite the National Drainage Plan, the MoWT has approached the CAF Multilateral Development Bank for technical assistance with the formulation of the Plan and discussions are still ongoing.”

Page 126 of the *Public Sector Investment Programme* of 2021, under the section on drainage, states that the:

“...work is being undertaken to develop a Comprehensive National Integrated Drainage Plan with the aim of improving drainage planning and management throughout the country.”

Mr. Vice-President, I see no mention being made of the continuation of this exercise in the PSIP 2022, nor any allocation of funding for this continuation. So I ask the question: Where are we with the development of this comprehensive National Drainage Plan?

The hon. Minister of Works and Transport in his contribution did not provide an update on this. Regarding all that I have outlined, Mr. Vice-President, I would definitely like some clarification about what seems to be a total lack of funding or will for the completion of this integrated flood management plan. Against the backdrop of our continuing lack of an integrated flood development plan, page 249 of the 2022 PSIP states, and I read from that document:

“Having adequate drainage infrastructure to mitigate flooding incidents, particularly in low lying areas, is imperative as climate change continues to exacerbate weather conditions, which can result in damaged road infrastructure, and cause personal, social, economic and environmental loss.”

And I am still reading from that 2022 PSIP:

“As such, Government has renewed its effort to increase coordination among disaster management and infrastructural development stakeholders to reduce losses due to flooding and enhance the overall quality of life of all citizens. On account of this, emphasis has been placed on strengthening the nation’s flood mitigation measures, which includes implementing quality drainage infrastructure, continuing river clearing, and the rehabilitation and improvement works. To this end...”

—According to the PSIP 2020:

“Government will invest a total of \$203.7 million for the development of modern drainage systems that meet ecological requirements and assist in the reduction of flooding in Trinidad.”

Mr. Vice-President, except for the allocation of the upgrade of existing pumps and gates and embankment rehabilitation, it seems as though we are

prepared to continue with declaring water courses and desilting unsustainable approach to solving our drainage problems. This approach has been—has had quite a popular run from successive governments over decades, consuming hundreds of millions of taxpayers' dollars and seems now to be entrenched in how we approach our drainage—entrenching our drainage culture and how we approach the problems of flooding.

The question is asked, considering the continuous desilting programmes and its considerable expenditure to date, year, after year, after year, what has been done to effectively prevent and manage or control the occurrence of erosion and siltation and what are the projects under the PSIP to bringing this about?

The development and implementation of an integrated flood management plan would effectively address the reduction of this considerable recurrent expenditure and address other issues as it is intrinsically linked with the Integrated Water Resources Management Policy. And again, I am asking for the funding, the commitment and the will, to complete this integrated flood management plan so that it can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals which we are aiming for in *Vision 2030*.

Mr. Vice-President, the same applies to transportation. *Vision 2030* clearly identifies a National Transportation Plan. And again, when I look at the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* expenditure for 2022, page 106, Item A: 001, of the Development Programme, under the line Item of Development of a National Transportation Plan, no moneys have been spent on this Item in 2019, 2020 and 2021. And a sum of \$200,000 has been allocated for fiscal 2022. Mr. Vice-President, where are we with this National Transportation Plan, and no update has been provided in any of the contributions thus far.

Under the PSIP, we continue to see the pattern of billions of dollars being spent on this sector, this transportation sector over the many years by successive governments without the benefit of sustainable transportation planning. It may sound as a bold statement, but I am putting it forward without the benefit of sustainable transportation planning. It is imperative that as a nation, we ensure that the billions of dollars being spent on this sector falls within long term sustainable development plan.

The UN Commission for Sustainable Development identifies six pillars for sustainable development, sustainable transport development, and one of these is integrated land use transportation planning. And while it says heavy emphasis on road widening, road upgrades and interchanges in order to build and increase the capacity of our nation's roads, these are exceedingly very high risk capital intensive projects and the lack of an overall transportation plan prevents us from allocating the funds necessary to implementing other transportation policies, such as the high vehicle occupancy policies, and the development of a mass transit system.

Mr. Vice-President, there is no single institution responsible for overall planning, management and regulation of the public transportation sector. Over the many years, reports submitted to successful Governments recommended the establishment of a transit authority. *Vision 2020* also endorses the establishment of a transit authority. And an integrated National Transportation Plan would address this. On page 53, of the budget statement of the Minister of Finance, not for this fiscal year, but for fiscal year 2021, the hon. Minister, as one of the key pillars, stated, and I quote:

“• smart transportation strategies and systems will be developed by ensuring that proper service levels are met from both urban and rural residents; by providing a variety of viable and appealing transportation options; and by managing optimal parking, especially in highly urbanized areas.”

Hon. Minister of Finance, there was no update on this vision that was presented in fiscal year 2021, as to where we are with regard to this particular pronouncement and we are continuing to spend billions of dollars in this sector. In order to ensure sustainability of our spending in this sector, Mr. Vice-President, it is imperative that we allocate the funds necessary, let us get this integrated National Transportation Plan completed. And let all our developmental works with regard to transportation be allowed to fall within a sustainable framework.

Mr. Vice-President, in the Budget Statement of 2021, the Minister of Finance had identified a period of 254 days that it was taking to receive approval for construction permits. And in his words, the situation was totally unacceptable. However, that 254 days, it should be noted did not include the inordinately long time it also takes to obtain a completion certificate from the regional corporations. And this could easily add another three to six months in the overall process with interest on bridging loans at its peak during this period. And again, the budget for this fiscal 2022 has not really mentioned what progress has been made in this critical issue in the context of the ease of doing business. No update has been provided in the budget statement before us.

Mr. Vice-President, for decades the issue of statutory approvals are being discussed ad nauseam, and several solutions identified but we have failed to bring about the desired change. Each of the many statutory stakeholders continue to be a law unto themselves, and seem to be only accountable to only themselves. What

we have is a corrupt and inefficient system that costs citizens and developers no end of heartache, headache, stress and financial losses. Building inspectors in the corporations have morphed into private architects and engineers and construction entrepreneurs, as they provide a service to potential home builders and developers for private fees whilst still holding on to their substantive positions in the corporations. I still do not see any allocations or mention made for the operationalization of the Planning and Facilitation of Development Act, 2014.

Since 2014, Mr. Vice-President, and I am questioning whether the Government has lost the will or whether they intend to get this Act operationalized. The operationalization of this Act is a vital cog in building the ease of doing business, expediting development approvals, and curbing illegal developments that have the potential to have disastrous impacts, on flooding and environmental degradation that we are seeing on an increasing frequency due to the changes in climate.

Mr. Vice-President, this Act calls for the establishment of a national planning authority that will have as a standing committee, a development control committee comprising of representatives of all statutory stakeholders and which would as one of its major responsibilities coordinate the approval process. Again, I am asking the hon. Minister to look at allocating the necessary funding to get this Act operationalized. Mr. Vice-President, if we are to stand a chance of achieving *Vision 2030* Sustainable Development Goals, we need to complete our multi sectoral integrated planning with regard to water security, food security, transportation, and other aspects of integrated national development. I took the time to outline the checkered history of the Integrated Water Resources

Management Policy. And I really hope that the multi-sectoral integrated planning on which *Vision 2030* is based is not heading in a similar direction.

Mr. Vice-President, I would like to ask the question: Are we giving the necessary priority and funding to advance and complete the preparation of these comprehensive multi-sectoral integrated plans and policies necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of *Vision 2030*? And I also ask this in the context of the PSIP 2022, in which a projected expenditure of approximately TT \$3.06 billion and under the theme, the fifth theme of *Vision 2030*, “Placing the Environment at the Center of Social and Economic Development”, we see only a minuscule allocation of 13.3 million, or just point 4 per cent of the PSIP 2022 budget.

Mr. Vice-President, something does not seem to be right here. Placing the environment at the center of social and economic development in the overall context of all that is happening with climate change, environmental degradation, and all of the issues coming out of the environment and what we need to look at, I cannot understand an allocation of just 13.3 million out of TT \$3.06 billion or just point 4 per cent of our overall PSIP 2022 budget.

Mr. Vice-President, how much time do I have again?

Mr. Vice-President: You finish at 3.05.

Sen. D. Teemal: Thank you very much. Mr. Vice-President, as I try to wrap up and looking back at the presentation of this budget by the hon. Minister of Finance, just to reflect on one or two notable omissions in my view, in that, there has been no statement about Petrotrin in the budget. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in his presentation in this House—his contribution did say that with regard to the Guaracara Refinery that there were three entities looking at putting in

bids for the Guaracara Refinery. But without any precise statement about Petrotrin in the budget, Mr. Vice-President, it is just not only a question of the refinery but in my view, the overall monetization of the assets of Petrotrin and definitive statements and policy on how this can be brought about, I felt would have been—we would have had something in the budget about the overall approach to the monetization of the assets of Petrotrin.

3.00 p.m.

Another notable omission, and it may be a moot point, at this point in time, Mr. Vice-President, is the lack of the summary of expenditure for fiscal 2021 within the budget statement. And also, I would have liked to see or to get some information on an indication of what steps are being taking to get us removed from the European Union blacklist. The Minister of Finance did indicate that he is moving away from free zones to special economic zones.

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

Sen. D. Teemal: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. And, Mr. Vice-President, this move from free zones to special economic zones, to me, it is absolutely necessary that precise and definitive steps are taken to get us removed from the EU blacklist as it would, of course, impact negatively.

Mr. Vice-President, in closing, I must make mention of two particular contributions that I find—I would want to use the word “refreshing” in the whole context of the many contributions, valuable contributions from Members of this House, and one was from the Minister of Digital Transformation, the hon. Hassel Bacchus. [*Desk thumping*] And I find it was refreshing that we are looking at the whole process of digital transformation in an innovative and creative way to bring it into the mainstream, you know, of our national duties and responsibilities, and

then also the Minister of Public Administration, the hon. Allyson West. [*Desk thumping*]

You know, the Minister Allyson West, really within that period of time that she had, she outlined a framework for the entire reform of the public service and I found it to be rather comprehensive in terms of what was presented. But both the Minister of Digital Transformation and the Minister of Public Administration, when they were presenting their findings, when they were making their contributions, Mr. Vice-President, one thought was uppermost in my mind at all times during the contributions. Because when I think about the legislative changes that would be necessary to bring about the changes that are being proposed, particularly, with regard to reform of public administration and I reflect on the legislative gridlock that we are engaged in right now, in this honourable House, the legislative paralysis that has gripped us.

I go back to the appeal of Sen. Dillon-Remy, when she appealed to the parties involved that we have to find a way—if we have to bring about all these changes, legislative changes—to break this legislative gridlock. For if we cannot break this legislative gridlock, well, then, all the legislation and all what we are doing here and all what is necessary to bring about the change is not going to happen. And I would like to add my voice to that of Sen. Dillon-Remy that the parties get together. It is not impossible. It is possible that we can work together to find appropriate mechanisms to break the legislative gridlock that we find ourselves in. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. It is always an honour and privilege to contribute to deliberations of this august Chamber. I wish to begin my contribution

by congratulating the Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert, for his presentation of a very well-conceived Appropriation Bill for this fiscal year.

Mr. Vice-President, I had the privilege of contributing to the discourse in another place and spent some time giving the achievements of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs with the money that we were granted to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So, I would wish to begin my contribution this afternoon in the Senate with a quotation from a famous author by the name of John Steinbeck and he said this about the profession of teaching:

“Teaching might...”—well—“be the greatest of the arts...”—because the teacher’s—“medium is the human mind and spirit.”

The teacher’s job is to empower and uplift the human mind and spirit, not to burn it down.

Mr. Vice-President that, unfortunately, the burning down of the mind and spirit is precisely what one contribution appeared to do during this debate. I heard an attempt to attack the spirit of some of the most hard-working public health officers in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Vice-President, it is my duty to respond to some of the comments that were made by Sen. Gopeesingh during this budget debate.

I am a proud graduate of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of the West Indies [*Desk thumping*] and I want to begin with the good, because Sen. Gopeesingh was one of the best lecturers at that faculty, a distinguished gentleman, inspired many of his students, inspired me and I developed great respect, and I still have great respect for Dr. Gopeesingh. He has also saved many lives in this country. He has also contributed to public life in various ways.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I was deeply, deeply disappointed in some elements

of Sen. Gopeesingh's contribution. And he referred—the Senator referred to the fact that he taught some of the public health advisors who are working with the Government and with the country on the COVID-19 response, and he stood here and boasted that he taught three of them and they are neophytes and novices and failures at their job. Well, I have a message, through you, Mr. Vice-President, to Dr. Gopeesingh, Sen. Gopeesingh, and the message is this. Yes, you taught some of them but today your students, including me, are now grown and serving and contributing to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, [*Desk thumping*] and a good teacher would take that as a credit, as opposed to tearing down and attacking and denigrating the very service that your students are proudly providing today.

But the worst part, Mr. Vice-President, you know what the worst part is? Those hard-working public officers are not here to defend themselves. [*Desk thumping*] They are not in the Chamber and, therefore, I consider—now, I do not consider any Member of this Chamber a coward, but to attack their service, in the way that it was attacked, the manner that was approached, I am forced to regard that as a cowardly approach to come here under the parliamentary privilege to engage in a systematic denigration of the efforts of those officers. They are not here to defend themselves but they are sitting Members of this Government who will defend them, and that is what I shall do, Mr. Vice-President.

And I heard the Senator complained in his speech, he made comparisons and he tried to draw negative comparisons about the mortality rate in Trinidad and Tobago due to COVID-19, and went on a tour of the globe to try to make the effort, the clinical efforts of our health care providers seem inadequate or insufficient or, worst of all—he used the word “criminal” even—contributing to the deaths of our citizens.

But, Mr. Vice-President, I would wish to refer to what I have in my hand as a printed quotation from a Facebook page of one Tim Gopeesingh made on the 30th of August, 2020. These are his public pronouncements and I will offer it to the Senate for the record. The goodly Senator indicated to the national community that he had recovered from a recent COVID-19 infection, and these are his words and I quote:

“Special thanks to the doctors, nurses, Para-medical professionals and support staff for the professionalism and dedicated, efficient care and courtesy they extended to me during my hospitalization.”

Where was he hospitalized, Mr. Vice-President? Was it in another country with a different CMO and a different principal medical officer? It was right here in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And I continue the quote briefly:

“I am now significantly improved, and at home in quarantine in accordance with the Public Health requirements.”

Stated proudly. Who came up with those public health requirements that the Senator was boasting about on the eve of Independence? The same health advisory team that he took his time here, in this debate, to denigrate and attack.

Mr. Vice-President, Sen. Gopeesingh went on to indicate that, as far as he is concerned, there is no real medical contraindication to vaccination. There is no real medical contraindication to the COVID-19 vaccination. But I wonder if he spoke to some of his fellow Senators who share a bench with him in that regard. Because several of them are on the public record as casting doubts on the national vaccination programme and indicating that they have vague contraindications or co-infections or other issues that make them reluctant to receive vaccination or to disclose their vaccination status. So, again, this is a habit we see from Members on

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne (cont'd)

the other side, where they want to hunt with the hounds and run with the foxes at the same time. So, on one hand, we hear a lot of talk, “We support the vaccination programme,” but on the other hand, chipping and undermining that very programme.

Mr. Vice-President, if it is one issue I have with Members opposite, it is this. When they are in office, they wrap themselves in the flag, they pin it on their lapel coats proudly. They proclaim how patriotic they are and how they love Trinidad and Tobago and how great the country is, how great it is, how great is Trinidad and Tobago. But the moment they are swept out of office by the voting population of this country, they behave sometimes as if they are foreigners. Everything is instantly wrong with the very country they were proud to proclaim previously.

And I listened to the debate, this same debate in the other Chamber, and there was one Member who spent so much energy praising Guyana, praising Barbados and praising Jamaica. Everywhere else is good except your own country under the same flag that you were pinning on your lapels previously. Spending hours on Google—it is a habit of Members opposite, searching, straining for any possible negative comparison of Trinidad and Tobago with another country around the world. And that is an attack on the psyche of the citizens of this country. Mr. Vice-President, I am here to tell those Members, you will not succeed in those efforts. We will not allow you to succeed. [*Desk thumping*]

Imagine, Mr. Vice-President, we work hard at the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, with our colleagues in the Ministry of Health, to access \$3 million equipment like ventilators, oximeters and other life-saving equipment for the people of Trinidad and Tobago using our diplomat channels, using our avenues of influence, using our overseas missions, using our relationships with missions

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne (cont'd)

that are stationed here in Port of Spain to have a Senator come into the Senate to ridicule and to say, as Sen. Gopeesingh said, “Could we not have bought those things? Why should we get them for free?” Now, Mr. Vice-President, I am trying to understand the mentality at play here and the message appears to be, why get something from free when you can pay an inflated cost for it? Why get it for free? And that appears to have UNC DNA stamped all over that mentality.

I am proud to tell this Chamber, Mr. Vice-President, that today, this very day, a new PCR machine was given to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, free of charge, by the Government and the people of the United States of America. [*Desk thumping*] That represents the product of a good relationship, a production relationship. That is not something to be ashamed of. That is not something to denigrate and to say, “Well, we should have bought the PCR machine. Why we are accepting it from elsewhere?” What is going on? What is happening on the benches opposite? And we see it every step of the way when there are other opposition parties in other countries—some of those countries being praised by Members opposite—those opposition parties have taken a very different approach, have recognized that this pandemic threatens all of us and have avoided the path of attacking the COVID-19 response every step of the way; every step of the way.

I am not quite finished with Sen. Gopeesingh as yet, Mr. Vice-President, my revered and legendary teacher from the University of the West Indies. I am not quite finished with him as yet because he went on to make heavy weather, with his powerful voice, about the fact that we have had up to 10,000 asymptomatic patients quarantined at home and he presented that as negativism, as something—a bad decision. But he never went on to say what was his solution, what was his alternative to home quarantine. Where would he have put those tens of thousands

of asymptomatic diagnosed individuals with his great gynaecologist thinking and experience? He is not a neophyte, as he accused the others of. Where would he have put them?

But, Mr. Vice-President, I read his quotation. Last year, he was boasting that he was in home quarantine recovering and significantly improved. Again, benefiting from the measures and then coming here and denigrating those very measures. I do not know what else to call that, Mr. Vice-President, but political hypocrisy of the lowest order. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Vice-President, I do not know where he wanted to put those—only complaints, no solutions offered, very often creating facts along the way and attacking our health care team time after time.

Mr. Vice-President, 1,600 persons have died. No one is proud of that, but that is the reality of COVID-19 all across this globe. It is a deadly infectious disease. It does kill persons. And in trying to magnify the mortality rate in this country and making it a political football, there are a number of facts that a senior physician and an experienced Senator and politician should put on the record or should have put on the record. He did not, I will do so; I will do so.

One of those is the very high rate of chronic illness in this country. We have some of the highest rates of diabetes and hypertension. So when you are talking about mortality due to the pandemic, you have to bear in mind the existence of these co-infections and their influence on mortality. But there is an even more fundamental point that the Senator knows, but it is not convenient to the presentation to the approach on the psyche of the national community and that is this.

In Trinidad and Tobago, our national standards have led us to report on everyone who dies who has had a positive diagnosis of COVID-19. It is a very

comprehensive mortality report. There are other countries who do not do that. So even if the individual dies of something else, the death is reported and contributes to the overall mortality rate. So you cannot compare apples with oranges in a convenient way as the goodly Senator spent so much time doing. It is not applicable. And, again, talking about Trinidad and Tobago is 49th in the world and, again, shopping around feverishly for any negative comparison from the WHO Director-General to every single diplomatic engagement, and we have been involved in many of those engagements. Consistently, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has received consistent commendation and praise for the high level and effective response we have been able to mobilize against this very pandemic.

Mr. Vice-President, and then there was a joining in the chorus about other drugs and this is, again, part of the attack. So: “Oh we support vaccination and we want citizens to be safe,” but when you get behind that caption, there is a consistent attack. So, we heard it again in this debate. We heard it again. The Government is not using certain drugs that should be used, according to the senior gynaecologist, should be used in ICU and in our public health system to treat COVID-19. The message is you are being denied effective treatment and somehow this is contributing to a loss of life. That is the presentation that was made. Am I misquoting? That is the presentation. Mr. Vice-President, that is a very dangerous line of approach when you are talking about health care in our public health system.

Let me state, categorically, the Ministry of Health of Trinidad and Tobago, in its execution of its duties under the Constitution follows the guidelines of the World Health Organization, both with respect to vaccination and with respect to every single medication used in the intensive care unit in the high dependency unit

and on the wards. There is no deviation. There is no room for adventurism or an individual doctor— senior, junior or in-between—saying: I went on Google, I went on Facebook, I went on YouTube and I have this idea or this suggestion, I can pronounce the drug or who cannot—it matters not. If it is not found in the World Health Organization's guidelines, if it is not found in the national clinical standards, the clinical protocols of Trinidad and Tobago, based on those guidelines, it has no place in the treatment of COVID-19 in this country. Maybe you may find it somewhere else, not in this country.

But, Mr. Vice-President, those standards have stood the test of time. They have served us well. They have helped us avoid some terrible outcomes that we have seen elsewhere. They have helped us avoid fake drugs, fake vaccines, fake agents, rich middlemen who have hoodwinked, not just companies, countries, states and jurisdictions. That is what have been going on. There has been a quiet heist because this is an opportunity. Some people see this as an opportunity. We see this as a responsibility to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and we will conduct our responsibility in the best order and the highest traditions of the People's National Movement and with regard to the welfare of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Who else? What other clinical protocols is the Ministry of Health supposed to follow? A pastor? Some random doctor who is your friend or who is not your friend? It cannot work like that. And the Minister singled out a particular drug—not the Minister, a former Minister of Education, singled out a particular drug that he says has not yet passed phase three clinical trials, and is advocating for its use on human beings, citizens of this country. That, Mr. Vice-President, is simply irresponsible. It has no place in the current protocols. We cannot deal with it like

that.

And then there was this reference—attention was turned to the Minister of Health with a strong reference, and I am quoting here, Mr. Vice-President:

Do you remember when the Minister of Health said, at one stage, there is no need to wear a mask and then later on he said, you must wear a mask?

And that was stretched and elaborated to suggest the Minister of Health does not know what he was talking about and should resign. So, at one point, in our globe, learning and understanding of this pandemic, the Minister of Health said there is no requirement to wear a mask and, at another point, months later, the same Minister of Health says you must wear a mask, and that is held up as a negativism and a rationale for the resignation of the Minister of Health.

Mr. Vice-President, I held up for ridicule, he must resign. By that token, Mr. Vice-President, Prof. Fauci must also resign, Dr. Tedros of the WHO must also resign, the directors and leadership of CARPHA must also resign and the leadership of the Pan American Health Organization must also resign, because this is the nature of science. Science is not a religion. Science is not dogma. You learn, you observe, you distil your findings and observations. You apply your learning to new recommendations, and that is the progress of science.

With this pandemic, unfortunately, a lot of this learning, this building of a compendium of knowledge is occurring in the public gaze and it has confused some people. Some of those, sadly, are weak at science or did not pay enough attention during their education process. But Sen. Gopeesingh knows better and he understands that one stage, an antihypertensive could be prescribed freely and then as medical science learns more, they would realize that you cannot eat or drink grapefruit while taking the antihypertensive because it will cause a negative effect

on you. Does that mean that those who were prescribing freely before without a caution should resign? Should give back their medical licence? That is science, that is learning and that is progress.

And I want to say, Mr. Vice-President, to counter those unfortunate calls in the middle of a pandemic for the Minister of Health to resign, that every citizen of this country should be proud of the earnest and sincere and well-applied efforts and energy of the Minister of Health of Trinidad and Tobago—[*Desk thumping*]—tireless, sincere efforts, full of integrity, not always perfect, but always doing his best every single day with the team that has been afforded to him and availed to him. That is what science is about. It is about learning.

3.30p.m.

Mr. Vice-President, I have to say a few words about Ivermectin. I have to say some words about a drug called Ivermectin. Before I do so I want to make reference to another contribution, that of Sen. Lutchmedial. Sen. Lutchmedial entered this debate with a very broad portfolio and gave the Chamber a breathless scattershot attack, totally disorganized and sometimes disappointing, apparently obsessed with the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago to the extent that frequent references, personal references were being made at one point; references were being made to ongoing serious cases before the courts of Trinidad and Tobago and elsewhere complete with conflict of interest. And I want to advise, offer some humble advice to Sen. Lutchmedial, the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago is not the place for pursuit of private practice. The Senate of Trinidad and Tobago is not the place for pursuit of anyone's private practice. It is not the place for pursuit of professional jealousy or of any personal agendas.

There was talk in the Senator's contribution about the Leader of the

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne (cont'd)

Opposition, praised as a freedom champion, a freedom fighter. Those were the words being used; yes, the same Kamla Persad-Bissessar that we know very well was being praised as a freedom champion by a Senator in this Appropriation Bill debate. And I want to ask the Senator who used those descriptive, where was she and where was this freedom champion when just a few years ago 5,000 urban young men were herded into trucks illegally, illegitimately and denied their freedom? Where were they then? Was she fighting for their freedom? Was she seeking to liberate them?

She went on to talk about state of insecurity—state of insecurity, again, constant attack. But, Mr. Vice-President, I remember a claim of a limited state of emergency by the same freedom champion, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, claimed to have implemented a limited state of emergency in Trinidad and Tobago and when we checked the actual record of what was sent to Her Excellency, it was not a limited state of emergency as claimed publicly but a full state of emergency. Where was your freedom champion then? Certainly not fighting for freedom or liberty for anyone in this country. And when public officers of the United National Congress, the day before they were swept out of office found themselves late in the evening in offices, hustling to change contracts and agreements, including with a firm called the OAS to the tune of almost \$1 billion. Where was the freedom champion then? Certainly not fighting for freedom.

When the Parliament was hoodwinked and deceived into support for a section 34 clause, where was the freedom champion then? Certainly not fighting for any citizen's freedom, rather for the rich who got richer to stay free. [*Desk thumping*] Where were they? And then the Senator came to talk about hypocrisy and accusing the Attorney General of same. Oh my goodness! Speaking of

hypocrisy, Mr. Vice-President, in my respectful and humble view the most recent example of profound political hypocrisy was when a certain Senator tried to condone tax concessions—tried to condemn tax concessions of some Members of Parliament whilst at the same time defending and cradling and embracing those very concessions, vehicle concessions for herself. What greater political—in broad daylight in the public view, what greater political hypocrisy can there be than that but, again, classic “UNC DNA”. They want to hunt with the hounds and run with the foxes at the same time. So one Senator in Opposition must get vehicle concessions—and is telling the population that, you know, “Leave me with my concessions, I just bought a new car”, but Sen. Lezama and Senator—I do not know—Deonarine, or someone else, some other Senator must not because she says so and then is accusing the Attorney General of political hypocrisy.

Mr. Vice-President, I believe the contribution of another Senator who used to be a Minister of Sport at one stage has already been comprehensively dealt with. I will not spend much time focusing on that Senator’s contribution but there was one reference when he was contributing that caught my attention and I spent some time thinking about it. He told us, sports lead to respect and personal development—sports lead to respect and personal development, and I said to myself, “Wow, look at the author of those very words.” He went to talk about the Anti-Doping Bill and where is the lab for doping and I said to myself, “Wow, look at the author of those words”, but then the reference that caught my attention most vigorously was when that Senator boasted loudly that on his bench there are two former athletes who gave their sweat for this country at the very highest level and he pointed across the aisle and said, “They do not have any former top national athletes on the Government Bench”, as if this was some sort of senatorial accolade.

But, Mr. Vice-President, he was being truthful because there are two Members on the UNC Bench who have served this country in the field of sport with great distinction and who have given their energy and sweat and maybe tears for this country—

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you. But my question to that Senator and to all Members of his bench is this, bearing in mind their former service, of what value is it to take the national community to a lofty hilltop as a sportsman and then as a public official take it down into the gutter? [*Desk thumping*] Of what value is that to run on a field with the national flag and uniform in one decade and then in the next denigrate and attack our highest offices in this land [*Desk thumping*] going below the white line on the road?—of what value is that? And the good book says, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world?”, and at one stage some of them were on top of the world—to gain the whole world and then lose his soul, Mr. Vice-President, and I want to leave that for the contemplation of the goodly Senator.

I promised a few words on Ivermectin and this is where, Mr. Vice-President, I have to make reference to a Senator for whom I have the very greatest respect, an Independent Senator. But I realize in this debate he came again with this line about Ivermectin and I am not sure where it is coming from. I believe it is from a sincere place. I do not believe it is with any ill-intent but I am uncomfortable with this said, with leaving those references on the floor of this Senate without a response because there are people listening and there are unfortunate people who are leaning on this drug as opposed to WHO-approved vaccinations. And so we have to be very, very careful in advancing a broad spectrum, anti-parasitic medicine as having

a role in our national treatment protocols. I do not have much time but I will just leave a few authoritative references on this matter.

I will start with the manufacturer of Ivermectin, Mr. Vice-President, Merck, global company, and Merck released a statement stating that there is no scientific basis for potential therapeutic effect against COVID-19 from the preclinical studies and there is no meaningful evidence for clinical activity or clinical efficacy in patients with COVID-19 disease. These are the people who made the drug advising us that it is premature to make these types of recommendations to the national community or to any health care provider in Trinidad and Tobago. The World Health Organization has told us exactly the same thing. The FDA has told us exactly the same thing. The Infectious Diseases Society of America has told us exactly the same thing. The European Medicines Agency has told us exactly the same thing. The American Medical Association, American Pharmacists Association and American Society of Health-System Pharmacists have told us exactly the same thing.

So, Mr. Vice-President, the overall message is, we will all have our personal opinions; we all know people who know things or see things or say things, at the end of the day the national standard has always been the WHO guidelines. That has served this country, this Government and this society well. It has helped us preserve lives right across both islands of Trinidad and Tobago. It has made our parallel health care system and our sincere efforts attractive, an example to several other countries who are now seeking, at this late stage, to emulate some of those facets. Let us not be distracted. While we listen, while we respect, we hold to our standards. We are proud of our health care providers. We are proud of our Chief Medical Officer, our Ministry of Health team and all of the others who are giving

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne (cont'd)

their blood, their energy and their time to stand between our people and the worse pandemic of our times. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. Jearlean John: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to join this debate. Again, as my colleagues who have gone before me would have referenced the Minister of Finance's cause Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic; Resilience, which is supposed to be the path or road map in Trinidad and Tobago to recover quickly from the difficulties and headwinds that we now face.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, in the time allotted to me I will just cover a few areas, maybe three areas that I felt were interesting to me and which I really have not heard persecuted in this honourable House. So in looking at the building blocks upon which this budget is predicated to effect this resilient recovery, I think the Minister missed an opportunity to update—to give an update given where we are and literally we would have—last year, 2020 was a very rocky and uncertain time and it would have been good in this year if we could have gotten an update of a lot of the projects which would have been presented in this same House where which some would not have started; some may be works in progress. Some appear to be recycled ongoing projects and proposal dating back since the first budget of this Government in 2015.

Mr. Vice-President, we have some pressing and practical issues as the headwinds facing us, for example, the shortage of forex for businesses and for citizens to conduct their own personal and private business. This was mentioned by Sen. Lyder. Students are still without devices; I just saw something coming across where the Government has now mandated that the students in Forms, I think, 4 to 6

now return to school whether they are vaccinated or unvaccinated and I think that is the best path forward, our children need to go to school. There is—well, of course, I said connectivity and access to school, a pathway for the creation of short or long-term good paying jobs. A lot of people have fallen out of work and in the fog of the pandemic and multiple problems these are some of the most pressing issues and basically we have not heard much about resolving them. Even in some of my colleagues, Senators on the other side, the other one was waiting—persons who—hon. Senators who hold very important Ministries, such as the Minister of Tourism, for instance, you know, took his time throwing pot-shots when I really wanted to hear what he was doing in the Ministry.

So the Minister of Trade and Industry has lamented that the service sector really earns little or no foreign exchange but, Mr. Vice-President, this is not for lack of industry, there is good potential here, you know, just within the food sector. For instance, we have the Harfords of Mario's Pizza, we have Joe's Pizza, we have the Pizza Boys brand which I am familiar with and Rituals Coffee House, all these are homegrown and they have the potential, based on the initiative of these really great entrepreneurs. They have the potential to grow into global brands as big as Domino's, Wendy's or Starbucks. If it is the Government is really serious about what they are saying with this public-private and how do you leverage what is out there, because, again, in the limited time the Minister of Tourism gave himself and he spoke about the KLM airlift arrangement, which of course is a good arrangement—you are always happy when there is airlift because that is the most important thing in terms of persons, visitors, relatives, the diaspora accessing Trinidad and Tobago. CAL and its routes, they are insufficient to service—well, of course our needs in a sense but also there is need to drum up more marketing and

awareness.

And I know there is a \$360,000 marketing budget—Mr. Vice-President, through you, I tell the Minister of Tourism, I think that is inadequate, quite frankly, because this flight comes via Bridgetown and many times, for those of us who would have travelled, sometimes you see BA coming via St. Lucia or there is a flight coming via Bridgetown or Grenada and many times the flight empties in these islands just prior to and we are making the same contribution. Sometimes we give additional concession on fuel and other charges, et cetera. So this is something we really have to look at to ensure that when the flight—the KLM comes down here, because this access point is really a valuable opportunity for Trinidad and for me, particularly the Tobago market because I do not think any of the islands, as beautiful as they are, as beautiful as the beaches are, could compete with the beaches of Tobago, particularly Man of War Bay and the snorkeling that is there. And I mean, of course, any one of my other Tobago-born Senators could argue that because this is a thing of pride in Tobago, who has the better beaches.

So, Mr. Vice-President, what one needs is the collaboration, cohesiveness and seamlessness in this new normal and that is why I am suggesting that with respect to this public-private and maybe KLM, et cetera, that we roll it all up, give these people an opportunity. I think the Minister of Tourism did mention that they are having some trade shows, or whatever they call them, into Holland and of course, I think you have to pinpoint the businesses that you think it is most possible and probable to be able to extend their brands. And maybe they may be able to contribute even to your own marketing dollar, you know, and you put it in one pool for everybody. Because these folks—and just a few I named—I am sure the Minister of Trade and Industry will know quite a few more that lend

themselves to franchises, et cetera, and this is a big and ready pool of forex just waiting for us to tap in, because I have not eaten any of these pizzas that we import; we have the licence, we have to pay forex for license fees that are better than those that are made in Trinidad and Tobago for Trinidad and Tobago.

I think when I looked, I think, on the papers very recently and saw that Carib had contracted, and Sen. Roberts spoke about that, contracted this DJ Khaled, and really in this marketing campaign for World of Change and the tag line is “I am going to take you to the world’s most exciting playground”. I mean, this makes you feel as if you are in the south of France or one of these very exotic European destinations and we have it here. And I think that is branding, why do we not jump on that? You know, we continue to focus at this time on an investment in the San Fernando Waterfront, and I am not saying we do not need to upgrade and improve and build a San Fernando Waterfront but in this time of competing priorities, you know, the opportunity cost of many things that we need maybe investing in these SMEs with potential to earn us forex because we still—I did not hear where we are really making an effort, and I think it was Sen. Vieira who made that point in terms of the non-energy sector. This is a major sector that we have to put everything into it to develop. So, I am saying, the money that we use, how is San Fernando Waterfront at this time going to generate for us much-needed US forex and pay back? Even the US dollars we may have to borrow to develop it. I am not saying do not do it but perhaps it may have to be some kind of delayed gratification. So I think the Government really needs to go back to the drawing board instead of doubling down the way I saw, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have doubled down on the addiction to oil and gas.

Mr. Vice-President, patriotism is not the definition as preferred generally by

the Minister of Works and Transport in trying to escape criticism for our roads being the worst in the history of our country. Trinidadians and Tobagonians have a deep and enduring love for their country and sometimes it is just expressed in the way—we will just turn up predictably at a “doubles” line or the coconut vendor or even walk the Queen’s Park Savannah, you know, it just shows how much we love the place. If you walk the Chancellor Hill you will see a lot of people up and down, they have music playing, and what music?—soca music, and that really is something that happens very frequently; you have this little phone and it is playing loudly. So they are not allowing the energy to die. They play this music on their mobile devices so the Government really has never found ways to support this abundance of viable and creative ideas to package our cultural products. Although the Minister of Digital Transformation speaks eloquently of “made in Trinidad and Tobago for Trinidad and Tobago”, but of course he has just come into the mix with respect to that.

You know, Mr. Vice-President, during this same pandemic South Korea found a way to have something they called “contactless” concerts, they are not brighter than us or have more content than us; we are content rich. In Tobago we spend an entire period with this thing called the Heritage Festival when we showcase “we food”, the dance, the music, the way of life; even just the smell of how you cook that food, the authenticity around the fireside, the dirt oven; the clothes; the clothing, everybody is in character in the village, you know, these are things that we can package just as Korea has done. As I said they have this thing called “contactless” concerts, we have so much content here and, you know, the performance, the combined augmented reality, technology with 3D graphics and interactive live video calls between fans and artistes and they make millions of

dollars in US for their country.

As a matter of fact, very recently, and for those of us who look at Netflix, there is a new show called the Squid Game and it is a South Korean fictional drama with which contestants, who are deeply in debt play children's games. This one was—what?—a red light, green light, stop, in order to win—something as simple as that. But what has happened is that it has become Netflix's largest enterprise so far. It is very unprecedented as far as they are concerned and with that content Netflix now has decided to invest US \$500 million into Korea for more content for this year alone. You know, I mean, the Minister of Finance did speak about probably we need one big idea and he is probably right, because one big idea, I remembered years ago, looking at my television and there was Bill Gates and he was moving around some cards on a table and Steve Jobs took that and created what is now the Apple phone and we cannot put down. And that was the first one-trillion-dollar market cap company in the world and now it is worth just over 2 trillion—trillion dollars, one company, and that was an idea I remembered seeing Bill Gates just moving around these big cards and it ended up as apps on the iPhone.

So our people are brilliant. They are so creative. Very recently I was looking at some programme that Sen. Roberts had and he played a piece of music and I just looked it up on YouTube that was—it was not soca, that was a young man from Trinidad and Tobago singing there. So, as I said, this thing, this Squid Game that has taken the world by storm is now being played in 90 countries and the producer, the developer says:

“We've always believed that the most locally authentic shows will travel best, so having a show that's about really authentic Korean games and

characters become really big not only in Korea but also globally — it's such an exciting moment for us.”

So there are things we can do because, as I said, we do not have to go out too far and look, our people are just so talented. Just the way we speak, the way in Tobago we just tell a lot of stories; there is a way, we are always just natural story tellers. So it is a matter of harnessing that. Mr. Vice-President, recently, again, I am looking, I am seeing where in Afghanistan where they are managed by Taliban—well, prescribed by the US Government as a terrorist group, and girls are learning to write code and they find programming work in areas like web development, game development, mobile app development and graphic design. Their goal is to empower a whole new generation of female tech leaders.

So this week in the debate, I know the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, he congratulated the workers of CEPEP and, yes, they are doing a great job but I believe that there is an over-representation of young people in that programme. They can be put to much better use—you know, we need the landscaping, we need the clean-up, but these are our young, the most promising that we have and this is the time to harness them. And I think that is why I felt, for me this year the most anticipated presentation was from the Minister of Digital Transformation because 2020 started with news of the pandemic and the presence of COVID-19 throughout 2020 introduced great challenges to Governments around the world. It is a health crisis which brought with it consequent economic turmoil and the common domain for successfully addressing the twin challenges of health and economic crisis was the technological infrastructure of countries. People, as we know, and firms had to adapt. And again we missed an opportunity because the students who had been benefiting from these laptops every year by this time, you

know, if that had continued into 2020 when the pandemic had hit, we would have been—well, I mean, we would not have been where Estonia is that the Government is using as a model, but certainly we would have been in a much better position with our children.

There has just been so much loss by a lot of our school-aged children not being able to access their education.

4.00 p.m.

Sen. Bacchus, through you Mr. Vice-President, said the Government's role would be how it addresses policy moving forward, and how they address the question of fostering innovation. Yes, how do you kind of harness innovation? Again, the Minister of Finance said, what we need may be one big.

I remember in 1995 I was Managing Director of the PTSC, and I was buying books, business books from a little outfit, a small outfit named "Amazon" at the time, and books about Jack Welch of GE, all these work gurus at the time, Sandy Wilde of City Bank, Meg Whitman of eBay, Carly Fiorina of Hewlett Packard, that is where they were at that time, and it was almost a start-up. They went through a lot of ups and downs, but a *New York Times* report of May 12, 2011, has said, I am quoting, Mr. Vice-President:

"With the pandemic shifting sales online and consumers flushed with stimulus checks, Amazon on Thursday"—that is this year—"reported" — US—" \$108.5 billion in sales in the first three months of the year, up 44 per cent from a year earlier."

So the Minister is right, we need a good idea, but to get—we would not stumble into it, we have to plan for it, we have to work for it, we have to show up for that bright idea and that big idea, as Sen. Vieira referenced.

Again, the *New York Times* of April 29, 2021 said with the onset of the pandemic Amazon experience was according to *Reuters* July 2020:

“While rival brick-and-mortar retailers have had to shut stores during government-imposed lockdowns, Amazon hired 175,000 people...”

As a child you would have heard in school, if you went to Charlotteville Methodist, “If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail”. Belmont Boys’ RC says, “Try and try again boys, one day you will succeed”, but we do not want to be in that. We want to be preparing all the time so that we will succeed.

So again, Mr. Vice-President, through you, the hon. Minister of Digital Transformation commented that citizens and commentators have not really questioned the overall directions or measures proposed in the budget, but rather the central debate has been around the challenges and concerns with effectiveness and speed of implementation. That is right, people are concerned about results, because they are under stress. A lot of children are out of school, people are out of jobs and they are under stress. So, the hon. Senator does not have an enviable position in terms of where he now sits in getting us back to normal, because everything will be riding, by and large, on this digital highway.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper report, 6,000 small and medium-sized businesses have closed their doors, right here. That is a major implication for the persons who have been employed at those businesses. Where are they going to find work? Many of these small and medium enterprises depend on a dependable source of forex and, of course, some bright idea with respect to moving forward.

Therefore, in talking about the forex, you know the hon. Minister of Finance in his opening statements appear to take objections because, I quote, he said:

Persons who told us in October 2015 that if we did not immediately devalue

the TT dollars we would run out of forex in six months.

I mean, I want the Minister of Finance to advise this honourable House where are citizens or business people accessing this forex? Because, you cannot get any anywhere, and a lot of our businesses are just dependent on this model of importing, and that is something. I think if it is that one gets this digital transformation right, it brings in new ideas and a fresh perspective. As the hon. Minister said through you, Mr. Vice-President, he is determined to get it right. I know I am talking a lot about digital transformation, because I do not know if it is his reasonable tone or his demeanor and, you know, he is a Tobagonian, but I really wish him well. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] I wish him well, you understand.

Again, Mr. Vice-President, if you would allow me to repeat, the hon. Minister, the central debate has been around the challenges and concerns with effectiveness and speed of implementation. So from a practical standpoint, right here in the city, if you are walking or driving around the Queen's Park Savannah there are blackout zones. There are times if I am walking Lady Chancellor, I multitask and I am on a Zoom meeting simultaneously, but there are certain areas the connectivity just drops off. These are fixes; I do not know if they are easy fixes, but these are things that are in front of our very face that perhaps we could try to fix, because we are saying connectivity is the way to go, and it is, indeed, the way to go.

I think it was Sen. Lutchmedial who spoke about some issues with, I think, TTConnect. I can tell you that my mother had gone once to request my sister's—who lives abroad—birth certificate at the Ministry responsible, and she got it. But I think two weeks ago she needed to get the new copy and she could not. So my

sister then went to request it online, and it took her three days to complete the transaction, because the credit card was not going through. These are just little bugbears in the system. I must say, when I picked up the phone and I called the public servants, they were very helpful, but if it is we are saying it must be contactless and what have you, it has to be. The experience must be a smooth experience for people to buy into it, because you have an 80-year-old woman going to this place to get this birth certificate, up and down and what have you, but as I said, the public servants had been really outstanding. But systems have to work to engender that trust you talk about and to be sustainable.

So, again, as the hon. Minister said, people lose hope before they lose trust, but this digitalization is built on trust, because people have to give up of their personal information. Hence the reason, in looking at the Estonia model, that the well-known technology magazine, *Wired*, had deemed them the world most advanced digital society. They have indicated that trust is the most critical component in building and participating in the digital infrastructure. They say that the Estonia digital government is all about cooperation and reciprocities. The departments cooperate with each other to promote digitalization and win the trust of users and the people who interface. Another critical fact, in the year 2000, the Government of Estonia declared Internet access to be a human right.

So now we have these black spots in 2021, but since 2000, they have been planning literally for this. It is not about luck; people do not stumble into things. Many times you do not even know why you are doing something, you just have this idea and you are just working it. So I was very, very surprised when I saw it was actually a human right. So it meant when the pandemic hit, many other European countries came to a halt, they did not. If that is the vision—because it

may not be COVID, but it could be something else, and given what is possible in terms of new businesses that we would not have thought about—and getting young people engaged, I think the Minister also said that.

Now, another positive out of this whole digitalization in Estonia, when I looked at the ranking, I know we do not have the doing business ranking anymore, but I still looked at, I think, the 2019 and 2020 ranking. Estonia was ranked at No. 80, and Trinidad and Tobago was 105, and there is a reason for that. It must have been because of the interaction, the collaboration, all those systems that were running and connected, that would have made it so easy. If one would have gone through how quickly you could connect with electricity, or with water, et cetera, I am sure we would have been stunned by what their data and statistics are telling us.

So, Mr. Vice-President, this brings me to where the Minister of Finance in 2020 to 2021, the national budget, announced a notable change in the corporation tax incentive, which is to further encourage SMEs to access equity financing and view listing on the TTSE, the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange, as a viable option. Now this has been going on for a very long time, and I think there were only two companies that were listed in 2012, and none since. So, basically, you mean they have all these concessions, one has to ask, we have to ask ourselves: Why are these businesses moving towards or really accessing what could be, in effect, a cheaper source of financing?

A lot of these small, micro enterprises, they start with savings or family helping and so on. So by the time they get to the end of one period, money has run out, because if things do not go according to plan, there is no money for the second round of purchasing, restocking, because this is money many times people are

living on, they are paying their bills on, and they have to run their business at the same time. A lot of people have very good ideas, and they could do with a boost of capital that is not too expensive.

One has to ask themselves, why are our citizens not—I mean, we are so entrepreneurial, everybody like a little business, they have some little something going on. But yet there is a difficulty with the private sector opening up their books to do this thing called a “prospectus”, and approach the stock exchange. I think, even just a year ago or so, we were here with some amendment to the Bill. I am saying, it has to be more than just throwing more concessions, and these concessions are given at the cost to taxpayers, because there is revenue foregone by taxpayers.

So one has to ask, and this is where I think sometimes in terms of a budget statement or reading the budget, it would be helpful if one says: Okay, well we came with the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange, this idea, to boost it, because it is thinly traded, et cetera, where do we go from here? And we are here, we have approached—because maybe instead of just asking people to come, you have to find them, the ones you think on the outside who look as if they have the most potential, and you work with them to get to that point and say, you are only going to get these concessions, if—the end of this road is that you are going to be listed. Because many times we give these concessions for people to export, where does this forex they earn go? Does it stay in some bank abroad and it is not repatriated here? All of these are things we have to look at because, at the end of the day, the citizens are foregoing something for folks to get these very generous concessions at times.

So, Mr. Vice-President, the prevailing economic challenges due to the

pandemic, they have brought about many uncertainties. Research from the CSO shows that approximately 11 per cent of SMEs' start-up funding comes from the banks, which is fairly expensive funding. The remaining derive from personal and family savings, and as I said before, this can soon run out. So listing on the stock exchange creates an avenue for smaller organizations to access the capital that is needed, especially against the backdrop of these hard financial and economic times.

Of course, one can encourage and say you can use the money raised by the IPO to pay down debt and release funds for reinvestment, but it may not just be a good idea to just talk to people. One may have to, as I said, do a bit of handholding. In addition, for those who are looking for new avenues, I think the Minister spoke about a lot of agro processing. There was a bit of investment in that, but there are other things we can do, like recycling, coding, well more agriculture, because you see all along the road you see pawpaw, you see pineapple, you see a lot of fruits.

Again, in South Korea what they did, they took all of these fruits and created skin care products. They create masks for the face, people have all these fancy—what they call it? K-Beauty—a lot of these masks and “ting dat really eh doing anything for yuh face”, but it sells. It is a \$5 billion industry. [*Laughter*] No, it does nothing for your face. This thing just sits on top of your face, but it sells. It is all fun, like bear and pig and “dis and dat”. We are very creative and we have all of these fruits. We can do the same thing, Mr. Vice-President.

Again, earlier this year, we debated the Economic Partnership Agreement Bill, 2021, and this provides for the implementation of the Economic Partnership Agreement between the Caribbean Forum, Cariforum States and the United

Kingdom of Great Britain. I take these things seriously when we come here, and I believe that what we were doing was opening an avenue for the citizens of this country.

Very recently, I think it was last week, it is reported that there is a labour shortage in the UK. Well there is also one in the US, and they are saying it is in the food industry, and potentially Christmas turkeys are all amongst the items made scarce in Britain because of a lack of workers. I do not know if the hon. Minister, through you Mr. Vice-President, would have been approached the British High Commission, because they are about to hire 5,000 foreign truck drivers and 5,500 poultry workers, and give them visas to work in the UK for three months, because they are desperate. They have been culling pigs, because they cannot get butchers.

I do not know how hard or how long it takes to train somebody to become a butcher, but we have a lot of people who are out of work, and these are things we have to pick up on and we have to be nimble and run at it. Many citizens, I am sure, will be willing to go to the UK, because this is remittances. I mean, you have a lot of countries in Asia, et cetera, that they literally run their economy on these remittances from abroad. So we need to be nimble.

England is saying they need butchers and truck drivers, and the same is true for America, because they have a lot of backup on the ports in the US. Last week I saw the President address that, the inflation is out of control, and they are having the same issue that we are having here, because a shortage of truck drivers has added to the supply train constraints, that is in the US also, making the delivery of goods to consumers even more costly and so.

Now, the Minister of Works and Transport “doh want truck drivers on de road”, so let us export some, because we have some of the best truck drivers. I see

them flying all over “de” road, they appear to be very expert at what they do. Why do we not try and get some of them out, so they can make an honest living?

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance—because now we want to talk about some short-term jobs in the construction sector—is of the view that:

“a merger of the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company Limited and the Home Mortgage Bank will create adequate synergies to ensure approved alignment with delivery of the Government’s national housing programme, a stronger customer value proposition and increased shareholder value. Greater mortgage loan availability would lead to a larger financing turnover in the mortgage sector and a gradual reduction in the demand for houses.”

The Minister is talking about creating, I think, in the process of creating one entity called the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Bank. Mr. Vice-President, I can tell the Minister here today, without fear of contradiction, he could bring all the banks in Trinidad and Tobago and make it one bank, that will not solve the problem. The problem at the HDC is that good title in many cases cannot pass. There are a lot of the documentation that is outstanding.

The hon. Minister of Finance has said, through you, Mr. Vice-President, there is a backup of about 175 applicants. That database in 2015, the last time I heard about it, was about the same size, and the following obtained: 51 per cent were low income with a monthly income of a spread between 2,500 to \$6,000—so that speaks to design and cost of the house—20 per cent, lower to middle income, monthly income of 6,000 to 11,000, and 13 per cent, upper middle income, monthly income of 11,000 to 25,000 per month. Beyond that, there might have been a joint income of over 25,000, to about 40,000.

So, Mr. Vice-President, in this fiscal I have seen that there is—which is usual over the years, for an allocation for the Infrastructure Development Fund by the Government. There has been zero for the HDC, but yet I am hearing it announced that they are going to mobilize some new construction, and complete some ongoing construction. I do not know if maybe the Minister of Finance has signed a guarantee for them to raise funding from the private bank.

I did take note that at the Standing Finance Committee the Minister of Housing and Urban Development did not have a specific breakdown of units, but claimed that over the last six years 5,000 units had been handed over. Now, I am going to give the Minister the benefit of the doubt, but I think that maybe she probably was reading her notes incorrectly. I think the hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Development in the other place, Mr. Vice-President, projected that there will be 7,000 housing units built in 2022. Again, I do not know if that is possible, given the fundamentals, because in 2010 for instance—what had happened, in 2010 there were about 53 different sites. They had no building approvals, they had no statutory approvals, no EMA, no Town and Country, fire, WASA Drainage Division, T&TEC, none of the approvals were there. So there were many houses being constructed, but the approvals were not there. So what happened is—

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

Sen. J. John: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. So what happened is that good title could not pass, because these were there. People had to then design as built, now to start. So from 2011, an aggressive exercise was undertaken where site by site the HDC undertook to develop all the required drawings, secure statutory approvals, install wastewater plants. There were considerable wastewater plants being constructed. I want to give you a better number than considerable, but I think it

was 28 wastewater plants being constructed.

Just to give you an idea, for instance, Edinburgh South, Chaguanas, the contract date at the time was 2007, but the waste water plant was completed in 2012; Carlsen Field, contract date 2007, waste water plant, 2012; La Fortune, 2006, waste water plant, 2015, all its stations. What that meant that that went on and on. It meant that persons were being allocated the houses, but the title could not have passed. So the HDC at the time gave a document called the “Licence to Occupy” and that Licence to Occupy, what it did, the citizen, the person, the new homeowner would have made a deposit. The HDC did not retain any of the payments; that was sent straight to the TTMF. But by the time you got the titles organized, the people’s circumstances would have changed and it would have taken a much longer time for them to be able to go and really purchase the house, complete the mortgage arrangement.

So through you, Mr. Vice-President, I am urging the Minister of Finance, if he going to give any guarantee or what have you, ensure that the fundamentals are in place, because at that time the value of about \$7.4 billion in real estate, after one would have done all that I said, the 33 sites which were organized, the value was 7.4 billion. I am certain that a lot of that money has not been converted, because the occupiers of those units at this time they probably—well, I mean I cannot give a particular percentage, because I have not been there a long time, they were not able to convert, because their circumstances would have changed. People would have lost their jobs. If they would have come and applied as a couple, now they are single. So you had all of these issues, and you just had to have people just sitting in these houses and not being able to pass good title.

Mr. Vice-President, do I have a minute at all?

Mr. Vice-President: You finish at 4.24, so you have about two minutes.

Sen. J. John: I have two minutes. I thank you. I am hearing everybody talking about the environment, et cetera, and I do not want to get into that debate. But there was a time, Mr. Vice-President, when I was the Minister of Tourism, Transport and Tobago Affairs, and I had to go and meet with the then Chief Secretary. I represented the UNC Government in Tobago, and Mr. Chief Secretary then would say, “Ms. John, when you come, may I see you?”, and I would tell the Chief Secretary, “You will not come to me, I will come to you Chief Secretary”, because in Tobago we grow up to respect each other. Maybe that is what it is all about, just us having that respect. Sometimes the debates gets a little corrosive, and then it is really not at all useful.

Mr. Vice-President, I thank you so much for the opportunity.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing.

Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing: Thank you so very much, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to join this debate on the presentation of the budget package for fiscal 2022. Permit me please to begin my debate by expressing my gratitude to the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, for having safely steered this country over the past 18 months through the pandemic of the COVID-19 virus, through the economic crisis and through the relentless, unrelenting challenges of dealing with a very, very, very difficult and unwilling to look after the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Opposition party.

I wish to express my congratulations to the Minister of Finance, the Hon. Colm Imbert, as well as to the Minister of Planning and Development, the Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis, for their excellence in preparing this budget titled, Resilience in the Face of a Pandemic.

I want to thank all of those Ministers who would have spoken before, and who reported to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, on their performances in their portfolios. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Independent Senators, because many of their contributions hold great merit in this debate.

Mr. Vice-President, again, for the second consecutive year, I have heard a regurgitated speech coming from the Opposition. In the other place we would have had a response from the Leader of the Opposition there, and the response was cut up into several little pieces over here and just dished out and divvied out by the Members here, which tells me that the Opposition continues to show the country that it is bereft of ideas.

Permit me please, Mr. Vice-President, to respond to some of the comments that would have been put into the public domain throughout the course of this debate. Mr. Vice-President, every single Opposition speaker, probably save and except for the person who spoke immediately before me, went along with the theme of a declaration of war against the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Let me tell you what is a declaration of war against the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. You see, the same legislative gridlock and paralysis that Sen. Teemal spoke about, let me explain to you that that is the declaration of war against the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Since 2015 and straight up to 2021, the Opposition has refused to lend its support to legislation that would severely improve the lives and protect the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. The Opposition refused to support legislation such as the anti-gang legislation, bail restrictions, gun control, the whistle blower, the evidence amendment, especially the anonymous witness protection, the FATCA, which they eventually supported, the TTRA and gambling, and that is an

absolute declaration of war against the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and I denounce the UNC for those actions in this Parliament. You are holding the people of this country hostage.

Mr. Vice-President, a lot of the Members talked about, and particularly Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial, who I realize is very much in tune with the sound of my voice, because every time I open my mouth she looks up at me, and she is ready to say something quick, quick, quick to me, but that is good. At least you know to listen to good and intelligent things. [*Desk thumping*]

They talk about misappropriation of funds and misbehaviour in public office and the conduct of public officials. Just to let Sen. Lutchmedial know, in the seven years, well in the six plus years that the PNM has been in office, the PNM spent much less than the UNC/PP did in the 63 months of maladministration in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. [*Desk thumping*] But let me tell you, let me remind this population, because I have to respond to some of the nonsense that has been put into the public domain here.

LifeSport, that is misappropriation of funds and misbehaviour in public office; Hoops of Life; the highway to Point Fortin that Minister Browne would have spoken about; the multiple foreign trips with the sister nurse; the Ministers with accusations of football bribes in brown bags allegedly; the use of the national helicopter services for short trips across the island; the \$1 billion Beetham Waste Water Treatment Plant; the Curepe Interchange; the leaked email; the subsequent removal of the Minister and all the other actions in between. Those are actions of misappropriation of funds and misbehaviour in public office.

Mr. Vice-President, I just want to quote something here—well not quote something, I want to refer to a point of squandermania at SporTT. A special audit

by the Office of the Auditor General into SporTT showed that \$411 million was spent on sporting utilities, and that was not achieved; 2.3 billion in projects under management by SporTT, with no means of measurement of performance; 7.5 million in legal costs associated with mass dismissal of staff; 90,000 for an award of unfair dismissal to an employee who worked with SporTT for less than one day, and 2.5 million paid to contractors, consultants for a recreation facility at Grande Riviere.

4.30 p.m.

When you want to talk about misappropriation of funds and misbehaviour in public office, the vanity billboard projects, every Christmas we are seeing Santa Kamla the Prime Minister on billboards all across the country. The NGC happiness campaign. And might I remind the country that a former Attorney General was accused of witness tampering insofar as a matter concerning the Police Complaints Authority.

Madam—Mr. Vice-President, sorry. We talk about misbehaviour in public office. The PNM has never, this administration has never had to have a by-election in Chaguanas West, D'Abadie/O'Meara or St. Joseph because of MPs who had to resign for one reason or another leading from misbehaviour in public office. [*Desk thumping*] The PNM also has never had any partnership and then have the partner resign after the Fyzabad accord. If we would recall, the MSJ pulled out very, very early in the People's Partnership and by the end of it, it was the United National Congress and the congress of the person that would have been in the Parliament in Trinidad and Tobago.

So when the UNC wants to come here to talk about a declaration of war and misbehaviour, I am very, very taken aback by a lot that because quite frankly they

are the authors of many of the things that have stained the goodness of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, there is one other thing I want to reply to before I go into my contribution here today. I just want to remind Sen. Lutchmedial that the Parliament is a very sacred place, particularly this upper Chamber of the Senate, and UNC does not stand for “uncouth” and it would do her very well, it would do her very well indeed to bring some dignity to the debate as I know she is very capable, professional dignity in what I know she is very, very capable of doing, Mr. Vice-President.

So, Mr. Vice-President, there are two things I would like to talk about coming out of this budget, two particular areas. I would like to focus on communications and on gender affairs. Mr. Vice-President, again, I want to compliment the Prime Minister because the Government showed its ability to cope well with a range of difficulties that it faced in this demanding situation brought about by the COVID-19. And the resilience of the Government partnering with the nation augured well for its performance which underpinned with a whole of government approach and methodologies for management of the nation in general and successfully managing the response to COVID. The hon. Minister of Finance presented this appropriation Bill that was designed to guide Trinidad and Tobago to economic growth and to ensure that no one is left behind. And that is certainly the mandate of this present administration.

Mr. Vice-President, we know that communication is strategy and creativity. It is planning and managing that takes place first and then communications are employed. And so I really want to commend the Government which battled with agents of deliberate miscommunication during the last year. And the resilience

shown by the Government Ministers and officials of the State, the medical team, all of those who follow the management of the scientific team to manage the medical data, those who allowed the science to guide us, to use evidence-based data to drive the management of the human response to reduce the spread and to communicate effectively with the citizens and ensure that measures for behaviour change were followed in Trinidad and Tobago. And that required, of course, a major communication strategy.

However, permit me please to thank those who made the Herculean efforts on the parts of different sectors in society who partnered with the Government to respond to this deadly virus and to ensure that the official messages of the Government were not altered. And that alteration of the messages of the Government continues to be a great challenge that the citizens face. And that altering is a deliberate attempt by oppositional elements in this country. Fake news has caused confusion in the minds of many because the misinformation has now gone into the public domain and, of course, fake news has a certain way of spreading rapidly and maybe faster than real and factual evidence.

So the prompt response of the Government at all levels of the COVID-19 was a very effective strategy. From March 12, 2020, it was resilience that drove the Government, the engine of the Government to focus and to communicate. And I thank all of the citizens who made the right choice to block out the din and the noise of the opposing voices. Many of these persons commandeered systems of communication including persons of influence who deliberately misled citizens who would have looked to them for guidance. The deliberate misinformation spread to print and electronic information although press releases from the Government and the health teams were responsibly disseminated.

Mr. Vice-President, in the presence of compelling evidence, facts of—compelling evidence and facts, deliberate misinformation was circulating. There were challenges to the medical professionals who were operating with the WHO and with PAHO with opinions that were actually not facts. So I know, Mr. Vice-President, that the budgetary allocations for each Ministry would have been increased to ensure effective communications to support this Government in its mandate.

Mr. Vice-President, another area that is of great importance to this Government is gender affairs. The mandate of the Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs is clearly outlined. And again, it is an area which is supported by a whole of government approach in general and in particular the welfare of all citizens of this nation. The mandate of the Gender Affairs Division is to effectively promote gender equity, gender justice through the process of gender mainstreaming in all government programmes and projects.

The gender affairs strategic objectives are:

- “To improve the quality of life of men and women and boys girls, at all levels of society through the promotion of gender equity and gender equality.
- Research and disseminate information on gender specific issues.
- Promote change in gender discriminatory social consciousness and traditions.”

And that is a problem that we battle with very, very much so in Trinidad and Tobago, where we know that there are traditional things that we expect women to do or we expect girls to do that we would not allow boys to do or preference is given to boys in certain spheres.

- “Build consultative mechanisms within government, international and regional agencies, academia, NGOs and private sector partners in advancing gender equality.
- Develop gender policies to promote the equitable advancement of women and men, boys and girls in all spheres of development.
- Prevent, punish and eradicate gender based violence.”

And the legislation, a lot of the legislation that has come here would deal with some of those matters. And in order to achieve the stated objectives, the Gender Affairs Division has developed projects and programmes to address some of those issues which affect women, men, families and ultimately the country. So let us talk a little bit about some of those issues because I think it is very important for the country to focus on gender-based issues. And gender again does not only refer to women. It refers to women and men, boys and girls.

So:

- “The Gender Affairs Division continues to design, implement and execute programmes via its Domestic Violence Unit to address the crucial problem of Domestic Violence in...society.
- The Male Programme promotes gender equity by taking into account the needs of men, their perspective and expectations, as well as facilitating a level of awareness, which deconstructs the stereotyping,”—that we need to move away from but which is very prevalent in this society.
- “To address the issues of inequality in economic structures and policies and in all forms of productive activities and access to resources, the Gender Affairs Division...seeks to:
- Design, implement and execute activities and programmes as well as collect

data to engender social and economic policy in the key areas of the Ministry and”—of other—“relevant Ministries.”

Another one of the issues that is being focused on is, to—

- “Continue gender sensitization activities for key target groups, including members of the media,”—member of the “protective services, the private sector, and the health sector among”—other sectors.

The Gender Division Unit also seeks to:

- “Provide technical and financial resources to NGOs to assist them in promotion...and execution of specific projects and programmes.”—to support to the wellbeing of our citizens.”

Mr. Vice-President, the budget allocations to support both the excellent care-intensive work of the Office of the Prime Minister Ministry of Gender Affairs and complementing this with the range of support services from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services which I think deserves extra credit for the tremendous work it has done over the course of the past 18 months and they must be commended.

Under the leadership of our hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley and under the fiscal management, the prudent fiscal management of our Minister of Finance, both Ministries were funded to ensure ongoing support and in particular to support those citizens who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. And so, Mr. Vice-President, all of these things that have been mentioned here have been catered for in the budget. If you go into the *Social Sector Investment Programme* document you would find the details relating to this. But all of these things have—some of them have been actualized already and some will be actualized, developed, strengthened, implemented in the coming weeks and

months ahead, Mr. Vice-President.

And so, Mr. Vice-President, as I make my very, very brief intervention and as I start to wrap up, I just want to remind this country that—you are very much—I see Sen. Nakhid is very excited to join into this debate, Sen. Nakhid. And let me remind, Mr. Vice-President, I am speaking to you. My apologies. Mr. Vice-President, through you, let me remind this country that no other Prime Minister has had to steer this country through a pandemic. One other Prime Minister, one other former Prime Minister could not lead the country out of a brown paper bag. Not my words, I am just quoting what I heard somebody say somewhere along the way. And so this is not a tale of two leaders. This is a tale of two islands in one country under steady, sober and sufficient leadership in the person of [*Desk thumping*] Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. [*Desk thumping*] This is not a Government where a golden handshake was received, a \$10million golden handshake was received before the Minister became the Minister of Finance. This is not a Government where we engage in backroom deals and other things that would embarrass this country should it come out into the public domain.

And, Mr. Vice-President, I want to say that I commend this budget to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I join my voice in lending my fullest support to it. I thank you very much for the opportunity to join in this debate and I look forward to the people of Trinidad and Tobago continuing to trust this Government and to partner with this Government as together we work out making sure that we survive these very trying times. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. David Nakhid: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to join this debate, first of all in the name God the most gracious, especially most

merciful. I would like to on behalf of the UNC extend our greetings to the Islamic community on the birthday of our beloved prophet Muhammad [*Arabic spoken*] and also on behalf of the UNC who also has the international vision to acknowledge that after 34 years the attempt now by Burkina Faso named appropriately by their former President Thomas Sankara who renamed it Upper Volta after the French colonialists had decimated the country and he was, on their bidding murdered by their puppet Blaise Compaoré, and that case after 34 years will now be prosecuted in Burkina Faso, and we wish them all the best in bringing these criminals to justice.

Mr. Vice-President, I look forward to this debate especially that I learned recently that the Minister of Finance, the hon. Minister of Finance was a visitor to our house in Champ Fleurs and went to school with my brother both at St. Mary's and at UWI. So based on that and I remember him briefly with his motor cycle and red jacket [*Laughter*] coming to the house. And if he was allowed to come in the doors of Mr. Nakhid's house—I leave it right there. That means that there is some redemptive quality there.

Mr. Vice-President, unfortunately I have to do some cleaning up to a lot of things that were proposed and submitted here unfortunately. I really was looking forward to going along the lines of what I consider an epic submission from the Independent Sen. Vieira. I thought he set a landmark in terms of a vision not for any party but as a vision. And, of course, any submission with a vision will be automatically antithetical to what was presented before us. However, when you see and I do not know how the Minister of Finance could stomach that, when you see the submission for sport was given by several people other than the Minister of Sport and Community Development, you have to question the value of the budget

as far as sport is concerned.

I saw the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts comment and I would like to just answer him briefly. He spoke about, and I keep hearing references to LifeSport and what was done and nobody seems to go into detail. I heard about an audit report now but based on my information, that audit report was thrown out by the court and is a matter of—it looks like if a lie is repeated enough, it will gain some currency. I will be the first one to say, if they, other than just references to LifeSport and money spent, other than the details I will give now, if they can bring details or charges that were brought against the former Minister of Sport, I will be the first one lining up with them to try and gain some justice for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

But from my understanding, the pilot project of LifeSport from the first Cabinet Note was for one community with 60 participants, Mr. Vice-President. It involved education, a \$1,500 stipend, uniforms, equipment, laptops, 40 meals per month, salaries of counsellors, coaches, coordinators. It became expanded to a national programme based on the work of a certain Dr. Selwyn Ryan and his committee. Because of the success of that pilot project, it was then expanded therefore, we heard these allusions and these references to, it was raised from \$40million to \$400million. And the reason for that, it was expanded to a national programme involving 60 communities of 40 to 60 participants therefore the increase in the cost.

In 24 months an average of 2,400 participants involving some of the lowest echelons of society. In that time only two people were killed in gang warfare. So it seems to me we have a case of no problem having rental buildings for \$23 million but when black and brown people among the disadvantaged communities of the

East-West Corridor stand to benefit, it seems to be a problem. And I have to ask myself, why is that? Where are the freedom fighters on that side?

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

So, and you know, it kind of throws you off track—ah, Madam President, welcome back. It kind of throws—it throws you off track when you hear these repeated references without any details. And to hear the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts making a reference to a case that I brought in my former university, my alma mater American University. Then it reminds me of a mentor I had, a Scottish coach who once told me that my pursuit other than excellence in football should be the pursuit of nobility. And in pursuing nobility you would encounter fools and foolish people. And in order to deal with that you have now to educate.

So let me educate the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. He made a comment that I had lost a case against American University. I did prosecute that case. The reason being, Madam President, I am the proud owner of a football academy with a branch in Lebanon and Belgium. I played at American University. He said that I was a legend. I do not know about that. My plaque still hangs in the hall of fame. My son attended that university. My son now plays for another university in Washington DC. And the reason I brought that lawsuit was the following. Black representation, black and minority representation in Washington DC and in America in soccer, what we call football, is 39 per cent. Representation among management, coaching for black and minority people is less than 1 per cent. And this should serve as an indication for people who profess to represent or to be the black party of Trinidad and Tobago because I heard them pounding the desks to much delight that I had somehow not gotten that job. Well, let me tell you

something, what we have not figured out.

The white supremacist structure of America realizes, recognizes the brilliant, they are brilliant, that one of the most important social jobs in America is the coach of a university, the coach of an organization. He affects generations to come, generations. I think of, at least, 10,000 Trinidad and Tobago nationals who went through the university system like I did. To date, we have had five, five out of over 10,000 getting jobs in the university system. Countless have been refused even an interview for those jobs.

So I wonder for the party that professes to represent—well, I know from my uncles, Rudolph Charles, Kenneth Charles, I know where the so-called father of that party would come to in Laventille when he needed something. It was right by my Tantie Georgie house, right up there by Uncle Rudolph, Uncle Kenneth, and I think maybe the Minister of Finance would know that. So I have no doubt if they want to pound their desks about someone trying to improve the lives of black and minority people, then maybe they will pound their desks for this one. I was put in jail for five days in Lebanon, five days. I think even your Prime Minister of this country alluded to that. He called me a jailbird. So if you want to speak about professional dignity, Senator, through you, Senator, maybe we should consider that as well.

The reason that I was a jailbird is that I had advocated for 27 West African players who were denied their rights, treated horribly. I because of my advocacy, despite being put in jail, if you want to clap the desk for that one, changed the law, the Lebanese law that every club had to have the financial capability to employ West African players. That is still on the books in Lebanon. So I “doh” mind. My goal is not as the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts alluded to. My goal is

not to always win. I have played enough sport, 42 years. I have lost some spectacularly but I have won some spectacularly.

So when he—from all his submissions what irked me the most is that he would attempt to say that he was a footballer also. Madam President, I had left this country after representing the national team with damaged knees, bruised backs, could not play for my country, suspended by my club for coming home and playing, and the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts says to me, who has won two Caribbean players of the year, two national players of the year, first player from Trinidad and Tobago to play in Europe at a time when I called “mavro putana”, “black prostitute”, when I was called “schwarze”, “nigger”, every word that you could hear.

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, may I please ask you, we are governed by certain parliamentary language in this Chamber. Can I ask you to withdraw the last word please?

Sen. D. Nakhid: That is German.

Madam President: Just withdraw and move on. But please just remember there may be things that could be said outside of this Chamber in conversations with everyone in life but when you are in the Chamber please try and use the language that is recognized in this Chamber.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I withdraw. But that word I used was not English. It was German. Anyway, so the point being, Madam President, when a Minister of tourism who I hope as he described himself as a footballer for some reason, I hope his physical coordination was much better than his verbal agility because he would have been a lumbering centre back without skill. But he should know that to put himself in any comparison with Sen. Anil Roberts who has won gold medals for this country,

world championship, Olympic, represented the national team, to put himself in that company as a footballer is like—well, then I understand why this Government can refer to a bus shed as a transportation hub. Sad.

So, Madam President, I will not go to rebut the Minister of Public Utilities who also tried to—but obviously he did not have any detail as that side always does, they mention LifeSport and hope that the public will run with it. But I hope that now I have given some detail, I hope that they bring some counter argument to the detail that I provided rather than just cast aspersions.

Madam President, good quality as John Ruskin said is produced as a result of intelligent effort. There must be the will to produce a superior thing. And it goes for the budget as well. There must be an intelligent effort there. There must be the ideal, the objective to produce something superior. In my opinion there is nothing either intelligent or there is no effort that I have seen in what was a long-winded protracted effort by the Minister of Finance.

5.00 p.m.

A prominent economist, Marla Dukharan, if I can quote her, spoke about it, and she was right in stating that the budget lacked transparency. I know it has been referred to—accountability—because we were never told how much money was collected, spent and borrowed in the last fiscal year, and I think that is what was missing from all those who claimed to represent their portfolio. All of them until now. We have not heard what comparative figures, what was achieved, what was not achieved in the last fiscal year. We have had a long-winded history of what somebody else did, what the UNC did before, who was taken to jail. And then I realized, if we have to elevate the discourse, I will not try to be like that. Because as you have rightly said, horses for courses.

Now, we are in the Senate, so I want to pose some questions to my colleague. Why, Minister of Finance—why did he not give some kind of comparative analysis? Say this is what I said in the last budget and this is what was achieved. I would think that would be a no-brainer. I would imagine that would be so, instead of coming back with a whole bunch of new estimates for '21/'22. But then I said, okay, as he said himself, he would leave it to those described in the budget with their portfolios to do so. But all of them, except possibly the Minister of Digital Transformation, all of them failed miserably. Not one of them gave correct figures. As a matter of fact, I was wondering what did Dr. Tim Gopeesingh do? He must have seriously ruffled some feathers for people to attack his submission without once stating what did he say was wrong, and I will go briefly into that.

Not one of them in defending these people, and they said—one of them respectfully said, “Well, how can he attack people who are not here?” Well, there are also other people not here other than the Ministry of Health’s team, and those are the 1,600 people who died. Those are the 6,000 SMEs closed down. [*Desk thumping*] Those are the 100,000 people who fell off the NIB list and hundreds of thousands, possibly more in the informal sector. That was only the formal sector. And I really do not want—because I can get—I really do not want to get the discourse at a level that will not be beneficial to those listening at home and outside of this Senate Chamber. Not one until now has told us what were the deliverables and what was delivered? Not one! And I thought that somebody, after listening—well, I certainly was inspired, and everybody here knows that I have been at loggerheads all the time with Sen. Vieira. I was inspired to elevate the discourse but what did I hear? What we did five years ago, what we did 10 years

ago, what they will do.

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, in his submission, tell me one, one deliverable he mentioned? He talked about, they are going to have more hotel occupancy, they “gonna” have this, they will have that but he never once mentioned that as late as August 2021, by our reports, hotel occupancy was down 75 per cent in Tobago; 75 per cent. So what are you going and build a new hotel for? Why are you so eager to give friends, family and financiers these opportunities?

But when the government under Kamla Persad-Bissessar decided to use sport to give disadvantaged communities opportunities, centres, NSC centres, MIC Training Centres, all of these, why do you all have a problem with that? No. Why you all have a problem with DSS? This Government is for who?—not the major stakeholders of the country? Not the black and brown people? Not the Chinese, the Syrians, everybody? So why you all so against black and brown communities getting a share of that pie? Why? These are not your base. And you all want to come and talk about how under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, 5,000 were taken away in an SOE, but you all have kept the disadvantaged communities of the East-West Corridor under an SOE—economic SOE for 49 years. [*Desk thumping*]

There is nobody who can look impartially at the situation on the East-West Corridor and not lament the fact that you all ever existed as a party. What have you all done? Do not come and tell me about after, “You all do this before,” I want to know what happened now. For want of a better phrase, “I in it now.” “Nakhid here now”, talk to me. What have you all done for 49 years of direct representation in these communities? Nothing. Nothing. You all right to hang your heads, bow your heads because you all know. I do not know, it seems like this Government, they

have a way of rolling out the same kind of people, you know, the same—I do not know, like if you have a memo you all pass all year. Everybody comes, talks for 15, 20 minutes, “picong, lash somebody” about this and that, and then for 15 minutes gloss over what is their portfolio.

Your Minister of Finance must be so disappointed with you all. He would not say that, but he must be. Because he said you all will come and beef up his submission. He said that. I have to be careful because “meh brother will hit me some hard clout if I talk bad about him”. But that is true. He was depending on you all. He was depending on you all to come and talk. But no, we had the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs talking about the Ministry of Health. We had the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts talking about the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. “All yuh in a mess. It have anybody there who represented their portfolio?” And then the saddest part, to hear the newly minted Senator, Sen. Ibrahim, use the sickness of Sen. Gopeesingh to make a point, “He must be have long COVID so he forget.” I thought that was uncalled for. I really thought that was uncalled for. But I understand, I understand. Everybody pounded their desk, everybody was happy with you. You scored a blow. But to be honest, you fizzled out like that firework in the garbage next to AG.

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, please remember that you address the Presiding Officer.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Sure. But, Madam President, his contribution fizzled out like that firework that was in the garbage bin. It was poor submission. Why not use the time to try and educate the people on the ground perhaps? Tell us what did he said wrong? He said, “There is no parallel health care system.” I have said that for months. The same social media post that you all alluded to. I have said that for

months, there is no parallel health care system. Tell me why there is one? You all could do that? You all cannot. Let me tell you why. I have checked doctors in Belgium, in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, sent them pages of information. That is not a parallel health care system. You know what is a parallel? Let me educate you all. I know there are some brilliant people on that side, not many but there are some. A parallel health care system is one that involves the optimal uses of your resources in parallel—therefore, a parallel health care system—in parallel with, perhaps, the private health care system.

In other words, it cannot be a parallel health care system once you direct resources away from something to something within that system; it cannot be. So in other words, you said, “Okay, we have COVID, pandemic, we have to be resilient, so here what we should do.” The COVID cases—so we do not have people dying, death sentence once they are in ICU, what we will do, we will make sure in that health care system, we will keep it for COVID and partner with the private health care system for everything else that is needed, so we do not have people falling down dying because they cannot get procedures done, operations done. That is parallel health care system or; or if you are forward-thinking like Sen. Vieira, said to you all, you would say, “You know what? Maybe, just maybe, we will link in this crucial time the Ministry of Health with, perhaps, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and do what? We will have a chance now to have a homeopathic parallel health care system, so we can begin educating the public as to what should be the order of things in their eating, in their nutrition.”

In other words, we would force what is a comatose, Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to begin to educated the public as to how they should eat, not putting up thing on a social media post. That does not do anything. That cannot

reach people in rural areas. But a comprehensive, public national discourse—how do we alleviate all these comorbidities that we hear them talking about? What a perfect opportunity this was to do that. Was it not? You do not think so? I think so. But we did not. You know why? There is no intellectual capacity on that side. There really is not. And I do not say that without any—if there is, show me. Do not just come and mouth what WHO and PAHO, what they tell you all—and CARPHA and—we are an independent country. We are a country that is supposed to be independent-minded. Do not come and parrot what somebody else is saying and pass it to us.

So now they said vaccine hesitancy. But who tell you that it is vaccine hesitancy? Why could it not be with the amount of professionals—intelligent—who are against the vaccine, why not talk about vaccine intelligence? They made a choice. They looked at things and made a choice. I for one have advocated for the vaccines but that does not mean that my word is absolute. That does not mean that your word is absolute. What about having a discussion? No. Because that is the Achilles' heels of this Government. You never consult in any meaningful way, not with the TTUTA, not with education, not with the nurses. It is your way or the highway. [*Desk thumping*] And why is that? I mean, I could get—you know, I had a laugh when I hear Senators, through you, Madam, some of the Senators there talk about, “We should keep the discourse and we should have respect for our public servants,” and all that.

Okay. If that is the case then, why do you all allow, all the time, the constant berating, not for something that she has advocated, but personal attacks on the political Leader of the Opposition? Why did none of you all come out and talk about that? Why? Why do you all always have to dog whistle, like the Minister of

Foreign and Caricom Affairs, that she heard it, 5,000 boys dog whistling and she was not a freedom fighter there? Why? I will tell you why. You really do not know how to come out of this, eh. You on that side. You really do not know how to liberate economically, all those lil black boys on that hill there. You all do not know, eh. You really do not know. I will have to assume that is the reason or then I will have to assume something even worse, that you do not want to. Is that why the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries does not seem to want to have an overarching agricultural policy to put things in place that could relieve us of our dependence on food imports? Is that to allow friends and financiers to keep importing food at higher prices? I am asking these questions, and I hope I get some answers. Do not try to tell me about what UNC did in 2013 and—I am talking about now. What a perfect opportunity this was to have nationwide consultations with the farmers to talk about food security? Not only about giving out land tenure and seedlings and hampers, you could have a separate Ministry for that, the Ministry of seedlings and hampers. He could do that real good. But put somebody of competence in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries that could address an overarching agricultural policy that could deal with food security.

You see, the problem is not only about planting and so, it is what we plant; how we give them access; how we build them better infrastructure, better roads; how we deal with praedial larceny. All these things are an easy fix with the political will. Then I have to ask myself, why is there not the political will? Who do we want to keep getting richer and richer?—people who import the foods, and come and tell me about, “You give 185,000 market box”? What that does? All you do is increase the dependency, that syndrome that the PNM seems to thrive upon in 49 years of governance. Why not try—take my advice, why not try if you truly

represent the people you say you represent? And I am only going by what the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs said. If you are really the party that represents the disadvantaged communities—because that is your areas; that is your areas. You do not say that? “That is our areas. You could never lost there.” That is what you say. I know, “my uncles up there does tell meh”. You could never lose there. Why do you not—

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: Why do you not try and get these people into agriculture in a meaningful way? When we try, your Prime Minister says, “patchoi politics”. When we try, we hear all kinds of things. But when we look at you, what have you done? “Black people and brown people only good for CEPEP and URP”? Talk to me. Bring CEPEP people; bring CEPEP people into agriculture. How about that for a thought? If you were really serious about agriculture, talk to CEPEP and bring them in. Do not only have black people holding up tarpaulin and somebody whackering, and think that is sustainable. That is not.

Madam President: Sen. Nakhid, can I ask you please to try and be a little more restrained in your words. Your words are very divisive, and I would ask you, please, you have a few more minutes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I am guided. But I would think, Madam President, that divisiveness would come about as a result when the economic inequalities are so apparent in Trinidad and Tobago. That is where economic divisiveness comes about and this Government has done everything in their power to keep it so.

So, as I close, Madam President, I would just like to ask—I did not hear much or see much in the budget about the Children’s Authority. I would just like to bring that back into the national consciousness and wonder why that is so. You told

me last time, Madam President, do not mention their names, I will not. But I will like to remind that two young boys who escaped were killed, murdered, and just something to through out at you. This Government commissioned an enquiry, I have been asked for an interview. I went, I did the interview, all of that, and so. And my question: How come this Government, other than that enquiry, has never addressed the Director of that Children's Authority under whose watch five boys escaped and two were murdered? And I will leave this with you.

That is why our institutions, it is so important that they remain independent and not become PNM party groups, a way for PNM to transfer funds. Because I have asked the question before, three times in this House, how can you account for that allocation to Children's Authority where it comes up to almost \$200,000—\$185,000—I want to be specific—\$185,000 per child under the Children's Authority. That “maths not mathsing”. You cannot account for that money. So, where is that money going? And then came back mid-year with a \$16 million allocation. Where is that money going? And no account until now. And you have a director held, until now, unaccountable, who, after those boys escape, asked Mr. Jamaal Shabazz, can he locate those boys? Why would that be, instead of going to the police? I would just leave that with you all.

So, in closing, Madam President, I hope that this Government, at some point in time, will keep those people of the disadvantaged communities, turn them into true stakeholders of their communities and not the hustlers that they have become under this PNM Government. I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you very much, Madam President, for the opportunity to join this debate. We have had 34 speakers—I am the 34th—34 speakers on this Bill, and

I am happy for the opportunity.

I want to thank the Minister of Finance, as all my colleagues have done, and the Minister of Planning and Development for the tremendous work that has been done in very difficult circumstances and over several years, but this year in particular, in the context of COVID-19, which is far more extended than we all anticipated. The budget is premised on three pillars: transforming the economy, food security, and ensuring that no one is left behind. And a lot of times we focus on the expenditure side. I listened to a lot of my colleagues talk about what we should do; could do; if they were here, what they would do, without ever referencing the revenue stream. And this budget must be considered, like all, from 2015, in the context of not what we want to dream about but what we can afford. This is about affordability, and doing the best that we can do in the circumstances.

Madam President, I did not expect—at a certain point I thought Sen. Nakhid, who takes up a lot of my time, because I normally come after him—I did not expect to have to say anything. He was going along very well, and of course, I wished the time limit was just 20 minutes. It would have been his best 20 minutes in this House. The other 20 was just wasted. I will say one thing, however, Sen. Nakhid seems to have a problem with Ministers speaking about things that are not in their portfolio. Well, that is what Cabinet Ministers do. They are quite capable of addressing any matter that comes before them. But I want to point out to you, I never thought a shadow will have a problem in operating. You are a shadow Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and you managed to talk about everything except your portfolio. And you are a shadow, you are supposed to merely stand behind the substantive and follow, disagree with everything, quarrel about everything, and you managed not even that. No wonder they are always

asking for the man in the suit and the leather shoes up in Caura when I go, and by the market. You are an enigma in the constituency of Tunapuna. You are also an invisible man. And I am not surprised that you have now abandoned your shadow, and your political leader will have to find something, some nebulous thing to give you to do because you do not even seem capable of shadowing.

Madam President: Minister—

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Even LifeSport—

Madam President: Minister, I remind you to speak to me.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Thank you very much, Madam President. Even LifeSport— I am not going to go into the details of the LifeSport, but I will just say this. When I was in secondary school, this Daniel Educational Community came about, and they organized these August holiday classes and so on, and that was my first contact with the name Adolphus Daniel. So, by the time I grew up, it was not a strange name.

And then, in 2012—around 2012/'13 somewhere there, when the Adolphus Daniel name became connected with LifeSport, I paid very close attention. I could stand here all day and talk about LifeSport because I wrote a lot about it in the *Express*. And then, on 23 March, 2021, I saw a newspaper headline:

LifeSports' \$34 million man Adolphus Daniel has died

And in the context of everything I had written and read and so on—and I mean no disrespect to him or to his family. He died in Tobago, I do not know the cause of death, but one thing came to me as I read that headline, Sen. Nakhid, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales*. That is what came back to me. And you are right, no one has been arrested or charged or anything with LifeSport. I do not know why, but I know that when I heard that Adolphus Daniel had died, it

came back to me that dead men really tell no tales.

I listened to Sen. Roberts talk about everything relating to sport. And if Sen. Nakhid, this LifeSport was the saviour of what you described as black and brown and all of that, and it gave so many opportunities and created so many opportunities, I found it strange that Sen. Roberts did not mention LifeSport at all. Something that cost over \$400 million and put money in the pockets of so many persons who catered for ghost, cut grass, cut playgrounds for \$250,000 a playground and all of that, I thought that that would have been one of the many things he would have talked about. But, maybe he knows, like Adolphus Daniel, maybe he knows, but why it was never mentioned? But let me tell you facts about it.

Let me tell you facts about sports. Because in the allocation of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, you would see this year an allocation of just over \$700 million—\$709 million and that includes transfers to statutory bodies and similar bodies, and you would see that at page 298 of the Estimates. And then, if you go further on in the Draft Estimates, you will see under the Sub-Item: Transfers to State Enterprises, you will see some loan items, principal and interest. And you will see under PSAEL, which is Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited, you would see principal—provision there for the payment of principal on a \$29.3 million loan. And you see, I talked about LifeSport and sport 2010 to 2015. What the UNC did Sen. Nakhid, and you may not know, is that in raiding the National Gas Company and the surpluses there, the Government engaged Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited to contract a series of contractors for what was described as the upgrade of sporting grounds around the country; recreation grounds, sporting facilities, jogging tracks and so on.

5.30 p.m.

And as line Minister for PSAEL, I could tell you that PSAEL holds close to \$200 million in unpaid bills on account of recreation grounds and so on, that NGC refused to pay for. Because at a certain time during your term, NGC commissioned an audit and found that many of those facilities, in respect of which they were called upon to pay, the work was not done. Jogging tracks half way around a ground, facilities where repairs and so on, were being claimed and there was nothing being done. And NGC turned its back on PSAEL, leaving PSAEL holding that debt, 70 million of which exists today.

And that \$29 million loan in “banga season” that PSAEL with no revenue had to pay to settle a court matter is a loan that out of the 709 million allocated to agriculture this year that comes out of that allocation, the 29 comes out, the principal payment, interest on the loan 1.3 million comes out this year. And if you look lower down I might as well tell you, you would see part of the construction programme that your government engaged in, also remember I said in another place in 2021, six years later I am still cleaning up UNC mess. And what you see there is a \$90 million loan that comes out, that is more than 10 per cent of that 709 million allocation for this year.

It is a \$90 million loan that EMBD had to take out in this “banga season” to settle one, one construction claim, one claim, court claim. So 29, plus 1 million in interest, plus a \$90 million payment on principal plus two other interest payments and you find that out of that \$709 million allocated to agriculture this year, 135 has to be paid out to service loans for debt incurred by you for which there was litigation and in respect of which the defence of the state enterprise was that this work could not be verified, it does not exist. And that is the legacy of sport; that is

the legacy of sport. Go around the country and the principal beneficiary of that work via NGC was the famous SIS Group and the 65 companies in that group, go and check the records.

I listened to Sen. Lyder and I must thank you Sen. Lyder even though you were wrong. You feel—you sounded very angry that this \$500 million was not real and it has been reduced this year to 300 and I will explain it to you. You do not need to be upset with the Minister of Finance. I have said it on many occasions, the Minister of Finance has quarreled with me for not spending the money fast enough, and I will explain that to you.

And Sen. Lutchmedial, well I was disappointed and I was surprised. I did not expect that a little, I do not know it is a problem on a walkabout in Bel Air somewhere will cause you to consume your 40 minutes in this budget debate dealing with my colleague, the hon. Attorney General. I did not expect that at all. I was quite surprised and even more surprised at the absolute lack of substance in what you have contributed today, absolute lack. And in fairness to you I will point out seven areas in which it just lacked credibility, substance, facts and it was just petty.

I would describe your contribution as pettiness. And if you are aspiring both for my colleague's constituency and his current job title you have to do better. [*Desk thumping*] You have to do better. Your first point on national security and saying that it is about time sports be allocated more than national security, well you had your time and between 2011 and 2015, across five budgets you consistently increased your spend on national security. If you were reducing crime there was no need to and in the top 10 items, even that year when there was LifeSport, sport never figured in your top 10 allocations to Ministry. And you moved from

4.7billion in security to 5.17, to 5.5, to 6.5, to 6.99 in 2015, your last budget. You were not decreasing and you were not saving and fighting crime successfully and moving money for sport. And the records are there, you cannot fool everybody. You could fool yourself and you did a very good job at that today.

You talked about the leak, the leak over my head as showing no value for money and you talked about EMBD and I will explain that to you. You talked about, if it is one thing we do well is to rename things and I could go through all the things you renamed. I could go through to LifeSport, the famous smile orange, everything that you have. But the fourth point I want to make in relation to Sen. Lutchmedial is this, you keep saying that this Government has one strategy in relation to crime, particularly on legislation, you keep saying. And if you say it often enough you alone will believe it, because this country has enough evidence in relation to crime.

Number one, TTRA, because I do not know how many persons said it in the debate, but I was very clear that TTRA is a battle against white collar crime. [*Desk thumping*] You did not support it. I spoke on gambling and gaming and I am very happy to see that the police are now tackling some of those groceries where you could go and play Play Whe, play Play Whe and get a receipt for Malta and Shandy and underwear as I explained in my debate. You did not support that. Gambling, gambling, known globally as a source of organized crime, as a place where organized crime organizes itself.

Firearms, you offered no support even when young men were packing ARs; you offered no support on evidence and, in particular, witness anonymity. We had to strip that Bill out of—we had to strip witness anonymity out and bring that Bill here to get support. You refused to support it. Anti-money laundering, I have gone

through on many occasions, on every mutual evaluation round it was pointed out that on simple things, including gambling, you were not achieving, you were not meeting the targets. We had to update the legislation here.

Whistleblower, you offered no support. Anti-gang, on two occasions in 2016 and 2017 you refused to support anti-gang and we had to split bail and anti-gang, we had to separate the two and try to get them passed separately. Follow the money, you had no interest in that. That is a big crime fighting initiative and that is a commitment made in the CFATF and FATF process; that is a commitment that is made. DNA, we had to pass the regulations eventually, we had to operationalize eventually, because having gotten the legislative change you sat and did nothing.

A simple thing—look, local government reform has nothing to do with crime, and you managed as the Prime Minister said in San Fernando last night in a 323-page report, you managed to object with one page and about 87 words. And that 323-page report the Prime Minister did not say it last night that followed a previous report. That report that the Prime Minister referred to last night was in respect of one clause, clause 3 of the Bill. The JSC had already completed the work on the Bill and that was in respect of one clause. That was 10 meetings, that was nine public consultations and at the end of it you objected with one page less than 100 words.

So it is not only about crime, you come and you talk about the vaccine and vaccine hesitancy. You could fool yourself with that talk, “yuh cyah” fool me. I does read the papers, you know, and I read in May 2021 when MP Dr. Roodal Moonilal talked about using Sinopharm on citizens as guinea pigs. That is what in May 2021 Dr. Moonilal was telling the country. And after the death of a young—a 49-year-old tyre shop owner in Debe, a very popular guy, Rustan, after his death

Dr. Moonilal spoke at his funeral and, I am happy he did it, circulated a video where he advocated vaccination. And on August 26, 2021, the newspaper had a story:

“...Moonilal ramps up vaccination...drives”

You “cyah” fool anybody and come and talk about vaccine hesitancy. If there was anybody driving vaccine hesitancy between May and August 2021 it was you, it was you and we still have problems. And I have spoken publicly that the problems that I have encountered as a Minister from rural communities in going into those communities and getting people to take the vaccine. You talked about poor management of legal affairs, poor management of legal affairs. There is a little phrase that I wrote down here, poor management of legal affairs. I just want to repeat one little phrase here. And this is the 2014 complaint that then Solicitor General Donaldson sent to the Prime Minister at the time, Kamla Persad-Bissessar. And in that complaint she referred to an unethical business venture being conducted within the Office of the Attorney General.

This is the Solicitor General writing the Prime Minister of the country at the time reporting an unethical business venture being conducted within the Office of the Attorney General and Sen. Lutchmedial could come and talk to me today and the country about poor management of legal affairs, having been part of a cut and paste Ministry? I am not prepared to listen to that. And the seventh, Sen. Lutchmedial came and talked about lawsuits against EFCL and EMBD, lawsuits against EMBD and EFCL and unpaid contractors. And when I said I will come back to value for money I will tell you because I am the line Minister for EMBD since 2015 and I have said publicly that we have had to spend money to defend these claims. And as of today in respect of \$532 million in claims we have been

able to settle them for \$28 million. [*Desk thumping*]

These are not lawsuits piling up and not being defended, you know. These are lawsuits being fought vigorously, vigorously in order to extract—that is what you call value for money. And I will give you three examples very quickly. And I asked the question one night in the other place, \$169million claim settled for 25million, and I asked in the other place, who gives up \$140million just like that? Who will do that? A \$61million claim settled for 2 million. Who gives up \$59million just like that? An \$11 million claim settled for 350,000 and we remain holding in matters that are actively contested \$3.8 billion in claims, \$3.8 billion in claims, value for money. We are now trying to get some element of value from these debts that you incurred and left one state corporation, one state entity, EMBD, with no source of revenue, you know. EMBD has no source of revenue.

They recently acquired—after we legitimized the quarry operations that EMBD had under it—one quarry, that became the only source of revenue for EMBD, the only source prior to that is the taxpayers of this country. And if these lawsuits, if these remaining claims have to be paid out, the taxpayer is on the hook for \$3.8 billion that we have made provisions nowhere for. And you come here to tell me about value for money. I live this every single day in my life as a Minister. This is the real world, this is not Bel Air, you know. If you have a problem with the Fresh Prince of Bel Air go down there and deal with him in the ballot box. But do not come in the Parliament, do not come in the Parliament and play Pontius Pilate because I, if nobody else knows the fact, I know the facts.

Madam President, in relation to agriculture, in 2015 I said I will focus as Minister on three things, the structure of the Ministry, governance and people, those three things. And I set about and my colleague Sen. Avinash Singh and the

officers of the Ministry set about to do significant amount of work in trying to figure out where we were. In relation to livestock we commissioned a report, praedial larceny we commissioned OLEP to do work for us. In lands, people now that we are making all this progress in land tenure it becomes a secondary issue for a lot of people. It remains the number one priority for me as Minister.

In veterinary services, in relation to the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago commissioned a report, commissioned audits, plan quarantine in relation to import permits and the long waiting time people had commissioned a report. Forestry Division and wildlife. You talked about consultation, Sen. Nakhid. We had consultations in relation to managing wildlife in this country.

In relation to subsidies and incentives, we commissioned UWI to do a review for us. Flood assistance with all the claims of fraudulent payments and fraudulent claims, we commissioned an audit and an incomplete piece of work is an audit into land surveyors and valuers in this country. I am just saying that in relation to the work that we did in order to determine what next has to be done.

In relation to governance we met a mess and I did something and we did things you were not prepared to do. So having reviewed the agencies and having reviewed the state enterprises—Caroni Green, something you were all over the place saying exporting pepper and exporting pepper, all over the place, full page ad, Caroni Green exporting pepper, earning foreign exchange. I asked Caroni Green to do one thing for me and that was to produce evidence of a US account or an account where they hold foreign currency and they could never do that. Caroni Green never exported anything. They used the government subvention to fund pepper cultivation to compete with poor farmers on the local market and they were dumping the peppers in the market. They were not exporting anything, they were

closed down.

Seafood Industry Company, well intentioned at first and they became a research, they spent \$3 million/\$4 million a year on researching prawn. They bought tilapia from the tilapia producers and sold it at a very highly subsidized price. We cannot sustain that in this country. That cannot be the model on which we operate. The taxpayer, the state will intervene in those areas where assistance is required, but we cannot run a business on the basis of buying something and selling it at a loss. You cannot run business like that. CFTDI which is the Fisheries Development Institute, I would say Caribbean Fisheries Development Institute, I will say that they are on life support. We have done two reviews, gave them an opportunity to function, I would say that they are on life support.

ADB: In my first contribution, budget contribution, I pointed out that ADB had granted loan for a spa; ADB had granted loans to people for all sorts of crazy things. And I could tell you with confidence now ADB is not perfect, the Minister of Finance wrote some very strong letters to ADB in terms of indebtedness, the debt profile, the recoveries and so on, but ADB is in better hands and in better management.

NAMDEVCO: You belittled the 185,000 hampers. The same poor people that you are talking about who should be kicking ball and playing cricket and so on, they have to eat too, and you could belittle that. Because life is good for you, you know, Sen. Nakhid, life is great, I “doh” jealous you. But we had to make an intervention and NAMDEVCO has been the intervention. And it is not just 185,000 families, it is more than 300 farmers, including those you sought to represent on the East-West Corridor, 300 farmers. They were paying \$50million in this or more in these difficult times. The local chicken processors, \$7 million and

during the period May to September 2021, NAMDEVCO was able to buy six million pounds of produce from local farmers. It could mean nothing to you Sen. Nakhid because you do not know farms, you do not know farmers, you do not know—you farm in the supermarket. [*Desk thumping*] You had no idea what goes on in this country.

Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises: I have talked about that, their operations have been reduced and they do minimum operations right now. EMBD I have said, EMBD had to be strengthened in order to deal with this—which state enterprises is carrying a litigation profile of close to \$4 billion. They had to be strengthened, they had to be given the right boards, the appropriate instructions and so on, the appropriate funding in order to defend the country's interest. And the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago, a lot of Ministers, a lot of Ministers played football with the ASTT. Well I must credit Devant Maharaj for laying the foundation that I had to continue in ensuring that the taxpayers' interest in ASTT was protected. And I have written, I have done a lot of things, I am not going to go into the detail, but I will tell you this, the \$4million mounting debt and interest that ASTT has incurred must be dealt with by the board and must be dealt with by the ASTT.

In relation to people, the third element in 2015, dealing with our people. I had to ensure that performance appraisals in the Ministry is addressed. You cannot be running a Ministry and the system allows for performance appraisal and years go by and you are not doing performance appraisal. Disciplinary measures. Madam President, I have no problem in saying to the country that I believe that there might be few, if any Ministers, who have referred more disciplinary matters in my case to the Prime Minister than I have done. And they deal with PS, Deputy PS, Deputy

Conservator of Forest and several senior people.

I have referred more matters than any Minister who is not the AG or national security to the police, involving corruption, involving a number of all different sorts of things. I have—we reviewed training opportunities. The same people were getting the same opportunities all the time. It had do with job title and where you rank in the organization and not along a development path. And finally in relation to boards and committee appointments ensuring that people with potential were given the opportunities.

But, Madam President, in relation to the allocation, I want to say about the 500 million, the 500 million was a fund. Sen. Lyder it was a fund established and in the last fiscal year we did a lot of the planning in relation to this. So Cabinet has approved Homestead. Homestead is a policy of this Government, Cabinet approved a series of projects, the first of which is in El Reposo in Sangre Grande, the second one is in Talparo on 200 acres of land. We expect that when completed those will cost 250 million that has been committed out of the 500 million in this fiscal. We have made provision to pay some bills which will become payable in this year.

The NAMDEVCO food boxes programme was funded as you know through a variation in this Parliament of \$62.5 million that came out of the 500. The Ministry itself has committed itself to do certain projects to boost the farmers and they relate to water management, \$18 million in projects for water management, 2 million to improve the water supply to the National Seed Bank in Chaguaramas, 11 million to Plum Mitan; the main expense there is to change those pumps which are more than 35 years old to do that in this fiscal. That is just some of the things we have planned.

In this year the Minister of Finance announced a very ambitious access road programme, \$80 million in this fiscal year covering roads that we have never been able to get the money because of the cost involved. We are going to focus on those high cost roads in this fiscal, \$80 million. We have talked about digital transformation. We have a very ambitious plan through the Minister of Digital Transformation and iGovTT. We have been investing, every year the Ministry has been investing its IT capacity, particularly, in relation to land tenure and we have committed \$18.5 million of that \$500 million for that.

We have committed four—we talked about greenhouse, I have talked about Greenhouse Park and the need for the State to be the lead developer in greenhouses if we are to get that to replace a significant part of open field and traditional agriculture and we have committed \$40 million for greenhouses. We have the agriculture incentives. We have now launched a new aspect of the 100,000 grant which is a fast track process. Any young person between the ages of 18 and 35 who applies during the period October 18th and December 15th, 2021—

Madam President: Minister—

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:—will get a response by—

Madam President: You have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Five minutes, Ma'am? Madam President, thank you. So in relation to the 300million, Sen. Lyder, it is not a reduction. The 500 million was a fund. We made commitments against the \$500million last year, we made commitments against 490 of it and this year we estimate that we will be called upon to pay about \$300million in bills, because that is the way the budget system operates. So the allocation of 300 million in this fiscal is meant to pay those bills which will become due as we start to implement and we start to incur cost in

this fiscal year and we will spend 300 million.

We believe that we still have claims for the next fiscal year and I am sure that by the time we have used out the entire \$500million fund, I am sure that we will have to appeal and we may successfully do so, the Minister of Finance to give us more money.

So, Madam President, I want to say that my friends have been saying “dey doh” know they have not seen the moneys spent, “dey doh” know what is happening. I understand why they do not know what is happening because I have said it many times and I say it again, you can go back to the 2010-2015 period and not one person in the UNC can say to me this is the agriculture project that we have done. Because you know why, they were not prepared to do what we did in Aripo, they were not prepared to sit with the trade unions and say, we cannot continue to use an—allow an asset to waste like that. And we have so many complaints, I have responded to Motions by Sen. Mark and so on, and Aripo, I reported 22million in private investment already made and it will reach maybe 50, 60 million when it is completed, private money.

We have said, right now there is more than \$200 million in private sector agriculture projects. You know I am not hearing anybody in the Opposition talking about NOVO and the life project, an investment that is completed. They are already supplying to Massy, 60million in private sector funds. The new hatchery under Nutrimix group will come on stream in 2022. The work being done by Central Farms, the duck people will be completed in 2022. The rice parboiling plant will be completed in—and you will start to see, and you will start to see more and more private sector money. Because if you look it is not Aripo and stop you know, we have put out 790 acres in La Gloria; we have put out a portion of land at

the National Seed Bank in Chaguaramas; you would see one coming soon in Guayaguayare in Mayaro. And I have said that between now and 2022 you will start seeing smaller and smaller parcels being put out for private/public partnerships for every citizen to participate and that is the direction that agriculture must go. We must lay the foundation, you must clean the mess, you must understand what you are doing and you must create an environment as we have demonstrated that it is not public money, it is private money that is attracted to the great work that you have been doing. Thank you very much, Madam President.

[Desk thumping]

6.00 p.m.

Madam President: Minister of Finance. *[Desk thumping]*

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam President.

Madam President: Minister, I remind you, you have 45 minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, I may very well wrap up just before that or even before that. Madam President, we have come to the end of the budget exercise in the other place and in this place. When I commenced this process in the Senate, I made the point that I was moving an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2022. I referred to the Bill which has three clauses and a Schedule, and gives Head of Expenditure and appropriations for a number of Ministries and Government Departments ranging from the President through the Tobago House of Assembly, and then a number of Ministries, all the way down to the Ministry of Digital Transformation. I also made the point that there are direct charges which are not required to be appropriated, and that is why this Appropriation Bill is in sum of the \$43.8 billion.

However, during this debate in the Senate I do not remember a single Senator on that side referring to these Heads of Expenditure. I did get a better understanding when Sen. Richards spoke and I must compliment several of the Senators on the other side. What was important to me was the tone. There were, of course, some points of contradiction from the Independent Bench but the tone was very, very encouraging. I want to thank in particular Sen. Richards, Sen. Deyalsingh, Sen. Deonarine, Sen. Seepersad, Sen. Dillon-Remy, Sen. Ahye, and I have some words for my two school friends, Sen. Vieira and Sen. Teemal in a while. And I want to confirm that I did go to school with the brother of Sen. Nakhid; that is a fact. We did go to university together and maintained connection since then. That is 45 years ago. But I also went to university with Sen. Vieira and Sen. Teemal and I had the privilege of working with Sen. Teemal together in a consulting firm. So I go back 45 years with those gentlemen and that is why I will leave them for last. *[Laughter]*

On the Opposition Bench, Sen. John was going very, very well until she went into the deep—the hon. Senator that is—went into the deep blue sea somewhere between Speyside and Goat Island. Sen. Nakhid was also going extremely well until he ran off the rails by Sforzata Panyard somewhere in St. Augustine. But be that as it may, the other four or five Senators' contributions were of no value. Absolutely none. And what I find intriguing was the contribution of temporary Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, very interesting, because I have had my staff taking notes, watching the debate, taking notes and recording for me comments made by all of the hon. Senators opposite on the Independent Benches and on the Opposition Benches, and the signature feature of Sen. Gopeesingh's contribution was the Ministry of Health is on autopilot; I call for the immediate

resignation of the Minister of Health or he must be fired; he has failed miserably. So that is summing up the contribution of Sen. Gopeesingh.

And then I was intrigued in reading the contribution of Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye who spoke about the condition of our roads, and let me just announce at this point in time while we were preparing the budget documents—we have to send the documents to the printers about one week in advance—and we were finalizing at that time, it did not find its way into the documents, but I wish to announce that the Government took a decision that we will allocate the sum of \$100 million to the Ministry of Works and Transport for a national road repair programme in fiscal 2022 [*Desk thumping*] and all of us know that this is important. All of us have hit the inevitable pothole on our way home, and therefore, the Minister is going to be given \$100 million to do a national road repair programme specifically to deal with that problem.

It will be funded either through realignment of the Infrastructure Development Fund appropriations or by way of loan financing through a special purpose state enterprise such as NIDCO or some other relevant state enterprise. But I thought that was important that I say that because in the notes from Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye, the Senator did in fact refer to the incidents of potholes throughout Trinidad and Tobago, and it did jog my memory that we did agree to this national road repair programme. But Sen. Ahye also said the following: “The Minister of Health has done an incredible job given the difficult task of handling COVID-19”. When I square that with Sen. Gopeesingh who said, “The Minister should be fired. He has failed miserably”, I am afraid I will have to go along with Sen. Hazel Ahye’s definition and description of the Minister of Health’s performance in the last two years. He has done a fantastic job. I want to

congratulate [*Desk thumping*] him. And all impartial commentators, even people who do not support the PNM, have made that point.

He has done exceptionally the well in terms of handling this unprecedented global pandemic. And I wondered why Sen. Gopeesingh spoke like that? You know it is interesting that some of us, quite a lot, would think that Sen. Gopeesingh's contribution was of no value, and others on the other side I guess they have to say so, thought it was wonderful. I thought to myself what is the problem here? So I pulled up an article on post-election grief and post-election grief is real, and you know there is an—the article speaks to a lady who, shortly after Abraham Lincoln was elected in 1860, she documented her concerns in her diary. She did not support that party. She felt grieved. She said now is the beginning of woe. And they say from post-election grief comes depression, sadness, loneliness and fatigue, and they say the cure to post-election grief is to get back into politics. So it seems there is no cure for Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh. Poor fellow. So I understand what the problem is. It is post-election grief.

But moving on, let me go to Sen. Mark. Sen. Mark made his usual scandalous, untruthful, wrong, false—I wish I could say some unparliamentary words—contribution following on a commentary in one of our daily newspapers about an investment by First Citizens Bank in a Jamaican company. There is a particular journalist who has been writing a torrent of negative articles about this, seeking to give the impression that something, and Sen. Mark fell into that trap or willingly joined into that negative campaign and uttered absolute nonsense in his contribution asking for an investigation.

Well let me just say, Madam President, these are facts. First Citizens Bank is diversifying outside of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago with the full support

of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] First Citizens Bank is seeking to make investments throughout the Caribbean seeking to acquire banks throughout the Caribbean, in the Northern Caribbean, in the Southern Caribbean, and even outside of the Caribbean region and we are encouraging them. The only way for our companies to grow is to diversify outside of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

I remember the CEO of Massy telling me so many years ago that that company had maxed out in terms of market share in Trinidad and Tobago and had decided many, many years ago that having also maxed out in the Caribbean in terms of market share, that Massy decided to go into Central America and is now doing very, very well in penetrating markets in Central America. So that is the future for our large companies. They must diversify, they must reach out into international markets. Republic Bank is in Ghana, for example, having acquired a significant bank in Ghana.

So let us go to this old talk about Barita. What is Barita? Barita Investments Limited is a publically traded company on the Jamaica Stock Exchange. It has the distinction of being the oldest, the oldest, operating stock brokerage company in Jamaica. It is 44 years old. It is the largest securities dealer in Jamaica. It has under management JMD \$300 billion in assets under management which would be somewhere in the vicinity of TT \$15 billion. The company is audited by one of the top firms in the world, by BDO, a global accounting firm, and its board of directors are all prominent and longstanding members of the business community in Jamaica. It is not a fly-by-night company. As I said, it is 44 years old and is the largest security dealer in Jamaica.

So FCB, in seeking to diversify outside of Trinidad and Tobago, in seeking

to grow, purchased shares in Barita. The aggregate cost of shares purchased by FCB was a total of JMD \$5.8 billion or somewhere in the vicinity of TT \$260 million. Since acquiring these shares between 2019 and 2020 and so on, the value of that portfolio has grown from TT \$260 million to TT \$390 million, Madam President. So FCB has made a capital gain on its investment in Barita of \$130 million over the last two years [*Desk thumping*]*—*130 million and it gets dividend income of 5 per cent or in excess of 5 per cent which is one of the highest dividend rates in the Caribbean. And therefore, I want to congratulate FCB for its investment in Barita. I want to encourage FCB to continue to invest in the region as I do also encourage all of our Caricom partners to invest in Trinidad and Tobago. We must not be so insular. If we cry down Trinidadian investment in Jamaica, it creates an atmosphere, an anti-Trinidadian atmosphere, like a former Prime Minister years ago created such a bad relationship with Jamaica by saying that Trinidad and Tobago is not the ATM of the Caribbean. So if earning \$130 million on a \$260 million investment in two years is bad, I do not know what is good. So that was just Sen. Mark making one of his usual wild, groundless, baseless, scandalous, frivolous and useless allegations.

The other Opposition Senator who also seem to be competing with Sen. Mark and Sen. Roberts as to who could the shout the loudest or scream the most in this Parliament was Sen. Lyder. And Sen. Lyder tried to insinuate or state that the construction of the Tobago airport is somehow a terrible thing. And you know I have a word of advice for the Members of Opposition who want to cry down the construction of the new terminal building in Tobago, that it is not going to assist you with respect to getting support among Tobagonians. I am happy to be the Minister of Finance who has been given the assignment to for at long last be

responsible for the management of the construction of a world-class airport terminal in Tobago, bringing Tobago into the first world in terms of airport infrastructure. I am proud and honoured [*Desk thumping*] to be given that assignment, and that terminal building will be built.

But let me just give some information. Sen. Lyder carried on at a rate saying that the airport in Tobago is costing twice the airport in Antigua and insinuating that the airport in Antigua is larger and better than the one in Tobago; utter nonsense. The actual cost of the new terminal building in Tobago compared to the terminal building in Antigua—because what was built in Antigua in 2015, the VC Bird, a terminal building—was simply a terminal building. It was not an airport. They already had an airport. Anybody who has travelled to Antigua, anybody who has travelled intra Caribbean would know that Antigua is a hub for air transport in the Northern Caribbean and already had quite an extensive runway infrastructure with extensive parking for aircraft and so on.

So what Antigua did is built a terminal building, which is exactly what we are building in Tobago. The cost of that terminal building six years ago was TT \$670 million. The cost and the terminal building and associated airfield works in Tobago is TT \$870 million, and you have to deduct from that, Madam President, 154 million for enhancements to the existing runway, taxiway, additional parking for wide-bodied aircrafts in Tobago. So the actual terminal building, Madam President, in Tobago, is costing \$700 million. It is significantly larger than the terminal building in Antigua. And not only that, in stark contrast, Madam President, the new terminal building in Tobago is a LEAD building and LEAD is an acronym for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. It is the most wildly used green building rating system in the world and that terminal building

when completed will be a smart building, an energy efficient building, and one of the most modern buildings in the world. And therefore, Sen. Lyder's carrying on about the airport terminal building in Tobago, like Sen. Mark, was a bust mark.

So let me move on now to comments made by Independent Senators opposite because I cannot say anything else about the Opposition Senators. As I said, Sen. John was going good until she fell into the sea, and Sen. Nakhid was going good until he fell off the rails, but the other four, five, waste "ah" time. So let me let me move now to the Independent Senators.

The Independent Sen. Seepersad referred to a study that had concluded that over 300,000 persons are living on not more than \$900 per month. I want to remind hon. Senators that that study was not accepted by the Government several years ago because it was deemed to be unscientific. It was found that the author of that study had not been rigorous in their analysis, and while it gives useful information is it not a good reference point for determining poverty levels in Trinidad and Tobago.

But Sen. Seepersad made a very important point and I mean I wish to thank her for this, that and I quote:

"...we need to aggressively explore and develop Trinidad and Tobago oil and gas assets and use these resources to fund the country's future..."

—and went on to give some suggestions with respect to a national energy policy which would include accelerating the development of our resources in a short and possible time, providing incentives for private capital, increasing exploitation and development in shallow water and in deep water, and I dare say the Senator is absolutely correct. If in fact this change will come, this movement away from hydrocarbons as a primary source of fuel and we move towards renewables as the

primary source of energy, then we do need to extract and exploit our hydrocarbon reserves as quickly as possible. We do. That is a very important point.

I am not so convinced. In Europe, for example, in Europe, the European Union—I remember I was doing some studies some years ago and I was looking at renewable energy in Europe and I saw that they had a commitment among countries of the EU to have 20 per cent of energy from the renewables by the year 2020. Some countries achieved that and some did not, some went way above and some went below, but there are some countries in Europe that rely on coal. One of the most polluting hydrocarbon elements in the world and they must rely on coal. It is their only resource. They cannot afford to buy oil, they cannot afford to buy gas, and they are exploiting their coal reserves. And countries like Poland are reversing their commitment to renewable energy just because that is the only choice that they have. That is the resource that they have; and I want to make a point. While it is important that we move towards the use of renewable solar and in particular for the generation of electricity—that is a very important objective, we should strive for that—you do not make any money out of renewable energy. You do not get anything for it.

When you extract oil and gas you sell it and you earn revenue. Renewable energy comes at a cost. You get nothing from it. You will replace dirty energy, let us call it, from oil and gas with clean energy from renewables, but you do not earn any revenue from that. You may get some revenue savings because you could divert the natural gas in particular that currently powers our power plants, divert that towards petrochemicals and other processes. So you may be able to divert the gas and earn some revenue from that diverted gas because currently the gas that is used for the electricity generation in Trinidad and Tobago is subsidized. So you

will get some incremental saving there, but I want people to remember when you are on this renewables bandwagon we do not earn any money from renewables, but we earn a lot of money from oil and gas.

Sen. Richards: Minister of Finance, could I interrupt you for a second?

Hon. C. Imbert: Oh, certainly.

Sen. Richards: Thank you so much. Just to question based on your comment a while ago on Dr. Ralph Henry 2014 study. In light of the fact that Government did not accept the findings in that study, and the only one before that was in 2005, does the Government plan to commission a study of their own, given the impact of the pandemic, and certainly your own comments in the newspaper about the levels of poverty that may have risen, so they have an empirical sense of what is needed for intervention? Thank you.

Hon. C. Imbert: Sen. Richards, I cannot say at this point in time that there is a firm Cabinet decision to do that, but I would certainly encourage it. I think it is very, very important that we get real data rather than speculate on what the real problem is, because one of the things that touched me with Sen. Richards' contribution was when he spoke about people who are incapable of accessing assistance. They are in a state of hopelessness. They just cannot.

I remember when I was the Minister of Health—and Sen. Deyalsingh may know about this—I remember I had come into Health and the then CMO who is actually the uncle of the current CMO and I think he is the Dharmacharya now, that is Rampersad Parasram, giving me a book, and I say, “What is this?” And it was a book about mental health, and in it I saw something called the Messiah Complex and I say “What is that?” And he said, “You know, there are people they can't do anything. They come to you with a problem and they expect you to be like

a Messiah and you wave a magic wand and you solve the problem. They are incapable of doing anything.” So that is an important point that you made and we will have to try our best to help those people who really cannot help themselves. And that is one of the points behind the \$50 million in this budget that is being appropriated to assist small and medium enterprises who cannot help themselves in terms of discipline, accounting, record keeping, human resource management, industrial relations. They just live from day-to-day, from the days take to the next day. They have no savings. They have no management accounts. So we have \$50 million in the budget to assist all of these small and medium enterprises who are not up to date with their statutory obligations. We will provide them free of charge with professional services to get themselves in shape and get the discipline that is necessary. But it is a very, very important point, and that is why I was intrigued at the tone of hon. Members opposite rather than some of the things said, because everybody has their own opinion about the way forward for the country.

Let me come now to my two school friends, Sen. Teemal and Sen. Vieira. You know sometimes you can get carried away in the concept of a utopian society, and there was a lot of that in what Sen. Vieira was talking about, the concept of utopia. And while yes we should all strive for preservation of the environment, and we should strive towards maximum sustainable development, and we should make a big move at this point in time to make a quantum leap into the future and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and so on, which is really an extension of the third bringing more automation artificial intelligence and robotics into labour, really. That is what that is all about. And just as an aside how much more time do I have, Madam President?

Madam President: Twenty minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. There are two schools of thought on what will happen with the Fourth Industrial Revolution as automation, robotics, artificial intelligence takes over, there is one school of thought that it will create unemployment, and there is another school of thought that it will free up people from menial tasks and allow them to get involved in far more productive and useful employment, and therefore, create employment. So that is the other school of thought, that automation and robotics will relieve a lot of people of ordinary tasks and you can even see it already with smart phones. You can see every—the Minister of Digital Transformation said that there are over a million—is it?—smart phones in Trinidad, more phones than there are people. And we you can see even at the lowest level in the society, the poorest of the poor, use their smart phones to do all sorts of things and I can see this continuing into the future because we are moving.

In the last year the Ministry of Finance has been meeting with a team from the Central Bank who has been meeting with the commercial banks and the private sector to encourage the unbanked to come in to the system. And in fact, the Central Bank published a relaxation of the “Know Your Customer” rules for persons earning \$10,000 or less so that the rigorous criteria for someone to open a bank account has now been relaxed for persons at the lowest levels to encourage them to open bank accounts and move from unbanked to come into the mainstream of cashless transactions and electronic transactions and so on. So that I can see as we move along, as we go into digital banking more and more—I mean, some of the commercial banks are boasting you could do everything online. Well, not everything, but quite a few things you can and I can see going to the future that we may become as efficient as the United States.

6.30 p.m.

I remember years ago that one of the main banks in the United States was allowing you to cash your cheque with a photograph. You just take a photograph of a cheque and that is it, you send it to your bank account online and cash just goes in and that is it and it is credited to your account and so on. And I remember opening a small account in the Bank of America when one of my—my only child was studying there and they encouraged me to use the ATM outside, “they say doh come inside the bank. If yuh come inside the bank, we gonna charge yuh service fees”. But if you conduct all your transactions outside, no fees.

So I am just giving you a point. I can see as Trinidad and Tobago evolves, it is going to free up a lot of these problems for people at the lowest end of the spectrum in terms of paying “dey water bill, dey light bill, dey telephone bill”, in terms of ordering goods and services and therefore I see the fourth industrial revolution actually creating employment, freeing up people from menial tasks and getting them into far more productive employment. So we will see how it goes. So I wanted to just say to my two friends that this utopian view is nice.

But Sen. Vieira in particular complained about the construction of the highway from Cumuto to Valencia—I mean, to Manzanilla and you know, I remember—and I am going way back in time now, Madam President. I am going back in time 42 years to 1979 when I was the Assistant Resident Engineer on the construction of the Mucurapo Foreshore freeway now called the Audrey Jeffers freeway. And in those days, 1979, we already had a transportation plan which envisaged an east-west connection between Chaguaramas and Toco, a north-south connection between somewhere in the vicinity of El Socorro, St. Augustine going all the way down to San Fernando and then connecting into Point Fortin and

Mayaro. So that we have had a highway development plan on paper now developed by experts for over 40 years and the Cumuto to Manzanilla highway is simply the completion of the East-West Corridor link. That is all it is.

And I want to read now from a Privy Council case and that is the case of *Fishermen and Friends of the Sea v Environmental Management Authority* and it was a Trinidad and Tobago case. The judgment was given in October 2018, the citation is UKPC 24 of 2018. And there is an intriguing statement in there as the privy counsellors, as the law lords were going through the factual matrix, they came upon this statement from the Ministry of Works and Transport. By the way, the Government won that case. The Privy Council agreed that all necessary environmental precautions had been taken, including wildlife underpasses and things like that to allow animals to go underneath the highway and so on and also there was no adverse impact on the environment. The Privy Council agreed, the Ministry of Works won the case. But this is what the Privy Council reported that:

“The...”—Churchill Roosevelt Highway Extension which is this project going all the way to Manzanilla is—“of national importance. It was described in the Ministry’s Environmental Impact Assessment as follows:

“The...”—Churchill Roosevelt Highway Extension—“is a cornerstone of Government efforts to stimulate the regional economy of the north and east and is a key component of Government plans to decentralise its administrative and planning functions to the regions. It is envisaged that the highway will help to close the income and communications gap that exists between rural and urban Trinidad by:

-supporting agriculture in the region;”

The north east region of Trinidad.

“-facilitating the regeneration of the town of Sangre Grande...consolidating its role as a regional centre, and
-promoting tourism development on the north and eastern coasts.”

And the point that I am making that is self-evident. The United States built its economy, the most powerful economy in the world. The United States built its economy on the foundation of a national highway grid. If they had not done that, they would not be the economic powerhouse that they are today, they would not have the capacity for the transport of goods. Today, you can go online and you can order something from a factory in California and using that same national highway grid in the United States, that item will be transported from California through all the States down to Florida in a couple of days. That is because of their infrastructure.

And therefore, it is easy to talk about environmental issues and preservation of the environment but there is a flip side to that. If you decide all right, you do not want to disturb the pristine environment in the north east of Trinidad, then you may very well be keeping the people of north east Trinidad in poverty because you are not giving them the transportation links that they deserve and they should get to stimulate agriculture, industry and tourism. So I am just making that point. You can get carried away with utopian concepts. We have to live in the real world. And Sen. Richards made that point that last year's budget and this year's budget are dealing with a crisis; that is what we have to do. We are dealing with a crisis. So that is what I will say to my two school friends but I would also say to them, do not give up. I mean, I really admire and enjoy the passion and your contributions are very, very welcomed.

If I can move on now to some of other contributions. Sen. Deonarine, I am

sorry, I do not have two hours to analyse your contribution. [*Laughter*] Everybody else got one page, you got four pages [*Laughter*] so thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much and I can assure you that my staff, as I said, four pages of notes, some other Senators like Sen. Gopeesingh got three lines. [*Laughter*] You got four pages. So thank you very much. Your commentary is always very, very useful, very intelligent, [*Desk thumping*] very perceptive and, as I said, I do not have two hours to go into all of it.

But just to speak about the exemption of foods because I notice that Sen. Deonarine made that point. We liaised with the Supermarket Association because we felt that was good empirical evidence. The question we posed to them: What are the most commonly purchased basic food items by ordinary people in your supermarkets? Rather than going through an academic exercise of asking the Central Statistical Office or the Ministry of Trade, we went straight to the purveyors, the vendors of these products and they were able very quickly in a matter of a couple of minutes to be able to use the data of sales and tell us what are they. It is actually 45 most commonly purchased items of basic food and based on that, we came up with our list. And in fact, the order will be published within the next week or so to make those 40 to 45 items, some of them we are consolidating them together. Like cereal, for example, we had types of oats and so on, we are consolidating that into one Customs classification. So it is about 41 items that we will be exempting from VAT zero-rating and we do believe that that is what we can do as a government.

We have to be very, very careful with import duty because import duty exists to protect local manufacturing. So that for example, the poultry industry told us because we liaised with them as well. We liaised with the basic food processors,

food producers as well in Trinidad and Tobago and we spoke to them about VAT and duty and we asked them to give us some feedback on what are the implications of removing customs duty or value added tax. Value added tax is considered to be neutral. It does not really give anybody any advantage. It should lower the price if you remove it. But if you remove customs duty like with poultry, they said that, and I said it in the other place, that there are American producers of poultry with parts of the bird that are not favoured in the United States like leg and thigh, they do not eat that very much and they have them in freezers, you know, millions of pounds of leg and thigh in freezers for years and they are just waiting for Trinidad and Tobago to reduce the import duty and they will flood the local market with chicken and destroy the local poultry industry in addition to being very unhealthy. So that we had to be very, very careful about tampering with duty and we have not adjusted any duties yet but we will be adjusting the value added tax on those 45 items and as I said, we went to the Supermarket Association to get real empirical data.

But all of the comments of Sen. Deonarine, you spoke about our budget assumptions, you asked me again for the medium-term fiscal framework. Hopefully when this budget exercise is completed, we can publish that and lay it in the Parliament. And you also made a comment that if we expect to balance the budget within the next couple of years, it means that we will have to cut expenditure and generate revenue in the order of about \$9 billion, you are absolutely right. But I want hon. Senators to remember that in one of the previous years, 2018 or 2019, we got revenue up to \$47 billion and it was climbing. So it is not impossible to get revenue up to \$50 billion and it is not impossible by weaning some of the state enterprises off of subsidies and transfers to get expenditure back

down to 50 and to balance; it is not impossible, it is just going to take a lot of work.

And while I am on that, you know it is fashionable for the media to accuse the Minister of Finance of being responsible for everything: health, agriculture, energy. You know, if I get a statistic from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries about oil production and I quote it in a budget speech and it does not happen, “Oh, the Minister of Finance, he did not achieve his target for oil production”.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, I am almost finished. And if I say we are going to have an agricultural stimulus programme and for one reason or another things are maybe a bit delayed because of proper planning, they say “oh, he did not achieve his agricultural target”. So I will say to Members opposite, you need to approach the Ministries that have responsibility for the issues. As Minister of Finance, it is just my job to report.

In the past, there have been Ministers of Finance who finished a budget speech in half an hour, just come in and say well, you know, this was the revenue, that was the income, this is the deficit—in those days, it used to have surpluses—and these are the fiscal measures and thank you and go home and there was no discussion whatsoever, there was no proper reporting to the nation. I have chosen a different approach, try as best as I can to give as much information as I can, as much reporting as possible, as much forward-looking statement as is possible, and interestingly enough by speaking for three or four hours, I get two complaints. One, you talk too long and two, you did not talk long enough. [*Laughter*] And I saw that in two editorials in the same newspaper on subsequent days. On a Tuesday, “dey say he talk too long, he coulda finish that in an hour, waste time”.

That is on the Tuesday. Now on the Wednesday, “he did not speak about tourism, he did not speak about culture, he did not speak about sport, why he did not talk about those things”? And I notice this theme also creeps into commentary.

The fact of the matter is that in the budget presentation, we try our best to report without talking for six hours on as many things as possible and Sen. Nakhid is correct, I do not where he has gone. It is the responsibility of the line Ministers to report on their Ministries and I would ask Members, I do not want to use the word “confront” because it is not a good word, it is an aggressive word, but I would ask you to approach individual Ministers to speak about their plans and their policies and their programmes and so on for the years ahead.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, I would like to invoke Standing Order 42(5) just to allow the Minister an opportunity to indicate whether he has any interest in the matters before us.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, if the Minister had wanted to invoke that Standing Order, he would have. Minister, continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam President, I am confused. I am looking at the fiscal measures here and I am not seeing anything that I have an interest in or could possibly have an interest in. I do not know what on earth the hon. Senator is speaking about. I do not know if he is just trying to create confusion. Let me just go through everything here. I do not import food. I do not sell computers. I do not intend to buy any FCB shares as I did not do on the last occasion. I am not into heritage conservation or therapy equipment, pension funds. I am not a first-time home owner. I am not a foreign investment company. I am not into manufacturing. I do not have an overweight truck. *[Laughter]* I do not think that I have an SME that would be listed on the stock exchange. I am not into enhanced oil recovery. I

Appropriation (Financial Year 2022)
 Bill, 2021
 Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.10.20

am not into digital technology or exporters or anything like that. So, it is just Sen. Mark just doing his usual nonsense.

So let me go now to the—the measures are all there. And I just want to say in the last minute available to me because Sen. Mark interrupted me. There were nine documents laid in the Parliament. The *Review of the Economy* gives you the fiscal performance and all of the details on each sector, its performance in 2021 and also expenditure and income. The Estimates of Revenue will give you the actual revenue for 2020, the Estimates for 2021, the projected for 2022. The Estimates of Expenditure will give you 2020, 2021 and 2022. So all of the information that I have been asked to produce which is not possible in a budget speech is in the documents. I urge Members to read the nine documents, all of the answers to your questions will be in there and I beg to move, Madam President.
 [Desk thumping]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam President. In accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that a Bill entitled An Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2022, not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

Question put: That the Bill be read a third time.

Sen. Mark: Division.

The Senate divided: Ayes 21

AYES

Rambharat, Hon. C.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2022)
Bill, 2021
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2021.10.20

Gopee-Scoon, Hon. P.

Hosein, Hon. K.

West, Hon. A.

Browne, Dr. Hon. A.

Mitchell, Hon. R.

Cox, Hon. D.

de Freitas, N.

Sagramsingh-Sooklal, Hon. R.

Bacchus, Hon. H.

Lezama-Lee Sing, Mrs. L.

Bethelmy, Ms. Y.

Ibrahim, Dr. M.

Young, N.

Richards, P.

Deyalsingh, Dr. V.

Deonarine, Ms. A.

Seepersad, Ms. C.

Teemal, D.

Thompson-Ahye, Mrs. H.

Dillon-Remy, Dr. M.

The following Senators abstained: Mr. W. Mark, Ms. J. Lutchmedial, Mr. D. Lyder, Mr. A. Roberts and Mr. D. Nakhid.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

UNREVISED

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to a date to be fixed. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.52 p.m.